

SISSALA NOUN GROUPS

RON ROWLAND

1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

The nouns in Sissala¹ may be assigned to groups on the basis of the suffixes for singular and plural. A detailed examination of these suffixes shows that phonetically there are over twenty different suffixes, combining to give over thirty different singular-plural pairs.

It is the purpose of this paper to describe the phonological structure of the noun suffixes, and in particular to draw attention to the reduced vowel system that operates in them; and to show how, on the basis of this phonological analysis it is possible to assign all the singular-plural pairs to two noun groups only.

Following is a list of thirty phonetically different pairings:

SINGULAR	PLURAL	MEANING
1. bié	bísiŋ	child
2. tʃené	tʃesíŋ	month
3. kaŋá	kansáŋ	wing
4. tɔnlóŋɔ	tɔnlónsɔŋ	chin
5. bímuló	bímullóŋ	baby
6. nandóŋɔ	nandóŋhɔŋ	friend
7. leríŋ	leré	place
8. nenéŋ	nené	fruit
9. haráŋ	hará	back
10. hɔrɔŋ	hɔrɔ	house
11. luoróŋ	luoró	abdomen
12. fihe	fihíŋ	stomach
13. káha	kásáŋ	thatching grass
14. dóho	dósɔŋ	tail
15. nadána	nadánaŋ	knee
16. fɔmɔ	fɔsɔŋ	monkey
17. piesé	pieséé	sheep
18. háála	háálaa	woman
19. kuorò	kuoróo	chief
20. pɔré	pɔresíŋ	hoe
21. bagá	bagasáŋ	farm
22. nátóŋɔ	nátóŋósɔŋ	elbow
23. dzímuŋ	dzíŋŋe	hen
24. daŋáŋ	daŋŋá	snake
25. tɔmóŋ	tɔŋŋɔ	beard
26. láŋ	lará	water
27. nyɔáŋ	nyɔará	shea butter
28. néŋ	nesíŋ	cow
29. daáŋ	daasáŋ	stick
30. fɔóŋ	fɔonóŋ	river

¹The Sissala people, numbering about 60,000, live mainly in the Upper Region of Ghana and within the administrative district of Tumu, though they extend westward into the Lawra administrative district, and northward into Upper Volta.

The material for this paper was obtained in several field trips, comprising a total of about fourteen months, during the past two years, for the Institute of Linguistics working in co-operation with the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. The dialect is Sissala as spoken in the village of Nabugajaj, 15 miles south-west of Tumu.

2. THE PHONEMES

Before proceeding to a description of the noun suffixes the phonemes of Sissala are listed.

The ten vowel phonemes can be charted as follows:

FRONT	CENTRAL	BACK
i		u
ɛ		ɔ
e		o
ɛ	ʌ	ɔ
	a	

The consonants are twenty-four in number: p, kp, t, k, b, gb, d, g, f, v, h, tʃ, dz, s, z, r, l, w, y, m, ŋm, n, ny, and ŋ.

There are four tones: high, low, rising and falling. High is marked with ' , low is unmarked, rising is marked with ˊ , and falling is marked with ˋ .

3. THE NOUN SUFFIXES

Of the ten vowel qualities in Sissala, eight are used in the noun suffixes – but in such a way that there is never contrast between more than five vowels. These may, for convenience, be symbolised in the following way:

	FRONT	CENTRAL	BACK
High	I		U
Low	E	A	O

3.1. In suffix I, which may be symbolised as -Vn (where V represents one of the five contrastive vowels), the contrasts are as follows:

	FRONT	CENTRAL	BACK
High	-Iŋ (-iŋ)		-Uŋ (-oŋ)
Low	-Eŋ (-ɛŋ)	-Aŋ (-aŋ)	-Oŋ (-ɔŋ)

The vowel quality used is predictable from the last vowel of the stem, since there is harmony which can be stated in terms of front, central, and back tongue positions.^{2,3} In front and back tongue positions there is further contrast between high vowels and low vowels.

i.e.	FRONT		BACK	
	i		u	
High	ɛ -Iŋ		ɔ -Uŋ	
	e		o	
Low	ɛ -Eŋ		ɔ -Oŋ	
e.g.	kɔdi-iŋ	'food'	tʃáɔ-ɔŋ	'blood'
	dzi(m)-iŋ	'hen'	lorum-ɔŋ	'cockroach'
	ler-iŋ	'place'	napɔl-ɔŋ	'root'
	nɛn-ɛŋ	'fruit'	luɔr-ɔŋ	'abdomen'
	páŋ-aŋ	'hair'	tɔm-ɔŋ	'beard'

²When a y follows the last vowel of the stem, the vowel of the suffix is in front tongue position.

e.g. napóyŋ napóye 'thigh'

³This harmony operates consistently with all the vowels except ɛ and ɔ which require a as the harmonising vowel. In certain words, however, the harmony with front or back tongue position is maintained, and I have so far been unable to set this up as a predictable feature.

e.g. yíɔŋ yíɔ 'breast'
but vɛŋ vɛ 'well'

3.2. In suffix 2, which may be symbolised as -CV η (where C represents s, h, or l), the contrast is reduced to three vowels in front, central and back tongue positions.

	FRONT		CENTRAL	BACK
	-CI η	(-si η)	-CA η (-sa η)	-CU η (-so η)
e.g.	bi-si η	'children'	nátó η ó-so η	'elbows'
	tfe-si η	'months'	tonón-so η	'chins'
		kan-sá η	'wings'	

3.3. In suffix 3, which may be symbolised as -V, there is again a five vowel contrast, but with some differences in the vowel qualities.

	FRONT	CENTRAL	BACK	
High	-I (-e)		-U (-o)	
Low	-E (-ε)	-A (-a)	-O (-o)	
e.g.	nyl-e	'horn'	lorum-ó	'cockroaches'
	fih-e	'stomach'	napal-ó	'roots'
	ler-é	'places'	kuoró-o	'chiefs'
	sem-é	'porcupines'	hór-ó	'louse'
	pán-a	'hairs'	lal-á	'wars'

3.4. The number 4 is reserved for absence of an overt noun suffix. This occurs in the singular form of all nouns with a single vowel (other than i or u) stem final.

4. GROUP I NOUNS

These are the nouns which take suffix 3 (-V) in the plural.

4.1. Stems ending in a consonant, or the vowels i and u, take suffix 1 (-V η) in the singular and suffix 3 (-V) in the plural.

e.g.	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	ni-i η	ni-é	'mouth'
	ni η n-i η	ni η n-é	'lip'
	piel-i η	piel-é	'mountain'
	bereg-é η	bereg-é	'trap'
	tápál-a η	tápál-a	'day'
	hal-á η	hal-á	'egg'
	koyun-ó η	koyun-ó	'heavy load'
	por-ó η	por-ó	'skin bag'
	pol-ó η	pol-ó	'vein'
	hól-ó η	hól-ó	'charcoal'

Stems ending in m cause an η to come before the vowel of the suffix in the plural. Assimilation of stem final m to the point of articulation of the η causes it to become η also.

e.g.	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	tu η -i η	tu η - η é	'spear'
	ðam-á η	ðam- η á	'snake'
	tom-ó η	tom- η ó	'beard'
	por η -ó η	por η - η ó	'cricket'

4.2. Stems ending in a vowel, other than i or u, take 4 (zero suffix) in the singular, and suffix 3 (-V) in the plural.

e.g.	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	piesé	piesé-é	'sheep'
	puyé	puyé-é	'leopard'
	háála	háála-a	'woman'
	bóná	bóná-á	'goat'
	kuorò	kuoró-o	'chief'

5. GROUP 2 NOUNS

These are the nouns which take suffix 2 (-CVŋ) in the plural.

5.1. Stems ending in a consonant, or the vowels *i* and *ɛ*, take suffix 3 (-V) in the singular and suffix 2 (-CVŋ) in the plural.

The occurrence of *s*, *h*, or *l* as first consonant (-C) in suffix 2 may be stated as follows:

(a) When a lateral occurs stem final it is followed by an initial lateral in the suffix.

e.g.	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	kawɫ-é	kawɫ-líŋ	'navel'
	bimul-ó	bimul-lóŋ	'baby'
	díndól-o	díndól-lóŋ	'hill'

(b) When a non-lateral occurs stem final *s* and *h* may be used interchangeably.⁴

e.g.	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	díbi-e	díbi-sɯŋ or díbi-hɯŋ	'bird'
	nandóŋ-o	nandón-sɯŋ or nandón-hɯŋ	'friend'

5.1.1. Certain further statements are necessary for the description of Group 2 consonant final stems:

(a) When an *h* or an *m* occurs stem final in the singular, it is lost in the plural.

e.g.	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	fíh-e	fí-hɯŋ or fí-sɯŋ	'stomach'
	káh-a	ká-haŋ or ká-saŋ	'thatch grass'
	dóh-o	dó-hɯŋ or dó-sɯŋ	'tail'
	fóm-o	fó-hɯŋ or fó-sɯŋ	'baboon'
	bóm-o	bó-hɯŋ or bó-sɯŋ	'mosquito'

(b) When an *n* or an *ŋ* occurs stem final in the singular, its occurrence or non-occurrence in the plural form is governed by the tongue position of the vowel.

With front vowels it is lost.

With central vowels it is optional.

With back vowels it is obligatory.

e.g.	bóobɪn-é	bóobɪ-síŋ		'grave-vault'
	tʃɛn-é	tʃɛ-síŋ		'month'
	nadán-a	nadán-saŋ or nadán-saŋ		'knee'
	kaŋ-á	ka-sáŋ or kan-sáŋ		'wing'
	ɬnɪŋ-o	ɬnɪŋ-sɯŋ		'chin'
	nandóŋ-o	nandón-sɯŋ		'friend'

⁴The *s* is more commonly used in the village of Nabugajan, whereas *h* is more commonly used in Tumu which is still within the Issala dialect area. It is not yet possible in view of this divergence of usage to state whether it will be necessary to set up sub-classes of stems on the obligatory use of either *s* or *h* in certain nouns.

5.2. Stems ending in a vowel except *i* or *ɪ* take 4 (zero suffix) in the singular and suffix 2 (-CVŋ) in the plural.

e.g.	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	puré	pure-síŋ	'hoe'
	bɔyé	bɔye-síŋ	'chest'
	bagá	baga-síŋ	'farm'
	gúŋgúro	gúŋgúró-sɔŋ	'hyaena'
	boró	boro-sóŋ	'door'
	sɔbɔ́	sɔbo-sóŋ	'thorn'

6. TWO VOWEL FINAL STEMS

A number of nouns still remain which show a clear relationship to those treated above, but which cannot be handled only on the basis of the noun suffixes set up so far. One feature which they all have in common is that in the singular the last two vowels are contiguous, or in a very few cases it is a single vowel with a rising tone. This is in contrast to the division already set up of C final and V final stems. If the two vowels are taken as being stem final, then we are left in the singular with a suffix -ŋ. Working now, from the plural form to the singular, it is suggested that this is really an *n* or an *r* which occurring word final in isolation appears as an *ŋ*.⁶ If we set up then, a suffix 5 (-*n/r*), we are able to assign all the remaining nouns to the two groups already established. The stems will need to be divided into 2 sub-classes on the basis of their occurrence with *n* or *r*.

6.1. GROUP 1 WITH TWO VOWEL STEM

These take suffix 5 (-*n/r*) in the singular, and suffixes 5 and 3 (-*n/r* and -*V*) in the plural.

e.g.	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	lɔáŋ	lɔa-r-á	'water'
	gbáa-ŋ	gbáa-n-a	'type of lizard'
	nyáá-ŋ	nyaa-r-á	'shea butter'

6.2. GROUP 2 WITH TWO VOWEL STEM

These take suffix 5 (-*n/r*) in the singular, and suffix 2 (-CVŋ) or a contraction of 5 and 2 (-*n/rVŋ*) in the plural.

Where the two stem vowels are the same the suffix 5 is lost. Where the two stem vowels are different the suffix 5 replaces the first consonant of the suffix 2.

e.g.	SINGULAR	PLURAL	
	nɛ-ŋ	ne-síŋ	'cow'
	daá-ŋ	daa-síŋ	'stick'
	jóo-ŋ	jóó-sɔŋ	'fishing trap'
	pápaá-ŋ	pápaa-r-áŋ	'leaf'
	tɔó-ŋ	tɔo-nóŋ	'pig'

7. COMBINED STATEMENT OF GROUPS

The two vowel final stems can now be combined with the other stems to make an overall statement.

⁶The lateral or nasal are the only consonants that can occur word final in Issala. Where it is a nasal it assimilates as to point of articulation with the initial consonant of the following word. When the nasal occurs final in isolation it always manifests itself as *ŋ*.

7.1. NOUN SUFFIXES

These may be symbolised as follows:

1. -Vŋ 2. -(s/h/l)Vŋ 3. -V 4. zero 5. -(n/r)

7.2. NOUN GROUPS

These may be charted as follows:

	Stem final C, l or t		Stem final V		Stem final VV	
	SINGULAR	PLURAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL
Group 1	1	3	4	3	5	5 and 3
Group 2	3	2	4	2	5	2