

“Plural words in the Macro-Sudan Belt”

Since Dryer (2013) identified a hotspot of plural words in northern Sub-Saharan Africa, plural words regularly occur in overviews of the Macro-Sudan Belt (e.g. Güldemann 2018; Güldemann & Hagemeyer 2016). Plural words are still relatively poorly understood. There is no uniform definition of ‘plural word’ in the literature and therefore no way to consistently identify them across languages. Dryer (2013), for instance, makes a distinction between plural words and clitics, but without clearly defining the former says that “[p]lural clitics are probably best thought of as a type of plural word”. There is no comprehensive overview of plural words in the Macro-Sudan Belt (compare Dryer 1989). In this presentation, I survey the properties of markers identified as plural words and plural clitics in the Macro-Sudan Belt. I base my analysis on a sample of 41 ‘plural word languages’. Most plural words:

- are marked only once in the noun phrase (= they are not part of an agreement paradigm)
- occur adjacent to roots of different classes (= they are ‘clitics’),
- are segmentally invariable (= they are ‘phonologically independent’),
- are dedicated plural markers (= they only express plurality, nothing else),
- follow the head noun, and
- can occur with adjectives but not adjacent to numerals.

Plural words are often optional. In those languages where we have etymological clues, plural words are typically grammaticalized from 3PL pronouns. There appears to be no meaningful way to distinguish ‘clitics’ from ‘words’ in the available data. I conclude with notes on explaining the occurrence of plural words in the Macro-Sudan Belt. I also ask some questions about the possible wider occurrence of plural words in Sub-Saharan Africa (cf. Van de Velde 2005).

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Van de Velde, Mark L. O. 2005. The Alleged Class 2a Prefix *bò* in Eton: A Plural Word. *Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 31(2). 119–130.