A sketch of Naki Grammar  
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MPI EVA, Work in Progress talk

1 Background

[1] Note: This is true work in progress, all information, claims, transcriptions, etc. should be considered tentative.

[2] Naki (ethnologue code MFF) is a Beboid language of Northwest Cameroon with, perhaps, about 3000–4000 speakers. The term Naki is used by speakers of the language to refer to themselves, not the language itself. My own speaker tended to spontaneously refer to the language as Mekaf (pronounced as “Menkaf” to my ears), the name of the main Naki village.

[3] Previous work on the language includes Hombert (1980), a survey of noun classes in all of Beboid, survey work done by SIL (Hamm et al. (2002), Hamm (2002), Brye and Brye (2002)), and a Master’s thesis at the University of Yaounde I have not had a chance to look at.

[4] Naki has been classified as Western Beboid, presumably based on its geographic location. However, ethnographic and lexicostatistical evidence suggests it should be classified with Western Beboid languages.

[5] The most detailed work on the grammar of any Beboid language is Hyman’s (1981) grammar of Noni (Eastern Beboid) and, at least superficially, Naki seems to be similar to Noni.

[6] My work was conducted primarily with one speaker in Bamenda, the capital of the Northwest Province of Cameroon over a period of about two and a half weeks. I made one overnight trip to the village of Mekaf to meet other speakers. English was the contact language.

[7] In the village of Mekaf, Naki is still used extensively, and the language does not appear to be in any imminent threat of becoming endangered due to its geographical remoteness. (However, one can imagine that things could change quickly if the Ring Road were paved.)

[8] The only local language which the Naki speakers appear to have competence in is Aghem, a Grassfields Bantu language spoken in adjacent areas and the language of the area in and around Wum, the closest major town (about an hour away by car on a dirt road).

[9] Otherwise, the main language of communication with other groups is Cameroonian Pidgin, an English-based creole which appears to be related to Nigerian Pidgin and Krio. (This language is not anywhere near mutually intelligible with English.)

2 Phonology
2.1 Phonemic inventory

Consonants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LAB</th>
<th>ALV</th>
<th>ALV-PAL</th>
<th>VEL</th>
<th>LAB-VEL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STOP</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>k</td>
<td>kp</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>g</td>
<td>gb</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFF</td>
<td>c</td>
<td>ch</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VD</td>
<td>dz</td>
<td>j</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRIC</td>
<td>f, fy</td>
<td>s, sh</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASAL</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>ny</td>
<td>ng</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIQUID</td>
<td>l, r(?)</td>
<td>y, w</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sound transcribed as fy is realized that way sometimes, but with my primary consultant it typically had a different realization. Hombert (1980) transcribes it as 3f. My first guess at it is that it can be realized as a doubly-articulated labial-alveopalatal fricative.

The phonemic status of r is unclear. There certainly are phonetic r-like sounds but they may be conditioned variants of an alveolar stop in coda position. I have identified one possible minimal pair of r with t:

[a] bór ‘9.fire’
[b] bót ‘9.gun’

If there is a phonemic r, it would appear to have a limited distribution, only appearing word-finally. Perhaps, it is an allophone of d?

The sound written here as sh often sounds more like shy. I write it as sh everywhere since I have not uncovered evidence for a contrast between the two sounds.

Various consonants have been observed to phonetically have secondary articulations like labialization and palatalization. It has not been established if these should be treated as consonant-glide sequences or as single segments in their own right.

Vowels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>FRONT</th>
<th>CENTRAL</th>
<th>BACK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HIGH</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>u</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MID</td>
<td>e, r(?)</td>
<td>ø</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOW</td>
<td>a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There might be a contrast between e and ø, but I have examined too few of the relevant lexical items to be sure. A possible minimal pair is:

[a] ǧa-ḏa ‘12.mouth’
[b] ḏa ‘start’

But, there are words where e and ø were transcribed as though there was free variation. In any case, as of today, I learn towards a phonemic distinction, at least in some environments, in particular, word-finally.

A few lexical items were articulated with long vowels somewhat consistently. I have yet to determine, however, if vowel length is phonemically contrastive or if it is conditioned in some way.

[a] ʺudâ ‘14.bridge’
[b] uñu ‘5.fufu’
2.2 Tone system

[22] First comment: The tone system is essentially unanalyzed.

[23] There are three tone levels: high, mid, and low

[a] shë ‘5.hen’
[b] bwë ‘5.dog’
[c] shë ‘6.hen’

There appear to be some monosyllabic tonal contours. The plural of the word nyàm ‘9.animal’, for example, appears to have a mid-low contour and the first person plural pronoun appears to have a mid-high contour.

[a] nyàm ‘10.animal’
[b] kā ‘we (subject)’

Different tones in different syllables do appear to be possible

[a] fìmfì ‘9.wind’
[b] à-dzé ‘12.mouth’

3 Syllable structure

[26] Noteworthy about Naki syllable structure is that the language allows coda p, t, k, and l, which appears to be unique among Beboid languages, according to data in Hombert (1980:94).

[27] Some examples

[a] nsòk ‘1.cup’
[b] kop ‘1.knife’
[d] byìl ‘9.fish’

In addition, like other Beboid languages, Naki allows nasal codas.

[a] zhìm ‘cut’
[b] fùmùjàng ‘seven’

[29] Nasals do not appear to be tone bearing units, but they can appear as part of complex “onsets” suggesting that they can possibly be syllabic.

[a] nsòk ‘1.cup’
[b] nggú ‘6a.water’

[30] Coda k is often fricativized

[31] Coda t is often unreleased, or, perhaps, articulated as a glottal stop

As discussed above, a phone approximating an r (though sometimes voiceless, like a final Turkish r) seems to contrast with t word-finally. This is, perhaps, phonologically d—further adding to the range of possible Naki coda stops.

4 Morphology

4.1 Noun class system

[32] Naki noun classes are still fairly robust, though somewhat reduced from the Bantu prototype. Noun classes are relevant both for singular/plural pairs and concord. Verbs, generally, do not show agreement—so, obviously, noun classes in Naki do not factor into verbal agreement the way Bantu noun classes do.

[33] The noun classes given below, generally follow the numbering scheme of Hombert (1980), except I have not uncovered an instance of his class 14/26 and the one candidate word for this class seemed better characterized as 14/14.

[34] The concord has only been systematically examined for the definite article, which is what the concord column in the table refers to.

[35] A number of irregular words in a given class with respect to singular/plural pairs have been uncovered. The information in the table, therefore, might not apply to all nouns in a given class.
Naki Noun Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NC</th>
<th>MORPH</th>
<th>CONC</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
<th>SEMANTICS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>Ø/bu-</td>
<td>-l-b-</td>
<td>nsök/bünsök 'cup'</td>
<td>humans, misc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/6</td>
<td>Cw/-ng</td>
<td>w-L-</td>
<td>fwiñfông 'moon'</td>
<td>not established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/6</td>
<td>Ø/-ng</td>
<td>w-L-</td>
<td>gôgông 'egg'</td>
<td>body parts, misc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a</td>
<td>N-</td>
<td>m-</td>
<td>mbî 'wine'</td>
<td>liquids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/10</td>
<td>'ř'</td>
<td>y/-f-</td>
<td>cúcú 'house'</td>
<td>animals, misc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/8</td>
<td>a-(b)i-</td>
<td>k/-by-</td>
<td>adzed/berdžé 'mouth'</td>
<td>body parts, misc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14/14</td>
<td>u/-lu-</td>
<td>w/-lw-</td>
<td>üddää/üdää 'bridge'</td>
<td>not established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19/26</td>
<td>fy/-lm</td>
<td>fy/-lm</td>
<td>fyidäämdää 'culvert'</td>
<td>diminutive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further examples of class 1/2

[a] mwä ‘1.man’, bünü ‘2.man’
[b] kpäm ‘1.wife’, bükabam ‘2.wife’

Further examples of class 5/6

[a] tù ‘5.horn’, tông ‘6.horn’
[b] kpâ ‘5.hand’, kpâng ‘6.hand’
[c] ū ‘5.tongue’, lông ‘6.tongue’
[d] kinté ‘5.chest’, kinténg ‘6.chest’
[e] yêt ‘5.eye’, yê ‘6.eye’

Further examples of class 9/10

[a] shê ‘9.hen’, shé ‘10.hen’
[c] shyám ‘seed’, shyám ‘10.seed’

Numbers

I know nothing about numeral systems, but since there was a conference on them here recently, here are the Naki numbers I recorded. The tones are highly tentative since I haven’t re-listened to the tape.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>GLOSS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ømü</td>
<td>‘one’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ñfö</td>
<td>‘two’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ðtid</td>
<td>‘three’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ðnà</td>
<td>‘four’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ðtí</td>
<td>‘five’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ðsí</td>
<td>‘six’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fámájáng</td>
<td>‘seven’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jánɡ</td>
<td>‘eight’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fámádžófó</td>
<td>‘nine’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dzófó</td>
<td>‘ten’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mácá</td>
<td>‘twenty’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mádzó mó ‘thirty’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mádzó mó ‘forty’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that the numbers for seven and nine appear to be derived from the numbers eight and ten, respectively.

Could the form of the number twenty be a trace of a former vigesimal system?

4.3 Personal Pronouns

The basic subject pronouns, maybe—some of these might represent a fusion of the pronoun with a TMA marker, affecting the realization of the vowel.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SG</th>
<th>PL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>mí  ká</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>wá  bá</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>lá  bá</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The basic object pronouns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SG</th>
<th>PL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>míi  sì</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>wó  bó</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>lá  bá</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Logophoricity may turn up, but some basic elicitation in the area did not reveal any obviously logophoric pronouns.

Not thoroughly worked out are pronominal forms for non-human nouns.
5 Verbal morphology

There is important, but limited, segmental verbal morphology and more extensive, but unanalyzed tonal verbal morphology.

One major type of segmental verbal morphology are TMA-conditioned stem alternations for some verbs. The conditioning of these alternations has not been established, the morphophonology of the alternation is either not predictable or not obvious, and not all verbs seem to show two such stem types.

There are some possible verbal suffixes, but, right now, I think they are better analyzed as postverbal “particles”.

While particular lexical pairs showed possible traces of verbal extensions (e.g., kpé ‘die’/kpêd ‘kill’) no clearly productive extensions were uncovered.

There are some possible verbal suffixes, but, right now, I think they are better analyzed as postverbal “particles”.

A potential case of segmental agreement morphology is a homorganic nasal that appears at the beginning of certain verbs preceded by the first-person subject pronoun (perhaps they just need to have a first person subject regardless of the presence of the pronoun preverbally—I don’t recall collecting the relevant data to test this). This is reminiscent of a similar phenomenon found in Noni (Hyman 1981:77).

But maybe this is just a type of limited nasal harmony? (Relevant here is the fact that the village name Mekaf sounds like Menkaf to my ears.)

In addition, of course, there’s lots of tonal morphology, which plays a role in TMA marking and, making matters even more confusing, also plays a role in focus marking, as will be discussed below.

6 Syntax

6.1 Basic word order

Basic word order in Naki is fairly rigid SVO

Kum kill. NEAR PST 9 rat 9 the
“Kum killed the rat.”

For the verb give unmarked objects have the order recipient-theme. Another construction is also available with an unmarked patient followed by a recipient marked with a circumposition(?).

Kum give. NEAR PST Sii 19 thing
“Kum gave Sii something.”
6.2 Focal word order

A curious feature of Naki grammar is a special “focal” form of the verb—with different “tone” (intonation?) from the unmarked form—which is associated with different argument ordering than is otherwise allowed.

A core use of this form is for subject Wh-questions—and answers for those questions—when the subject appears immediately postverbally.

Word order in this focal construction appears to be relatively “free”. (I have no idea what the information structure is of the two sentences below.)

6.3 Negation and SAuxOV order

SAuxOV word order is attested in Naki, though it’s not a rampant phenomenon, and appears to be an optional variant of SAuxVO order where it is found.

It did not seem to be possible with, for example, the future auxiliary si.

I found it, however, with the negative auxiliaries.

Some unchecked examples transcribed in my notes indicate that for ditransitive constructions, the following orders are possible: SAuxVOrecOtheme, SAuxOthemeVOrec, SAuxOrerecOthemeV. But: *SAuxOrecOVtheme. (But, note that the recipient was pronominal while the theme was not.)

Orin, my apologies, but I didn’t find a clear example of “other” when going over my materials in preparing for this talk.

6.4 Miscellaneous syntax

Consecutivization with directionals

Verb-phrase coordination

1sS sing. PRES 1s 9.song & dance
“I am singing and dancing.”
want

[a] Küm ðê sî kî kwê ká.
   Kum want.PRS 1pO 1pS(?) arrive home
   “Kum wants us to go home.”

[b] Küm ðê lâ kî kwê ká.
   Kum want.PRS COMP(?) 1pS(?) arrive home
   “Kum wants us to go home.”

[c] Küm ðê sî lâ kî kwê ká.
   Kum want.PRS 1pO COMP(?) 1pS(?) arrive home
   “Kum wants us to go home.”

7 For more information. . .

In the spirit of Good (2004), I am experimenting with writing this grammar as a
semi-structured database.

At present, I am writing it using wiki-software. If you’re inside the Institute, you
can see its present stage of development at:
http://lingua79.eva.mpg.de/twiki/bin/view/NakiGrammar/

At present, no one outside the Institute can see it.

If you get asked for a username by your browser, you can use “GuestUser” with
password “NakiGuest”.

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