Regula Christiansen-Bolli


Introduction. Tadaksahak, spoken mainly in northeastern Mali by some 32,000 speakers (the Idaksahak, literally ‘sons of Isaac’, and their associates), is the largest language belonging to Northern Songhay1 – a small group of closely related languages of the Sahel-Sahara region with a Songhay core vocabulary and basic grammar, but a lexicon overwhelmingly composed of Berber loans, bringing with them a good deal of Berber morphology. The fact that Tadaksahak causative and passive morphology is not only entirely Berber, but can only apply to Berber roots – forcing systematic suppletion of almost all inherited Songhay stems (Christiansen and Christiansen, 2002) – illustrates the extent of language contact, resulting in what some would define as mixed languages (Wolff and Alidou, 2001; Benítez-Torres, 2009). This is reflected in the typology (mixing prepositions and postpositions, pre- and post-nominal numerals, etc.) as well as in the vocabulary.

The development of Northern Songhay is not yet well-understood. Souag (fc.) proposes a scenario for its spread northwards to Tabelbala which suggests that Northern Songhay had already emerged some 800 years ago, giving ample time for contact effects to build up. However, why and when it came to be adopted by the Idaksahak, who probably originally spoke Berber, remains unclear. In addition to its obvious value as the first grammar of a very inadequately documented language, Christiansen-Bolli’s grammar provides vital data for understanding the contact-intensive development of this language and of the family to which it belongs.

Overview. The introduction presents a brief overview of the Idaksahak in context, including a helpful map, a brief discussion of their non-Tuareg origins (Jewish according to some of their neighbours, Moroccan Berber according to themselves) and their traditional function within Tuareg society as religious specialists ("marabouts"), and some notes on dialectal variation and the circumstances of fieldwork. It is followed by a discussion of the phonology, which, as Nicolaï (1979; 1981) noted, shows an interesting combination of Berber features (such as emphatics, schwa, and sibilant harmony) and Songhay features (such as phonemic vowel length and a voiceless palatal stop).

The most striking feature of the morphology, discussed in chapter 3, is the systematic suppletion found in diathesis morphology. The proto-Northern

---

1 For a hopefully comprehensive bibliography of the family, see https://sites.google.com/site/lameen/northern-songhay.
Songhay causative suffix -nda has been lost without trace; the only means of forming causatives is the Berber prefix s- (with various not entirely predictable allomorphs, along with vowel ablaut in the stem to which it is attached), and, with a few exceptions, this prefix can only be attached to Berber roots. Thus, for example, the causative from bübi ‘be black’ is š-ákwal, based on a root found in Tuareg. The same is true of the reciprocal (expressed analytically elsewhere in Songhay) and the passive (which within Songhay presents difficulties for reconstruction). The Tadaksahak facts apparently generalise to its close relative Tagdal as well (Benítez-Torres, 2009). As elsewhere in Northern Songhay, shorter verbs are usually but not always borrowed with a prefix y-, apparently corresponding to the Berber 3m.sg. subject prefix. It is possible that the contrast is reconstructible for some subgroup of Northern Songhay: compare Tadaksahak kəmás ‘to tie up... in corner of garment’ (p. 49) and Korandjé kʷmʷuš ‘to tie up in cloth’ with Tadaksahak y-iddár, Korandjé (y)i-ddža ‘to live’ (p. 293), both from Berber (Souag, 2010).

Nominal morphology too has been significantly complicated by Berber influence. Most nouns in the language take the Berber gender prefixes a-(m.sg.) / ta- (f.sg.), even though Tadaksahak has no gender agreement, and these prefixes have derivational uses to indicate size and gender. Whereas proto-Northern Songhay, like most Songhay languages today, probably had only a single clitic plural morpheme for noun phrases, Tadaksahak has four main plural classes, with several subclasses, often involving internal vowel change as well as affixation. Compounding has become quite unproductive, often supplanted by Berber derivational morphology. Postpositions are all inherited, while prepositions include at least two Berber loans. The grammar unfortunately does not discuss relational nouns, but as elsewhere in Songhay, they play an important role: cf. p. 190, tabákart on mó (sheep gen front) “in front of the sheep”, p. 245, gánda n cidáy ka (earth gen under at) “under the earth”.

The pronouns are much as in other Northern Songhay varieties, including the etymologically mysterious 2nd person plural ándî. Their syntax and morphology, however, contain some surprises. The pronoun separator n (p. 123), apparently a meaningless morpheme placed between adjacent pronouns (or rather between a pronoun and a following 3rd person pronoun?) to separate them, has only loose counterparts elsewhere in Songhay. The suppletive 2nd person dative ana has been retained from Songhay, unlike in Korandjé, and, unlike any other Tadaksahak dative pronouns, follows rather than precedes the direct object pronoun – as all dative pronouns do in most Songhay varieties. Most bizarrely, the instrumental/comitative preposition anda follows its complement when, and only when, the predicate to which it belongs also contains