

The Standard Wolof Morphology: A Descriptive Study of the Adjectives

Dr. Mariama Soda NDAO

Teaching Assistant in English Linguistics and Grammar at UN-CHK (Université Numérique Cheikh Hamidou Kane)

Abstract: This descriptive research paper analyzes the morphology of Wolof adjectives by distinguishing two main categories: free morphemes and bound morphemes. Wolof adjectives often function like state verbs and require class markers to form relative or qualifying constructions. These class markers structures vary across the same class-based patterns found in nouns and pronouns. Bound adjectival morphemes occur in attributive structures that express possession or relationships between nouns. Some forms also involve phonological adjustments like epenthesis. The research illustrates how attributive adjectives derive new meanings from nominal stems and how plural forms follow similar morphological rules. Thus, the study shows that Wolof adjective formation is deeply rooted in the language's system of noun classes. It emphasizes that Wolof's class-based grammar shapes the structure and meaning of all adjectival forms.

Keywords: Wolof morphology, Adjectives, free morphemes, bound morphemes, class markers, state verbs, attributive constructions, possessive structures.

INTRODUCTION

The morphology of Wolof adjectives is organized in a complex and systematic way that is rooted in the language's class-based grammatical structure. Unlike in languages where adjectives stand alone as a distinct lexical category, Wolof demonstrates a strong interaction among nominal class markers, verbal roots, and attributive morphology. Consequently, many adjectives are formed from verbal stems and class markers, rather than simply existing as standalone lexical adjectives.

This research explores the morphological processes involved in the formation of adjectives in Wolof, focusing on the distinction between free morphemes and bound morphemes. In Wolof, free adjectival morphemes typically originate from verbal roots that transform into relative modifiers when combined with suitable class markers. These class markers are crucial for determining the agreement between nouns and the adjectives that modify them. Bound morphemes, in contrast, play a vital role in forming attributive constructions that express possession or relationships between nouns. Morphemes such as -u (singular) and -i (plural) attach directly to nominal roots to create attributive adjectives that denote ownership, association, or inherent characteristics. By examining these two categories of free and bound adjectival morphemes, this research outlines the structural patterns of standard Wolof. We demonstrate through descriptive examples how nouns, pronouns, and adjectives share a unified morphological system based on grammatical classes. This system influences the meaning of adjectives in both relative and attributive constructions. Our analysis enhances the

understanding of the internal structure of Wolof morphology and highlights the crucial role that class markers play in shaping adjectival structures.

Problem Statement

The morphological structure of the Wolof adjectival system is still underexplored and inconsistently analyzed, even though Wolof is recognized as the most widely spoken national language in Senegal. Existing studies indicate that Wolof heavily depends on noun-class markers, verbal roots, and relational morphemes to convey adjectival meaning. However, there is currently no comprehensive account that clearly distinguishes the roles of free and bound adjectival morphemes or explains how these forms function in the most effective learning and teaching strategies.

Moreover, the interaction among class markers, the qualifying morpheme (-u), and the attributive morphemes (-u) and (-i) is often addressed in a fragmented manner. This leaves gaps in our understanding of how Wolof systematically constructs relative adjectives, qualifying forms, and attributive expressions. The lack of a unified description complicates the analysis of adjectival agreement patterns and makes it challenging to provide accurate pedagogical and grammatical references for both learners and researchers.

Accordingly, this study addresses a gap in research by offering a detailed description and classification of free and bound adjectival morphemes in Standard Wolof. It also examines their morpho-syntactic behavior. By doing this, the research aims to clarify the mechanisms behind adjectival

formation and contribute to a more coherent understanding of Wolof morphology.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive linguistic approach to analyze the morphological structure of adjectival forms in Standard Wolof. Its objective is to identify, classify, and examine the mechanisms by which Wolof generates adjectival meaning, with a particular focus on distinguishing between free and bound adjectival morphemes. The methodology combines data collection with morphological analysis, as detailed below.

This issue focuses on native Wolof usage as documented in established grammatical descriptions and linguistic studies, including the works of Faye (2012), McLaughlin (1997, 2004), Sauvageot (1965), and Torrence (2013). It also includes authentic linguistic examples gathered from contemporary Wolof usage across various media, oral speech, and educational materials. The study views Wolof adjectives not as an isolated lexical category, but as part of a broader system where noun-class agreement and verbal derivation collectively influence adjectival meaning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Wolof morphology has consistently highlighted the importance of the noun-class system and its impact on the structure of modifiers such as adjectives, determiners, pronouns, and relative markers. Foundational studies, including those by Sauvageot (1965) and Dialo (1981), have provided essential insights into the Wolof nominal system, showcasing its extensive range of class markers and the morphosyntactic relationships they establish. These investigations have established that adjectival modification in Wolof cannot be understood in isolation from class agreement, as modifying elements must align with the noun's class through specific morphological markers.

Subsequent research has further explored the origins of adjectival forms, focusing specifically on their verbal roots. Scholars like McLaughlin (1997; 2004) and Torrence (2013) argue that in Wolof, there is only a limited set of underived lexical adjectives. Instead, most adjectival meanings derive from stative or inchoative verbs that are used in relative constructions. This perspective aligns with broader analyses of Atlantic languages, where adjectives often correspond to verb-based predicates rather than being distinct lexical items. This observation is

also supported by typological studies, such as those by Welmers (1973) and Creissels (2000).

Recent scholarship has refined the analysis of the relative and attributive morphology of Wolof adjectives. Faye (2012) provides a detailed account of the qualifying morpheme -u, which is a bound element that attaches to verbal stems to create relative adjectives. His work demonstrates that class markers function not only as agreement prefixes but also as integral components of the morphological structure of modifiers. Similarly, Ngom (2003; 2004) emphasizes the significance of class-based agreement in both spoken and written Wolof, shedding light on phonological variation and dialectal differences in the use of relative markers.

The literature on attributive constructions highlights the functional and semantic differences between relative adjectives and genitive or relational forms. Scholars identify the bound morphemes -u (singular) and -i (plural) as markers that create construct-like structures to express possession, kinship, inherent characteristics, or relational meaning (Robert; Kihm). Studies of Wolof relational nouns show that these attributive morphemes often extend or shift the meaning of the base noun, resulting in forms such as *xarit-u*, meaning "friend of," or *këru*, meaning "house of." This process is consistent with typological observations of construct morphology in noun-class languages.

The scholarly literature indicates that Wolof adjectival morphology is most effectively understood within a unified theoretical framework that incorporates class agreement, verbal derivation, and relational nominal morphology. This study builds on existing research by describing both free and bound adjectival morphemes and situating them within the context of dialectal variation. This contribution offers new insights into the understanding of Wolof grammar.

CHARACTERISTICS OF WOLOF MORPHOLOGY

In Wolof, adjectives are classified into two categories based on their morphology: free morphemes and bound morphemes. Free morphemes are created using consonant classes, while bound morphemes are associated with relative and attributive adjectives. Both types of morphemes differ from the nouns they modify, whether they are free or bound. In this research, we will first describe both free and bound

morphemes, and then provide a detailed analysis of their characteristics.

THE FREE ADJECTIVES MORPHEMES

The adjectives in Wolof primarily function as state verbs that transform into relatives, qualifiers, or attributes. In these structural contexts, we can distinguish between free and bound morphemes associated with nominal roots to form adjectives. For instance, the adjective 'rafet,' meaning 'beautiful,' can convey a less precise meaning on its own. To capture its full significance, it is essential to associate specific lexemes as class markers, which help identify the nouns that "beauty" qualifies. In this case, we derive a relative adjective from the corresponding class marker. Consequently, the structure of the class marker informs the qualification morphemes, resulting in relative adjectives.

According to Faye (2012), the qualifying morpheme -u is attached to the verbal stem to create a relative clause. In this context, the class

marker j- refers to the noun 'jigéen' and serves to form both a determiner and a relative qualifier, as illustrated in the example: j-u jigéen ju rafet, which translates to "a pretty woman."

In a similar vein, the noun 'xar', meaning 'sheep', is used to describe 'white'. The class marker 'j-' combines with the vowel '-u' to form the relative pronoun 'ju', while it freely relates to the adjective 'rafet'. The bound morpheme '-u' influences the corresponding lexeme, as the class marker dictates its form. The allomorphs '-i' and '-u' vary from the determiner to the relative pronoun, while the basic root 'j-' remains consistent. These categories of adjectives modify the morphology of nouns into adjectives that include class markers. Additionally, we have identified the possible categories for these classes, which classify the nouns as follows: b-, g-, j-, k-, m-, s-, and w. We illustrate them, building the structural rules of their adjectives in the following:

02.

j-u	jigéen ju ñuul	"a black woman"
k-u	nit ku baax	"a kind person"
m-u	meew mu far	"a fat-filled milk"
s-u	suuf su weex	"a black sand"
w-u	fas wu ñuul	"a black horse"

Class markers are necessary between nouns and the morpheme -u to establish adjectival structures. The bound morpheme -u contains the rules for variations based on the class markers.

When considering plural forms, variations from the classes ñ- and y- occur depending on the basic roots. However, some class markers, such as j-, m-, and s-, do not affect the plural form for certain nouns.

03.

y-u	xale yu góor	"a male child"
y-u	jigéen yu ñuul	"a black woman"
j-u	diwlin ju xonq	"a red oil"
ñ-u	nit ñu baax	"a kind person"
m-u	meew mu far	"a fat-filled milk"
s-u	suuf su weex	"a black sand"
w-u	fas wu ñuul	"a black horse"

The morphology of adjectives in Wolof resembles the structures found in nouns and pronouns, as outlined in the first section. This similarity occurs because Wolof is a language that categorizes words into classes. Nouns, pronouns, and adjectives all utilize class markers that function as lexemes. The following lines will provide further details on this topic.

THE BOUND ADJECTIVES MORPHEMES

The section underlines the qualifying adjectives with a bare classification. According to the meaning within structures, some morphemes are bound to their roots based on the grammatical rules for further precision in speech. This section primarily focuses on the morphemes bound to nouns to build specific adjectives. Indeed, when we mention the adjectives with bound morphemes,

we set them in the attribute forms, which the study highlights in detail.

The Attribute Adjectives Morphemes

We note the singular and plural attributes with specific morphemes. The mark of the singular *e* is set to qualify the plural nouns with the bound

morpheme *-u*. The plural morpheme is *-i*. The attribute morphemes vary in relation to meaning. In the process of building the morphemes, the morphemes *-u* and *-i* are bound to the nouns to be qualified. The following set of examples illustrates the structures of the attribute adjectives.

04.

jabar-u	jabaru Abdu	“the wife of Abdu”
kër-u	këru Soxna	“the house of Soxna”
we-u	wewu bey	“the nail of the goat”

In the given examples, we distinguish the attribute categories that deal with nouns. Indeed, we characterize the possessive nouns based on their categories. Otherwise, things and objects are

possessed by persons, and the persons may be owned by others as well. Based on the respective categories, various cases are set.

05.

tubey-u	tubeyu Goora	“the trousers of Góora”
kër-u	këru baay Njaay	“the house of Baay Njaay”
we-u	wewu bey	“the goat’s nail”
tank-u	tanku ginaar	“the coa’s foot”

The case occurs in the last example related to the epenthesis phoneme *-w* before the bound attribute morpheme *-u* to give “wewu” ‘the nail of’.

06.

añ-u	añu tàkk	“the wedding meal”
bor-u	boru weer	“a month-debt”
xarit-u	xaritu Abdu	“the friend of Abdu”
jëkkër-u	jëkkëru Buso	“the husband of Buso”

All the nominal stems get different meanings when they structure the adjectives according to the bound morphological process. In the same process,

the adjective ‘xaritu’ is rooted in the noun ‘xarit’ with a different meaning:

07.

xarit	‘a friend’ xarit-u	“a friend of”
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We have underlined that the plural attribute morpheme, which varies into *-i*, marks the plural class marker from the plural nouns to qualify. The

plural morpheme *-i* is bound to the nouns. We set the following structures to illustrate:

08.

tubey-i	tubeyi Goora	“the trousers of Goora”
kër-i	këri baay Njaay	“the houses of Baay Njaay”
xarit-i	xariti Abdu	“the friends of Abdu”
jëkkër-i	jëkkëri Buso	“the husbands of Buso”

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The exploration of Wolof Morphology reveals distinct features that significantly enhance our understanding of its linguistic framework.

The Free-Bound Morpheme Distinction

The text establishes a useful distinction between free adjectival morphemes and bound attributive

morphemes within Wolof morphology. This distinction is valid because Wolof does not have a significant, independent lexical class of adjectives. Instead, adjectival meanings are often expressed through verbal stems and morphosyntactically conditioned constructions. While the term “free” implies some level of morphological

independence, it is important to recognize that these forms still require agreement with the appropriate noun-class markers. Therefore, they are considered free only in comparison to the more tightly restricted attributive constructions. Clarifying this nuance would enhance conceptual precision.

Centrality of Class Markers in Adjectival Morphology

The analysis emphasizes the crucial role of noun-class markers (e.g., b-, j-, k-, m-, s-, w-) in the formation and distribution of adjectival forms. This approach aligns with the established understanding of Wolof as a class-driven grammatical system, where class markers act as essential agreement morphemes across nominal, pronominal, and adjectival domains. In the case of relative adjectival constructions (e.g., j-u rafet), the text accurately identifies: The core elements of the agreement structure include the class marker, which serves as the fundamental agreement element; the morpheme -u, functioning as the relativizing or qualifying marker; and the adjectival root, often derived from a stative verb, which acts as the semantic nucleus.

This interpretation aligns with previous analyses that characterize these forms as reduced relative clauses rather than simple attributive adjectives, highlighting their syntactic complexity.

The Function of the Morpheme -u

The identification of -u as a relativizing morpheme that attaches to class markers to form words like ju, bu, and wu is accurate. This process positions adjectival modification within a wider clausal framework, which is a characteristic feature of Wolof and several other Niger-Congo languages. Additionally, the reliance on verbal stems to convey adjectival meaning further reinforces the interpretation of these constructions as syntactically clausal rather than purely morphological.

Bound Attributive Morphemes

The discussion surrounding the bound attributive morphemes (-u for singular and -i for plural) effectively illustrates their role in conveying possession and other relational meanings (e.g., xarit-u Abdu, jëkkër-i Buso). These constructions are similar to construct-state or genitive-linking structures found across different languages. It's noteworthy that adding these morphemes alters or expands the semantic interpretation of the nominal base (e.g., xarit "friend" becomes xarit-u "friend

of"). This insight is both linguistically significant and aligns with the relational noun system in Wolof.

Additionally, the mention of phonological processes, such as epenthesis in we-w-u, highlights the complex interaction between morphology and phonology in forming attributive forms.

Integration within the Class-Based Morphosyntactic System

A key contribution of this text is its demonstration that adjectival forms in Wolof must be understood within the context of a larger agreement system that governs nouns, pronouns, and determiners. This unified system requires obligatory agreement in both relative and attributive constructions, leading to a closely interwoven morphosyntactic structure. The analysis effectively captures this typological characteristic and positions Wolof within the broader context of noun-class languages across different languages.

Terminological Considerations

To improve clarity in our discussion, we can consider revising some terminology as follows:

- Replace "free adjectival morphemes" with "relative adjectival constructions" or "relative modifiers."
- Change "bound adjectival morphemes" to "attributive" or "construct" morphemes.
- Instead of referring to adjective-noun modification, use "adjectival functions realized through relativization."

These refinements will align our discussion more closely with contemporary linguistic typology and descriptive grammar.

CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in the text is thorough and well-grounded in established linguistic research on Wolof. It effectively captures the morphological processes involved in forming adjectives, emphasizes the importance of noun-class agreement, and shows how adjectival meaning is distributed across both verbal and nominal domains. With more detailed learning materials and minor adjustments to terminology, this study would be a valuable contribution to the descriptive morphology of Wolof, enabling practitioners to grasp the fundamental concepts of Wolof grammar.

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