Something old, something new, and something borrowed: evolving grammatical gender systems in Juǀʼhoan

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Grammatical gender–the classification of nouns expressed by agreement (e.g., Corbett 1991)–is found in over half of the world's languages and Africa is a hotspot not only with respect to the distribution of grammatical gender systems but also the typological diversity of such systems (e.g., Heine 1982; Nichols 1992; Corbett 2013; Güldemann 2000). In Kalahari Basin Area languages (aka 'Khoisan'), gender systems exhibit two systemically opposed typological profiles. In languages of the Kx'a and Tuu families, gender is largely insensitive to number and sex, a profile rarely found in Africa. This stands in sharp contrast to gender in Khoe languages–important contact languages–which is sensitive to both number and sex (cf., Güldemann 2000).

This presentation focusses on Juǀʼhoan (Kx'a) and its pronominal gender system which amongst other things encodes a culturally salient distinction between 'in-group' humans, including kin and other fellow local forager groups , and all other animates. This presentation describes the evolution of the gender systems in particular speech communities, detailing an important typological change to the gender system with the innovation of sex-specific genders due to contact with Khoe languages. In addition to observing system internal changes, such as the recycling of agreement material to increase the number of genders from five to seven (see Figure 1), there are significant insights to be gained from this case study.

First, the innovative sex-based genders apply uniquely to 'in-group' humans. As shall be demonstrated, this contact-induced change actually increases the linguistic markedness of an important sociocultural opposition and arguably promotes its retention. Second, this case study provides an opportunity to observe the secondary development of a sex-based distinction in a gender system with a primordial animacy opposition (cf. Güldemann, in prep). As such, this study details an interesting case of feature retention promoted by language contact and typological change and emphasises the contribution of the micro-level investigation of lesser studied languages to historical linguistics and linguistic typology.
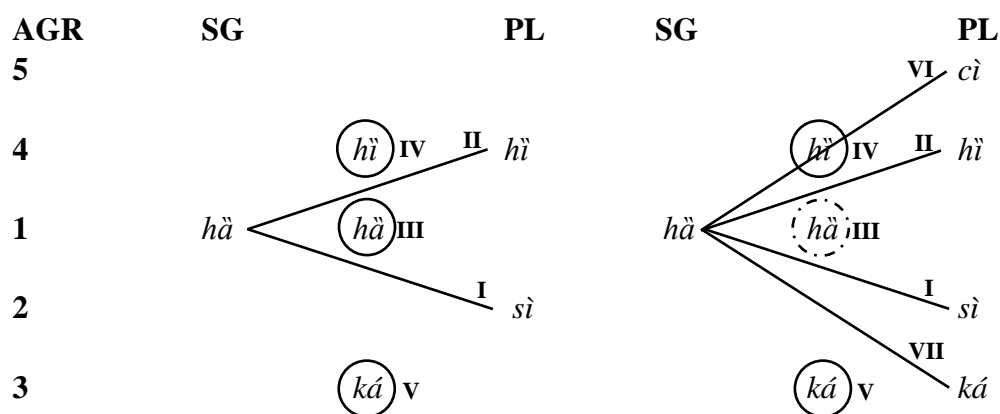

Figure 1 Gender systems in Juǀʼhoan A (left) and in Juǀʼhoan B (right). Arabic numerals stand for agreement classes (AGR). A pairing of singular (SG) and plural (PL) agreement classes form a gender, enumerated by Roman numerals. Circles represent transnumeral genders (cf. Pratchett 2021)

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