

The Nuer Lexicon

Oliver Bond,¹ Tatiana Reid,² Matthew Baerman¹

¹ Surrey Morphology Group, University of Surrey;

² University of Edinburgh

In common with most other Western Nilotic languages, Nuer is underserved with materials for literacy development: since Crazzolara (1933) and Kiggen (1948) there have been no modern grammars or dictionaries, or reliable guides to orthographic principles. At the same, the great potential that Nuer data has to make to linguistics in general remains underexploited, due to the complexity of its morphology and morphosyntax, which make it impenetrable to all but the specialist. We describe here the development of the *Nuer Lexicon*, an online resource which represents a unique partnership between language users and academic linguists.

The *Nuer Lexicon* is conceived of as a hybrid lexical and grammatical resource. The lexical entries for inflectable words are supplemented with representations of their paradigms. Nouns are inflected for case and number. Verbs have subject agreement alongside non-finite forms, and orthogonal to this, manifest parallel paradigms according to various derivational categories, such as transitive, antipassive, applicative, and multiplicative.

The lexical entries are of three types, depending on the source. Firstly, entries derived from our own research. These are pan-dialectal, drawn from the Jikany Gatjiok, Jikany Gatjak, Lou (East Nuer), and Bentiu (West Nuer) varieties, and have been subject to phonological and morphological analysis. They are given both in IPA and in the practical orthography, and supplemented with sound files. The IPA transcription allows for the representation of tone, which is not reflected in the practical orthography, and the three-way contrast in vowel length, which in the practical orthography is reduced to a two-way contrast. It also allows for the representation of consonantal phonemes found in Bentiu that have no correspondence in the practical orthography. The entries also provide a visualization of the morphological analysis in terms of alternations of vowel grade, length and tone. The second type of entry has been derived from a corpus of Nuer texts that we have been developing, and contains the orthographical representation of the paradigm. The third type of entry is based on user suggestions, a facility that the lexicon provides for. Before being admitted to the lexicon, these are vetted and discussed with members of the Nuer community through a dedicated Facebook group. In this way the lexicon can respond to the needs and interests of language users.

The *Nuer Lexicon* thus serves as an ongoing case study of how the language community and linguists can partner to develop a resource which is beneficial to a wide range of users. One thing this work has revealed is that there is wide divergence in orthographic practice, both across published material and among language users. By engaging with this variation we can provide useful material for a systematic codification of orthographic norms, something which is still lacking.

References

Crazzolara, P. J. 1933. *Outlines of a Nuer grammar*. Vienna: Anthropos.

Kiggen, J. 1948. *Nuer-English dictionary*. London: St. Joseph's Society for Foreign Missions.
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