

Beyond “noun classes”. Gender and deriflection in two Kulango variants of Côte d’Ivoire¹.

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ABSTRACT

Abandoning the classical philological concept of “noun classes”, the author aims to analyze and describe the mechanisms characterizing the gender systems of two variants of Kulango applying the model proposed by Tom Güldemann and Ines Fiedler (2019) based on the concepts of agreement (AGR), gender, nominal form (NF) and deriflection (classes).

Kulango is a Gur language spoken in the north-eastern territories of Côte d’Ivoire. The two variants considered in this paper are the one spoken in the prefecture of Bouna (Elders 2008) and the one spoken in the sub-prefecture of Nassian (Micheli 2007). Both variants are based on number inflection systems indicating complex SG/PL number features, through specific NFs attached to the lexical basis as suffixes. In the variant of Bouna there are some examples of NFs for transnumeral nouns, which do not occur in the variant of Nassian.

The gender system presents instead a simple animate/inanimate pattern, as it is the case in Akan (the major Potou-Akanic language), as described in Güldemann and Fiedler 2019:114-121.

Agreement in qualitative adjectives seems to be lacking in the variant of Nassian, except for some small traces in color adjectives, while it seems to be present and productive in the variant of Bouna. In any case, the triggered element (i.e. the adjective) is influenced by the animate/inanimate gender of the head noun rather than by its NF. Comparing the data emerging from the analysis of the two Kulango variants, it results evident, specifically from table 2, that the dialect of Nassian, presents a quite larger degree of simplification with respect to the dialect of Bouna. This is probably due to the fact that the sub-prefecture of Nassian lays in a buffer region between the territory of the Kulango kingdom of Bouna and the lands occupied by the Akan kingdom of Gyaman with which cultural and economical networks must have been historically stronger with a consequent higher influence.

Keywords: *Grammatical gender, Gur languages, Kulango, Animacy, Deriflection*

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1. Introduction

Greville G. Corbett opens his introduction to *The Expression of Gender*² with a perfect slogan: “*Gender is an endlessly fascinating category*” - full stop.

This opening declaration alone suffices to let the reader suspect that under this endless fascination a brave linguist will find a quite complex network of morphological, lexical and cognitive imbricated phenomena.

¹ The contents of this paper have been presented and discussed at the 4th Symposium on West African Languages - Naples, 21-23 September 2022.

² CORBETT 2014:1

If it is true that *gender* is a complex category in itself, it is also true that things become even more complex when trying to grasp and describe the mechanisms underlying African languages in general and, non-Bantu Niger-Congo languages in particular.

In these languages, indeed, the category of gender intersects with some other features, *i. e.*, nominal classes, number and animacy.

In order to better understand how all these features interact with one another, it is first of all urgent to deconstruct some of the classical concepts referring to them.

In their brilliant contribution to the volumes edited by Di Garbo, Olssen & Wälchli in 2019³, Tom Güldeman and Ines Fiedler reached well this aim and proposed a new model for the analysis and description of all those phenomena that until then were too superficially summarized under the umbrella definition of “nominal classes”.

Güldeman & Fiedler, in fact stress the inadequacy of the traditional conceptualization of nominal classes that universally implies a “one-to-one trigger-target mapping”, while conflating in an inconvenient way categories such as agreement class and noun form, which possibly, in the same language, have different behaviors and respond to different rules⁴. Therefore, abandoning the just mentioned classical, inadequate conceptualization, the Güldeman/Fiedler model makes a distinction among all the different mechanisms underlying it, and identifies four different categories, namely:

1. *nominal form* (NF)
2. *deriflection* (a newly coined term/concept - see below)
3. *agreement* (AGR);
4. *gender*.

In so doing, and in order to give anyway an idea of the interconnection characterizing these four different categories, Güldeman & Fiedler propose the use of the concept of *gender systems* as conceived by Corbett 1991, *i. e.*, systems of nominal classification - or categorization - that are reflected *in some ways*⁵ by agreement.

In this paper the author will adopt the Güldeman/Fiedler model describing and discussing the behavior of two Kulango variants concerning number inflection, NFs, and deriflection classes on the one hand (paragraph 2) and gender and agreement classes (paragraph 3) on the other hand.

While nominal forms and agreement classes are to be thought as concrete elements anchored in the morphosyntactic contexts in which nominal and non nominal gender marking occur, deriflection and gender reflect more abstract aspects bound to the lexical/semantic dimension of the words themselves⁶.

Quoting Güldeman and Fiedler, in fact:

“What is called here deriflection (classes) is the morpho(phono)logical counterpart of genders. They are classes of form paradigms operating over nominal lexemes and established on account of identical formal variation that does not need but often does interact with such features as gender, number, etc. Our newly coined term “deriflection” (a blend of “inflection” and “derivation”) thus refers here in a more narrow sense to relevant morphology or phonology that interacts with gender”.⁷

³ DI GARBO Francesca; OLSSON, Bruno, and Bernhard WÄLCHLI (2019) *Grammatical gender and linguistic complexity, Vol. I & II* - General issues and specific studies (Studies in Diversity Linguistics 26 & 27) Berlin: Language Science Press.

⁴ See GÜLDEMAN and FIEDLER 2019: 103.

⁵ Italics is mine.

⁶ cf GÜLDEMAN and FIEDLER 2019: 99.

⁷ *Ibidem* 2019: 99.

Kulango is a non Bantu, Niger-Congo, Gur language spoken in a very small area in the South of Burkina Faso bordering Côte d’Ivoire, in the north-eastern territories of Côte d’Ivoire and in two small villages in Ghana. The two variants considered in this paper are the one spoken in the prefecture of Bouna (Elders 2008), and the one spoken in the sub-prefecture of Nassian (Micheli 2007).

The prefecture of Bouna is completely inserted in the Gur speaking world, surrounded by Gur speaking peoples, while the sub-prefecture of Nassian borders the Akan world, whose closeness has possibly caused the language to evolve more quickly and initiated a process of simplification that is particularly visible right in its gender system. The speakers’ total population for Bouna and Bondoukou (Nassian) Kulango is 133.900. For Bouna Kulango, Ethnologue 2022 reports 14.400 speakers in Côte d’Ivoire and 15.500 in Ghana, while for Bondoukou (Nassian) Kulango the speakers are 77.000 in Côte d’Ivoire and 27.900 in Ghana.

Similarly to the situation of Akan (the major Potou-Akanic language) as described by Güldeman & Fiedler (2019: 116-121), in Kulango a very complex number inflection system on the one hand, is opposed to a very simple animacy-based gender system.

2. Nominal forms and number inflection system

In Kulango the specific NFs indicating SG/PL are suffixed⁸ to the lexical basis.

In the variant of Bouna there are some examples of NFs reserved to transnumeral nouns that do not occur in the variant of Nassian.

As the reader will see in picture 1 and 2 below, both systems are complex to describe due to the high degree of allomorphy characterizing the NFs. In addition to this, many SG NFs can combine with more than one PL NF and the reverse is true, creating a multiplication of pairs that is frankly very difficult to manage, even for fluent and mother tongue speakers.

Regarding allomorphy, Elders (2008 - Bouna) and Micheli (2007 - Nassian) adopted different approaches in their respective grammatical descriptions.

In Micheli’s grammar (2007) only the feature \pm ATR was, in fact, considered as key in determining allomorphy, while no other tentative grouping was attempted, due to the high number of exceptions. On the contrary, Elders proposed larger extensions for grouping allomorphs, on the basis of formal (phonological) rules and considered primarily consonant sounds (and not the opposition voiced/voiceless) as *discrimina* for identifying the different groups.

In this paper Elder’s rules have been applied to the representation of both variants.

Here a prospect of Elders’ singular NFs and their allomorphs:

NF -*ɔ* allomorphs -*o*, -*yɔ*, -*yo*, -*ɛ*

NF -*yɔ* allomorphs -*yo*, -*ỹɔ̃*, *ỹõ̃*, -*yv*, *yi*, *yɛ*, -*ỹĩ*

NF -*gɔ* allomorphs -*go*, -*wɔ*, -*wo*, -*gɛ*, -*ge*, -*ga*, -*ŋɔ*, -*ŋo*, -*ŋɛ*, -*ŋe*, *ŋa*, *ngɔ*, -*ngo*, -*ngɛ*, -*nge*, -*nga*

NF -*kɔ* allomorph -*ko*

NF -*kɔ* allomorphs -*kpo*, -*gbɔ*, -*gbo*

NF -*rɔ* allomorph -*ro*

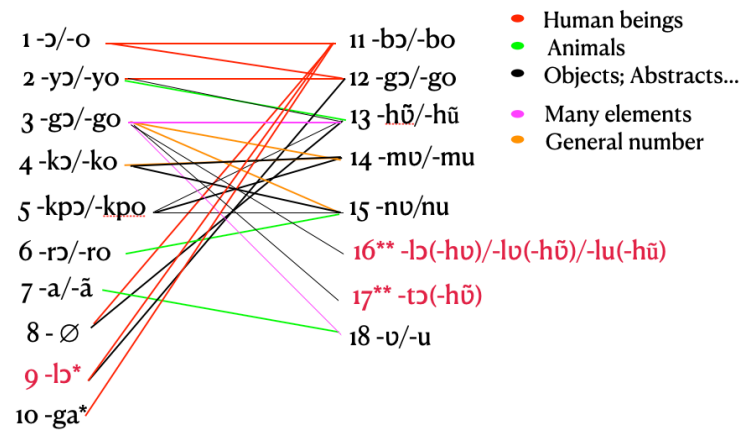
NF *a* allomorph *ã*

⁸ The reader should remember that in Niger-Congo Bantu languages prefixation is the rule rather than suffixation.

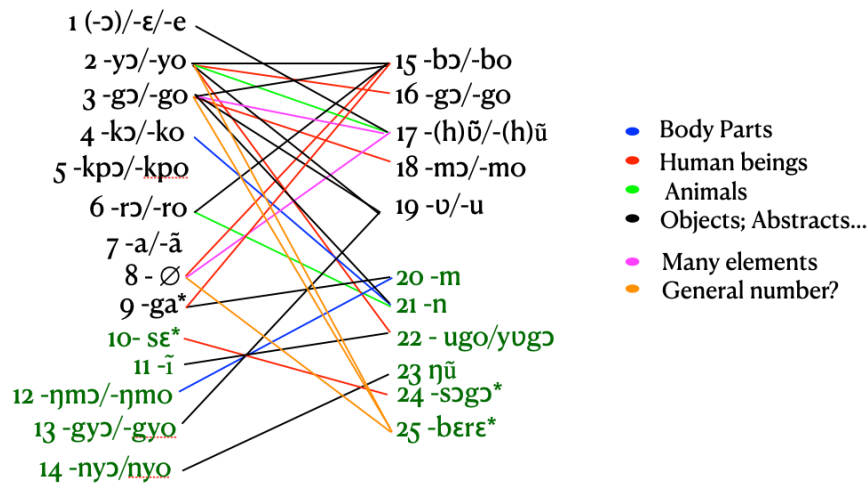
Elders' plural NFs' allomorphs:

- NF *-bɔ* allomorphs *-bo*, *-mbɔ*, *-mbo*
- NF *-gɔ* allomorphs *-go*, *-wo*
- NF *-hũ* allomorphs *-hũ*, *hĩ*
- NF *-mv* allomorph *-mu*
- NF *-nv* allomorph *-nu*
- NF *-lv* allomorphs *-lv*, *-lu* only in *-lv-hũ*, *-lu-hũ*
- NF *-tv* only in *-tv-hũ*

Picture 1 - NFs and number inflection system in Bouna Kulango elaborated on the basis of Elders 2008⁹:



Picture 2 - NFs and number inflection system in Nassian Kulango elaborated on the basis of Micheli 2007¹⁰:



Some NFs, attested in one single word in Nassian Kulango, were not considered for the construction of the table. However, it is probably worth pointing them out here. Apparently isolated singular NFs are: *mārã/mābɔ* “dog”; *vɛɛlɔ/vɛɛbɔ* “brother”; *yɛɛɛ/yɛbɔ* “woman”; *hɛɛn/hɛɛmɔ* “young man”; *dan/danũ* “cobra cracheur”; *bikyo/bin* “excrement”; *golonyi/golonũ* “hook”, while apparently isolated plural NFs are

⁹ In red those NFs which are not present in Nassian Kulango

¹⁰ In green those NFs which are not present in Bouna Kulango

beregyɔ/berɛgwɔũ “nail”; *dagogyo/dagozvũ* “corn”; *zũŋɔ/zũrũ* “thing”; *ɔgɔrinyɔ/ɔgɔrɪŋɔũ* “rival wife”.

As the two tables demonstrate, the number of NFs in the two cases still remains different. However, considering the behavior of the two variants, some common points emerge:

- In Kulango, NFs conflate information about both the semantic/lexical organization of nouns and of their number. This semantic/lexical organization lays at the basis of the language gender system, anchored to the concept of animacy.
- Although the number inflection system is very complex and to some extent chaotic, with a crossed type of agreement where class convergence is present in both directions, some pairs are semantically coherent, especially those regarding humans and animals (e.g. *rɔ/n(v)* - *yɔ/(h)ũ* *animals*; $\emptyset/bɔ$ - *yɔ/gɔ* *humans* common to Bouna and Nassian and *kpo/mv* - *ŋmɔ/m* respectively in Bouna and Nassian *body parts*¹¹).
- Generally, we can speak of a number inflection system, in which there is (usually) no conflation of NFs and gender classes, as we will see in a while.
- Both in Bouna and Nassian there are traces indicating that some qualitative adjectives (in Nassian Kulango only “black” *biɪ*-, several others in Bouna Kulango, see Elders 165-169) are triggered by the gender of the noun.
- Plural NF *-(h)ũ* represents in both variants the general form people use when they are uncertain about which one correctly applies to a specific singular. The same form is regularly applied to loanwords.

Many are also the points the two variants do not share. Let us focus now on these divergencies.

Concerning Bouna Kulango:

- 2 NFs for general numbers seem to be attested. In Elder’s terminology (p.127) they were indicated as *plural limité*. The NFs involved are: NF3 *-gɔ* (sg) - NF14/15 *-mv/-nv* (pl. lim.) - NF13 *-hũ* (pl. ill.) and NF4 *-kɔ* (sg.) - NF14 *-mv* (pl. lim.) - NF15 *-nv* (pl. ill.). In Nassian kulango there is no evidence of anything similar.
- Elders (p.134) attested two pl. NFs (*-lɔhũ* and *-tɔhũ*) resulting from the combination of two other NFs, respectively NF16 *-lɔ* and NF17 *-tɔ* + the general pl. NF13 *-hũ*. In both cases the so formed plurals have an alternative plural displaying only the general *-hũ*: *fɛɛgɔ* “shoulder” > *fɛɛlɔhũ/fɛɛhũ* and *kpeŋɛ* “granary” > *kpeŋɛtɔhũ/kpehũ* - in this last case the plural would be composed by 3 NF.
- Elders (p.127) attested also a SG/PL class *-lɔ/-gɔ* that should have as its only member numeral 20. Its plural would correspond to multiples of 20. Investigating in this direction could be productive in terms of identifying a possible numeral system: *yipɪlɔ/yipɪgɔ* “twenty”; *yipɪgɔ bilaa* (twenty - pl. - two) “forty”.

Referring to Nassian Kulango:

- Singular NF class *-lɔ* (not present in the picture) seems to have just a couple of members *vɛɛlɔ* (pl. *vɛɛbɔ*) “little brother” and (*nda/nna*) *gbolo* (pl. *nda/nnagbolo-bɛɛ*) “old man/woman” (Micheli 2007:33);
- Plural NF *-n(v)*, appears also in the SG *heen* (pl. *heemɔ*) “young man”. Otherwise, both in Nassian and Bouna variants, the same NF marks out liquid mass nouns (Micheli 2007:33);

¹¹ In Bouna Kulango the pair *kpo/mv* is not used exclusively for *body parts*, but it includes also other objects. Therefore, in picture 1 the pair is identified in black, *i.e.*, *Objects, Abstracts...*

- some Nassian Kulango NFs characterizing human beings have a peculiar behavior, in that they do not respond to ATR rules. These NFs are SG *-se* and PL *-sɔgɔ / -berɛ*. It is possible that originally these NFs were words in themselves: if we consider the two PL forms, in fact, we see that they are bisyllabic and it has to be said that the majority of Kulango words is made of two syllable (semantic basis + NF). Be it as it may, their etymology is nowadays not transparent;
- NFs *-se/-sɔgɔ* are used also to create a derivate agent noun from a verb: *niase*, “uterine nephew” lit. “the one who washes”;
- PL NF *-berɛ* can be applied also to an already plural noun, carrying its own NF (often *-sɔgɔ*), stressing in this case the belonging to a specific group of people (or even supernatural beings): *gusɔgɔ / gusɔgɔberɛ* “relatives / people of the family”; *gyinãv̄/gyinãv̄berɛ* “jinns / people of the jinns”;
- NF *-yɔ* can convey information about number (SG) and dimension (SMALL): in fact, when attached to a NF in a noun referring to a human being, it generates a diminutive: *yere* > *yereyɔ / yebɔ* > *yerewɔ*; *heen* > *heenio / heemɔ* > *heeniugo*.

3. Gender and agreement (AGR)

As it is the case in Akan¹², the Kulango gender system is not coherent with NFs and presents a simple animate/inanimate pattern.

Nonetheless, in general, specific NFs that can be interpreted as indicative of animacy, characterize proper deriflection classes¹³ encompassing human beings and animals.

This feature suggests a possible original semantic organization of the core vocabulary of the language in which specific NFs were indicative of internally coherent groups of words.

Despite the system is not always regular, some traces of this kind of semantic grouping are still visible, even though corrupted, in part of the vocabulary of some of the classes characterizing inanimate objects, like body parts, food, weather, etc.

Be it as it may, concerning the centrality of animacy in the gender system, the two variants of the language considered here do not show any difference.

The animate gender classes are generally applied to human beings, animals, supernatural beings and trees and plants; in brief to all those elements that are considered possessors of a life-soul (*mãyɔ*). Uncertainties about the presence of this life-soul in one particular referent brings the speaker to apply to the word the inanimate gender. Depending on this livelihood, in fact, a word that usually appears with an animate gender, may occur with an inanimate gender. This happens for example with unknown evil spirits, with dried-out trees and plants or with human or animal dead bodies.

Therefore it can be said that animacy is not given in abstract terms.

Rather is is conceived in a very contextualized way and it is dependent from the actual condition of life/death characterizing the element it refers to.

The inanimate gender refers usually to inanimate objects, tools and food, body parts, abstract nouns and natural elements. Animate and inanimate genders are reflected in the presence of trigger and triggered morphemes. The trigger element is not really the NF morpheme. Rather is is represented by the animate/inanimate feature that is especially

¹² GÜLDEMAN and FIEDLER 2019:114-121.

¹³ *i. e.*, recalling again GÜLDEMAN and FIEDLER’s definition “classes of form paradigms operating over nominal lexemes and established on account of identical formal variation that *does not need but often does* [my stress - ndr] interact with such features as gender, number, etc.”

embedded in the most semantically coherent SG-PL NF combinations (see tables 1 and 2 below). Triggered elements are subject and object pronouns, possessive and demonstrative adjectives and, as already discussed in the previous paragraph, in a very few cases, qualitative adjectives.

Below, the author reports two tables displaying trigger and triggered elements in SG and PL AGR classes.

Table 1 - SG agreement classes:

Trigger	(Trigger) NF	(triggered?) Qualitative adjective	Triggered subject pronoun	Triggered object pronoun	Triggered possessive	Triggered demonstrative
Animate*	1) -ɔ; 2) -yɔ; 8) -∅; 3) -gɔ; 6) -rɔ; 7) -ã*B; 8) -lɔ*B; -n*N; 10) -eɛ*N	-rɔ**	hũ	-ɛ***	bɔ (B) ũ (N)	hɪɪ
Inanimate*	3) -gɔ; 4) -kɔ; 12) -ɲmɔ*N	-kɔ**	hɔ	-gɛ***	hɔ	hɛɛ

Observations:

- The symbol * indicates those trigger elements (NFs) that are present only in one of the two variants (Bouna OR Nassian);
- The symbol ** indicates the triggered element found in the major classes to which belong the very few qualitative adjectives that still testify the possible previous existence of the triggering mechanisms in the whole class;
- the symbol *** indicates that, due to allomorphy, the quality of the vowel and plosive is influenced by the final vowel of the verb and can be different from the one presented in the table. For example, in Nassian Kulango the vowel becomes *-a* or *-va* when the verb ends respectively with *-ɔ*, *-a* and *-e* or *-ɛ* when the verb ends with *-i*, *-e*, *-u* / *-ɪ*, *-ɛ*, *-v*;
- The letters (B) or (N) indicate that the form appears only in one of the two variants of the language, namely Bouna (B) and Nassian (N).

Table 2 - PL agreement classes

Trigger	(Trigger?) NF	(triggered?) Qualitative adjective	Triggered subject pronoun	Triggered object pronoun	Triggered possessive	Triggered demonstrative
Animate	11B/15N) - bɔ; 12B/16N) -gɔ; 16B) -lɔ*; 17B) - tu*; 22N) - ugo*; 24N) -sɔgɔ*; 18N) -mɔ*	-rɔ**	bɔ	-bɛ (B) -bɔ (N)	bɔ	bɛrɛ*** (B) nɪɪ (N)
Inanimate	13B/17N) - (h)ũ; 14B/20N) - m(v);	-kɔ**	ɲɔ (B) ũ (N)	-(h)ũ	hɔ (B) ũ (N)	ɲɛɛ (B) wĩĩ (N)

Observations:

- Symbols * and ** have the same meaning as in table 1;
- Symbol *** reminds the reader that the same form in Nassian Kulango corresponds to a frozen NF indicating groups of people or supernatural beings. The form can never be applied to animals.

The data emerging from the comparison of the two Kulango variants, especially those presented in Table 2, seem to confirm that the variant spoken in Nassian presents a quite large degree of simplification with respect to the variant spoken in Bouna.

This is probably due to the fact that the sub-prefecture of Nassian lays in a buffer region between the territory of the Kulango kingdom of Bouna and the lands occupied by the Akan kingdom of Gyaman with which cultural and economical networks must have been historically much stronger with a consequent much higher influence.

4. Final Remarks

In conclusion, the application of the Güldeman/Fiedler model based on the concepts of deriflection, nominal forms, gender and agreement classes has been shown to be much more appropriate to the description of the peculiarities of the Kulango language than the classical model of nominal classes.

The comparative analysis proposed in this paper has demonstrated that in both variants deriflection and gender are key concepts that allow a more precise description of all those phenomena implied in the mechanisms governing a highly complex (and most of the times chaotic) number inflection system with a crossed scheme of SG-PL NFs combinations that must match with a very simple gender system based on animacy.

Although the mapping of NFs in the number inflection system and of AGR classes in the gender system is superficially different in the two variants, our comparison outlines a fundamentally very similar core structure.

Especially, similarities are evident in the most coherent NF pairs (e.g. those regarding humans, animals and body parts or objects and deverbal nouns) in the number inflection system and, in the SG AGR classes in the gender system.

In both variants there are traces of a trigger-target mechanism connecting nouns and qualitative adjectives, which is, however, much richer in Bouna Kulango. This is possibly due to the fact that Bouna Kulango is closer to other Gur languages showing the same feature (e.g. Lohron), while it has already been pointed out above that Nassian Kulango has probably been much more influenced by the Akan languages spoken in the neighboring territories. Suffice it to say that the Kingdom of Gyaman is an Akan kingdom which shortly after its foundation adopted Kulango as its official language¹⁴. In both variants the major number inflection class is becoming more and more functional.

Indeed, both in Bouna and Nassian applying the major plural NF *-(h)ũ* to no matter what noun, is not really perceived by the speakers as a mistake.

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¹⁴ cf MICHELI 2012: 137-139.

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