



# MORPHOLOGICAL CLASSES AND GENDER IN 'BÓNÁ' (YUNGUR)

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- Our first work on ʔóná (Yungur), an Adamawa language from Nigeria.
- We will show that the ʔóná noun class system is non-canonical, which is not untypical for the area:
  - a beautifully symmetric system of three agreement classes, that can each be triggered by either SG or PL nouns,
  - signs of breakdown (uncertainty and random (?) variation),
  - hints of renewal in class marking on nouns
- And propose a hypothesis on the origin of construct forms of nouns

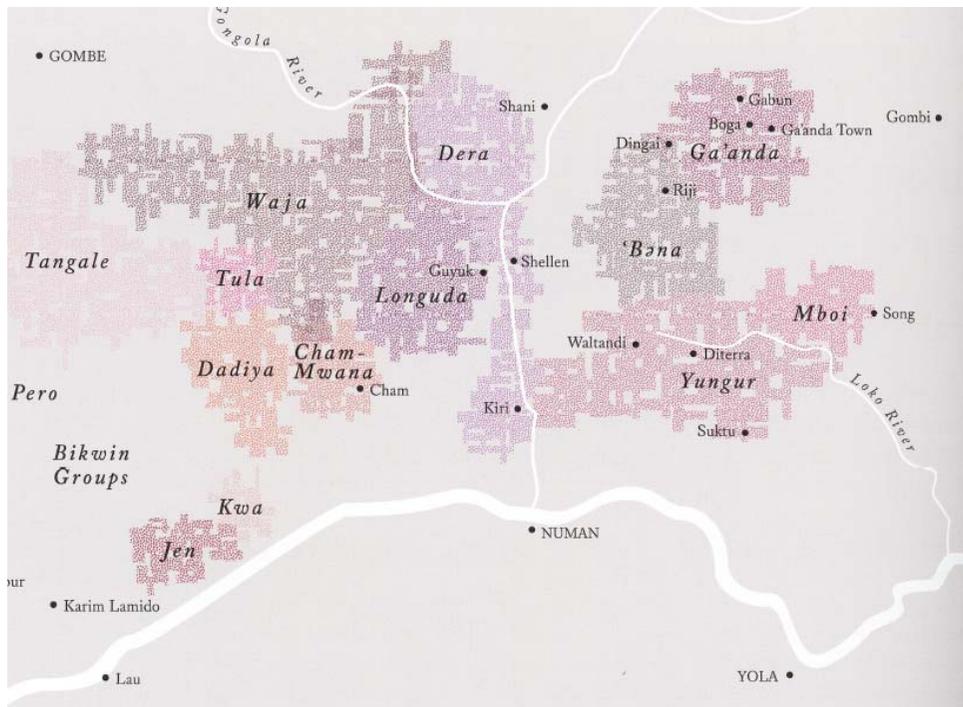
- Introduction to the Bóná language
- Noun classes in Adamawa
- Agreement classes (genders) in Bóná
- Morphological classes in Bóná
- Construct forms of nouns

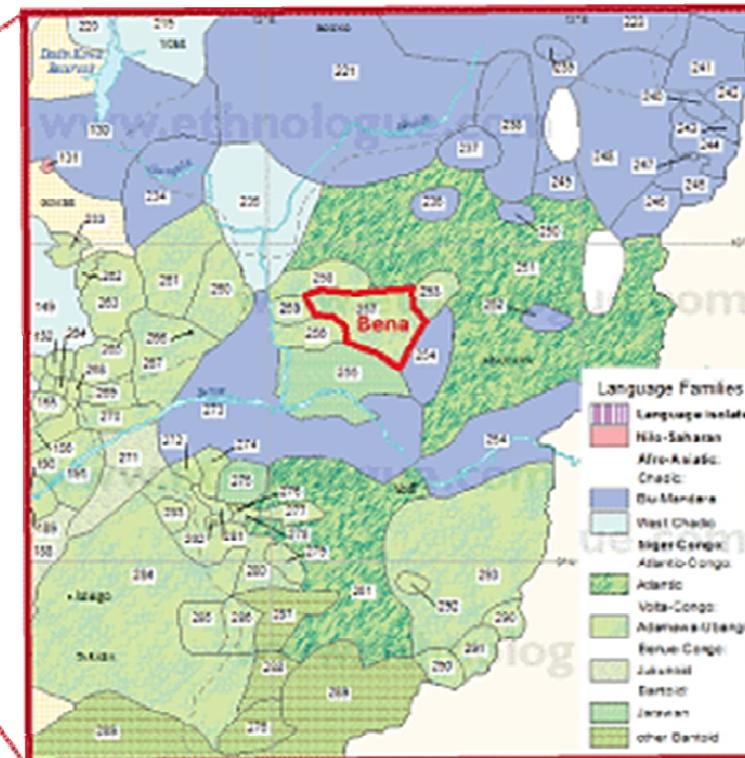
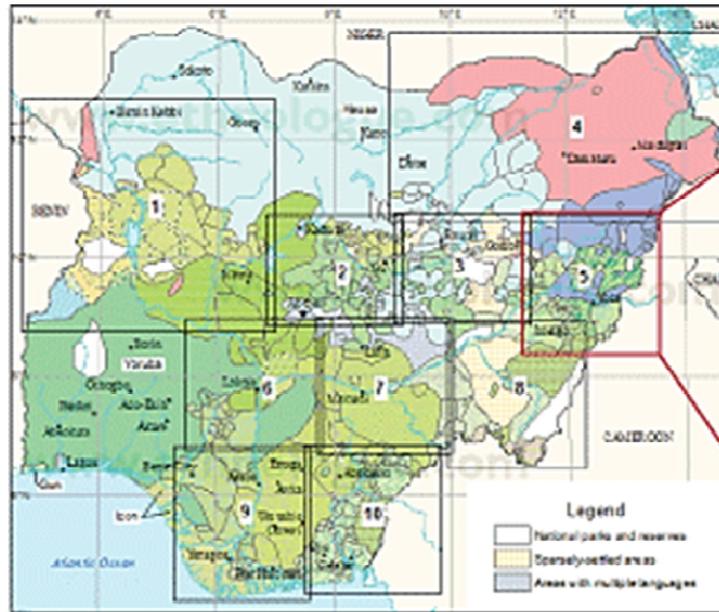


Sā:ḃētá Bùktà,  
our main consultant

Forms a sub-group of Adamawa(-Gur), together with Mboi and Kaan (Libo).

Genealogical classifications are allegedly complicated by lexical taboo.





## Segmental phonology

- about 25 consonant phonemes\*
  - labio-velars
  - implosives (ɓ, ɗ)
  - labio-dental flap found in one ideophone
- 6 vowel phonemes

## Tone

Three level tones, with a puzzling distribution:

In stem-initial syllables, voiced obstruents are always followed by a L, other consonants never.

There is no such correlation in other syllables.

Rather simple tonology

Two major tone rules: rightward spread and contour simplification. In both rules, L and M tones behave as if they were identical.

Morphotonologically more complex, e.g.

Nouns with a L or a H pattern in isolation are split in two tone classes each in the position of genitival modifiers. H nouns are either H or M in this position and L nouns either L or LHL.

- logophoric pronouns
- clusivity distinction in 1PL
- aspectual distinctions (no clear evidence of tense)
- ...

all fairly typical for the region / family

- Only a quarter of Adamawa languages have overt class markers (Kleinewillinghöfer, ms).
- Usually they are suffixes, showing resemblances with class markers of the Gur languages.
- We have very few grammatical descriptions of Adamawa languages, especially those of Nigeria, and therefore little information about gender agreement.
- As a whole, the family tends towards the “Kwa” type in Good’s (2012) typological overview of N-C noun class systems (which doesn’t include Adamawa languages).

Bóná has gender agreement on demonstratives, indefinite determiners, possessive pronouns and some adjectives. There are three distinct agreement patterns: wa, ya and ba.

(9) dòbrè **wānō** ‘my bush’  
rèké **yānē** ‘my sugar cane’  
ám **bánā** ‘my children’

(10) fótá: **wā** ‘this horn’  
ét **yā** ‘this person’  
ám **bā** ‘these children’

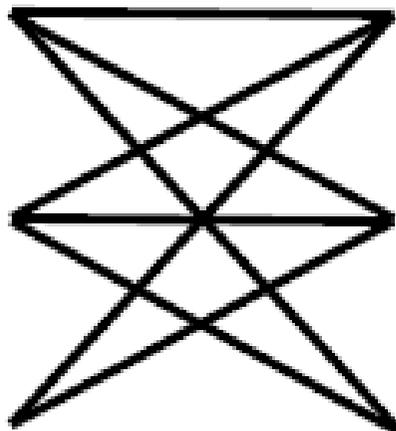
(11) pá: tʃé**ô** ‘black sesame’  
ét tʃé**ê** ‘black person’  
bét tʃé**â** ‘black people’

If we define genders as sets of nouns that trigger the same agreement patterns, there are eight genders in Bóná.

SG

PL

wā



wā

yā

yā

bā

bā

Although gender assignment is semantically largely arbitrary, at least one semantic generalisation can be made:

almost all **6a**-nouns are plural **human** nouns.

This semantic principle is “active” in the polysemous noun *kǎ:má*

(12) *kǎ:mó wā* ‘these seeds’

*kǎ:mó 6ā* ‘these paternal consanguinal relatives’

Untypical characteristics (in a N-C perspective):

- three different agreement patterns = very few
- all can be either SG or PL (but *ba* is very rare in the SG)
- frequent doubt among fluent speakers on the right agreement pattern
- nouns that trigger the *ba*-pattern, can usually also trigger *wa*-agreement (in free variation)

Bóná has about twenty **morphological classes**, defined as coded singular/plural pairings.

Most of the class markers are suffixes (or enclitics), but there are some pre-stem markers and circumfixes too, on top of a number of irregular pairings that involve suppletion.

Formal typology of morphological classes:

SG and PL coded

-a / -e

-e / -a

-e / am- ... -a

-e / -ma

-e / ɓ- -a

-e / -sa

-o / -sa

-o / -a

-ra / -ta

...

only PL coded

∅ / -me

∅ / -mse

∅ / yò:-

∅ / -se

∅ / -sa

∅ / -ta

...

no class marking

SG = PL

no PL

NB: formal stacking?

Example of SG and PL coded: the *-ra / -ta* class.

The tone of these class suffixes is lexically determined:

- (mostly) H if the last stem tone is H
- (mostly) M if the last stem tone is M
- unpredictable if the last stem tone is L

- (12)    *bàl-lā / bàl-tā* ‘hill/s’  
          *bèm-rà / bèm-tà* ‘bracelet/s’  
          *bõ:-rá / bõ:-tá* ‘spring/s’

(N.B. entirely H nouns of this class are consistently of the tonal type that becomes M in genitive modifier position)

Derivational use:

(13) trees

kāt-ā / kātɕ-ě

kūml-á / kūml-é

bàt-ā

their fruits

kātā-rá / kātā-tá

kūmlā:-rá / kūmlā:-tá

bàtè-rá

The -ra / -ta affixes apparently add to a stem that contains the singular suffix -a

The -e / ám<sup>M</sup> - ... -a class: **renewal** of class marking

ám<sup>M</sup>, arguably derived from the noun *ámbá* ‘children’, appears as part of a circumposed plural marker in a semantically heterogeneous group of nouns.

(14) bwàdē / ám bwàdā ‘calabash/es (sp)’

bwè: / ám bwà: ‘dog/s’

fólé / ám fílá ‘hoe/s’

About half of the nouns have no class marking, i.e. no coded opposition between a SG and a PL form.

- some have no plural (e.g. mass nouns)
- for some nouns, the SG and the PL are simply identical

(15) sùkē: / sùkē̄: ‘tiger nut/s’ (*Cyperus esculentus*)  
ō: / ō̄: ‘field/s (sp)’

- for many nouns our consultants say they don't know the plural, which is surprising since there is a kind of default plural marker yò:, which shows up in borrowings.

NB.

(16) dù:mà 'salt'

hwā:mā 'paste'

mē:mā 'milk'

mūt mā 'blood'

sóm mâ 'urine'

bà:mà 'chaff'

Not morphologically separable, but arguably a historical class marker (cf. Bantu class 6).

The choice between agreement patterns *wa* and *ya* can be predicted on the basis of the last segment of the noun, whether it synchronically has a suffix or not:

Final a, o → wa

Final C, i, e, u → ya

→ this suggests that historical class suffixes have been integrated in stems.

Most Bóná nouns have two (sometimes three) forms, the choice of which is determined by their syntactic environment.

When modified, these nouns have a reduced form, which can be analysed as **a construct form** (Creissels 2009).

(17) há:témō ‘onion’  
há:tém wā ‘this onion’

but

(18) gòmló ‘okra’  
gòmló wā ‘this okra’

(20) **été** 'person'

**étó** kwáلكwāl 'the person is beautiful'

**ét** kwáلكwāl yā 'a beautiful person'

**ét** yā 'this person'

**ét** bārè 'a man'

Possible origin:

- Lack of class marker on the noun in the presence of agreeing modifiers, as e.g. in Aghem (Hyman 1979).
- When class markers are integrated in noun stems, this leads to construct forms.

- The Bóná noun class system is reduced in a typologically interesting way: three classes that can each be either plural or singular.
- There are signs of its further reduction/breakdown (variation, doubt).
- Gender assignment is phonological.

- Bóná has a complex system of morphological classes (20 + ), which is clearly evolving, but which seems robust:
- There are signs of breakdown: former affixes integrated in stems, doubt about correct plural of nouns.
- But also signs of renewal: a new prefix (< 'children'), seemingly stacked affixes.

- Nouns tend to have no class marker when accompanied by an agreeing modifier
- In combination with the integration of class markers into stems, this leads to the emergence of construct forms of nouns

- Creissels, Denis (2009). Construct forms of nouns in African languages. In: Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond, Monik Charette, David Nathan & Peter Sells (eds) *Proceedings of Conference on Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory 2*. London: SOAS. [www.hrelp.org/eprints/ldlt2\\_08.pdf](http://www.hrelp.org/eprints/ldlt2_08.pdf)
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- Kleinewillinghöfer, Ulrich. (1996). Die nordwestlichen Adamawa-Sprachen – Eine Übersicht. In: Seibert, Uwe (ed). *Afrikanische Sprachen zwischen Gestern und Morgen*. Frankfurter Afrikanistische Blätter, 8: 80-103.