

The naming of birds in !Xam and other TUU languages of southern Africa: a preliminary report

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Abstract

The great diversity of birdlife associated with the different eco-regions of southern Africa is reflected in the extensive repertoires of bird names found in the indigenous languages of these regions, for example, in Zulu (Koopman 2018), Tswana (Cole 1995) and Sotho (Moffett 2010). It is reasonable to expect that other African languages of the southern region — specifically the various Khoisan languages — should reflect a similar wealth of bird names. The initial purpose of this paper was simply to identify the bird names recorded in varieties of !Xam and other !Ui languages, and to discuss their morphological structure and any derivational strategies used. The paucity of the list arrived at, however — and the high proportion of borrowings among even those few words — prompted a widening of scope. Bird names from related languages of the broader TUU (!Ui-Taa) family were added to the tabulation, as well as names from both the Khoekhoe and Kalahari branches of the KHOE family. Inspection of the finally assembled corpus led to the findings reported here.

In a relatively small number of cases, cognate series extend across the !Ui and Taa branches of TUU — as would be expected. In a few other cases, the N!uu names have affinities exclusively with names in the Taa language, !Xoon. In most cases, however, the N!uu names appear to have been adopted, either from Khoekhoe or colonial sources. In a few further cases, the N!uu names have evidently been recently innovated — but on the basis of patterns typologically more consistent with Khoekhoe. The scale of the problem has turned out to be even greater than this. Closer examination of the !Xoon bird names reveals that, for the most part, they have been adopted from languages belonging to the Kalahari branch of KHOE, such as Naro in particular. Finally, study of the bird names in Kalahari KHOE languages such as Naro, !Gana-!Gui and Khwe reveals a number of compound names of apparently recent coinage, since the basic term for ‘bird’ in these compounds is adopted from neighbouring NTU (Bantu) languages. The cumulative evidence leads to the unexpected conclusion that Khoisan languages of at least the TUU family, and certainly also the Kalahari branch of KHOE, do not have repertoires of bird names nearly as extensive as those found in other indigenous languages of southern Africa.

This report closes with preliminary discussion of some potential reasons for this state of affairs — including, but by no means limited to, the straightforward possibility of inadequate documentation, as well as lexical attrition associated with ongoing processes of language loss and shift.

Keywords: bird names; birds of southern Africa; Khoisan languages (TUU and KHOE); comparative linguistics; borrowing; lexical attrition; language loss

References

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