Seenku Phonology and Morphosyntax from a Typological Perspective

The Seenku language, also known as Sambla, is spoken by around 16,000 people west of the Bobo-Dioulasso city in southwestern Burkina Faso. It is a Mande language with two dialects: Northern and Southern. Part of the Samogo language group, Seenku belongs to the Niger-Congo family and is primarily used in domestic, everyday life. The French colonized Sambla in July of 1898, which has resulted in the education of the Sambla people in French. Due to the presence of many language groups in the geographic area, different ethnicities have been using Jula and French for spoken and written communication, respectively, which threatens this language with endangerment. The source I will be referencing, *A Grammar of Seenku,* is written by Dr. Laura McPherson, was published in 2020, and is supported by the National Science Foundation Documenting Endangered Languages program. Primarily obtained through elicitation and texts, McPherson's work and research is an incredibly thorough study documenting the grammar, typology, discourse, usage, and customs of the Seenku language and people. In this paper, I will be discussing Seenku's phoneme inventory and an introduction to its syllabification and tone system, giving an overview of Seenku's morphology, and summarizing the antipasivation process, which is its valency-reducing mechanism.

Phoneme Inventory

The phoneme size of the Seenku language is moderate to large in its vowel and consonant collections. The consonant inventory contains 20 core phonemes plus two marginal phonemes, /p/ and /j/, and the five places of articulation are as follows: Bilabial, alveolar, palatal, velar, and labiovelar (See Table 1). As for the manner of articulation, stops, orals, and nasals, each exhibit contrast in their places of articulation. Something that makes Seenku unique is its possession of the phonemic alveolar affricates /ts/ and /dz/, which is rare in Mande languages. Apart from that, Seenku's consonant inventory as classified by Maddieson as "average-sized," and this common cross-linguistically and globally, showing up in 201 out of his 563-language sample (Maddieson).

Seenku also has a rich vowel inventory that consists of 8-9 phonemic oral vowels and five nasal vowels. Seven of these, /i e ɛ a ɔ o u/, are found in the usage of all speakers, which is notable because having seven vowels is characteristic of Mande languages (See Table 2). Large vowel inventories are prevalent in Africa, especially in the Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, and Nilo-Saharan families, but less common cross-linguistically with only 184 out of Maddieson's 564-language sample possessing a large vowel inventory. Seenku's vowel inventory predicts an extensive tonal system since complex tone systems tend to have a higher number of consonants and vowels.

Syllable Structure

One of the most distinctive features of the Seenku language lies in its syllable shape. Its sesquisyllabic stem shape is rare outside of Southeast Asian languages and refers to a configuration where a “half” or “minor” syllable (typically a reduced vowel like [ə]) precedes a full syllable (In Table 3, you can see the Cə inserted between the full syllable). Sesquisyllables can be open or closed, and most commonly occur with a V nucleus. They can also co-occur with V: (long vowel), VV, and VV:, although the number of attested roots drops with growing structural complexity. Attested sesquisyllables syllable shapes include CəCV, CəCVn, CəCV:, and CəCV:.

Except for a few pronouns, syllables require an onset and nucleus. With sesquisyllabic words, monosyllabic words compose the majority of Seenku’s vocabulary. Monosyllables consist of a single onset consonant + a simple or complex nucleus, simple being the most common. They allow the same nucleus types as sesquisyllables and can also be open or closed (See Table 4). Maddieson categorizes Seenku’s syllable structure as “moderately complex,” the most common group cross-linguistically, appearing in 274 of his 486 language survey. This group is globally widespread, but especially so in Africa, Eastern Asia, and most of Australia. Seenku’s syllabic roots can be trisyllabic at most, and the CV.CV disyllabic root shape is overwhelmingly dominant. Language contact and borrowing from Jula and French are responsible for most occurrences of non-monosyllabic roots. Disyllabic roots are typically made of simple syllables but can also have sesquisyllables counting as one of the two. The most common root shapes are CV.CV, CV.CV.CV, CVN.CV, CV.CV:, and CV.CəCV. Seenku’s syllabification system predicts a complex tone system because complex tone systems are strongly correlated with the occurrence of moderate to simple syllable structure.

Tone

Increasingly central to Seenku grammar is its tone system, which is one of the most intricate systems of languages of Burkina Faso. Out of Maddieson’s 527-language sample, only 88 tonal languages were classified as “complex.” Tone systems are ubiquitous in Southeast Asia, the Americas, and Africa, with complex tones especially prevalent in West Africa and languages of the Niger-Congo family. Neighboring languages have 2-3 tones, but Seenku is the only known language of the area with four contrastive tone levels, which are as follows: Extra-low, low, high, and super high. (See Table 4). Also, having been labeled Low/Mid/High (with the extra high/low counterpart), the two new tones are a possible product of evolution (originating with a 3-tone system). From the four tone levels, a two-feature system creates at least seven 2-tone contours. McPherson describes the representation as binary, featuring two categories: Upper and raised

(See Table 5). Contour tones are common in tonal languages with more than three-tone distinctions and are found mostly in Southeast Asia, Mexico, and Central America. The tone-bearing unit is the syllable, each with the potential to host a maximum of three tones. Because the TBU is distributed on the syllable (contour tones found on long and short vowels prove that), it is essential to note that tone and vowel length are somewhat related in Seenku.

Seenku's tones have either grammatical or lexical functions. The grammatical tone has three categories: Tonal affixation, a complex sandhi process, and the optional elision of grammatical clitics. I will be talking about Seenku's lexical tone function, particularly its distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs. Lexical tone melodies make up for Seenku's simple-syllabic stems. They include category-specific distributions and syntactic categories (nominal tone), adjectival and participle tone, and transitive and intransitive tone.

Because Seenku's transitive and intransitive verb stem lengths and segmental make-up show no differentiation, it is left to the three-way tone contrast (X, H, S) to identify the two. This tone contrast converts into a two-way distinction, with intransitive verbs neutralizing H and S to H and transitive verbs becoming S. Labile verbs, which can be used transitively or intransitively, exemplify the differentiation in S-toned stems (See Table 6). The intransitive verb shown in (a) exhibits the tonal melody HX while the transitive (b) shows the S tone. The same is shown in another example (See Table 7), where H-tone stems undergo tonal change. The intransitive (a) again demonstrates HX tone, and the transitive (b) S tone.

Morphology

Seenku is not a particularly morphologically rich language, and it has replaced much of its segmental morphology for tonal. It lacks noun classes, which is typical for Mande languages, and the only inflectional morphology on nouns is for differentiation between singular and plural nouns, which is shown by vowel fronting and tone raising, which is shown below. (See Table 8) The only exception to this is singular/plural suffixes in a few human nouns. Having little inflectional morphology is linguistically atypical, being characteristic in only 141 out of 969 languages in Dryer's sample. The majority of languages with little affixation is characteristic of Southeast Asia, Indonesia, and Western Africa. Additionally, Seenku has a rigid word order, which is typical of Mande languages. Sentence order is Subject - TAMP – Auxiliary – Object – Verb – PP/Adjunct – Negation, and noun phrase order is Possessor/indefinite determiner – Noun – Adjective – Numeral – Demonstrative/indefinite determiner- Quantifier. Only internal objects can appear before the verb, and any indirect object must appear with a postposition after the verb, the only exception being that certain adverbs are permitted to appear clause-initially. SOV word order is standard cross-linguistically, appearing in 564 of 1376 of Dryer's sample. This

word order is especially prominent in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia, and the Mediterranean. McPherson doesn't mention Seenku's noun case, but given its strict word order, I can predict that Seenku will not have an extensive case system since languages with extensive case systems tend to have freer word orders. It is also not mentioned whether Seenku is analytic or synthetic. Still, based on its extensive tone system and productive compounding, I am hypothesizing that Seenku is analytic since these are common features of analytic languages, which are also typical of West African languages.

Adjectives have plural inflection, but Seenku verbs inflect for aspect, and reality status (irrealis vs.. realis). They do not possess participant agreement, and tense and negation are typically shown by post-subject markers and particles, while aspects are marked with grammatical tone. Transitive pre-verbs (valency-increasing) and compound verbs are demonstrated by compounding, and pluralization which is shown by a full reduplication of the verb stem.

Antipassivation

Seenku's only non-tonal affixation of its verbal morphology is the antipassive, which is what I will be talking about. McPherson prefers the term "deobjective" due to its valency-reducing nature that takes away an object from the verb. The Antipassive is shown by suffixing (although it sometimes appears to be an infix) and is of limited productivity since not every verb can be antipassivized. The underlying phonological form is [-i], and two lexically-specific allomorphs are employed to mark the antipassive, and they are /i/ and /ri/. Having two antipassive suffixes is a common feature of Mande languages. According to McPherson, it is unpredictable which allomorph gets used, but she notes that /ri/ are more common after high vowels (if the last vowel of verb root is high) and /i/ after non-high vowels. What the antipassive does is suppress the patient of the transitive verb, leaving the agent unchanged (See example 9). P, the word for "beer", is suppressed (deleted), and the antipassive morpheme is shown in (d) adding /ri/ to the verb. Furthermore, it is not uncommon to use the antipassive transitively. Many of these antipassive verbs can continue to take a patient (or be used transitively) but with modified semantics where the transitive verb takes partitive meaning (See table 10). Based on its valency-reducing mechanism, it is likely that Seenku is an Ergative/Absolutive language since they are more closely associated with having the antipassive construction.