

The associative construction and friends within Niger-Congo: When nouns unite

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The noun phrase is highly important to communication and is significant within historical-comparative work (e.g., wordlists). Noun phrase internal constituency and order is correlated with discourse pragmatics and sentence-level syntax in African languages (e.g., evolutionary syntax). We propose a workshop discussing and exploring the evolution of the range and forms of the associative construction both within and beyond the noun phrase.

Across Niger-Congo, the common Noun-Noun construction (also known as the *associative construction* per Welmers, 1963; a.k.a., *connective*, e.g., Meeussen 1967; *connexive*, e.g., Schadeberg 1995:176, and *genitive*, e.g., Benson 2020) has different interpretive meanings and invokes a variety of morpho-phonological forms. These forms in turn have various information-structure implications and communicative impacts. The associative construction has been discussed for certain sub-branches of Niger-Congo (e.g., Bantu, see Van de Velde 2013). The full range of functions of Welmers' *associative construction* is little explored synchronically or diachronically.

While the syntax of the structure is consistently [N Assoc N], variations on the form of the *associative marker* itself are diverse as seen in examples 1a-e where the form can take the shape of a low vowel, a low tone, or in some languages a high tone. The canonical form for Bantu is proposed as AG-*a*; that is, a root *-a* which is preceded by a noun class agreement prefix (Meeussen 1967), and later Van de Velde (2013: 219). The exact morpho-phonological shape of the construction varies from language to language.

(1)

- a. Kagulu [kki] (Bantu; Tanzania; Petzell 2008: 86, as cited in Van de Velde 2013: 217)

<i>m-eji</i>	<i>g-a</i>	<i>mu-nyu</i>
6-water	AG6-CON	3-salt

‘salt water’
- b. Swahili [swa] (Bantu; Welmers 1963: 433)

<i>maji</i>	<i>y-a</i>	<i>chumvi</i>
{water	AG-ASSOC	salt }

‘salt water (water associated with salt)’
- c. ut-Ma’in [gel] (Kainji; Nigeria; Paterson 2019: 264)

<i>swā</i>	<i>d-</i>	<i>=u-rwág</i>
nose	AG5-ASSOC	=C7-elephant

‘elephant trunk’ (*swā* ‘C5-nose’; *rwág* ‘C7-elephant’)
- d. Kwakum [kwu] (Bantu; Cameroon; Louagie et al. 2023)

<i>ndètè</i>	<i>-kèè</i>
big	CON -fish

‘the big fish’ (~ the being big/bigness of the fish)
- e. Igbo [ibo] (Kwa; Nigeria; Welmers & Welmers 1969: 316)

<i>ímé</i>	<i>†íkó</i>
inside	cup

‘inside of a cup’ (ímé ‘inside’; ikó ‘cup’; ASSOC conveyed by tonal downstep)

Within the noun phrase, various semantic relationships or functions between the nouns are described for the associative construction including: possessive (example 3), part-whole (specific-general) (example 1-c.), material-composition (thing-compositional material) (example 2-a), person-place (person from a place), place of use, and time of use. At the clause level, these same constructions can convey semantics related to method, utility (material), location, time, and cause.

(2) Swahili [swa] (Bantu; Welmers 1963: 433)

- a. material: *nyumba z-a mawe*
'houses made of stone'
- b. material: *alifikanya kw-a mti*
'he made it out of wood'

(3) Mumuye [mzm] (Adamawa; Shimizu 1983, as in Cahill 2000: 37)

- | | | | | |
|------------|---|---------------|---|-------------------|
| <i>kìn</i> | + | <i>kpàntī</i> | → | <i>kìh kpàntī</i> |
| chicken | | chief | | 'chief's chicken' |

The [N Assoc N] construction therefore sits at the apex of phonological, syntactic, and semantic evolution. The evolution of semantic uses (Evans 2012: 201) may affect clauses on different evolutionary trajectories from morpho-phonological sound changes. Therefore, the rather productive and promiscuous *associative construction* can become involved in independent evolutionary trajectories, e.g., phonological sound changes and semantic uses. The proposed workshop welcomes studies which illustrate the associative construction from any Niger-Congo language, from a historical-comparative or internal-reconstruction perspective. Of particular interest are those studies which discuss the evolution of forms or functions related to noun-noun constructions from Gur, Adamawa, Dogon, Ubangi, and other purported Niger-Congo branches with constructions parallel to identified associative constructions in other branches.

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