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Diachronic changes in the system of noun class markers in Dargwa

The many Dargwa idioms, that since the end of the last century have been considered independent languages, provide a rich body of material for the comparative historical study of many linguistic phenomena. The present study aims to describe the phonological changes that have occurred in the noun class system of Dargwa, by comparing synchronic data from the Akusha dialect, on which the literary language is based, and several idioms in which the system of classmarkers has undergone significant changes[1]. Cases of deletion will be discussed, as well as assimilation and fossilization of class markers.

In Dargwa, class markers are portmanteau morphemes that express both gender and number. In addition, they can express person and aspect, as well as essive case marking on nominals. Most commonly they appear as part of the verb: verb stems have a designated slot for this marker. In literary Dargwa four class markers can be distinguished: *w, r, b, d*. Their function as part of the verb depends on three factors: 1) number; 2) person; 3) position in the word, which can be either prefixal, infixal or postfixal.

The marker *w* denotes the masculine singular noun class. The affixes *r, b* and *d* each have several meanings: *b* serves to mark neuter singular as well as third person plural for masculine and feminine gender. The marker *d* is used in prefixal position and expresses the first and second person plural of all classes and also the third person plural neuter (in this case it is used infixal and postfixal).

Table 1. Noun class markers in literary Dargwa[2]

	singular	plural			
	1st / 2nd / 3rd person	1st and 2nd person		3rd person	
	Prefixal, infixal and postfixal	prefixal	inf./postfixal	prefixal	infixal/postfixal
masculine	w			b	
feminine	r	d	r		
neuter	b			d	r

The masculine class marker *w* most commonly undergoes changes; when it precedes the vowel *u* it is often dropped, which can be explained by the articulatory proximity of these sounds, for example: *ulq-es* "to dance" (masculine) (cf. *r=ulq-es* (feminine),

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b=ulq-es (neuter)).

This marker is also deleted in the position between two vowels, in which case the vowels merge: *ka + w = at-es* → *ka-at-es* → *ka-t-es* "to put". In a number of dialects, the merger of vowels that occurs after the class marker *w* has been dropped, results in a long vowel: *a + w=at-is* – *āt-is* "to put on top" (Urakhi dialect).
The marker *w* is also lost when a prefixal element is attached to a verb with a stem vowel *e:* in this case the vowel of the prefix is dropped: *ka-w=erx-es* → *ka+erx-es* → *kerxes* "to complete". In many cases the class marker is dropped together with the vowel that follows it: *če + w=a-es* → *če-a-es* → *čees* "to see".

In the Akusha dialect the deletion of the class marker has progressed further; the marker *d* is deleted together with the vowel of the preverb: *ka-d=erd-es* → *k-erde-s* "to cleave". Diphtongization of the class marker *w* can be observed in two cases: a) when a prefix with a vowel is attached to a verb with stem vowel *i*. The loss of the marker *w* thus leads to the formation of the following diphtongs: *aj* (*a+i*), or *ej* (e+*i*). For example: *ka+w=ikes* → *ka-jk-es* "to fall", *če+w=iz-es* → *če-jz-es* "to insist". This rule, however, only applies to verbs that do not contain an infixal element. In verbs with an infixal element the stem vowel *i* is dropped together with the class marker: *ka-w=ilz-es* → *ka-lz-es* "to stand up".
b) when prefixes with a vowel *a* or *e* are attached to verbs with a stem vowel *u*. This leads to the formation of the diphtongs *aw* and *ew*: *ka+uq-es* → *ka-wq-es* "to descend", *če-uq-es* → *če-wq-es* "to attack". The element *w* in these diphtongs is a reflex of the vowel *u*, which coincides with the masculine class marker.
In the Southern dialects, class markers *b* or *d* may gemminate when they occur in adjacent positions: *gu=b+b=at-uj* → *gu=p:=at-uj* (*b+b* → *p:*) "to leave" (Itsari dialect).

The fossilization of class markers is a widespread phenomenon in Dargwa. It occurs particularly frequent in the formation of action nouns, such as *bjarɢ* "upbringing" (from (*b=jarɢ-es* "to raise"). In the Kajtag dialect the class marker in the ending of the auxiliary verb is dropped: *ca* "to be" (from *ca=b=i* (neuter)). As a rule, the essive case in Dargwa is derived from the lative case by adding a class marker: *ši-lizi=b* ("in the village"). In the Kajtag dialect there is no overt essive case-marking; both functions are performed by the lative case. In Shari, which is closely related to Kajtag, the essive is formed with a single morpheme -*w*, which is a fossilized masculine noun class marker: *žuz ust'ul-li-gu-w tsa=b=i*, "The book is located under the table."
The process of deletion of the essive marker in the Kajtag dialect may have taken place in the following manner: operative class markers (-*w*, -*r*, -*b*, -*d*) (as in other dialects of Dargwa) → fossilized class marker -*w* (Shari) → ∅ (Kajtag).