

“The history of gender-number suffixes in Niger-Congo”

Williamson (1989: 33), founded on evidence provided by several researchers on different Niger-Congo language groups, claimed, “There is, in fact, considerable evidence that [gender-number] prefixes are older than suffixes in Niger-Congo.” Based on this widely acknowledged assumption, this paper wants first to survey the different languages with gender-number suffixes attested in Niger-Congo and second to demonstrate that these suffixes are in fact a secondary development. With respect to the diachronic status of suffixes, we can differentiate between four groups of languages: (I) languages not showing any preference (e.g. Gola, Sherbro), (II) languages only displaying suffixes (Gur), (III) languages where an older prefixation type developed to circum-/suffixation (Grassfield Bantu, Kagoro), and (IV) languages where the original suffixes lead to secondary prefixation (Ditammari). We will try to advance a possible historical scenario for their development and show that the suffixes have as their origin on the one hand bare classifiers and on the other hand unbound class markers with determining function.

Williamson, Kay. 1989. Niger-Congo overview. In *The Niger-Congo languages*, ed. John Bendor-Samuel, 3-46. Lanham: University Press of America.