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Word Classes in Bilin

BILIN

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1. Bilin is usually considered to be a member of the Agau group of the Cushitic (a branch of the Hamitic) languages.[1]) It is spoken in and around Keren in Eritrea (Ethiopia). Like other Agau languages, it forms a small linguistic island in a predominantly Ethiopian Semitic area.

In terms of traditional typology[2]) it is clearly an inflectional language. Precisely what is usually meant by 'inflectional' is not clear, but for Bilin the essential characteristics are:

(i) that the morphology is statable in terms of inflectional categories (case, person, number, etc.), all of whose terms have positive exponents,[3]) so that, in Matthews' terminology,[4]) every word so treated is assigned 'a specific set of morphosyntactic properties';

(ii) that there is some degree of fusion in the exponents of terms in these categories, i.e. that determinate segmentation[5]) is not always possible – there are 'portmanteau[6]) morphs';

(iii) that there may be more than one exponent of the same term in one of these categories, i.e. there are allomorphs that are not

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[1]) C.f. A. N. Tucker and M. A. Bryan, *The Non-Bantu Languages of North Eastern Africa*, (Handbook of African Languages, Part III), (London, 1956).

[2]) C. E. Bazell, *Linguistic Typology*, (London, 1958), also published in *Five Inaugural Lectures*, ed. P. D. Strevens, (O.U.P. Language and language learning series, Vol. 11), (London, 1965).

[3]) Bazell, op. cit., 13.

[4]) P. H. Matthews, 'The inflectional component of a word-and-paradigm grammar', *J. Ling.* 1 (1965) 140.

[5]) Bazell, op. cit., 11.

[6]) C. F. Hockett, 'Problems of morphemic analysis', *Lg* 23 (1947) 231–247, also in *Readings in Linguistics*, ed. M. Joos, (New York, 1958).

phonologically determined (even allowing for other than linear segmentation in the statement of the exponents – which may be prosodic or discontinuous).

The morphology of Bilin is highly complex. For one class of word (the verb) the 'scatter',[7] i.e. the total number of forms of a single word (the total number of 'words' in a single 'lexeme'[8])) is, in theory at least, over 10 000.

If reference is made to morphosyntactic criteria alone the words of Bilin fall into two main classes only – NOUNS (*'nouns* in a broad sense')[9] and VERBS.

The inflectional categories associated with the noun are NUMBER and GENDER. These are perhaps best treated as a single category, NUMBER-CUM-GENDER,[10]) since there are only three terms – masculine (singular), feminine (singular), and plural (common). For the verb the categories are NUMBER-CUM-GENDER, PERSON, and what I have called ASPECT and TENSE. There are three terms in the category of person – FIRST PERSON, SECOND PERSON, and THIRD PERSON, but since there is no masculine/feminine distinction with first and second persons, a seven-term (not a nine-term) category of number-cum-gender-cum-person could be recognised. The paradigms[11]) arranged in terms of person and number-cum-gender I have called 'tenses'. These, however, include not only 'past' and 'present' tenses but also some that could be characterised as 'conditional', 'relative', 'jussive', 'reported speech', 'temporal', 'participles', etc. What I have called 'aspect' is a classification of these tenses on formal grounds into two classes. The exponents of aspect are wholly prosodic, involving stress and vowel harmony; semantically they differ in time reference – present and non-present (past and future).

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[7]) Cf. J. R. Firth, 'The technique of semantics', *TPS* 1935, 62.

[8]) For 'word' in this sense and 'lexeme' see J. Lyons, *Structural Semantics*, (Philological Society publication, 20), 12 (Oxford, 1963). We are here concerned with lexeme classes, I believe, but since the title of the volume refers to 'word classes', I shall talk about 'words' and '(word) forms' rather than about 'lexemes' and 'words'.

[9]) Cf. C. F. Hockett, *A Course in Modern Linguistics*, 22. (New York, 1958).

[10]) For more information see my 'The verb in Bilin', *BSOAS* 19 (1957) 131–159 and 'The noun in Bilin', *BSOAS* 21 (1958) 376–391, henceforth referred to as 'Verb' and 'Noun'.

[11]) I use the term 'paradigm' to ıefer to a specific set of forms sharing some property, not to the entire scatter of the verb or noun.

2. Perhaps the most interesting problem associated with word classes in Bilin concerns the category of CASE. Prima facie case is, as in other languages, a category associated with the noun and may be exemplified by the following paradigms:[12])

	'man'	'mother'
Nominative	gərwa	gäna
Accusative	gərwäs	gänât
Comitative	gərwädí	gänädi
Dative	gərwäd	gänäsí
Genitive	gərwi	gänâr
Directive	gərwil	gänätʃl
Ablative	gərwilʃd	gänätʃləd

The category of case is inflectional in the sense suggested above – all the terms have positive exponents, there is fusion (-a is the exponent of both singular and nominative), and there are allo-morphs.

Case, however, is marked not on the head of a nominal phrase, but on the last word form only of such a phrase. This is often a form of a noun – of a substantive (see below) or an adjective functioning as modifier (modifiers usually follow the head). There would then seem to be no problem since both substantive and adjective are within the class noun; case would appear to be a category of the noun, but stated once only in a nominal phrase, not as in other languages (e.g. Latin) both on the head and on all modifiers.

The problem arises from the fact that the final word form of a nominal phrase may be not a form of a noun at all. It may, for instance, be a 'relative' form of the verb; a member of a paradigm such as:

3 masc., 1 masc./fem.	gäba	(he/I) who refuse(s)
3 fem., 2 masc./fem.	gäbra	(she/you) who refuse(s)
3 plur.	gäbnd	(they) who refuse
2 plur.	gäbdənd	(you) who refuse
1 plur.	gäbna	(we) who refuse

But the forms quoted[13]) here are those used when they, as modifiers,

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[12]) For the names of the cases cf. L. Hjelmslev, *La categorie des cas*, (Acta Jutlandica, 7, 1), (Aarhus, 1935).

[13]) In 'Verb' 138, the paradigm given is *gäbäxʷ, gäbräxʷ*, etc. But these are the 'nominalised' forms – see below and 'Verb' 159.

precede the head. If they follow the head they have case (as well as number-cum-gender). For the 3 masc., 1 masc./fem. forms the complete paradigms are:

	masc. (sing.)	fem. (sing.)	plur. (common)
Nom.	gäbäx^w	gäbäri	gäbäw
Acc.	gäbäx^{w}sí	gäbärit	gäbäwsí
Com.	gäbäx^{w}dí	gäbäridí	gäbäwdí
Dat.	gäbäx^{w}ʒd	gäbärisí	gäbäwʒd
Gen.	gäbäx^{w}ʒd	gäbärír	gäbäwʒd
Dir.	gäbäx^{w}lí	gäbäritʒl	gäbäwlí
Abl.	gäbäx^{w}lʒd	gäbäritʒlad	gäbäwlʒd

It is not verbal forms alone that have this characteristic. Genitive forms of nouns equally function as modifiers and like the relative forms of the verb may precede the head; but they may also follow the head and are then inflected for case (i.e. doubly inflected since they are already genitive). For the genitive form gərwi (p. 202) the paradigms in terms of number-cum-gender and case are like those of the verbal form given above:

	masc.	fem.	plur.
Nom.	gərwix^w	gərwiri	gərwiw
Acc.	gərwix^{w}sí	gərwirit	gərwiwsí
Com.	gərwix^{w}dí	gərwiridí	gərwiwdí

etc.

More striking still is that at least one suffix -di, 'and', which seems to be independent of the grammatical categories with which we are concerned here, is included with the word forms for inflection. Word forms with final -di have the case endings usually associated with feminine nouns ending in -i, e.g. q^{w}ərədi gərwadi 'the boy and the man' but q^{w}ərədi gərwadit q^{w}alx^{w}ʒn 'I saw the boy and the man' (di is suffixed to both words but only the second has case inflection). Other suffixes follow the case endings.

Modification in the modifier-head structure is, of course, recursive; if the modifier is a 'genitive', we can say not only *the boy's mother*, but also *the boy's mother's home*. In Bilin this syntactic recursiveness is matched in the morphology. A triply inflected form was noted – gərwix^{w}dʒx^w 'of the man's'; the steps in the derivation are gərwa nominative, gərwi genitive, gərwix^w genitive-nominative, gərwix^{w}ʒd genitive-genitive, gərwix^{w}dʒx^w genitive-genitive-nominative.

Some genitives have case endings where there appears to be no head with which they are associated as modifiers (the head is 'understood' or 'deleted'), e.g. *yədanəxʷə́s säna* 'like my brother's' but *yədanə́s säna* 'like my brother' (*danəxʷə́s* is genitive-genitive, *danə́s* is genitive, – *säna* 'like' is the head).

A similar interpretation is open to the forms *garʷixʷə́d* and *garʷiwə́d* both translatable as 'because of the man' but literally *to-the-of the man* (the deleted head being singular and plural respectively).

There would be no problem if the case endings could be regarded as derivational suffixes, but they have all the characteristics of inflection. What *is* clear is that case is not a category associated with the noun, but with the nominal phrase. In this respect it is not unlike the possessive *'s* of the notorious *The King of England's Isle* – except that this is clearly not inflectional.[14] We ought not then to describe the verb forms with case endings as 'verbal nouns' (or 'verbal adjectives'), since case is not associated with these forms but with the whole phrase,[15] (and should we also have to talk of 'nominal nouns' and even 'nominal-nominal nouns'?).

3. In terms of word classes of the traditional kind we probably do not need to subclassify the verbs in Bilin. But there are three points worth noting:

3.1. There are nine different 'conjugations of the verb'.[16] The differences between them are, however, purely morphological (and like aspect are prosodic, involving vowel harmony and stress), but

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[14] But for a similar feature in another Cushitic language, see B. W. Andrzejewski, *The Declensions of Somali Nouns*, (London, 1964), and my review in *Lg* 41 (1965) 676–680.

[15] There are two further comments. First, if we wanted to treat these in terms of 'class changing' feature, we should have to permit 'class changing inflection' but it is usually only derivatives that may be class changing (cf. R.H. Robins, *General Linguistics; an Introductory Survey*, (London, 1964) 258–259). Secondly, the position in Bilin is not different syntactically from that of other languages. It is merely that the position of the case endings makes it clear that it is the phrase, not the word, that is nominalised. In English similarly, in *singing hymns* it is nonsense to treat *singing* as a verbal noun – it is not the word but the whole phrase that is nominalised.

[16] 'Verb' 143.

they do not relate to any differences in the relevant grammatical categories.

3.2. In addition to the forms and the grammatical categories already mentioned most verbs of Bilin have also what are sometimes referred to as 'derived forms' or 'themes'.[17]) These are such as could be characterised as 'passive', 'causative', 'reciprocal', 're-ciprocal causative', 'frequentative causative', and 'frequentative passive'. But these are not inflectional, for two reasons. First, not all verbs have all the themes (indeed there is considerable variation); if theme were a grammatical category many, if not most, verbs would be defective. Secondly, although the exponents of each theme are not always the same (there are many allomorphs), there is no fusion of the exponents (there is always determinate segmentation).

If the verbs were classified in terms of the themes that occur there would be a very large number of different verb classes and all of them of indeterminate membership. It might be thought that we can distinguish between such types as transitive and intransitive verbs in terms of the latter having no passive, but even this would involve arbitrary decisions. For there are pairs of themes which translationally are of the kind 'surprise' and 'be surprised', but it is not at all clear from the morphology whether these are re-spectively active (transitive) and passive, or causative and active (intransitive).

The only feasible analysis seems to be to treat each theme as a separate lexeme, related in terms of derivation. Some of the themes may be designated transitive or intransitive but on purely syntacti-cal grounds.

3.3. We can recognise in Bilin two 'verbs 'to be'' (one the 'copula', the other of 'being in a place'), and a 'verb 'to have''.[18]) The term 'verb' is, however, being used in a rather different sense, for the 'verb' here subsumes forms of different verbs (lexemes). Some of these verbs (lexemes) have no other forms (are defective), others have forms that are used in different ways and with a different meaning. There is no doubt that a grammar would have to recognise these three 'verbs' with a considerable amount of supple-

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[17]) 'Verb' 132, n. 3.
[18]) Cf. my 'Bilin 'to be' and 'to have'', (*African Language Studies*, 6 (1965) 101–111).

tion, but the recognition of a subclass here would not be simply subclassifying verbs (lexemes), but rather verb forms; this sub-classification would separate forms of the same verbs.

4. For the subclassification of the noun we must rely largely upon syntactic criteria and especially upon the occurrence of forms as modifiers in nominal phrases, as heads of nominal phrases and as adjuncts. There are five main subclasses – ADJECTIVE, SUBSTANTIVE, PRONOUN, ADVERB and PREPOSITION.

4.1. Adjectives may be defined as those words whose 'basic' forms (i.e. those without double inflection) act as modifiers in the nominal phrase. In modifier position they agree in number and number-cum-gender and case with the head of the phrase which is normally a substantive.

Apart from this the main ways in which they resemble and differ from other subclasses of the noun are:

(i) adjective forms also occur as complements with the verb 'to be', the 'copula', (but so do forms of substantives);

(ii) forms of adjectives occur, though only rarely, as heads of nominal phrases (alternatively, however, they may here be treated as modifiers with the head deleted);

(iii) forms of both substantives and verbs occur as modifiers within the noun phrase, but not the 'basic' forms – only with double inflection (genitives of substantives and the relatives of verbs);

(iv) morphologically case endings for the adjectives are the same as for certain types of substantives, but their number-cum-gender morphology is quite different. The patterns for most adjectives are of two kinds only:

masc. (sing.)	fem. (sing.)	plur.	
gärix̣	gäriri	gäriw	'much'
čakkan	čäkkani	čäkkanan	'cruel'

They are quite unlike those of the substantive (p. 207); the only shared pattern is one that is borrowed from Semitic – that of the broken plural:

(adj.)	ḥädis	ḥädisí	ḥädayəs	'new'
(subst.)	näwid	näwidí	näwayəd	'lamb'

(v) all adjectives have forms with distinction of number-cum-gender as well as of case. This is true of only a very small number of substantives (basic forms only), such as *nāwid* (above).

4.2. Substantives occur only as head words of nominal phrases in their basic forms and, in the nominative (or 'uninflected form'), occur only as head words of noun phrases functioning as subjects or complements of the 'copula', but not as adjuncts (this distinguishes them from adverbs). Most of the differences between substantives and adjectives have already been noted. The plural formation of the substantives is quite characteristic and different from that of the adjectives (except as we have seen in the case of broken plurals). The most common features associated with this are:

(i)	change of consonant, e.g.	*'əxər*	*'əkəl*	'father'
(ii)	loss of final -*a*, e.g.	*wäka*	*wäk*	'hyena'
(iii)	reduplication, e.g.	*gāš*	*gāšəs*	'face'

or combinations of these.

Most substantives have only two forms in the number-cum-gender category, the singular being either masculine or feminine. A few have three (we have already quoted one example), others have only one, e.g. *qir* (masc. sing.) 'night', *'aqᵘᵉ* (plural) 'water'.

4.3. Pronouns have the same syntactical function as substantives except that:

(i) their forms do not normally occur together with modifiers (forms of adjectives or doubly inflected forms of nouns or verbs);

(ii) they constitute a 'closed class' – seven in all with, in their nominative forms, concord in terms of person as well as number-cum-gender with the forms of the verb. Some of the tenses of the verb have seven member paradigms, one agreeing with each of the pronouns; the seven pronouns are:

3 masc. sing.	*ni*
3 fem. sing.	*nəri*
2 masc./fem. sing.	*'ənti*
1 masc./fem. sing.	*'an*
3 plur.	*naw*
2 plur.	*'əntən*
1 plur.	*yən*

Morphologically the pronouns have one peculiarity – that the

nominative form is quite different from the other case forms which must be derived from the genitive (for most nouns the accusative, comitative, and genitive are derived from the nominative), e.g.

Nom.	*'an*
Acc.	*yət*
Com.	*yədí*
Dat.	*yə́d*
Gen.	*yə*
Dir.	*yəl*
Abl.	*yələ́d*

Moreover, the genitive forms of *'an* (*yə*) and *'ənti* (*kʷə*) do not have the phonological characteristics of Bilin word forms since there are no word forms of the pattern CV where V is a short central vowel. They could therefore be regarded as pronominal prefixes if we ignored their place in the paradigm.

4.4. Adverbs are problematic. It is not at all certain that they can be clearly distinguished from substantives. They have the case forms of nouns (or at least some of them) as shown by: *nandí läffäk* 'minds of today' (lit. 'with-now hearts'), *nád 'əndärǻsi təksəné* 'doing better than them' (lit. 'to them beyond-(acc.) we-doing-well'). They may, perhaps, be distinguished from substantives in that they may occur in their nominative (uninflected) forms as adjuncts (i.e. not necessarily as heads of nominal phrases that are either in subject or in complement position). In addition:

(i) they may appear not to occur with modifiers (no examples were tested in my texts);

(ii) they have only one set of forms in the number-cum-gender category though some (like *'əndärá* (above)) have the morphology normally associated with masculine forms, others (like *neŋʷi* 'this year') the morphology associated with feminine forms.

4.5. Prepositions are to be defined as a subclass of noun because their forms always occur with preceding genitival forms. They function, that is to say, as heads of nominal phrases with another nominal phrase as 'genitival' modifier. This is seen at its simplest when they occur with preceding genitive forms of the pronoun (pronominal prefixes), as illustrated by *dåw* 'all around' in *nén yədåw gən* 'they are all around me'. This is identical in structure

with *nén yəʃán gən* 'these are my brothers'.[19]) The genitival modifier
may itself be a highly complex form as shown in *'əhə́ni 'ən soldíra
dihisrəxʷə́s kot* 'take this in place of the penny you lost' (lit. take
the penny which-you-lost-genitive in-place-of), (with *kot* 'in place of'
the preposition).

5. There are no real problems about the main classes of Bilin.
The morphology clearly distinguishes the two main classes of verb
and noun. There is no justification for becoming involved in
arguments about the status of the forms of the verb with case
endings. As far as verb classes are concerned they are forms of
verbs, though their function as modifiers is indicated syntactically
and morphologically. What is of interest from a typological point
of view is the fact that in Bilin a part of the morphology that
indicates a change in syntactic function, though clearly inflectional,
has some of the characteristics of derivational suffixation (its
recursiveness, its application to a suffix like -*di*).

In the subclassification the most interesting points are, perhaps,

(i) in the class of nouns it is the adjective that most clearly
stands apart from the other subclasses, if, that is to say, we are
not simply concerned with syntactic classification (which is of
little typological interest since it is probably applicable to most,
if not all, languages);

(ii) the definition substantive/adverb is one that is not easily
established and may well not be always clearly maintained.

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[19]) In the neighbouring Semitic languages, Tigre and Tigrinya, a similar
feature occurs, in spite of the fact that the pronominal suffixes (not prefixes
in these languages) cannot be similarly regarded as genitive forms of the
pronouns since there are no case forms in their languages, e.g. Tigrinya
məska 'with you', *betka* 'your house'.