

Verbal number or agreement? Testing diagnostics in Kunama (Eritrea).

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A distinction has long been drawn between inflectional argument agreement and derivational verbal number (pluractionality). Verbal number is a semantic property of the verb (Lasersohn 1995:241; Mattiola 2019:27-28; Newman 1990:53), encoding multiple instances of an action (event number), or an action performed by or on multiple participants (participant number) (Corbett 2000:246-249; Durie 1986; Newman 1990, 2012:195). Event number has been extensively investigated (Cusic 1981; Henderson 2012; Lasersohn 1995; Ward 2012; Wood 2007). Little attention has been given to distinguishing participant number from verb agreement. I propose a set of diagnostics and test them against Kunama verbal morphology.

Kunama verbs have proved challenging to analyse (Böhm 1984:13-29; Thompson 1989:308-324) and raise questions about the boundary between agreement and verbal number. Two verb classes exist. Class II morphology is extremely complex, involving a person hierarchy, competing subject and object forms, tone, vowel harmony, and length, and appears highly irregular. Teasing these factors apart, I find a system that, while complex, is regular, in which agreement and participant number interact. A single set of nominative agreement prefixes occur. Object prefixes also occur that distinguish only person, not number. Both occupy a single prefixal agreement position based on a person hierarchy (1). Previous analyses argue object plurality is encoded by object prefixes with long vowels. However, length is independent of the object person prefixes: instead an underspecified vowel prefix harmonises with the vowel melody of whatever object prefix ((2a)vs(1b)) or subject prefix ((3a)vs(1a)) is present. In addition, vowel-initial Class II verbs display an additional prefix *n-* or *l-* between agreement and the root, deriving a pluractional stem. Distribution of the two prefixes is lexically determined (compare homophones (4)vs(6c-d)). Unlike agreement's accusative alignment, this morphology targets the absolutive object (4)-(5) and intransitive subject (6). To complicate matters, some verbs display an alternative prefix *m-* with dual subjects. Veselinova (2013) cites Kunama as exemplifying dual verbal number via suppletion. However, no suppletion occurs. Instead, the morphology concatenates in the same way as pluractional *l-* (7).

This raises questions for diagnosing participant number. Why not say absolutive plurality in (4)-(7) is a further layer of agreement? With sets of prefixes targeting S/A versus O, another prefix targeting S/O may allow the hearer to more effectively triangulate the referent. No established criteria exist for diagnosing participant number, but several typical characteristics have been proposed (Corbett 2000:252-258; Durie 1986:357-362; Mattiola 2019:86-93; Newman 1990, 2012), several of which apply to Kunama. I develop 10 explicit criteria against which I test *n-/l-/m-*, finding they conform to six: input to inflection (inside agreement, preserved in absence of agreement); input to other derivation; ergative alignment regardless of nominal alignment; restriction to a non-functionally determined subset of verbs; plural more widespread than dual; and conformance to transitivity hierarchy. They fail to conform to one: semantically restricted distribution (they occur with a lexically/phonologically determined conjugation class). They are inconclusive for three further criteria: fewer number distinctions than agreement; number mismatches; functional range. These criteria allow me to conclude that Kunama *n-/l-/m-* encode verbal number.

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