Can Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic help us understand the evolution of Niger-Congo noun classes?

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Noun classes: Niger-Congo and elsewhere

- Globally speaking, Niger-Congo type noun-classes are fairly rare; semantically based systems of number marking with affixes and concord on adjectives and other parts of speech are highly atypical, even in Africa.
- Indeed, there is every reason to think that they are not even typical of the whole of Niger-Congo, despite a large and careless literature to the contrary.
- They are lacking in Mande, Dogon, Ijoid, Kaalak-Domurik apparently from the beginning.
- They appear to have eroded in much of Kwa and Volta-Niger.
- So it is quite likely that they appeared partway through the evolution of Niger-Congo and the non-class languages are at the top of the tree.
Noun classes: Niger-Congo and elsewhere

Elsewhere in the world, the main area where these occur is in Papuan and Australian languages. In most cases these languages have only three or four classes, but a few have evolved complex systems comparable to Niger-Congo.

Similar systems without the same type of concord appear in North Caucasian and Yeniseian.

Nilo-Saharan has striking systems of affix alternation in a few branches, Daju, Kadu and Koman, but these are not associated with semantics or concord.

These can often be associated with a three-term system of number-marking.

So it seems a reasonable question to ask how noun-classes evolved.
Word structure in Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic

The Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic language phyla, despite being geographically intertwined in SE Asia, are not usually thought of as being genetically related.

Despite this, they have a strikingly similar word structure, usually known in the regional literature as ‘sesquisyllabic’. This image this suggests is quite misleading. However, words typically have a C prefix and a stem that looks as if it is underlying CVCV, though it is shortened in many languages.

In the regional literature the terms ‘minor’ and ‘major’ syllable are used.

Chinese, of course is not like this, but Sinitic is highly atypical for Sino-Tibetan; Tibetan does have this structure.

It is tempting to pronounce words as if they had a consonant cluster at the beginning but it ain’t so.
Word structure in Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic

- These prefixes do *not* mark number and thus do not alternate but they do have semantic associations; there is a particularly widespread k- prefix in Austro-Asiatic marking animals.
- Moreover, the prefixes can be exchanged in cross-linguistic perspective, in other words, the stem will remain the same and a new prefix acquired.
- So it is reasonable to assume that there was once a much more widespread system of semantically assigned prefixes and that this has eroded, but is still partially present in the minds of speakers.
- If so, how did this system originate?
Classifiers in Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic

- Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic, along with many other language phyla (Austronesian and many New World phyla) are marked by nominal classifier systems.
- These are essentially grammaticalised nouns that have become obligatory accompaniments (clitics?) when marking plurals or groups of nouns.
- They do not show any type of agreement.
- It is likely that the prefix systems in Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic are in fact frozen classifiers, which preceded noun stems and then became partially incorporated.
- A new classifier would then be applied to the stem.
- This very much corresponds to affix renewal in Niger-Congo where noun-class affixes become unproductive and a new affix is added.
Northwest Kainji went down this road

- Such a word structure is not typical of Niger-Congo in general.
- However, at least one group of languages does look like this synchronically. Nouns in the northwest Kainji languages (cLela, tHun, ut-Main, Gwamhi-Wuri), typically have the structure C.CVCV (often transcribed with a schwa to make sense of the otherwise disquieting appearance).
- These prefixes can be said to bear tone, although it appears to be always low, so it is no longer functional (also the case in Himalayan Sino-Tibetan).
- And it is highly likely that this was an intermediate stage in some other branches of Niger-Congo.
- Hyamic (Plateau) has developed a complex system of initial clusters.
And others went down this road

- Probably due to deletion of –V in the prefix
- Similarly, many Kordofanian languages have C.VCV structures, where the initial C is an alternating prefix. This suggests (perhaps) loss of C1 of the stem and subsequently loss of –V from the prefix.
Classifiers in Africa? I

- Nilo-Saharan languages don’t have concord but it do have productive affixes and affix renewal
- A language like Krongo can have up to three frozen affixes
- Which of course is part of th reason Greenberg classified the ‘Tumtum’ languages as Niger-Congo
- We do not usually consider African languages as having nominal classifiers, or SE Asian languages as having noun-classes.
- But there is increasing evidence for the secondary evolution of nominal classifiers in Niger-Congo languages
- The most well-known case is Kana, an Ogoni language, part of the Cross River group.
- Kana has pretty much lost its nominal morphology, and the classifiers, may be an attempt to compensate, as it were
Other examples have been mooted, such as in Ejagham, although rarely described in detail.

An interesting example is Mambay, an Adamawa language spoken in north-central Cameroun, described by Erik Anonby.

Mambay has a functioning system of noun-class suffixes, but which appears to be developing prefixed classifiers.

I suspect these systems are more common than has been recognised, as a function of what we expect to find in various language phyla.
Recently a clue to the evolution of such systems has surfaced. Gumuz, a Nilo-Saharan language of the Ethio-Sudan borderland described by Colleen Ahland, turns out to have a system of predicate classifiers, marking semantic fields, typically of shape or texture.

These are infixed in ‘split verbs’ and are copied as demonstratives.

The major classifiers are -Vk’w ‘head’, -Vts ‘body’, -Vc ‘eye/seed’, -k’wós ‘tooth’, and –ts’ê ‘ear’

- Mithun(1986) describes a verbal classifier whereby “a noun is incorporated into a verb to categorize an extra predicate argument...usually in S or O function.”
- With this type of verbal classifier, there is frequently a generic-specific relationship between the incorporated NP and the external NP which accompanies it.
The significance of this system is that classifiers which develop from grammaticalised body parts are governed by the semantics of nouns.

For example,

- ‘entities that are head-like in shape and/or function or closely associated with such objects’ govern the following classes of object
  - fingers, toes
  - water, sauce, beer,
  - lotion, soap (in a container)
  - ears of corn
  - pots, pans, cans

It is easier to imagine how such bound classifiers could develop into alternating affixes.
In constructions where the classifier refers to the object of the main verb, the classifier is suffixed to the verb and thus abuts the object noun directly.

It is thus not difficult to see how it could become attached to the noun rather than the verb.

It is not clear how common such systems might be in Nilo-Saharan; Ahland gives some other possible cases.

There are some striking resemblances to Fur, a language which is geographically remote.

So it seems possible that Nilo-Saharan originally had a predicate classifier system with grammaticalised body parts and others becoming re-analysed as affixes.
What might have happened here?

The persistence of t- and k- affixes are the most visible evidence of this system of incorporation and renewal.

However, Nilo-Saharan has another widespread feature, analysed by Gerrit Dimmendaal in 2001, the system of three-term plurals.

Essentially, this is a system whereby the unmarked term refers to a concept in general and a singulative and plurative are marked with affixes.

In English this could be conceptualised by the trio: ‘a beer’, ‘beer’, ‘beers’.

Such three term systems of number-marking are common in Nilo-Saharan and often make use of the affixes, especially t- and k-, which may thus alternate.
The controversial bit

Referring back to the possibility that noun classes were not typical of early Niger-Congo, I want to suggest that contact with Nilo-Saharan was responsible for their evolution.

At the node where Atlantic, some Kordofanian, Kru-Gur-Adamawa and other develop, is a radical break with the Mande/Dogon/Ijoid zone.

The guilty party may be Central Sudanic, which looks nothing like Niger-Congo morphologically today due to massive erosion, but shares more lexicon than most Nilo-Saharan.

So imagine persistent bilingualism leading to the adoption of both the three-term system of number-marking and the concept of semantic association of affixes.
What may have happened is that the early adopters made the same mistake as Greenberg over Kadu; they interpreted the system as more coherent and integrated than it actually was.

It seems possible Kaalak-Domurik [Katla-Tima] is an example of this; essentially, underneath extensive allomorphy, these languages have two singular number markers t- and k- and one plural marker, i-, which may have been adopted from Nilo-Saharan and are certainly not evidence for a system of noun-classes.

Three-term number marking persists in Niger-Congo today, especially in Gur and Kainji, though it has rarely been described. (and even singulatives in t-, though this may be coincidence)

So what was probably a relatively simple system (such as those Papuan with 3/4 classes) became elaborated with multiple semantically associated affixes

Which has also happened rather more rarely in both Papuan and Australian
The controversial bit III

- The last step is the evolution of concord, which is highly distinctive to Niger-Congo (although note it also evolves from non-concord systems in Oceania)
- My suggestion is that this evolves from demonstrative copying
- Long ago, Carl Hoffman suggested (in a discussion of Kainji) that copying of demonstratives lay at the origin of the switch from prefixing to suffixing and vice versa
- All that has to happen is for the copied demonstrative to be interpreted as part of an adjacent adjective
- The same mistake that leads to ‘thine arse’ being written ‘thy narse’ in Renaissance England.
A link with verbal extensions?

- There is a curious relationship between verbal extensions and noun-classes. At least in Niger-Congo, the two seem to go together (though not perfectly), although I don’t have any good explanation for this.

- But (at least in Plateau and Gur), the same three-term system of number-marking occurs with singulatives and pluratives.
Conclusion

- Of course, if any of these hypotheses are right, our approaches to Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo morphology are seriously confused.
- Looking at extra-African evidence for how morphological systems evolve may well provide clues to the genesis of those within Africa.
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