

The development of –ye from a subject marker in Old Kanembu to a multifunctional marker in modern Kanuri

Dmitry Bondarev, Philip J. Jagger & Doris Löhr

SOAS, University of London & AAI – UK
University of Hamburg - Germany

*This paper compares the functional distribution of the nominal suffix –ye in Old Kanembu and its descendant language modern Kanuri. In Kanuri, –ye is conventionally analyzed in semantic terms as marking the agent role in strongly transitive clauses (Cyffer 1983 ‘Case marking in Kanuri?’, Afrika und Übersee LXVI:195-95), but we show that in Old Kanembu –ye marks the syntactic subject (pro)noun (as attested in the Borno Qur’anic glosses), cf. Old Kanembu (non-agential passive subject with –ye) <ti-ro nadī-ye tartwalgiyoh> (he-IO you-ye you.will.be.returned) ‘you will be returned to Him’, and modern Kanuri which is ungrammatical with the –ye, i.e., *shíro nandí-ye yirwáltəwuwín (he-IO you-ye you.will.be.returned).*

We demonstrate that the earlier subject-marking role of –ye is retained in the following environments in modern Kanuri:

(1) with speech act and mental verbs (‘say’, ‘think’ etc.), e.g., Músa-ye shíro wono (Musa-ye to.him said) ‘Musa said to him’, and performative verbs (‘offer’, ‘order’, ‘suggest’, ‘promise’, etc), e.g., dárédé-ye andía sèkkê dáyye (the.policeman-ye us ordered we.stop.SUBJ) ‘the policeman ordered us to stop’;

(2) in addition to occurring in highly agentive clauses, –ye also acts as a marker of evidentiality, e.g. fútu wú-ye nongána dámáro fálégəkin (kind I-ye I.know DET.FM.ADV I teach) ‘the way I know, I teach’; –ye can also mark a topic, e.g., bawányí-ye, Yérwan shía cashambô (my.father-ye, in.Maiduguri him they.gave.birth) ‘(As for) my father, he was born in Maiduguri’.