Person and gender: competing agreement paradigms in Cicipu

Stuart McGill, School of Oriental and African Studies

1 Introduction

This paper is concerned with the Cicipu (West Kainji, Benue-Congo) language spoken in northwest Nigeria. Many, perhaps all, West Kainji languages have two interacting paradigms of agreement, one inflected for PERSON and the other for GENDER. These paradigms compete in the 3rd person, offering a choice of AGREEMENT morphology on PERSON MARKERS of various kinds[1].

I will first (§2) introduce the relevant morphosyntactic environments in Cicipu. In §3 I argue that, in contrast to Corbett's (1991) analysis of the East Kainji language Amo, it is better to treat the alternation as involving two separate feature paradigms (PERSON and GENDER), rather than a single complex one. The paper finishes with some brief comparative remarks (§4).

2 Person and Gender in Cicipu

Cicipu[2] is a member of the Kambari cluster of West Kainji, which belongs to the Central Nigerian branch of Benue-Congo (Blench n.d.). As with other languages in West Kainji, there are two sets of competing paradigms of person markers, one indexed for PERSON and the other for GENDER.

The various paradigms of Cicipu person markers can be represented as in Table 1. There are four different PERSON-marked paradigms depending on the morphosyntactic position: subject prefix, post-verbal object enclitic (2 sets), and 'elsewhere'. For GENDER-marked forms there is a two-way distinction between subject prefix and other environments.

Table 1: Summary of Cicipu person markers

	Subject prefix	**Post-verbal object**	**Elsewhere**
Person	person subject prefixes	object enclitics (2 sets)	personal pronouns
Gender	gender subject prefixes	gender pronouns	

Individual paradigms are given below for the independent pronouns and subject prefixes: PERSON in Table 2 and GENDER in Table 3. In each cell the independent pronoun is given first, and then the corresponding subject prefix[3].

Table 2: Independent personal pronouns

Person	Singular	Plural
1	ámú / N[4]-	ótú / ti-
2	ìvɔ́ / {C-, Ø-, vi-}	ìdɔ́ / i-
3	éví / u-	éré / A-

---

1   In this paper the term AGREEMENT is used inclusively to cover NP-internal agreement, intra-clause agreement, and anaphoric agreement (see Corbett 2006:21-23 for discussion). Therefore verbal prefixes, incorporated pronouns and independent pronouns are all held to 'agree', either with a clausemate NP or an extraclausal antecedent. PERSON MARKER is used in the same way as Siewierska (2004), as a cover term for independent pronouns, pronominal clitics and affixes, and grammatical agreement markers.

2   A sketch grammar of Cicipu can be found in McGill (2009); for the person marker paradigms see Chapter 7.

3   Both sets of subject prefixes are AMBIGUOUS AGREEMENT MARKERS (Bresnan and Mchombo 1987). In other words they can occur with or without an explicit subject NP.

4   The symbol **N-** represents a nasal homorganic with the following consonant, **C** represents an underspecified consonantal weight unit, which assimilates to the consonant to which it is attached, resulting in a geminate, and **A** represents an affix vowel whose value is determined by harmonisation with the stem.

Table 3: Gender pronouns/subject prefixes in Cicipu

Class[5]	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Pronominal	ke/kA-	he/hA-	yi/yi-	me/mA-	mi/mi-	ti/yi-	wi/wu-	vi/{C-,Ø-, vi-}	kwi/ku-

It is the competition between the two shaded areas that is of interest here. Example (1a) shows AG1 GENDER agreement on the verb, while (1b) shows gender-neutral 3PS PERSON agreement. Either is acceptable in the case of an NC1 noun (e.g. **kà-dáaná** 'eagle, 1/2').

(1) (a) **kò-dôohò**   (b) **ù-dôohò**   SUBJECT PREFIX, SG
      AG1-disappear\RLS6   **3S**-disappear\RLS
      it disappeared   *it disappeared*

The alternation also exists for plural nouns – (2a) shows gender agreement while (2b) shows (gender-neutral) person agreement:

(2) (a) **hò-dôoh<ìl>ò**   (b) **ò-dôoh<ìl>ò**   SUBJECT PREFIX, PL
      AG2-disappear<PLAC>\RLS   **3P**-disappear<PLAC>\RLS
      they disappeared   *they disappeared*

Since gender is not marked for 1st and 2nd persons, the alternation is confined to the 3rd person.

For what follows it is important to note that there is no Cicipu noun class pairing corresponding to the shaded 3P U/A forms in Table 2 (e.g. the (b) forms in examples 1-2). Instead, these forms can in principle be used with *any* referent (animate or inanimate), provided it is sufficiently discourse-topical (see McGill 2009 for details). The same is true for the object enclitics and other agreement targets.

3 Arguments for two separate paradigms

In §2 I presented separate person and gender paradigms as if they were 'facts' about Cicipu. However the various morphological distinctions could have been, and indeed have been, divided up differently. The point I want to make here is that the competition in agreement discussed in §2 is best modelled just as it was set out above – as two distinct paradigms, one indexed for PERSON and the other for GENDER. In other words, the U/A person markers are inflected for PERSON but are unspecified as to GENDER.

The situation in Kainji contrasts with Bantu, for which Welmers explicitly argues *against* the setting up of two paradigms, one for personal pronouns and one for gender pronouns:

> In a number of Bantu language grammars, there are references to "personal pronouns" in connection with verbs or with expressions of possession (which represent only one of many uses of the associative construction). The implication seems to be that morphemes or sets of morphemes meaning 'he/she, him/her, his/her' and 'they, them, their (personal)' belong with first and second person pronoun forms, and that referents to non-personal nouns have some kind of a secondary status. Actually, of course, *the referents for personal nouns, singular and plural, are nothing more than the concords for nouns of class 1 and 2. If there is to be any dichotomy, it should be between first and second person morphemes on the one hand and all class concords, including those for classes 1 and 2, on the other*

---

5 The numbering system bears no relation to the Bleek-Meinhof system.
6 Abbreviations: 1P = first-person, 2P = second-person, 3P = third-person, AG = agreement, NC = noun class, P = plural, PLAC = pluractional, PRO = pronoun, RLS = realis, S = singular.

Welmers' approach seems sensible for the kind of system he describes. Nonetheless, a complication arises from the fact that in many Bantu languages the 1/2 ("human") gender *does* occupy a privileged position – specifically, 1/2 agreement can be triggered by nouns which belong (morphologically) to other noun classes. To give just one example, in Kiswahili (Corbett 1991:248-250) a number of kinship nouns belong to NC9 in the singular and NC10 in the plural. As expected, these trigger gender 9/10 ("syntactic") agreement within the noun phrase. However when it comes to verb agreement, they trigger gender 1/2 (i.e. human, "semantic") agreement (Welmers 1973:175). The relevant point here is that the competition is between two different genders: 1/2 and 9/10, and the morphemes involved both uncontroversially inflect for GENDER and belong to the same feature paradigm. As was mentioned in §2, the situation in Cicipu (and other Kainji languages) is different – the U/A person markers are quite distinct from any of the genders.

The PERSON/GENDER alternation in West Kainji has not, to my knowledge, been discussed in the typological literature on agreement. However Corbett (1991:247) does briefly discuss a similar situation, involving two sets of pronouns in the East Kainji language Amo (described in Anderson 1980a:157-159). The gender-marked set can be used with either human or non-human referents, but the person-marked set (whose exponents are similar in form to the Cicipu U/A sets) are limited to humans. Again Corbett sees this as conflict between syntactic and semantic agreement, involving two different genders. He is thus implicitly setting up U/A as a "minority target gender" (Corbett 1991:160), i.e. one available for agreement but with no lexical members[7].

It might then be argued that Cicipu U/A should be treated in the same way, as an extra minority target gender. There is however an important difference between the situation in Kiswahili and Amo (as reported by Anderson), and that in Cicipu. In the former cases the distinction is between SYNTACTIC and SEMANTIC agreement (Corbett 1991:225-260). With Cicipu however, *any* kind of noun has the potential to trigger U/A agreement. Examples from the corpus[8] of nouns triggering both kinds of agreement include the words for *palm-wine*, *fish trapping*, *trees*, *a lake*, *a fence*, *clothing*, *beer*, *gin*, *tobacco*, *the Bible*, and *the Koran*, not to mention all kinds of animals and humans. In addition to animacy, the pragmatic notion of DISCOURSE-TOPICALITY (Tomlin et al. 1997) is a crucial factor. Inanimate objects may trigger U/A agreement, provided they are sufficiently discourse-topical (see McGill 2009 for details).

The problem with expanding the notion of semantic gender agreement to include such cases is that it brings into question what it means to 'agree'. Corbett (1991, 2006) and other typologists (e.g. Siewierska 2004) have adopted Steele's (1978:610) characterisation of agreement as "some systematic covariance between a semantic or formal property of one element and a formal property of another". In the case of Cicipu U/A agreement with inanimate referents, no such "semantic or formal property" can be identified. It seems the only way out is to abandon the idea that U/A agreement involves GENDER, and to consider it as simply PERSON agreement, since the feature value [PERSON 3] is the only thing that the agreement controller and target have in common.

In the remainder of this section I give five further arguments in favour of considering these person markers as exponents of PERSON rather than GENDER.

First, the two paradigms of independent pronouns can be distinguished by their phonological shape. All the independent personal pronouns have the shape VCV (e.g. **ámú** '1PS', see Table 2), whereas all the gender pronouns have the shape CV. Including **éví** '3PS.PRO' and **éré** '3PP.PRO' along with the gender pronouns would mean this generalisation would be lost.

Secondly, the two paradigms differ with respect to their tonal behaviour. In the realis[9] mood both

---

7   As for example, the Bantu locative genders.
8   See McGill (2009) for details of the Cicipu corpus.
9   In the irrealis mood all subject prefixes are always H.

person and gender subject prefixes have low tone utterance-initially, but they differ as to whether this prefix is affected by rightward H-tone spread. Gender prefixes are affected but not person prefixes (e.g. **kà-bárá ká-dúkwà** 'the old man(NC1) AG1-left', **Múusá ù-dúkwà** 'Musa[name] 3PS-left')[10].

Thirdly, only personal pronouns are involved in inclusory pronominal constructions, not gender pronouns. So in the case of a wall (**kù-cíngà**, 9/2) and a hut (**ká-ayá**, 1/2), either **éré ìn k-é** '3PP.PRO and NC1-PRO' or **kw-í ìn k-é** 'NC9-PRO and NC1-PRO' can be used to refer to the two objects, but not **h-é ìn k-é** 'NC2-PRO and NC1-PRO', even though **h-é** is the appropriate gender-marked plural pronoun for 'walls'.

Fourthly, as was diagrammed in Table 1, the two sets of object enclitics only exist for the three persons – there are no gender-marked object enclitics, the independent pronouns are used instead.

Finally, the corpus distribution of the U/A subject prefixes with respect to GRAMMATICAL and ANAPHORIC agreement[11] patterns with the 1P and 2P prefixes, not with the gender-marked 3P prefixes[12].

4 A comparative perspective

We can find evidence of similar alternations in a number of related languages. Still within the Kambari cluster, Hoffmann briefly mentions the Central Kambari (CK) PERSON/GENDER alternation, calling it "a very peculiar feature" (1963:168). Unlike Corbett's treatment of the East Kainji language Amo mentioned above, Hoffmann analyses the CK U/A forms as standing outside the gender system - "general 3rd person subject prefixes" (1963:168), likewise Crozier (1984:215-222). Crozier also identifies topicality as a crucial factor in the distribution of the alternation, describing the CK "personal agreement prefixes" as "topic agreement" and the "noun class concordial prefixes" as "subject agreement".

Similar alternations can also be found in East Kainji (Amo, see §3), Plateau (e.g. Kaje, McKinney 1978), and even further afield in Grassfields Bantu (Ngyemb   n, Anderson 1980b), although in the latter the alternation is limited to plurals. And of course, we should not lose sight of the fact that, as discussed in §3, Kiswahili and other narrow Bantu languages also have a 3rd person alternation, but between two different kinds of gender agreement. In fact, similar alternations can be found in other Niger-Congo families. Naden (1982:35) describes the situation in the Gur language Frafra:

> The demonstratives and particularly *the anaphoric pronouns usually took forms which were neutral with regard to the nominal classes, but were rather determined by patterns of topicalisation and participant-structure in the discourse*. The class-specific pronouns were rare and seemed to occur sporadically [my italics – S.M.].

In summary, the above-mentioned languages can be distinguished by considering the following:

- Are the 'over-generalised' agreement exponents gender-specific (e.g. Kiswahili) or gender-neutral (Cicipu, Central Kambari, Frafra, Amo, Ngyemb   n)?

- Is the relevant condition a purely semantic one such as animacy/humanness (e.g. Kiswahili,

---

10 There are also tonal differences between the independent personal pronouns and the gender pronouns, although this time the situation is reversed – the person-marked pronouns are the ones affected by neighbouring tones, whereas the gender-marked ones are stable (although the tone may vary according to syntactic position, it is seemingly independent of the surrounding phonological material).

11 See Bresnan and Mchombo (1987) for the distinction between GRAMMATICAL agreement and ANAPHORIC agreement.

12 Admittedly this could be explained in terms of topicality, rather than features.

Amo, Ngyembɔn) or does it also involve topicality (e.g. Cicipu, Central Kambari, Frafra)?

With respect to agreement features, the first question is to some extent irrelevant: it can still be argued that only the feature GENDER is involved by appealing to the 'minority target gender' concept. However the second question *is* relevant, as was argued in §3. If *any* kind of referent can trigger either set of exponents, then it is hard to argue that there is agreement in GENDER rather than just PERSON.

Languages with gender-neutral forms can be further parameterised according to how these forms came about. In most of the languages mentioned above the 'over-generalised' agreement morphology is phonologically similar to U/A or U/BA, and therefore likely to be a reflex of the Proto-Niger-Congo 'human' classes (i.e. those corresponding to Proto-Bantu 1/2, see Williamson and Blench 2000:40). However in others (e.g. Amo) the 1/2 noun class pairing clearly remains and the gender-neutral PERSON agreement markers appear to be an independent innovation.

The extent to which these parameters interact in Niger-Congo is a matter for further research.

References

Anderson, Stephen C. (1980a). The noun class system of Amo. In Larry Hyman (ed.), Noun classes in the Grassfields Bantu borderland 155-178. Los Angeles: University of Southern California.

Anderson, Stephen C. (1980b). The noun class system of Nygembɔn-Bamileke. In Larry Hyman (ed.), *Noun classes in the Grassfields Bantu borderland* 38-56. Los Angeles: University of Southern California.

Blench, Roger M. n.d. The Benue-Congo languages: a proposed internal classification. Electronic ms. [Available online: http://www.rogerblench.info/Language%20data/Niger-Congo/Benue-Congo/General/Benue-Congo%20classification%20latest.pdf]

Bresnan, Joan and Mchombo, Sam A. (1987). Topic, pronoun, and agreement in Chicheŵa. *Language* 63, 741-782.

Corbett, Greville G. (1991). *Gender.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Corbett, Greville G. (2006). *Agreement.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crozier, David H. (1984). A study in the discourse grammar of Cishingini. PhD thesis, University of Ibadan.

Hoffmann, Carl (1963). The noun-class system of Central Kambari. *Journal of African Languages* 2, 160-169.

Lewis, Paul. (2005). *Ethnologue: languages of the world*, 16th edn. Dallas: SIL International.

McGill, Stuart (2009). Gender and person agreement in Cicipu discourse. PhD thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies. [Available online http://www.cicipu.org/papers/gender_and_person_agreement_in_cicipu_discourse.pdf].

McGill, Stuart (n.d.). The genetic classification of Cicipu. Electronic ms. [Available online http://www.cicipu.org/papers/2009-05-06_classification_cicipu_working.pdf].

McKinney, Norris P. (1978). Participant identification in Kaje narrative. In Joseph E. Grimes (ed.), *Papers on discourse* 179-189. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics.

Naden, Anthony J. (1982). Class pronoun desuetude revisited. *Journal of West African Languages* 12, 34-42.

Siewierska, Anna (2004). *Person.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Steele, Susan (1978). Word order variation: a typological study. In Joseph H. Greenberg, Charles A. Ferguson and Edith A. Moravcsik (eds.), *Universals of human language* 585-623. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Tomlin, Russell S., Forrest, Linda B., Ming Pu, Ming and Hee Kim, Myung (1997). Discourse semantics. In Teun A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse studies: a multidisciplinary introduction, vol. 1: Discourse as structure and process* 63-111. London: Sage.

Welmers, William E. (1973). *African language structures.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Williamson, Kay and Blench, Roger M. (2000). Niger-Congo. In Bernd Heine and Derek Nurse (eds.), *African languages: an introduction* 11-42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.