

# Voice and valency in Shilluk, a head-marking language

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We present a descriptive analysis of voice and valency in Shilluk, a Nilo-Saharan language spoken in South Sudan. Shilluk morphology is mostly head-marking, and both nouns and verbs present rich morphological paradigms, in which stem-internal markers predominate. In relation to transitive verbs, the range of morphological patterns have been described in Remijsen, Miller-Naudé & Gilley (2016), but it remains unclear how the paradigm is structured. On the basis of new data, we hypothesize that Shilluk transitive verbs present three voices, which recur across a set of derivations. The system presents parallels both with that of related Dinka (Andersen 1991) and, further afield, with those of certain Austronesian languages (Erlewine et al., to appear).

The basic inflectional paradigm of a Shilluk transitive verb distinguishes between three different patterns of alignment of the verb arguments (voices). First, there is the construction with AVO voice, illustrated in (1). Here the verb appears in its basic morphological form, displaying its lexical (underlying) specification for tone, which is a Low tone in the case of {càm} ‘eat’ (1a), and a Low Fall in the case of {mâat} ‘drink’ (1b). Note that neither of the noun arguments is case-marked. When this construction is used, the postverbal object cannot be omitted.

- (1) a. **kùl à-càm kwān**                      b. **kùl à-mâat càak**  
Kul PAST-eat porridge                      Kul PAST-drink milk  
‘Kul ate porridge.’                      ‘Kul drank milk.’

Second, there is the OV voice, illustrated in (2). Now the verb is morphologically marked: the High Fall tone / <sup>˥</sup> / on the stem syllable replaces the above-mentioned underlying tones. The postverbal agent is case marked by **ĩr**, and it can be omitted, in which case an unspecified 3<sup>rd</sup> person agent is inferred.

- (2) a. **kwān á-cám (ĩr kùl)**                      b. **càak à-mâat (ĩr kùl)**  
porridge PAST-eat:OV PREP Kul                      milk PAST-drink:OV PREP Kul  
‘Kul / Somebody ate porridge.’                      ‘Kul / Somebody drank milk.’

Comparing the properties of these first two voices, OV is morphologically complex, in terms of a) grammatical marking on the verb and b) case marking on the Agent. Intriguingly, however, it is the OV word order that is considered pragmatically neutral by speakers, whereas AVO emphasizes the Agent’s intent. Various studies go with the structural evidence, considering the AVO voice to be basic (e.g. Westermann 1912, Tucker & Bryan 1966), and OV voice to represent passive voice: “[Shilluk people] generally prefer to speak in the passive voice” (Westermann 1912:78). More recently, however, Miller & Gilley (2001) have hypothesized that OV is basic, and that the alignment is ergative overall. That is, they interpret **ĩr**, which marks the Agent in OV voice, as an ergative marker. A crucial argument in their analysis is that “there is no formal marker of passive voice indicated on verbal morphology” (Miller & Gilley 2001:52). Considering forms like (1) vs. (2), and following Remijsen, Miller & Gilley (2016), we argue that this is incorrect, i.e., that OV voice is marked, relative to the AVO voice.

The third voice, labeled ‘VO’, has the object after the verb just as in AVO, but now the preverbal argument is not the Agent – cf. ‘non-topical subject’ in Dinka (Andersen 1991). It is shown in (3).

- (3) a. **pâal á-cāaam kwān (ɪr kùl)** spoon PAST-eat:VO porridge PREP Kul  
‘Kul / Smb. ate porridge with a spoon.’  
b. **lwôol á-māaŋ cāk (ɪr kùl)** cup PAST-drink:VO milk PREP Kul  
‘Kul / Smb. drank milk with a cup.’

VO voice is marked on the verb, which displays morphological lengthening of the stem vowel and tonal marking on the stem syllable. As seen from comparing (3a,b) with (1a,b), the tonal marking of VO is predictable on the basis of the lexical specification: in VO voice, Low roots have a Mid tone, and Low Fall roots a High Fall to Mid (/ <sup>˥</sup>˨˨˨/). The use of the VO voice is not limited to clauses in which the preverbal argument is an instrument, it can equally be a deictic constituent or a subordinator.

Combined with inflections to mark subject and tense-aspect-modality, these three voices – AVO, OV, VO – make up the inflectional paradigm available for any Shilluk transitive verb. In addition, most verbs present the following derivations: iterative, benefactive, centrifugal, centripetal, and two antipassives. The three voices are available in these derivations to different extents. Illustration (4) shows the forms found in the centrifugal derivation. Centrifugal is a valency-increasing operation, in that the destination can be included as an internal argument. As seen from (4c), the centrifugal yields a trivalent predicate when preverbal argument is oblique. However, VO and OV voices do not present distinct forms in this derivation, as seen from the fact that the verb forms in (4b) and (4c) are the same. This means that the marking of the VO voice is purely syntactic in the centrifugal derivation.

- (4) a. **kùl á-cāaam kwān pâac**  
Kul PAST-eat:FUG porridge village  
‘Kul went to eat porridge (in the village).’  
b. **kwān á-cāaam pâac (ɪr kùl)**  
porridge PAST-eat:OV/VO.FUG village PREP Kul  
‘Kul / smb. went to eat porridge (in the village).’  
c. **pâal á-cāaam kwān pâac (ɪr kùl)**  
spoon PAST-eat:OV/VO.FUG porridge village PREP Kul  
‘Kul / smb. used a spoon to go eat porridge in the village.’

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