

Gender and person agreement in Cicipu discourse

The Cicipu language (West Kainji, Benue-Congo) spoken in northwest Nigeria has the kind of robust noun class system which is characteristic of Benue-Congo languages – alliterative gender agreement is found on a great many agreement targets inside and outside the noun phrase. For a number of these targets, the gender agreement system is in competition with a separate paradigm, that of person agreement. Example (1) shows class 4 *gender* agreement on the article and verb, while example (2) shows gender-neutral *person* agreement.

(1) **má**-nà mò-yóo, **mà**-yũu í-bóci
AG4-ART¹ NC4-beer AG4-cause\RLS NC3-sickness
some beer, it causes sickness

(2) **wú**-nà mò-yóo, ù-yũu í-bóci
3S-ART NC4-beer 3S-cause\RLS NC3-sickness
some beer, it causes sickness

In this talk I will discuss the distribution of this alternation in Cicipu discourse, based on a corpus of approximately twelve thousand clauses of spoken language. I will show that a full description must invoke a constellation of phonological, morphosyntactic, semantic and discourse factors. In particular, both animacy and DISCOURSE TOPICALITY (Tomlin et al. 1997, Dooley 2007) are CONDITIONS on agreement (Corbett 2006). While nouns with human referents typically trigger person agreement, this is not always the case, and they may trigger gender agreement if they are of incidental importance to the discourse. Likewise while inanimate participants usually trigger gender agreement, if they become discourse topics then they may trigger person agreement. I will argue that a proper description of this aspect of Cicipu agreement requires a theory of information structure that takes into account the way in which topics develop through discourse (i.e. Cicipu agreement is sensitive to discourse topics rather than e.g. SENTENCE TOPICS as in Lambrecht 1994).

Corbett, Greville G. 2006. *Agreement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dooley, Robert A. 2007. Explorations in discourse topicality. *SIL Electronic Working Papers*.
<http://www.sil.org/silewp/2007/silewp2007-010.pdf>.

Lambrecht, Knud. 1994. *Information structure and sentence form*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tomlin, Russell S., Linda B. Forrest, Ming Ming Pu & Myung Hee Kim. 1997. Discourse semantics. In Teun A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse studies: a multidisciplinary introduction*, vol. 1: *Discourse as structure and process*, 63-111. London: Sage.

1 3S = 3rd person singular, AG = agreement prefix, ART = article, NC = noun class prefix, RLS = realis tone pattern.