



HAL
open science

Review of Stevenson, Roland C. (author) & Thilo Schadeberg (editor): Tira and Otoro, two Kordofanian Grammars by Roland C. Stevenson. (Archiv afrikanistischer Manuskripte, 8) Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, Köln 2009. 333 pp. Price € 48,-. ISBN 978-3-89645-173-6.

Nicolas Quint

► **To cite this version:**

Nicolas Quint. Review of Stevenson, Roland C. (author) & Thilo Schadeberg (editor): Tira and Otoro, two Kordofanian Grammars by Roland C. Stevenson. (Archiv afrikanistischer Manuskripte, 8) Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, Köln 2009. 333 pp. Price € 48,-. ISBN 978-3-89645-173-6.. Afrika und Übersee, 2013, Band 91, 2, pp.309-314. hal-01169432

HAL Id: hal-01169432

<https://hal.science/hal-01169432v1>

Submitted on 29 Jun 2015

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Stevenson, Roland C. (author) & Thilo Schadeberg (editor): Tira and Otoro, two Kordofanian Grammars by Roland C. Stevenson. (Archiv afrikanistischer Manuskripte, 8) Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, Köln 2009. 333 pp. Price € 48,-. ISBN 978-3-89645-173-6.

Today, the Kordofanian family of the Niger-Congo phylum remains one of the most poorly researched language families in Africa and worldwide. This book makes two descriptive grammars available to the scientific community, respectively Tira and Otoro (both of which belong to the Heibanian branch of Kordofanian), and is therefore a most welcome publication.

The author of those grammars, Roland C. Stevenson (1915–1991), is a member of the Church Missionary Society, who first arrived in Sudan in 1937 and soon got involved in the study of various Sudanese tongues. He devoted his PhD (Stevenson 1956–57) to the languages spoken in the Nuba Mountains, a region which is the home area of all attested Kordofanian languages. As “descriptive and comparative work on Kordofanian languages is still in its infancy”¹ (Schadeberg 1989: 79), Stevenson’s abundant linguistic production remains one of the main sources (and in some cases the only one) available for many Kordofanian languages.

The editor of these grammars, Thilo Schadeberg, is one of the very few linguists to have regularly worked and published on Kordofanian languages (e.g. Schadeberg 1981a/b, 1989) since the second half of the XXth century. As explained in the preface of the book, Stevenson wrote his Tira (TI) and Otoro (OT) grammars in 1942 and 1943 respectively. However, these existed only as typescripts and it is thanks to Schadeberg’s efforts that “the data and analyses” they contain are “presented here [i.e. in this book] for the first time in print” (p. viii).

As regards their structure, both grammars follow a parallel plan: they first give a short introduction about each language, followed by a phonological sketch (“phonetics”, pp. 6–17 for TI; 122–144 for OT), presenting in both cases the “vowels”, “consonants”, “sound change” (TI only) – i.e. contextual realisations of certain consonants, vowel harmony – and “intonation and stress”. A morphological section (pp. 18–103 for TI; 145–307 for OT) makes up the principal part of each grammar. It details first the main characteristics of the constituents of the noun phrase (“nouns, pronouns, qualificatives, prepositions and postpositions”), it then deals with the verb (pp. 58–87 for TI; 229–293 for OT), provides some elements of syntax (“relative and

predicative constructions" [TI only], "interrogative sentences"), and finally introduces the reader to "adverbs", "reduplication" (TI only) and "conjunctions" (pp. 95–103 for TI; 299–307 for OT). Each grammar concludes with a few pages of "specimen texts" and a bilingual English–Kordofanian "vocabulary" (pp. 108–113 for TI; 313–325 for OT). Note that in his description of OT Stevenson takes account of the internal variation of the language: although his analyses are primarily based on the Kwara variant, he regularly adduces data from two other variants, namely Kwijur and Orombe (p. 118). Following the OT grammar, the book includes a short "Appendix" in which Schadeberg has summed up the essentials of a MA dissertation on "The status and function of tone in Tira" (Swanson Watters 1993).

As regards form, this book is well edited. Some few misspellings and typos have been introduced by the editor while computerizing Stevenson's typescripts, e.g. he transcribes OT 'work' successively *ɲaro* (p. 238) and *ɲarɔ* (p. 244), whereas the author (1943) consistently spells *ɲaro* in both passages of his original grammar (pp. 129 and 135 respectively). However, such mistakes are very limited in number and, on the whole, Stevenson's originals have been faithfully reproduced by Schadeberg. As he explains in his preface (p. viii), he designed a "special format" for Stevenson's "small notes and comments". Every time he deemed it necessary, Schadeberg added some footnotes of his own to underline various problems raised by the author's typescript: e.g. in footnote 29 (p. 130), he points out an incoherence between the form (given on the same page) *k-ubel* 'in the shade' (where Stevenson obviously interpreted *k-* as a preposition and *-ubel* as a noun) and the form *gubel* 'shade' (p. 161), where the initial *g-* is analysed as a noun class marker. Schadeberg's edition of these grammars is therefore a high quality work, both from a technical and a scientific point of view.

As regards the content, insofar as I can judge from my own knowledge of Koalib (another Heibanian language), Stevenson's analyses of both Tira and Otoro are mostly accurate, and reveal the high linguistic skills of the author. He was probably one of the first linguists to describe the existence of a two-case (subject/object) system in the two Heibanian languages described (pp. 29–31 for TI; 165–171, 175–177 for OT). His account of this morphological feature – a typological exception within Niger-Congo – is clear and informative: he first provides many examples of case inflexions (e.g. TI *ɲen* 'dog.S' vs. *ɲen-ε* 'dog.O', p. 29) and then describes in detail the various values of the object case (which can be used in TI as the "object of a verb", as an

“accusative of respect” or in combination with certain “postpositions”; cf. p. 30f). Both the values and inflexions Stevenson describes are fully corroborated by my own data on Koalib (Quint 2006b, forthc. a). Concerning possessives, he rightly observes (p. 44 for TI; 197f for OT) that specific fused forms exist for several kinship terms: e.g. TI *dhithai* ‘my/our father’, *dhithalo* ‘your(.SG/PL) father’ (compare with Koalib *trnyrí* ‘my/our father’, *tárnyáló* ‘your(.SG/PL) father’); such forms are always coined from plural possessives: e.g. OT *kwurnöri* ‘my/our grandparent’, where the *-öri* ending is identical to the 1.PL (exclusive) suffix for non kinship terms (p. 197).

The fact that Stevenson chose to include a specific chapter on “directional verbs” in his grammars (p. 86f for TI; pp. 291–293 for OT) shows that he was obviously sensitive to the central importance of (oriented) movement in the verb inflexion of many (if not all) Heibanian languages² (see p. 263 his analysis of the value of the “imperative/3rd stem” for OT, in which he says that this form “adds the notion of doing something in another place and returning”). When discussing the “derived species of verbs” (i.e. ‘verb extensions’) in OT, he mentions (p. 290) the existence of “compound derivatives”, i.e. ‘double derivation’ or ‘the combination of several verb extensions with one and the same verb root’, which shows that he did not content himself with giving a list of OT verb extensions but tried also to understand how such extensions interact with each other. Concerning ideophones (p. 304), the description emphasizes the phonetic originality of this category relative to the remaining parts of speech of the language: “these ideophones often contain sounds foreign to, or rare in, the language as a whole”. This observation, which equally applies to Koalib (Quint 2006a: 101) and many other African languages (Creissels 1994: 30), is one more example of Stevenson’s perspicacious insights into the structure of the two languages he set out to describe in those grammars. Finally, his modesty and honesty are reflected in several passages of his writings, e.g. p. 297, where he explicitly admits that “full forms [of a given interrogative structure] (with all the verb paradigms) have not been worked out”.

Yet, in spite of their real scientific interest, the TI and OT grammars also have serious drawbacks, mostly at the level of phonology, which is clearly the weakest part of those descriptive works. First, Stevenson completely failed (or refused?) to give comprehensive tone rules for TI and OT, stating that each one of these two languages “is not a tone language in the fullest sense of the term” (p. 17 for TI; 141

for OT), while all recent works devoted to Heibanian languages (Quint 2009: 129–148; Jenks & Rose 2011: 3f; Schadeberg 1981a: 61, 65, 69 etc.) seem to show that most of them (including probably TI and OT) are tone languages. This failure to grasp the importance of tone in TI and OT probably led him to several inaccuracies: e.g. when he translates TI *wuji k-ico* as ‘a bad man’ or ‘the man is bad’ (see also a similar example for OT, p. 202), the Koalib equivalents of this sequence suggest that he may have missed a tonal contrast:

- | | | | | | |
|-----|----------------------------|----------------|-----|--|--------------------|
| (1) | <i>kwìcì</i> | <i>kwè-kèè</i> | vs. | <i>kwìcì</i> | <i>kwé-kèè</i> |
| | person | CLF-be.bad.PFV | | person | CLF.REL-be.bad.PFV |
| | ‘[the/this] person is bad’ | | | ‘a bad person’, i.e.
‘a person who is bad’ | |

As shown in (1)³, in Koalib (just as in TI) the sequences meaning ‘this person is bad’ and ‘a bad person’ have exactly the same segmental shape. However, tone (in this case, a tonal morpheme marking the relative form of the verb) allows us to distinguish between the two interpretations. Therefore, without any proper treatment of tone, the relative forms of the verb go necessarily unnoticed in a Heibanian language such as Koalib, and this probably holds true for its close cognate TI. No wonder then if Stevenson, whose description of TI does not mention tone, comes to say (p. 88) that “as far as can be made out, there is no relative pronoun in Tira (...)”. The second most important deficiency of the descriptions: there is virtually no mention of the existence of vowel harmony, a feature which, since then, has been shown to exist in at least two Heibanian languages, Koalib (Quint 2009: 33–40) and Moro (Jenks & Rose 2011: 3), and which I personally have been able to discover in Tira in 2006 on the Kalkada variety (Quint 2006c). In a small subsection entitled “vowel harmony” (p. 15), Stevenson says that, in TI, “vowels of prefixes, suffixes and particles may accommodate themselves to vowels of a neighbouring syllable”, but, apart from some few illustrative examples, he does not go much further on this topic. Similarly for OT, the careful reader can find here and there some faint traces of a possibly underlying vowel harmony, e.g. the two alternate forms (-*u* and -*o*) of the suffixed 3SG subject pronoun (p. 182). However, it is almost impossible to retrieve from the data presented the respective composition of each of the harmonic sets that very likely exist in those languages, and this is probably due to the fact that the author was not successful in identifying the actual phonological vowel units of either TI or OT.

Be that as it may, and in spite of several serious shortcomings, Stevenson's grammars of TI and OT are of great scientific interest, for, as the editor says, they "are genuine and novel additions to our knowledge" of Kordofanian languages. In conclusion, I would like to congratulate Thilo Schadeberg on having edited and published those precious grammars, thus enabling other people (be they scholars or speakers of the languages described) to have easier access to the linguistic data they contain.

Nicolas Quint

Notes

- ¹ Indeed, this twenty-years-aged quote still holds true today.
² For discussion of this question in Koalib, cf. Quint (2010: 296f; fc. b).
³ Abbreviations used here: CLF = classifier (noun class marker); PFV = perfective; REL = relative.

References

- Creissels, Denis, 1994: *Aperçu sur les structures phonologiques des langues négro-africaines*. Grenoble: Ellug.
- Jenks, Peter & Sharon Rose, 2011: High Tone in Moro: Effects of Prosodic Categories and Morphological Domains. In: *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*.
<http://idiom.ucsd.edu/~rose/NLLTonline.pdf> [visited 2011/09/29].
- Quint, Nicolas, 2006a: *Phonologie de la langue koalibe*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- , 2006b: "Do you speak Kordofanian?" In: *Proceedings of the 7th International Sudan Studies Conference, April 6th–8th, 2006*. Bergen: University of Bergen (CD-ROM).
<http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/docs/00/17/17/45/PDF/Quint-Bergen-2006.pdf> [visited 2011/09/30]
- , 2006c: *Fieldnotes on the Tira variety of Kalkada (South Kordofan, Sudan)*. Unpublished.
- , 2009: *The Phonology of Koalib*. Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe.
- , 2010: Benefactive and Malefactive Verb Extensions in the Koalib Verb System. In: Seppo Kittilä & Fernando Zúñiga (eds.), *Benefactives and malefactive. Typological perspectives and case studies*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- , forthcoming a. *Case in Koalib (a Kordofanian language) and related Heibanian languages*.
- , forthcoming b. *The Morphology of Koalib*.
- Schadeberg, Thilo C., 1981a: *A Survey of Kordofanian, Volume One, The Heiban Group*. Hamburg: Helmut Buske.
- , 1981b: *A Survey of Kordofanian, Volume Two, The Talodi Group*. Hamburg: Helmut Buske.

- , 1989: "Kordofanian". In: John Bendor-Samuel (ed.), *The Niger-Congo Languages*. Lanham & al.: University Press of America, 66–80.
- Stevenson, Roland C., 1942: *The Tira Language*. Unpublished (typescript).
- , 1943: *The Otoro Language*. Unpublished (typescript).
- , 1956–57: A Survey of the Phonetics and Grammatical Structure of the Nuba Mountain Languages. In: *Afrika und Übersee* XL, 2: 73–115; XLI, 1/2: 27–65; XLI, 3: 117–196.
- Swanson Watters, Kathie, 1993: *The Status and Function of Tone in Tira* [MA dissertation]. Nairobi: University of Nairobi.

Quint, Nicolas: Phonologie de la langue koalibe. Dialecte réré (Soudan). L'Harmattan, Paris 2006. 238 pp. Price € 22,50. ISBN 2-296-00491-1.

Nicolas Quint is an experienced linguist who has published several books on various dialects of southern France and on the creole language of the Cape Verde islands. The present book is his first on an African language. It offers the first in-depth study of Koalib phonology. Koalib is spoken in the Nuba Mountains of the Sudan Republic. In that ethnolinguistically heterogeneous area, the Koalib ethnic group is among the largest, comprising more than 100,000 people. Their language is considered to belong to the Heiban language family, which represents one of five subgroups of the still very little known Kordofanian branch of the Niger-Kordofanian phylum.

The book is organized in two parts, the introduction and the phonological study. The introductory part of 25 pages provides general information on Koalib. Quint considers the still controversial genetic cohesion among the Kordofanian languages and their external classification. Although each of the five subgroups – Rashad, Heiban, Talodi, Lafofa, and Katla-Tima – is typologically characterized by a noun class system (or at least traces thereof, as attested in Katla-Tima) there are very few lexical correspondences between the languages affiliated to these subgroups. The external classification of the Kordofanian languages as a primary branch of the Niger-Kordofanian phylum is problematic, too, because lexical correspondences between Kordofanian and Niger-Congo are rare. Moreover, there is no geographic cohesion between Kordofanian and Niger-Congo since the Kordofanian languages in the Nuba Mountains are completely surrounded by