

Noun + adjective compounding and quasi-compounding in the languages of Sub-Saharan Africa

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1. Introduction

In most languages, adjective + noun compounding is limited either to lexicalized combinations (as in *blackbird*), or to bahuvrihi compounds (as in *redbreast*). Adjective + noun compounding rarely constitutes a fully regular and productive morphological process creating words equivalent to the phrases consisting of an attributive adjective and a noun found in most languages. Attention has been drawn to this phenomenon by Dahl (2004: 225-235 & 2015: 127-131), who argues that “combinations of adjectives and nouns may become tightened and integrated into a one-word construction without losing their productivity.” He mentions Lakota, Burmese, Chukchi, and Elfdalian (Scandinavian), as languages in which combinations of adjectives and nouns that can be analyzed as morphological compounds are not constrained in the way compounds usually are, and constitute a regular and productive way to combine nouns with attributive adjectives. He also notes that Celtic, Romance, and Southern Ute have a contrast between tighter preposing constructions and looser postposing ones, the formers being consequently analyzable as instances of quasi-compounding (combinations of words which in some respects –but not all– behave as if they were the two elements of a single compound word).

In this presentation, I discuss African illustrations of these phenomena. Although this is rarely made explicit in the available grammatical descriptions, phenomena interpretable in terms of quasi-compounding in combinations of nouns with attributive adjectives are pervasive in the languages of Sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, clear cases of languages in which the integration of attributive adjectives and nouns into one-word constructions is the regular way to express modification of nouns by attributive adjectives can be found at least within the Mande and Gur language families.

The presentation is organized as follows. Section 2 deals with quasi-incorporation of attributive adjectives in Sub-Saharan languages. Section 3 presents cases of obligatory incorporation of attributive adjectives in Soninke and Manding (Mande). Section 4 examines cases of obligatory incorporation of attributive adjectives in Gur languages. Section 5 summarizes the conclusions.

2. Quasi-incorporation of attributive adjective in Sub-Saharan languages

In a paper published in 2003, I argued that Sub-Saharan languages provide evidence against mainstream approaches to lexical categories that put on a par adjectives and adverbs (and sometimes also adpositions) with nouns and verbs, and rather support the view that there are only two basic lexical categories (nouns and verbs), since adjectives and adverbs do not necessarily have the ability to ‘project’ phrasal categories.

At this point, it is interesting to begin by evoking the case of French, a language in which many attributive adjectives can equally precede or follow the head noun, but have different properties depending on their position. As rightly observed by Dahl (2004: 229-230), in French (and other Romance languages) preposed attributive adjectives are more tightly integrated, and can be viewed as forming ‘quasi-compounds’ with their head. An important contrast between preposed and postposed attributive adjectives, in addition to those mentioned by Dahl, is that preposed attributive adjectives lose the ability to project adjectival phrases – Ex. (1).

(1) French

(1a) **un guerrier célèbre**
a warrior famous

(1b) **un célèbre guerrier**
a famous warrior

(1c) **un guerrier [célèbre [pour ses nombreuses victoires]]**
a warrior famous for his numerous victories

(1d) ***un [célèbre [pour ses nombreuses victoires]] guerrier**
a famous for his numerous victories warrior

In many Sub-Saharan languages, all attributive adjectives behave in this respect like the preposed attributive adjectives of French. In the languages in question, the possibilities of expansion of attributive adjectives are limited to a single word expressing intensity, and other types of constructions must be used to express the equivalent of the adjectival phrases found in European languages. For example, in Sub-Saharan languages, the translation equivalent of NPs including an adjectival phrase such as *a man proud of his son* is typically a relative clause construction (*a man who takes-pride of his son*) rather than a construction involving an attributive adjective.

(2) Tswana (Bantu)

mù-ńnà yó ú-ì-píláfàtsà-ń ká mù-rwá-è
CL1-man CL1.REL S.CL1-REFL-take_pride with CL1-son-POSS.CL1
‘a man proud of his son’

To take another example, Bambara has an adjective **màlòbálí** ‘shameless’ that can be juxtaposed to nouns as an attributive modifier, but there is nothing in Bambara syntax that could be compared to the use of *shameless* as the head of an adjectival phrase including a complement NP such as *as shameless as NP* in English. In Bambara, *a child as shameless as this one* can only be rendered as lit. *a child whose shamelessness and that of this one are equal* – Ex. (2).

(3) Bambara (Mande)

(3a) **dénmísén màlòbálí**
 child shameless
 ‘shameless child’

(3b) **dénmísên mîn màlòbàli-yâ ní nìn tá ká kán**
 child.D REL shameless-ABSTR.D and DEM that_of POS be_equal
 ‘a child as shameless as this one’

Since the loss of the ability to project phrases is a typical property of incorporated lexemes, in languages that don’t have adjectival phrases, the construction formed by a noun and an attributive adjective can be analyzed as having at least some characteristics of compounding. Unfortunately, I cannot be more precise about the extent of this phenomenon, but the lack of constructions similar to the adjectival phrases found in European languages is at least a very common situation among Sub-Saharan languages.

3. Incorporation of attributive adjectives in Mande languages

3.1. Incorporation of attributive adjectives in Soninke

As regards the morphological incorporation of attributive adjectives, Soninke (West Mande) is a particularly clear case of a language in which the combination of nouns with attributive adjectives is an instance of morphological compounding, since in this language, the distinction between phrases and compounds is particularly clear-cut (Creissels 2016).

Crucially, Soninke nouns have a distinction between an autonomous form that can function as a word without any additional material, and a non-autonomous form occurring exclusively when the nominal lexeme is a non-final formative of a complex lexeme. Ex. (4) illustrates the use of the non-autonomous form of some Soninke nouns.

(4) Soninke (Mande)

	non-autonomous form	illustrations
yiràamê ‘cloth’	yiràn-	yiràn-gágàanâ ‘cloth seller’
dèbê ‘village’	dèbì-	dèbì-gùmê ‘village chief’
dìnmê ‘drum’	dìn-	dìn-tímáanà ‘drum player’
sámáqqè ‘snake’	sámán-	sámán-pátè ‘snake skin’
lâqqè ‘mouth’	lâxá-	lâxá-ntè ‘talkative’
nòxô ‘pregnancy’	nùxù-	nùxù-ntê ‘pregnant’

Morphologically, Soninke adjectives are not different from nouns. Like nouns, they have a non-autonomous form, a singular form, a plural form, and they can combine with the definite marker -`n. They can also fulfill the same syntactic functions as nouns. For example, **qúllè** ‘white’ can be found in all nominal positions (subject, object, etc.) with the type of meaning expressed in English as *a/the white one*. Simply, much in the same way as for example in French and other Romance languages, this use of adjectives requires some discursive conditioning: sentences such as (5c-d) imply that the notion

restricted by the mention of the property expressed by the adjective can be retrieved from the context.

(5) Soninke (Mande)

(5a) **Ń dà sélìngê-n qóbó.**

1SG TR chicken-D buy
‘I bought the chicken.’

(5b) **Ń dà sélìngû-n qóbó.**

1SG TR chicken.PL-D buy
‘I bought the chickens.’

(5c) **Ń dà qúllè-n qóbó.**

1SG TR white-D buy
‘I bought the white one.’

(5d) **Ń dà qúllù-n qóbó.**

1SG TR white.PL-D buy
‘I bought the white ones.’

As illustrated by Ex. (6), adjectives can also occur in noun + adjective combinations expressing the kind of modification typically expressed by attributive adjectives, but such combinations can only take the shape of compounds with the noun in its non-autonomous form, and nominal inflection expressed at the end of the compound, i.e. on the adjective.

(6) Soninke (Mande)

(6a) **Ń dà sélín-qúllè-n qóbó.**

1SG TR chicken-white-D buy
‘I bought the white chicken.’

(6b) **Ń dà sélín-qúllù-n qóbó.**

1SG TR chicken-white.PL-D buy
‘I bought the white chickens.’

In Ex. (6), **sélìngê** ‘chicken’ occurs in the same non-autonomous form **sélín-** as in noun + noun compounds such as **sélín-kánpè** ‘chicken wing’ or **sélín-gáagàanâ** ‘chicken seller’. In other words, in Soninke, noun + attributive adjective combinations have exactly the same morphological characteristics as noun + noun compounds in which the first nominal lexeme modifies the second one.

Crucially, it is also possible to combine adjectives with nouns in their autonomous form, as in (7c-d), but this implies a change in the function of the adjective. Adjectives following nouns in their autonomous form can only be interpreted as secondary predicates, not as attributive modifiers. In (7a-b), **yúgú-** is the non-autonomous form of ‘man’, whereas in (7c-d), **yúgòn** pl. **yúgùn** is the definite form of the same noun.

(7) Soninke (Mande)

(7a) **Yúgú-xàsè-n kàrá.**
 man-old-D die
 ‘The old man died.’

(7b) **Yúgú-xàsù-n kàrá.**
 man-old.PL-D die
 ‘The old men died.’

(7c) **Yúgò-n qàsé-n kàrá.**
 man-D old-D die.
 ‘The man died old.’

(7d) **Yúgù-n qàsú-n kàrá.**
 man.PL-D old.PL-D die.
 ‘The men died old.’

3.2. Incorporation of attributive adjectives in Manding languages

Manding languages, which belong to another branch of West Mande, also have compounds as the regular form of noun + attributive adjective combinations, with however the following two particularities:

- in Soninke, all attributive adjectives form compounds with the noun they modify, whereas in Manding languages, adjectives divide into two subclasses: those that form with their head a construction showing evidence of morphological compounding, and those forming less tight combinations with their head;
- in Soninke, the existence of a non-autonomous form of nominal lexemes facilitates the distinction between syntactic constructions and compounds, whereas in Manding languages, the distinction between two types of noun + attributive adjective combinations is exclusively tonal.

In Manding languages, the combination of all simplex adjectives and a minority of derived adjectives in attributive function with their head has exactly the same tonal properties (known in the literature on Manding languages as ‘tonal compacity’) as noun + noun compounds – Ex. (8a-b), whereas the majority of derived adjectives and all compound adjectives in attributive function combine with their head in a construction in which each of the two terms maintains its inherent tone – Ex. (8c), where **màlò-bálí** ‘shameless’ derives from **màló** ‘be ashamed’ by the adjunction of the privative suffix **-bálí**.

(8) Bambara (Manding, West Mande)

(8a) **mùsó** + **dàbá** → **mùsò-dábá**
 ‘woman’ ‘hoe’ ‘hoe for women’

(8b) **mùsó** + **nyùmán** → **mùsò-nyúmán**
 ‘woman’ ‘nice’ ‘nice woman’

(8c) **mùsó** + **màlòbálí** → **mùsó màlòbálí**
 ‘woman’ ‘shameless’ ‘shameless woman’

For more details on the morphological behavior of attributive adjectives in a Manding language, see Creissels & Sambou (2013: 229-230) on Mandinka.

4. Incorporation of attributive adjectives in Gur languages

4.1. Introductory remarks

One can find among Gur languages noun + attributive adjective constructions that show no evidence of morphological compounding, in particular, constructions in which both the attributive adjective and its head are full-fledged words consisting of a stem and a gender-number (or ‘noun class’) marker, with gender-number agreement of the attributive adjective with its head, as in Lamba – Ex. (9).

(9) Lamba (Gur – Aritiba 1987: 108-109)

(9a) **h̃** + **cépîno** → **h̃ cépîno**
 ‘dog’ (class ka) ‘a black one (class ka)’ ‘black dog’

(9b) **hásê** + **cépînasê** → **hásê cépînasê**
 ‘dogs’ (class sə) ‘black ones (class sə)’ ‘black dogs’

(9c) **lírú** + **cépînú** → **lírú cépînú**
 ‘pearl’ (class ku) ‘a black one (class ku)’ ‘black pearl’

However, clear cases of noun + attributive adjective compounding are also attested in various branches of the Gur language family.

4.2. The case of Gurmanche

Gurmanche (Ouoba 1982) is a case in point. In Gurmanche, as in Lamba, nouns forms have obligatory inflectional endings expressing gender and number (‘noun class suffixes’), for example **dāa-gā** (pl. **dāa-mú**) ‘market’, **tí-bū** (pl. **tii-dí**) ‘tree’. Adjectives as autonomous words have the same structure, for example **ciám-bū** ‘big, cl. BU’, **cián-dī** ‘big, cl. DI’, etc. However, in Gurmanche, contrary to Lamba, the combination of nouns with attributive adjectives is not the juxtaposition of two words each with its own class suffix. Like Soninke, Gurmanche has noun + attributive adjective combinations that show the same morphological characteristics as noun + noun compounds.

In the noun + noun compounds of Gurmanche, the modifying noun (which occupies the first position) occurs as a bare lexeme (i.e. without its class suffix), and this distinguishes compounds, in which the modifier has a generic reading, from genitival constructions in which the modifier has specific reference. In (10), the compound **dāa-ti-bū** (pl. **dāa-tii-dí**) ‘market tree’ can be used with reference to trees belonging to a variety commonly found in markets, whereas the genitival construction **dāa-g tí-bū** ‘tree of the

market’, in which each noun has its own inflectional ending, refers to a tree found in a specific market.

(10) Gurmanche (Gur – Ouoba 1982: 157)

(10a) **dāa-gā** + **tí-bū** → **dāa-tí-bū** ≠ **dāa-g tí-bū**
 ‘market’ ‘tree’ ‘market tree’ ‘tree of the market’

(10b) **dāa-gā** + **tīi-dí** → **dāa-tīi-dí** ≠ **dāa-g tīi-dí**
 ‘market’ ‘trees’ ‘market trees’ ‘trees of the market’

In Gurmanche, as in Lamba, adjectives have the same morphological structure ‘stem + class suffix’ as nouns, with the difference that adjectival stems can combine with any of the class suffixes found in the language, whereas the combinability of nominal stems with a subset of class suffixes is a lexical property of nouns. In most Niger-Congo languages with similar noun class systems, as illustrated above by Lamba, in the construction ‘noun + attributive adjective’, both the noun and the adjective have their class affix, and there is agreement between them. By contrast, in Gurmanche, such constructions constitute single words (with just one class suffix) in which the adjectival lexeme can be described as inserted between the noun stem and its class suffix; for example with **ciám-** ‘big’:

(27) Gurmanche (Gur – Ouoba 1882: 131-133)

(27a) **tí-bū** + **ciám-** → **tī-ciám-bū**
 ‘tree’ ‘big’ ‘big tree’

(27b) **tīi-dí** + **ciám-** → **tī-ciám-dí**
 ‘trees’ ‘big’ ‘big trees’

(27c) **diē-gū** + **ciám-** → **diē-ciám-gū**
 ‘house’ ‘big’ ‘big house’

(27d) **diē-dī** + **ciám-** → **diē-ciám-dī**
 ‘houses’ ‘big’ ‘big houses’

4.3. Other instances of noun + attributive adjective compounding among Gur languages

Noun + attributive adjective constructions with the same characteristics as in Gurmanche have been described in quite a few other Gur languages, but the fact that they must be analyzed as morphological compounds rather than syntactic constructions is rarely acknowledged in the available descriptions of the languages in question. An explicit and well-motivated acknowledgement of the compound nature of the noun + attributive adjective construction can be found in Dombrowsky-Hahn’s description of Syer, a language belonging to the Senufo branch of the Gur family (Dombrowsky-Hahn 2015: 228), but this constitutes rather an exception. For example, in Delpanque’s (1997) description of the noun + attributive construction of Dagara, which is of the same type as

that of Gurmanche, nouns and their attributive modifiers are written as distinct words, and the possibility of an analysis in terms of compounding is not mentioned.

5. Conclusion

In this presentation, after showing that many Sub-Saharan languages have noun + attributive adjective combinations in which the adjective behaves in some respects at least as if it formed a compound with the head noun, I have discussed the case of some Mande and Gur languages that can be added to the list proposed by Dahl (2004) of languages in which morphological compounding is a fully regular and productive way of expressing modification of nouns by attributive adjectives, although this phenomenon is rarely explicitly acknowledged as such in the current descriptions of the Mande and Gur languages in which it is found. This confirms Dahl's suggestion that the use of morphological compounding as the regular way of combining nouns with attributive adjectives is probably more widespread in the languages of the world than apparent from the available documentation.

Abbreviations

ABSTR = abstraction, CL = noun class, D = definite, DEM = demonstrative, PL = plural, POS = positive, POSS = possessive, REFL = reflexive, REL = relativizer, S = subject, SG = singular, TR = transitivity marker

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