Comparative nominal classification systems in the Mel languages

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The Mel languages of Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, possibly a primary branch of Niger-Congo, are divided into a Northern (Temne and Baga languages) and a Southern subgroup (Kisi and Bullom languages) (HAMMARSTRÖM et al. 2019).

Basically, the Mel languages have typical Niger-Congo systems of nominal classification. In Northern Mel nouns are marked by prefixes in a Bantu-like manner, while in Southern Mel both prefixes and suffixes are found. My PhD project has two primary goals: the synchronic description of the nominal classification systems of selected Mel languages and the historical comparative reconstruction of the systems of the proto-languages of Mel and its subgroups. The talk will provide first reconstructions of nouns taken from basic vocabulary. Based on these data, the reconstruction of the proto-systems of the subgroups is straightforward, but the two proto-systems – though they show some obvious parallels – turn out to be quite different from each other. So, the main challenge of the reconstruction work is to trace these systems back to Proto-Mel as their common ancestor.

At least in Kisi (Southern Mel, see Childs 2000) many nouns do not show a simple singular-plural dichotomy as it is e.g. typical for Bantu languages, but occur with three different class markers, possibly a singular and two plural forms. The distinction may even have to do rather with individuation than with number values. In Northern Mel, on the other hand, a clear singular-plural opposition can be found.

For the reconstruction of the Proto-Mel system two questions have to be answered. The first one is about a presence of triple paradigms as in Kisi in the proto-language. The second one is about the structure of nominal forms. Was it prefixing as in Northern Mel or prefixing and suffixing as in Southern Mel? A reconstructed Proto-Mel system with the latter structure would demonstrate that a Bantu-like prefixal system can be a secondary development. If so, the widely-assumed Bantu-like nature of the Proto-Niger-Congo system has to be thoroughly reconsidered.

References:


(Available online at http://glottolog.org, accessed on 2019-12-10.)