

## 1 The language and its speakers

### 1.1 Language type orientation

So is a verb-initial language and adheres to a strict word order in that the subject always precedes the object. Both verbs and nouns undergo suffixation, for the verbal derivational extensions, and for number and case marking respectively. The only prefixation which occurs is that of tense, aspect and polarity.

In the phonological system, both voice and implosivity are distinctive features. For the problematic classification of implosivity as a distinctive feature, see 2.1.2.1. Vowel harmony based on the distinction closeness-openness obtains. Vowel length is distinctive although long vowels occur relatively seldom. Although stress is not distinctive, it constitutes a syntagmatic organizational feature of the language, that is, it is not placed randomly but is dependent on and interacts with syllable structure.

The following word classes are morphologically clearly defined in So: noun, verb, and invariable particle. In syntactic terms, we can distinguish the following categories: nominals, consisting of nouns, pronouns, demonstratives and nominal selectioners; verbals, which include verbs and numeralia; adverbials, which consist of adverbs; prepositions; and invariable particles such as question words and quantifiers.

A word category "adjective" does not exist, rather attribution is expressed by means of a stative verb introduced by a relative clause. Thus a modifier is linked to a preceding noun by means of a relative clause. Similarly, adverbs are verbal rather than that they constitute a word class of their own. Non-derived prepositions, that is, opposed to relational nouns which have a prepositional function, do obtain, but these are exclusively loans from Karimojong, So's immediate neighbour. There is no overt nominal genitive marking, rather two nouns are juxtaposed with the possessum preceding the possessor. Nouns are marked for number and case only.

So has one absolute tense, namely past tense, with present and future time having no absolute value, but being temporally relative to a given context, and distinguishes between perfective and imperfective

aspect. A distinction is made between third and non-third person subject, with the former being an omissible element, and the latter an obligatory encodation on the verb. The first person plural has separate forms for inclusive (we: speaker and interlocutor) and exclusive (we: speaker and others excluding interlocutor). Question words can be placed either sentence-initially or -finally.

## 1.2 Location and dialects

So has three dialects which are/were spoken on three extinct volcanic mountains in the southern Karamoja area of northeastern Uganda (see Map), namely on Mount Moroto where the Tepes dialect is spoken, on Mount Kadam where the Kadam dialect is spoken and on Mount Napak where it was not possible to find any speakers; it is probable that there are no longer any So speakers on Mount Napak. Tepes (Tepeth) on which this description is based, was, in earlier works (cf. Heine 1976), used as a general term for both the language and the ethnic group. Since, however, this term does not include the three groups, the vernacular autonym So, **sɔ**, sg. **sɔr-at** is now used in its stead, following Heine (ms.).

Compare the following designations taken from Heine (ms):

So	Vernacular name	Mountain
Tepes	<b>tepes</b> , sg. <b>teps-at</b>	<b>moroto</b>
Kadam	<b>katam</b> , sg. <b>katm-at</b>	<b>kadam</b>
Napak	<b>yog toŋi</b> , sg. <b>nɛb toŋi</b>	<b>toŋi</b>
Karimojong	Ethnonym	Mountain
Tepes	<b>é-tepes-ít</b> , pl. <b>ŋí-tepés</b>	<b>morotó</b>
Kadam	<b>é-kadamá-it</b> , pl. <b>ŋí-kadamá</b> (goats' mountain)	<b>mórúá a ŋá</b>
Napak	<b>é-tepes-ít</b> , pl. <b>ŋí-tepés</b>	<b>napák</b>
Pokot	Ethnonym	Mountain
Tepes	<b>tapasiáác</b>	<b>tapaác</b>
Kadam	<b>kádamá</b>	<b>kaadâm</b>
Napak	—	<b>toŋi</b>

There are only few differences between the Kadam and Tepes varieties

and these will be stated in the following work where felt to be relevant.

### 1.3 Neighbouring languages

The So are surrounded on all sides by Nilotic groups, namely the Karimojong to the north, south and west, the Pokot to the south, around Mount Elgon, the Teso to the west, and the Turkana to the east. Contact with the Karimojong in all areas, and also with the Pokot in the Kadam area, is on a daily basis and has had a vast impact on the So language. Thus we are not only dealing here with lexical loans but also with phonological diffusion and grammemic loans.

The cultural contact involves not only integration but now almost total assimilation. In the Moroto area, it was continually pointed out to me by young So up to the age of about thirty-five, that although they were originally So, they were also Karimojong, that is, their daily life, their attitudes and practices were no different from those of the Karimojong.

### 1.4 Cultural background

The origin of the So is an unknown chapter in the history of east Africa. Only oral traditions refer to them moving from the south (it is unclear how far south) to where they are now, fighting their way up as far as Napak. The ethnic centre would seem to be Kadam, where, according to Heine (ms.) and Laughlin and Allgeier (1979), the older So traditions have to a greater extent than in Moroto and Napak resisted total assimilation to the contiguous ethnic groups. For a detailed study of the now sadly neglected cultural heritage of the So, the reader is referred to Laughlin and Allgeier's (1979) *An Ethnography of the So of Northeastern Uganda*. It is, however, known that the So were formerly mainly hunter-gatherers who practised some cultivation. Now they are pastoralists and subsistence farmers, their only crops being sorghum and more recently maize. In addition to these, they grow tobacco. One should add, however, that their farming is not a very successful enterprise since even if good climatic conditions prevail, which is not always the case, (for example in 1991 sorghum had to be planted five times before it yielded a harvest, an occurrence

which is not seldom), the So do not fence in their farming plots so that they are generally scavenged by baboons.

The exact number of the So is unknown, but according to Heine (1974/5) it was estimated at between 2000 and 5000. Laughlin and Allgeier (1979) give a number not in excess of 4800 for the entire So area in 1970. According to an unofficial source, however, their number recorded in the last census (1988) approximated 10,000.

### 1.5 Classification

So belongs to the Kuliak group of languages, a term introduced by Heine (1976) and also found in Lamphear (1976), a group which is itself an enigma in African linguistics. The term Kuliak stems from the Jie word **ɲikuliak** meaning "poor people", and designated a group of people who already lived in Jie territory when the Jie arrived there. These people were mountain dwellers and were primarily hunters. The reason for their being termed Ngikuliak was due to the fact that they possessed no cattle which for the pastoralist Jie entailed poverty.

The Kuliak languages are all spoken in the Karamoja District of Uganda, and include So (Tepes), Ik (Teuso), Nyang'i (Nyangea) and a probably by now extinct language called Dorobo. The Kuliak family has been variously classified as:

- 1) Fringe Cushitic in the Afroasiatic family (Tucker 1967)
- 2) a distinct branch of Eastern Sudanic in the Nilo-Saharan family (Greenberg 1963)
- 3) independent, a non-aligned language family (Tucker and Bryan 1956; Laughlin 1975; Heine 1976)

A summary of the external relations of Kuliak is found in Heine (1976), and so will not be dealt with further in this work.

### 1.6 Previous works on the So

While So society and culture have been well described by Laughlin and Allgeier (1979), relatively little work is available on their language. A grammatical sketch, first presented by Tucker and Bryan (1966), see

also Tucker (1967) was largely based on a questionnaire filled in by informants in the field. Furthermore, sketchy notes based on three short visits to the Karamoja in 1970 and 1971, were presented in Heine (1974/5), while more extensive data, in particular on the lexicon, have been published in Laughlin (1972; 1975). Other scholars who have carried out field research on the So are: Ehret (1971); Weatherby (s.a.); P.H. Gulliver (unpublished), and Köhler (unpublished), the last two of which I unfortunately did not have access to. I am grateful to Bernd Heine for generously providing me with some partly handwritten notes by Weatherby.

### 1.7 So - a terminal case

Although as an ethnic group the So number somewhere between 4000 and 10,000, the number of So speakers lies at the most around the 100 mark. Since no longitudinal studies exist on this case of language death, it is not possible from the meagre amount of data available and the minimal contact with So informants (the main hindrance being the somewhat fluid and unstable social and political situation prevailing in the Karamoja area), to assess satisfactorily the remaining speakers' competence. In various works on the theory of language death, distinctions are made between the types of speakers that are found in communities that are losing or replacing their original language. Without now going into a detailed description of the theory of language death, I shall explain some of the relevant terminology, in order to facilitate a better understanding of the present situation of the So language.

The process of language death can be a long-lived one relative to many factors, such as the size of the speech community, and the sociological and economic aspects, the latter termed by Sasse (1992) as the external setting, which induce language change. Due to the lack of older data on So, it is not possible to ascertain exactly how long this process has been going on here, or when the last fully fluent speakers lived, that is, those speakers with whom one could still observe the creativity processes that are prevalent in healthy languages, such as the replacing of old norms with new ones, the development of new forms etc., and where influence or borrowings from the dominant language

Karimojong (or Pokot in the Kadam area) did not cause detrimental major structural changes (i.e. reduction and loss) over and above the normal contact-induced changes found in two or more closely interacting speech communities. What is to be found in the So community, however, are a few semi-speakers who are *per definitionem* imperfect speakers who speak a pathologically distorted form of the language which is being abandoned, and who are fully fluent in the dominant or in this case the target language (cf. Dorian 1981, and Sasse 1992). Since the term "semi-speaker" covers a broad continuum of linguistic competence, Sasse (ibid.) makes a distinction between two types of semi-speaker, namely those who had reached a full fluency level in the language before the break in transmission, that is, before the onset of the death process, and who had simply become "rusty" (Lise Menn's term quoted in Sasse, ibid.:61) due to lack of regular communicative exchange in the abandoned language, the second group being the semi-speakers proper whom he defines as having, from the outset, been victims of the breakdown in language transmission and hence had learned and had always been producing a pathologically distorted form of the language. Although it is hard to say for certain which group the So speakers I consulted belong to, due to the lack of evidence to the contrary, I would tend towards classifying them as semi-speakers proper.

There are virtually no So under the age of fifty who speak the So language, their first language now being Karimojong, and an important second language in the Kadam area being Pokot.

Present-day So are both in their mode of thought and in their linguistic behaviour, Karimojong. Hence the only possible description to emerge from a work such as this is that of a language in decay. A synchronic description must necessarily show a retarded and sometimes frozen form of a language that even among the older generation has fallen into disuse. Elicitation of data was hindered by the fact that the So language is now a matter of the past, that is, narrations from the informants dealing with historical or past matters, had been learned, but could no longer be elaborated on, neither in their ideas nor in any formal way.

Thus, this present work is speculative in the sense that it is the de-

scription of an already decayed and progressively decaying language. Since, however, there exists no older grammar of the language, but simply a collection of texts and a grammatical sketch by Heine (ms), this synchronic description necessarily shows a great deal of ellipsis and morphological decay, for example, in the case-marking system, and a form of So which is riddled with Karimojong borrowings, both in the lexical and in the grammatical areas. Hence earlier forms of So must to a certain extent remain veiled, although comparative studies with its close relation, Ik, may be able to shed some light on the type of development or decay So is undergoing.

In short, the So language is reclining and moving towards simplification, it is a terminal case.

Having said this, we are extremely thankful that we had a chance to record the So language, although we very much doubt if we can do justice to it. Our only consolation is that it will not fall undocumented into oblivion as is the case with so many other minority languages in Africa.

## 1.8 The data

Since the two So groups, the Tepes and the Kadam speak minimally different varieties of So, which are not divergent enough to classify them as different dialects, their differences will not be further analyzed here. In fact, only one of the varieties, namely Tepes will be considered in the present work. The Tepes data stem from field research carried out by the present author in July 1991 and by Heine in February and March 1982, and September 1986. The present work, however, is based solely on the data that I collected in 1991. Any examples taken from the Heine corpus will be marked (Heine, ms.). Where relevant, reference will be made to the Kadam variety taken from data collected by Heine.

The data were collected through the medium of English, and to a certain extent crosschecks were also carried out in Karimojong. During this research, a number of So speakers were consulted, but special thanks are due to Mr. Mariko Aucha (approx. 50) from Akeme village near Moroto (Tepes) for his enthusiasm and patience. Furthermore, I

am deeply indebted to the following So:

Mr. Kiyonga (approx. 65), farmer, from Nabuin near Moroto (Tepes)

Mr. Cosimo Lokiro (approx. 50), builder, from Mokora near Moroto (Tepes)

Heine's informants on Kadam were the following:

Mr. Baku (approx. 60), ex-chief, from Nakapelieth near Nakaapiripirit (Kadam)

Mr. Long'ora Lowrien (approx. 50), farmer, from Nakaapiripirit (Kadam)

In addition, thanks are due to Mark Sagal and Dominic Sagal from Mokora near Moroto, who assisted and accompanied the present author to the mountain villages, and acted as interpreters.

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