

Number marking in the Maban languages and implications for classification

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The Maban languages constitute one of the orphan groups of Nilo-Saharan; they are generally recognised as one of its branches, but their exact place remains to be determined. Data on Maban languages is extremely patchy; only one full-length grammar exists and no comprehensive dictionaries. The paper establishes the sources of data, and the internal structure of the Maban group as well as proposing a phonological inventory of proto-Maban. Maban languages mark number on nouns with suffixes and at least some nouns exhibit three-term plurality, as elsewhere in Nilo-Saharan. The paper puts forward a provisional reconstruction of the system of tripartite number marking on nominals. This is shown to be extremely similar to that occurring in the neighbouring East Sudanic family, especially Taman. This suggests the possibility that Maban is either the closest relative of Eastern Sudanic or indeed an unrecognised branch of Northeast Sudanic.

Three Appendices provide a comparative wordlist with quasi-reconstructions, some short tables with examples of reconstructible forms, which indicate the possible shape of typical lexical items and some evidence for Maban cognates with wider Nilo-Saharan.