

Metre and Melody in Dinka Speech and Song

Beyond Text Large Grant



BACKGROUND

- The Dinka language is unusually rich in distinctions of tone, length and voice quality (Ladd, Remijsen, Manyang 2009).
- The Dinka people have a vibrant song tradition: it is common for Dinka people to make songs about matters that concern them (Deng 1973).

PROJECT GOALS

- To investigate the tone, length and voice quality systems of several Dinka dialects;
- To investigate the manifestations of these systems in song and in writing;
- To produce a collection of Dinka songs;
- To contribute to orthography and literacy development.

OUR TEAM

Investigators

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Logistical support in Sudan

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Other RAs

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DINKA SONGS

- Like language, song makes use of tone, length, voice and quality. We are analysing the interaction between language and song with regard to these parameters. In addition, we are studying the Dinka musical system as a whole.
- Most musical traditions in sub-Saharan Africa are based on cyclical multi-part vocal and rhythmic interactions. Melodies are typically based on 6- or 7-tone scales. In contrast, Dinka songs are composed in an extended series of connected song-segments that follow a simple, regular pulse – often accompanied only by clapping or a drum – and are performed in unison. The Dinka tuning system follows a 5-tone scale.



Ox with the "marial" (white & black) hide pattern.

- Apart from one book on song lyrics by Francis Mading Deng (1973), no research has ever been conducted on Dinka music.
- In Dinka culture, songs are used to chronicle all aspects of individual and communal experience. References to cattle are frequent.



Team members in Juba, January 2010: Angela, Simon, Peter, Ngong, Bert, along with Akol Kongoor Reech

THE DINKA SOUND SYSTEM

• Dinka has an unusually complex inventory of tone, length and voice quality distinctions:

• Two voice qualities (modal / breathy [..]) – for example:

ròoor vs. **ròoor**
'forest' 'men'

• Three vowel lengths – e.g.:

cól vs. **cóol** vs. **còool**
'mouse' 'charcoal' 'charcoal(pl)'

• Four distinctive tone patterns (Low, High, Falling, Rising) – e.g.:

wěēer vs. **wěēer**
'mouse' 'charcoal'

ròok vs. **ròok**
'kidney' 'kidneys'

kwiiil vs. **kwiiil**
'ropes' 'eyetooth'

• We have studied these distinctions in 3 dialects so far, and also in 2 related languages, Shilluk and Atuot (cf. map below). Work on more dialects will follow shortly. Findings so far:

- All dialects and languages studied so far have the three-level vowel length system;

- Dialects of Dinka differ considerably in the tone system.



Dinka dialects & related languages. Langs. & dialects studied so far are marked in green.



An annotated songline from our collection, illustrating the acoustic representation (waveform) and the annotations: Dinka orthography, translation, and comments.

LITERACY

- We are contributing to Dinka literacy by developing a resource for primary education:
 - one book each for primary 1,2,3;
 - approx. 18 songs per book;
 - tied in with the rest of the curriculum and representing a wide range of dialects;
 - illustrated by colour pictures;
 - accompanied by songs on CD

OUTPUTS

- A collection of Dinka songs, annotated (see above) and digitally archived;
- Several peer-reviewed articles on suprasegmentals in Dinka and closely related languages, and on the Dinka song tradition;
- A primary-school resource based on the Dinka song tradition (see left).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Francis Mading Deng (1973). *The Dinka and Their Songs*. Oxford University Press.
Ladd, Remijsen & Manyang (2009). On the distinction between regular and irregular inflectional morphology: evidence from Dinka. *Language* 85(3), 659-670.

FURTHER DETAILS

<http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/nilotic/>
<http://projects.beyondtext.ac.uk/dinkaspeech>



In the cattle camp.
[Photo by Ngong John Alwong]



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