

# The genesis of a discrete category of adjectives in Tomo Kan Dogon

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# Introduction

- In Tomo Kan Dogon, unlike in many African languages, adjectives must be regarded as a separate syntactic category
- This can be revealed by exploring derivational relations between positive and comparative forms
- All the data come from my fieldwork in 2011-2023 in Mali and Burkina Faso

# Outline of the talk

- The status of adjectives
- The relation between comparative (=COMP) and positive (=POS, non-comparative) forms of adjectives
- Intragenetic typology

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# The status of adjectives

- POS forms cannot be morphologically derived from COMP ones (Grano 2011; Grano & Davis 2018)

(1) *John is fat.*

(2) *John is fatt-**er** than Peter.*

# The status of adjectives

- Superficially, it does not seem to be the case in Tomo Kan

(1) àmàdú	[sè:dù <sup>L</sup>	ló]	mànà
Amadou	Seydou	DAT	fat
<b>subject of comparison</b>	<b>standard of comparison</b>		

‘Amadou is fatter than Seydou’.

(2) òkò	Há: <sup>n</sup>	H <sup>L</sup> máná- <b>yè</b> -wó
DEM	man	fat-YE-be.HUM

‘This man is fat’.

# The status of adjectives

- Attributive constructions: adjectives follow nouns and trigger an L-tone overlay on the latter

(1) à:<sup>nL</sup>            mànà

man            fat

‘a fat man’

# The status of adjectives

- POS forms consist of adjectival stems with a tonal overlay and an optional suffix -ye followed by a 'be' copula:

(1)      ñkò                      H á : n                      HL máná - y è - w ó  
         DEM                      man                      fat - YE - be . HUM

‘This man is fat’.

- Thus, they are morphologically more complex than COMP forms => morphologically marked forms



# The status of adjectives

- COMP forms pattern with stative verbs

(1) àmàdú      [sè:dù<sup>L</sup>      ló]      **mànà**  
Amadou   Seydou      DAT      fat  
'Amadou is fatter than Seydou'.

- In Tomo Kan, stative verbs cannot be inflected for any TAM category

(2) àmàdú      sàtá      **ùbá(\*-wó)**  
Amadou      Sata      like-IPFV.HUM  
'Amadou likes Sata'.

# The status of adjectives

- Is it possible that COMP forms are **basic** (=non-derived) forms of adjectives?
- If this is correct, then comparative forms are stative verbs projecting a standard of comparison

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# The status of adjectives

- Is the form used in POS constructions (=the one with the tonal overlay) contains an exponent of the POS category?
- In other words, does the tonal overlay (coupled with the optional suffix) is the marker of POS?

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- Is the form used in POS constructions (=the one with the tonal overlay) contains an exponent of the POS category?
- In other words, is the tonal overlay (coupled with the optional suffix) the marker of POS?

**NO**

- **The structure of the POS construction is yielded by a language-specific principle whereby subordination of verbs implies adverbialization of the leftmost one**

# The status of adjectives

- Only NPs can be coordinated

(1) àmàdú      **yè:**      sè:dú                      **yè:**  
    ‘Amadou and Seydou’

- VPs cannot:

(2) \*àmàdú    nà:      nù=-só**yè:**      jèndè    lwè:rè-só      **yè:**  
    Amadou    food      eat-FUTCRD      dream    sleep-FUT      CRD  
    Int.: ‘Amadou will eat and sleep’.

(3) sàtá                      <sup>H</sup>**déñî-yé:**                      há              kùbá  
    Sata                      sit.sown.PFV-CVB                      REF              leg

<sup>H</sup>**sá:r-é:**                      kwínî    jùrò=-wó  
    stretch.PFV-CVB              cotton    spin-IPFV.HUM

‘Sata sat down and stretched her legs to spin the cotton’.

# The status of adjectives

- The syntactic structure of POS:

ADJ – ADV(erbializer) – COP

(1)    ñkò      H<sup>a</sup>:<sup>n</sup>                                  H<sup>L</sup>máná-**yè**-wó  
      DEM    man                                      fat-YE-be.HUM  
      ‘This man is fat’.

# COMP semantics

- **A problem:** constructions without copulas are almost exclusive in Dogon languages
- Therefore, postulating a zero copula in COMP constructions requires serious grounding



# COMP semantics

- **Prediction:** if the forms used in COMP constructions are indeed initial forms projecting arguments, then the COMP semantics should be preserved even in the contexts where the standard of comparison **cannot** be used
- In fact, adjectives, when used on their own without a copula, are inherently comparative (Léger 1971)

(1) àmàdú      mánà

Amadou   fat

‘Amadou is fatter [than somebody]’.

# COMP semantics

- The prediction seems to be borne out
- Comparative meanings can be expressed by non-comparative forms

{There are two bags, the first one weighs 2 kg, the second one 3 kg.}

(1) nḗ	dùgù- <b>yè</b> -kó= <sup>n</sup>	yè
REL	heavy-YE-be.NONH=PTCP	FOC
ḡ	ìjé	
1SG	take.PFV	

‘I took the one that is **heavier**’.

# COMP semantics

- Superlative meaning can also be expressed by POS:

(1) bè            ànd-á:            ɲò<sup>nL</sup>            **cèmbè<sup>L</sup>**  
1PL.POSS    village-LOC    woman            beautiful  
ùmbóló    mátá    hò-s-é  
name        Mata    say-FUT-3PL

‘The name of the most beautiful girl in our village is Mata’.

# COMP semantics

- The same phenomenon was attested in other languages

NATORO (<Gur/ Mabia, my fieldwork notes)

{Looking at the road, which began to be overgrown with grass.}

(1) t̀̀ndm̀gā=: wā nī tó: **kā-pā<sup>n</sup>**  
before road DEM PST PEF-big

‘This road was larger before’.

- Here, the POS form is used (COMP forms require constructions with the ‘exceed’ verb)

# COMP syntax

- **A counterargument:** negative forms
- Vowel harmony in all verbal forms

(1) *dàlà* ‘kill’ *dàlǎ:-wó* ‘kill-IPFV.HUM’  
*dàlǎ:-wò-lò* ‘kill-IPFV.HUM-NEG’  
*ùbá* ‘like’ *ùbà-lá* ‘like-NEG’

- **No vowel harmony** in COMP constructions

(2) *̀̀kó* <sup>H</sup>*máṅgóró-dú* *bè* <sup>H</sup>*jíná* *lò*  
DEM mango-tree 1SG.POSS house DAT

***gèbè-là***

long-NEG

‘This mango tree is not taller than our house’.

# COMP syntax

- We conclude that the most plausible analysis is:

SUBJ            -            STAND            -            ADJ            -            Ø

(1) àmàdú            [sè:dù<sup>L</sup>            ló]            **mànà**  
Amadou   Seydou            DAT            fat

‘Amadou is fatter than Seydou’.

- The zero COMP morpheme blocks vowel harmony
- Probably, inherent comparative semantics is orthogonal to syntax (to be explored)

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# Intragenetic typology

- Adjectives generally behave like **nouns** in Dogon languages (Heath 2017)
- They often have nominal morphology
- In Tomo Kan, adjectives also pattern with nouns – for instance, they can bear diminutive suffixes
- In some languages, comparatives contain adjectives that are directly conjugated with verbal (agreement) suffixes:

(1) ñè-n            nǐ-bâ:<sup>n</sup>            lè            gùrú-m  
woman-SG this-owner      DAT      long-1SG.S  
'I am taller than this woman'.                      (Heath 2008: 443)



# Intragenetic typology

- In Bunoge, comparatives attach **stative** suffixes:

(1) sédù          ñgù                          ñ          gólè-w<sup>n</sup>  
S.                  ACC                          1SG      long-STAT

‘I am taller than Seydou is’. (Heath 2017: 236)

- These facts may indicate a possible verbal origin of comparatives
- However, we have seen than in Tomo Kan, adjectives are neither nouns (because they do not attach nominal copulas) nor verbs (because COMP forms do not pattern with verbs)