

Report
And yet, they understand each other:
Linguistic communication in !Xun

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Christa König

How much information is needed in order to communicate successfully? The answer to this question sheds some light on the fascinating communication strategies of !Xun people of southwestern Africa. !Xun are traditional hunter-gatherers, belonging to what used to be called “Bushman people”. The language is part of what is commonly known as the Khoisan family. A striking feature of !Xun, and of Khoisan languages in general, is the huge inventory of click sounds. With roughly 120 different phonemes, !Xun belongs to the languages with one of the most complex sound systems of the world.

Although !Xun looks like any other language, in that it has lexical items and grammatical items, there is one significant difference to most other languages: In !Xun, hardly any grammatical item is obligatory. The language shows great freedom with regard to the information which has to be conveyed in an utterance. Most of the information must be inferred from the context. Grammar may be used to play with; language may be used to convey hidden meanings, other than obvious ones.

Typologically, !Xun shows certain features which might be special: It is an isolating language where grammatical information is mainly encoded by particles or clitics. It has developed complex grammatical categories, in particular with regard to tense, aspect, modality, passive, causativity, reciprocal; it has a noun class system, plural marking, and complex demonstratives. Up to this point it looks like any other 'ordinary language'. But what distinguishes !Xun from other languages is the fact that hardly any of the categories are obligatory. The speaker has a great freedom to use them or not to use them. !Xun has many grammatical markers which are hybrids, they are used simultaneously as lexical elements, expressing a concrete semantics, and as grammatical markers expressing schematized meanings.

The question that this raises is the following: Is !Xun unique, constituting a type of its own, or are there other languages which show a similar typological profile? It has been claimed for South East Asian languages that they show similar features (see e.g. Bisang 2003). Japanese for instance shows some similar features in that like in !Xun many nouns are transnumeral and core participants are omissible.

Reference

Bisang, Walter. 2003. "Grammaticalization without coevolution of form and meaning as an areal phenomenon in East and mainland Southeast Asia – the case of tense-aspect-mood (TAM)". Typescript, University of Mainz.