Grammaticalization of Body-Part Terms in Mundabli

Rebecca Voll

Abstract

The chapter describes the grammaticalization of body part terms in Mundabli (Cameroon: Yemne-Kimbi, a.k.a. Western Beboid). It has been shown for related languages (Heine 1991: 123–147) that spatial postpositions are commonly derived historically from body part nouns, and this also seems to be the case for Mundabli.

However, Mundabli body part terms also occur in a third category, which I call the ‘postnominal body part construction’. In this construction they behave differently from both nouns and postpositions regarding both their semantics and their syntactic behavior. In this chapter, I describe postnominal body part constructions and show what distinguishes body part terms in these from both nouns and postpositions. I conclude by suggesting that Postnominal body part constructions are an intermediate stage in the grammaticalization from nouns to spatial postpositions.

1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe the grammaticalization of body-part terms in Mundabli (Cameroon: Yemne-Kimbi, a.k.a. Western Beboid). It has been shown for related languages (Heine et al. 1991: 123–147) and also seems to be the case for Mundabli that spatial postpositions are commonly derived historically from body-part nouns. However, in Mundabli body-part terms also occur in a third category, which I call the ‘postnominal body-part construction’. In this construction they behave differently from nouns on the one hand and from postpositions on the other, regarding both their semantics and their syntactic behavior. In this paper, I will describe postnominal body-part constructions and show what distinguishes body-part terms in these from both nouns and postpositions.

After a brief introduction to the language and its structure, I will first describe the structure of noun phrases and the use of postpositions in order to lay the foundation for comparing postnominal body-part constructions with both of them. I will then describe the structure of postnominal body-part constructions and reject the possibility that the body parts in these constructions...
are arguments of the verb in some kind of external possession (or possessor raising) constructions. Having done this, I will compare the behavior of body-part terms in postnominal body-part constructions with that of both nouns and postpositions by testing them for some of Heine’s criteria for nominality (Heine 1989 and Heine et al. 1991: 133) as well as for other language-specific criteria. The final section will summarize the findings and provide some conclusions drawn from the data.

2 Background

Mundabli (ISO 639-3 code: boe)\textsuperscript{1} is a Yemne-Kimbi\textsuperscript{2} (Niger-Congo, Southern Bantoid) language spoken in Lower Fungom in the Northwest Province of Cameroon. With only around 500 speakers (Good et al. 2011), it is endangered by virtue of its small number of speakers alone, although it is currently relatively isolated from the extensive influence of Cameroon Pidgin English (ISO 639-3 code: wes), the local lingua franca, due to its remoteness and due to a general lack of infrastructure in the area. The data on which this article is based were collected during fieldwork with various consultants, conducted mainly in Wum and Mundabli (Northwest Province, close to the Ring road), in 2008, 2009 and 2012, as well as during various phone calls with one of my main informants. The data includes both natural language data and data from directed elicitation sessions. Previous work on Mundabli includes a survey of noun classes in all “Beboid” languages (Hombert 1980) and survey work done by SIL (Hamm et al. 2002 and Hamm 2002) and more recently a treatment of tone in the tense system (Voll 2013) and a grammatical overview of the languages of Lower Fungom (Good et al. 2011). There is no standardized orthography for Mundabli. The examples provided in this article are transcribed using my own evolving system.

\textsuperscript{1} While the Ethnologue (Lewis 2009) lists Mundabli, Mufu and Buu as varieties of a single language with the name Buu, “it seems probable that the linguistic variety spoken in Buu is a distinct, though closely related, language from the varieties spoken in Mundabli and Mufu.” (Good et al. 2011: 105).

\textsuperscript{2} The Yemne-Kimbi group of languages (formerly known as Western Beboid languages) is a recently suggested group based on geographical criteria, as there is neither evidence for the genealogical coherence of this grouping nor for its affiliation with what Good et al. (2011) recently proposed to rename Beboid (but which is still better known as Eastern Beboid).