A grammar of Gaahmg, a Nilo-Saharan language of Sudan

Stirtz, T.M.

1 Introduction

Gaahmg (Gaam, enthologue code [tbi]) is a Nilo-Saharan, Eastern Sudanic language spoken in the Ingessana Hills of the Blue Nile Province of North Sudan, near the Ethiopian border. For centuries, the Gaahmg people have fought off invaders entering their hills. Even today, their culture and language have been less influenced by outsiders than those of other ethnic groups in the Blue Nile Province. Although Gaahmg speakers outnumber speakers of other languages in the area, little documentation has been done of their language. This work presents a description of Gaahmg grammar, including its phonology, morphology, and syntax.

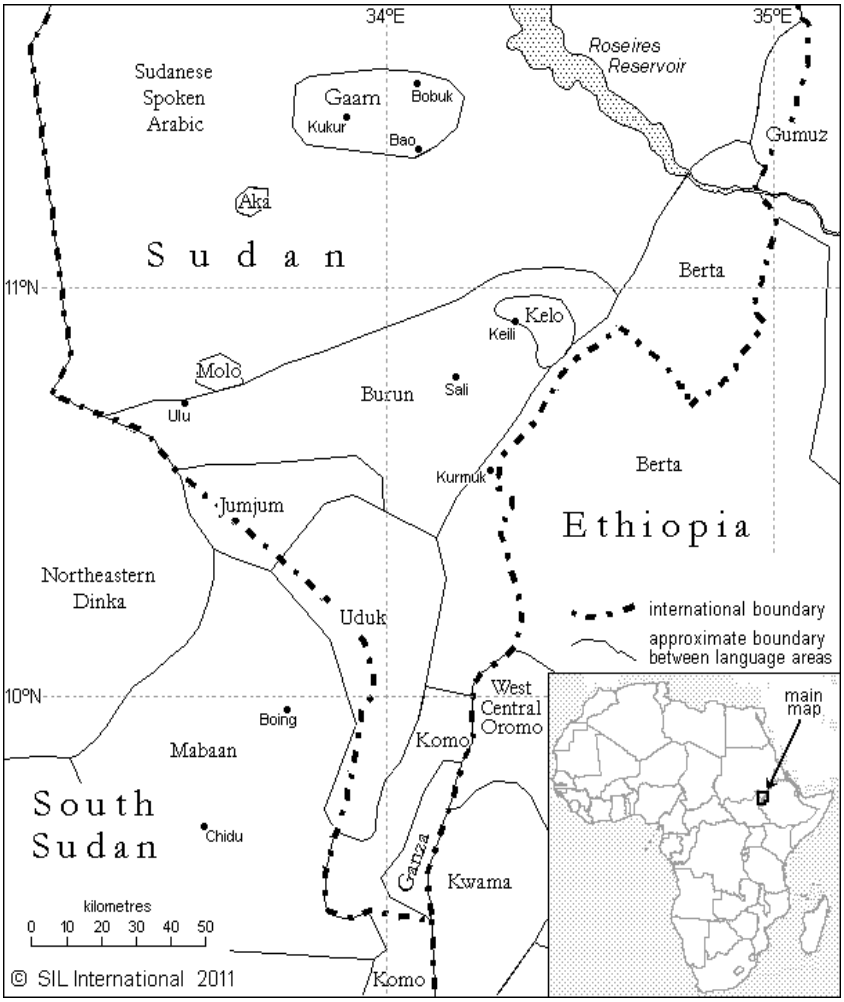
1.1 Gaahmg language

At the request of speakers, the name of the language is written orthographically with the grapheme /aah/ for the long vowel [ɔɔ]. The language name is pronounced [gɔ̀ɔ̀mg], meaning 'people of the Gaam or Ingessana Hills'. Other names for the language include Ingessana, Gaam, and Tabi. Ingessana is a name given by Arabs. Gaam is the word for hill, and Tabi is a hill name in the home area (Bender 1980:4).

Gaahmg is classified as a Nilo-Saharan, Eastern Sudanic language. Greenberg was the first to list Tabi (Gaahmg) as a separate branch of the Eastern Sudanic sub-family (1955:62). Bender proposed that Gaam belongs to an Eastern Jebel Family including the languages Aka, Molo, Kelo, and Ben Sheko which all have a first singular pronoun with the segment *n* and other similarities. He added that the total number of speakers of Eastern Jebel languages other than Gaam speakers probably does not exceed 2,000 (Bender 1998:39).

The Ethnologue states there are 67,200 Gaahmg speakers, who mainly live in the Ingessana Hills of the Blue Nile Province (Gordon 2005), bordering Ethiopia to the east. There are four dialects: Jog Tao (Soda area), Buwag (southeast area), Kulag (Bao area), and Jog Goor (northwest area). The first two are more closely related to each other, and the last two to each other. Although the dialects are distinct enough phonetically and lexically to identify a person as from the dialect area, they are easily understood from one to another (Jedrej 1995: 32). The teachers, politicians and other educated people mostly come from the Jog Tao dialect, which is analyzed in this thesis.

There are three published linguistic works on the language that predate the research of this author: *Ethnographical Observations in Dar Fung* by E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1932), *The Phonological Features of the Ingessana Language* by W. J. Crewe (1975), and *Preliminary Gaam-English-Gaam Dictionary* by M. L. Bender & Malik Agaar Ayre (1980).



1.2 Gaahmg land, history, and people

The Ingessana Hills are southwest of Damazine and northwest of Kurmuk in the Blue Nile Province. The capital of the Ingessena area is Bao (11.350797, 34.083710) and the government offices are in Soda. There are reported to be 78 hills in the area, some rising 300 meters above the surrounding flat plains. While the plains are grassland with occasional acacia trees, the vegetation in the hills has a much greater variety of plants and trees, with water sources even in the dry season.

Gaahmg speakers live in the hills and in the plains, interacting with other ethnic groups in the surrounding geo-political area known as the Funj. In addition to the related languages of the Aka, Molo, Kelo, and Ben Sheko, there are the Berta, Gumuz, Oromo to the east, the Burun, Jumjum, Uduk, Mabaan to the south, Dinka and Nuer to the west, and Sudanese Arabs to the north.

As Jedrej (1995) explains, the Gaahmg have historically protected themselves and their hills from many invasions of outsiders. As a result, their culture is much more resistant to change than that of other ethnic groups of the Funj. Mainly self-sustaining in what they cultivate in the hill area, the Gaahmg are slow to grow cash crops or to migrate for wages. As a result of past conflict with Arabs and other invaders, they have a reputation of being hostile towards strangers and even refugees.

Although the origins of the Gaahmg are unclear, the Ingessena hills were alternately raided for several hundred years by the Funj sultans of Sennar to the northwest or by the Abyssinian kings of Gondar to the northeast, the Ingessena hills being a borderland between these kingdoms that plundered for slaves and gold. The Dinka and Nuer to the southwest raided the Gaahmg for cattle during times of drought or flooding in their own areas (Jedrej 1995).

From 1820-1855, the ruling Turk-Egyptian Empire demanded heavy tribute of slaves and gold. When they did not receive their demands, they attacked and imprisoned the Gaahmg, taking several hundred prisoners at a time. The Gaahmg fought back with speed and surprise attacks, causing many attacks of the Empire to be unsuccessful (Jedrej 1995).

In 1888-1889, the Mahdi government raided the Funj area and the Ingessena hills in particular, to provide for Khartoum during a severe and widespread famine, taking 1000 head of cattle from the Gaahmg on one occasion. The Gaahmg made counter attacks and held Arabs captive for ransom at ten head of cattle per person (Jedrej 1995).

From 1903-1934, the Anglo-Egyptian Government was less brutal but continued the same pattern of collecting tribute and squelching resistance. When the Gaahmg attacked tax patrols in protest to tribute collections, the Anglo-Egyptian government conducted ‘military operations’ which, although they did not involve taking slaves, seized livestock and killed those deemed responsible (Jedrej 1995).

The main occupations of the Gaahmg relate to livestock, cultivation, or craft making. In particular, the Gaahmg grow sorghum, sesame, maize, peppers, gourds, and tobacco. They keep cattle, goats, pigs, sheep, hens, donkeys, mules, and camels. During the dry season, young men and boys take herds of up to 50 head of cattle a hundred miles south to the Yabus River for water and pasture. Some weavers,

potters, and blacksmiths peddle their products in neighboring towns. However, livestock is generally not taken outside the area for sale, but herders wait for merchants travelling into the hills for trade (Jedrej 1995).

Traditional religion and government of the Gaahmg are tied to localities. There are houses of god, or shrines, around which communities are centred. A group of elders in each community rules over and cares for the people they represent, deciding legal matters and organizing activities. An appointed elder is the custodian of the community shrine where ceremonies and celebrations take place. Each of the smaller or less important shrines is grouped under four great or important shrines, in each of the four dialect territories, which decide the annual festivals (Jedrej 1995).

1.3 The current research

The current research was conducted beginning in 2003 with speakers living in Khartoum. From April 2004-April 2008 the author continued field work in Khartoum as a language research associate of the University of Khartoum, Institute of African and Asian studies. The primary language resource persons for this period were Hashim Orta Adaw Madal, Safadin Hamid Ateeb, and Annaim Karaka Farajalla Yasin. All three are from the town of Soda, have spoken the Jog Tao dialect from childhood, and continue to speak it whenever they are with other speakers of the language. After April 2008, access to speakers was limited to two three-week trips to Kurmuk in southern Blue Nile Province, near the home area. The primary language resource person for this trip was Annaim Karaka Farajalla Yasin.

The original data set of nouns and verbs were taken from word lists entered into dictionary software by speakers of the language, which became the Gaahmg-English Dictionary (Madal 2004). The singular and plural forms of nouns and subjunctive and completive forms of verbs were written on cards and glossed in English and Arabic. The cards were sorted numerous times to isolate segments and tone in the same environments, and each time speakers read the words on the cards.

Texts were recorded on cassette, transcribed, and glossed by speakers of the language, the recordings made from a variety of individuals in the home area. Natural clauses were taken from the texts as frames for eliciting nouns and verbs with various morphemes. The cards were again used to elicit multiple nouns, verbs, and adjectives in the frames.

The data set on which the thesis is based contains 700 nouns, 150 verbs, 40 adjectives, and a handful of other parts of speech. There are 16 texts of about 30 interlinearized pages that have been collected. These consist of folk narratives, historical narratives, personal narratives, persuasive texts, and poetic genres. Ten of these texts are presented in chapter 17.

1.4 Overview and notations

Gaahmg is rich in morphology, particularly in nouns, adjectives, and verbs. To correctly analyze the morphemes and their alternations, we also discuss their phonological foundation and describe their syntactic environments.

The phonological description of chapter 2 includes distribution and contrasts of phonemes, phonological rules, syllable structure, and a tonal description of roots. Consonant weakening is common word-finally and intervocalically in roots and across morpheme boundaries. A significant number of lexical distinctions as well as distinctions in grammatical function are made exclusively by [ATR] harmony and tone. Thus, the phonological analysis of these aspects is indispensable for the morphological analysis.

Segmental and tonal morphophonological rules are presented in chapter 3. The vast majority of the alternations when morphemes combine can be attributed to processes described by these eleven rules. Clitics, having different alternations and functions than suffixes, are shown in chapter 4 to attach to more than one word category. In 4.2, there are four other criteria discussed which can be used to distinguish suffixes from clitics such as that suffixes attach to underlying forms of roots, whereas clitics attach to surface forms of stems. In 4.3, we establish adjectives as a distinct lexical category from nouns and verbs since they are not used in some of the syntactic constructions of either nouns or verbs, and there are some differences in the morphology when used as either category.

In chapters 5-13, word categories are presented. The morphology of nouns (chap. 6-7), adjectives (chap. 8), and verbs (chap. 9-10) are the heart of this thesis. Pronouns (chap. 5), prepositions (chap. 11), body part locatives (chap. 12), and adverbs (chap 13) are the minor word categories described, which have little or no morphology.

In chapter 6, we see that nouns have singular and plural suffixes. Although the vast majority of singular nouns do not have suffixes, plural marking is obligatory with plural referents. There are several plural suffixes, each with different tonal allomorphs, although most includes the segment *gg*. Most plural suffixes have no semantic correlation with the nouns to which they attach, but the suffix attached sometimes depends on the root-final segment.

As shown in chapter 7, noun stems may attach one or more of seven clitics: copular, definite, locative copular, dative, accompaniment, subordinate, or relative clause definite clitics. The clitics have different segmental or tonal allomorphs which attach depending on the stem-final segment. In chapter 8, we show that adjectives are similar to nouns in stem and word morphology. Most adjectives attach the plural suffix -*gg* which is required on plural referents. The same seven clitics attaching to nouns may also attach to adjectives.

In chapter 9, the verb stem is discussed which is composed of the root and optional slots for antipassive, causative, and modal or aspect morphemes. Aspect is marked segmentally in the verb word—by completive and continuous suffixes. Past tense is marked by tone on the verb stem—High tone on the non-past continuous suffix and MH tone on the past continuous suffix. Infinitive, subjunctive and imperative forms also add suffixes to the root. Deictic suffixes for each verb aspect and mode are also attached to the root. Finite verb forms are inflected for subject person by tone added to the stem-final syllable: High tone in third singular verbs, Low tone in third plural verbs, and Mid tone in first and second person verbs. Chapter 10 discusses the clitics of the verb word, including agented passive, passive, object and dative bound pronouns, imperfect, perfect, subordinate, and relative clause definite marker clitics.

Clause-level syntax is presented in chapter 14 to show the functions of morphemes. Agented passive, passive, antipassive, and causative morphemes are syntactically distinguished in a section on verbal valency. Non-verbal clauses with two sets of copulas are compared. Relative clauses, noun phrase agreement, and possession are also discussed, among other grammatical aspects. Chapter 15 presents sentence-level syntax, including coordinate and subordinate conjunctions, question clauses, and subject and object focus. After some concluding remarks in chapter 16, ten texts of various genres are presented in chapter 17 to verify the morphology and syntax in the context of natural language.

All data represent both underlying and surface (phonetic) forms unless otherwise marked. Where they differ, surface forms are written between brackets [ ], whereas underlying forms are written between forward slashes / /. Many of the clause examples are taken from the ten texts of chapter 17, which have reference codes. Throughout the thesis, examples from these texts list the reference code and line number in the free gloss from which the examples are taken. Pronouns, as in *ūgg ŋəlg* 'your (2pPp) necks,' have a different set of gloss abbreviations than other word categories (see the list of abbreviations and the discussion on possessive pronoun abbreviations in 5.1).

Example numbers are indicated with parentheses such as (3), whereas rules are indicated with braces such as {M3}. In 3.3, rule {M4} states that [+round] quality spreads rightward from the root to all suffix vowels not underlying specified for the feature [round]. However, roundness does not spread as specified in every word with every speaker, but tends to vary from word to word and from speaker to speaker. In this thesis, morphemes are transcribed as having the most possible rounding.