

Possibility and Probability in Siin Seereer Language

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Abstract

The present work deals with possibility and probability in Siin Seereer, a language belonging to the West Atlantic branch of the Niger- Congo family. Possibility and probability are two notions which are so close in meaning and that lots of people make confusion in their uses mainly in the verbs and phrases used to express them. The enunciator, focusing on his/her observation of facts, shows the possibility or the probability that the grammatical subject has to realize the predicate. In other words, he/she accounts the possibility or the probability of the realization or the non- realization of the predicative relationship. Thus, we have pointed out that most of the verbs, operators and phrases used to express these concepts are most of the time placed at the beginning of the sentence. Furthermore, there are some verbs which are used to express possibility and that can also be used to express probability if they are combined with other verbs or phrases.

Keywords: Enunciator, Possibility, Predicate, Probability, Seereer

1. Introduction

Seereer is an African language whose origin and classification have given rise to a lot of debates within researchers in general and linguists and historians in particular. Thus, several theses have been brought up for its classification. The main methods of classifying African languages, among other things, are to gather them in terms of groups, branches and families. This operation is essentially based on some comparisons of elements in terms of structures, phonologies, grammars, lexicon etc. of the current languages. However, Seereer language has linguistically been classified in various ways. According to Delafosse, Seereer language belongs to Senegalo- Guinean group which is part of the branch of Soudano- Guinean languages (Delafosse: 1912). As far as J. Greenburg is concerned, Seereer is a language which belongs to the West Atlantic group of the Niger- Congo languages family (Greenburg: 1963). This last classification is the one which is best accepted around the world even if there

are other classifications which are not tackled in this study.

Thus, belonging to the West Atlantic group, Seereer language, which is specially spoken in Senegal, is a language with many dialects all of which are mutually intelligible. Sauvageot (1965) makes the observation that the differences between the dialects are principally in the phonetics and lexicon. So, these dialects are divided into two groups: Siin (mainly called Siin-Gandum) group and Cangin group. The Siin Seereer (group) language, which is in the heart of this study, is linguistically speaking spoken in the Fatick region and in some parts of the Thies and Kaolack regions. Writing, speaking or studying this Seereer language, is not an easy task for non- speakers due to the complexity of its pronunciation, its morphological and syntactical systems and its grammar. This latter is a set of rules used in this language and through which the speaker can express his/her ideas and point of views some of which the possibility, probability, obligation, suggestion etc.

Possibility and probability are two concepts expressed in Siin Seereer by some operators and phrases. According to the research that we have done, we have pointed out that they are two notions which are so close in meaning that a lot of people make some mistakes when they want to distinguish them or express themselves. Even Seereer speakers find difficulties distinguishing them, let alone Seereer non- speakers. That is why this paper is written to shed light on the misuse and misunderstanding of these concepts. Furthermore, we would like to highlight the use of these notions and the relationships (similarities and differences) between them. In so doing, the theoretical framework on which this study is based is the functionalism. In other words, the way verbs and phrases used to express possibility and probability are formed and their functions and meanings in the sentence are in the score of this study. Thus, possibility (operators and phrases expressing possibility) will be dealt with at first and afterwards probability with its operators and phrases and finally the relationships between the two notions.

2. Possibility

Possibility can be defined as a chance that something might exist, happen or be true. It is the state or fact of being possible. In other words, possibility can be the character of what may be done, or exist, or happen even if it was not certain to happen. In Siin Seereer language, this possibility can be expressed through some words and phrases such as “waag”.

2.1 Phrases Expressing Possibility

2.1.1 Waag

“Waag” is an operator which can be used to express a lot of things in Siin Seereer grammar. It is an auxiliary which can even be regarded as a modal auxiliary in this language. This operator is very interesting in Seereer in so far as it can be used in positive, negative and interrogative forms to express possibility. Let’s consider the following examples in which it is used in positive or affirmative form.

✓ Maari a waaga rokiid.

Noun- Prn- Aux Acc- enter

“Mary may/can enter”

- ✓ A waaga moof mbiind ne

Prn- Aux Acc- stay- house- Def

“(s)He may/can stay at home”

In these examples, the operator in question is used in the affirmative form. But the most striking notice is the fact that it is used in its accomplished form. “Waag” is combined with “a” which is mainly employed as the morpheme of the accomplished aspect when it is attached to a verb or an auxiliary. However, in these sentences, the speaker is expressing the possibility that the grammatical subject (Maari in the first example and “a” in the second one) has to realize the predicate. In other words, (s)he allows the grammatical subjects to execute the predicates. There is an intersubjective relationship given that the speaker gives to the grammatical subject the possibility of doing something. A predicative relationship can also be noticed here in so far the speaker can just be establishing the possibility between the subject and the predicate.

Thus, what explains this coalescence of relationships is the fact that Siin Seereer language does not make a difference between objective possibility and subjective possibility. It does not make a difference between epistemic and deontic uses of this operator either. Nevertheless, in these examples, the grammatical subjects are in singular. But what will we have if they are in plural? Let’s tackle these sentences below:

- ✓ Diib fa Bugar a mbaaga ndet njom na

Noun- Conj-Noun- Prn- Aux Acc- go- wrestling- Def

“Diib and Bugar may/can go to the wrestling”

- ✓ A mbaaga ngar a simniido a in

Prn- Aux Acc- come- Prn- great- to- us

“They may/can come and great us”

Apart from the possibility that the speaker has expressed in these examples, there are other things that are very important in Seereer grammar. At first there is a consonant alternation when there is a shift from singular to plural. The operator “waag” in singular has become “mbaag” in plural; in other words, “w” becomes “mb”. This consonant alternation is recurrent in Siin Seereer language when there is shift from singular to plural. It is the case with the prenasals (mb, nd, ng, Ng, nj) which alternate with their voiceless corresponding plosives (p, t, k, q, c) in plural.

The second striking point is the personal pronoun subject “a” (the grammatical subject in the second example). “A” is a personal pronoun that can be used for both singular and plural subjects. In this case, you should refer to the verb if you would like to distinguish them. But this “a” (personal pronoun) is different from “a” as a class marker, which is always followed by a noun. So, whatever these points may be, there is the presence of the intersubjective and

predicative relationships. The speaker may be giving to the grammatical subject the possibility of realizing the predicate. (s)He may also be showing the chances of the realization of the predicate by the subject. Only the context can guide us to differentiate these relations. Nevertheless, what will have if these sentences are in negative form?

- ✓ Diib fa Bugar mbaage ndet njom na

Noun- Conj-Noun- Aux Unacc- go- wrestling- Def

“Diib and Bugar may not / cannot go to the wrestling”

- ✓ Mbaage ngar a simniido a in

Aux Unacc- come- Prn- great- to- us

“They may not/cannot come and great us”

These examples are in the negative form; and what shows this negation at first is the replacement of “a” (mbaaga) by “e” (mbaage). These two morphemes (“a” and “e”) are used for affirmative and negative forms or for accomplished and unaccomplished aspect when the subject is in third person (singular or plural). “E” is an operator which plays the same role as “not” in modern English grammar. But there is just a slight difference between them in so far as “not” can be used with all personal pronouns as subjects, whereas “e” is only for the third personal pronouns subjects. In addition, there is the deletion of the personal pronoun subject “a” which constitutes a focal point in the shift from singular to plural. So, with this shift of forms or aspects, the speaker is expressing a lack of possibility. Either (s)he does not give to the grammatical subject the possibility to realize the predicate or (s)he invalidates the predicative relation when speaking. However, other shifts can be noticed when the co-speaker is the second personal pronouns (singular and plural).

- ✓ Wo waagi ro ret no qol

you- Aux Unacc- go - Def - field

“you may not /cannot go to the field”

- ✓ Nu mbaage ndet no qol

you- Aux Unacc- go- Def- field

“you may not/ cannot go to the field”

In these sentences, the shift that is pointed out is in the negative morpheme “iro” for the second singular personal pronoun and the consonant alternation (“w” that becomes “mb” and “r” that becomes “nd”). Thus, in the first example, we could even do without the subject “wo”. In other words, it could be deleted without any semantic change. Instead of saying *wo waagi ro*, we can just say *waagi ro*. However, we have noticed that the translation is the same in English (*“you may not/ cannot go to the field”*), which shows that Siin Seereer language is more explicit than English as far as personal pronouns are concerned. For in English there is no difference between the second personal pronouns (singular and plural) whereas in Seereer,

there is. But whatever this morpheme shift and consonant alternation may be, the speaker is still expressing a lack of possibility towards the relation.

The operator “waag” can also be used in the interrogative form to express possibility. In this case, the speaker asks the co-speaker about the possibility of the realization of the predicative relation. In other words, (s)he wants the co-enunciator to tell if the grammatical subject has or does not have the possibility to realize the predicate. (s)He may also wonder about the chances of the realization of the predicative relationship. The examples below do illustrate it.

✓ Wo waaga damit am?

you- Aux Acc- help- me

“Is it possible for you to help me/ may or can you help me?”

✓ A waaga gayit joc ola ?

he- Aux Acc- graze- forest- Def

“Is it possible for him to graze in the forest or may/can he graze in the forest?”

Here, the enunciator does not know the answer or seems not to know it. It is up to the co-speaker to come to a decision about the possibility of the realization of the predicative relation. However, something has been noticed about the structure of these sentences. They are structured like sentences in affirmative form. Only the question mark distinguishes them.

All in all, we have noticed that “waag” is an operator which is used in Siin Seereer language to express possibility through intersubjective or predicative relationships. It is an auxiliary that can be used in affirmative, negative and interrogative forms. In affirmative form it is combined with the morpheme “a” which is most of the time regarded as a morpheme showing the accomplished aspect, even if it is sometimes used as a third personal pronoun (singular and plural). This form is different from the interrogative one due to the question mark. In negative form, it is used with the negative operator “e” used to show the unaccomplished character of the segment or to invalidate the relation at the moment of speaking. Furthermore, through this study, it is pointed out that “waag” can undergo a consonant alternation when there is a shift from singular to plural and become “mbaag”. Thus, this operator in question can be used with the verb “ref” (to be) to form the phrase “a waga ref” which constitutes the main analysis of the following part.

2.1.2 “a waaga ref”

The phrase “a waaga ref” is used in Siin Seereer language to express possibility. It is a term composed of four morphemes: “a”, “waag”, “a” and “ref”. The first one (a) is a personal pronoun that can be regarded as a subject. The second one (waag) is an operator expressing possibility and that can be used as an auxiliary (modal) or as a verb. As far as the third morpheme (a) is concerned, it is a word used to show the accomplished character of a segment or the affirmative or interrogative forms. The last one (ref) is a verb. The whole forms this phrase on purpose used to express possibility. However, the possibility expressed here, will only be found in the predicative relation. In other words, this phrase is always used

in an epistemic way. The speaker gives his/her point of view about the chances of the realization of the predicate by the grammatical subject. Let's take into account the following examples:

- ✓ A waaga ref e samba jiku pis nene

Phrase- rel-Noun- buy Acc- horse-Dem

"Samba may have bought this horse"

- ✓ A waaga ref e goor we ndamu o kuud oxe

Phrase - rel -men -Def- catch Acc-cm-robber- Def

"The men may have caught the robber"

These examples show that the speaker is expressing the possibility of the predicative relation. In addition, it may be an assertive point of view. According to him/her it is really possible that the grammatical subject (samba in sentence1 and goor we in sentence2) have realized the predicate. Perhaps, they have done the action. But there is something which is striking in these examples. The phrase in question is invariable whether it is in singular or in plural. There is no consonant alternation, nor shift. What might explain this is the fact that it is composed of a subject, verb (accomplished) and a relative pronoun. It can be regarded as a proposition. Thus, this relative pronoun "e" follows the phrase. Indeed this "e" is different from the one expressing the unaccomplished character or the negative form. However, this phrase is always placed at the beginning of affirmative sentences. But in negative sentences, what will happen? Let us turn these sentences into the negative form.

- ✓ A waaga ref e samba jike pis nene

Phrase- rel-Noun- buy Unacc- horse-Dem

"Samba may not have bought this horse"

- ✓ A waaga ref e goor we ndame o kuud oxe

Phrase - rel -men -Def- catch Acc-cm-robber- Def

"The men may not have caught the robber"

In these examples, there is no shift as far as "a waaga ref" is concerned. It is also invariable in negative sentences. The structure of the sentences does not change any longer. The phrase is always at the beginning of the sentences, followed by the relative pronoun. The only shift is the negative morpheme "e" which is used instead of "u" that is also used to confirm the acquired or accomplished character of a segment. But whatever the shift from affirmative to negative form may be, the enunciator always gives his/her point of view about the possibility of the realization of the predicate by the grammatical subject (affirmative sentences) or the lack of possibility of the grammatical subject to realize the predicate (negative sentences).

However, unlike the operator "waag", the phrase "a waaga ref" cannot be used in interrogative form. For within it, the speaker does not need to ask some questions to the

co-speaker or wonder about the possibility of the realization of the predicative relation but (s)he expresses his/her opinion on the possibility or lack of possibility of the subject to realize the predicate. Even though, these notions are not the only ones that used to express possibility in Siin Seereer language. Others such as “foog” are sometimes used.

2.1.3 “Foog”

“Foog” is a verb in Siin Seereer language which can be used to express possibility. It is composed of one morpheme. Indeed, when the speaker uses this verb in a sentence, (s)he expresses his/her point of view about the realization of the relationship between the grammatical subject and the predicate. For this, it is most of time used with the first person (singular, sometimes plural) to express possibility. The examples below can illustrate it.

- ✓ Foog am e Soxna gaara nqel maak ne saax le

think- I- that-Noun-come Acc-Noun-big-Def- Noun-Def

“I think that Soxna has come in the Parliament”

- ✓ Foog am e goor we ndeta no siir

think - I- that-men-Def-go Acc-Def-herd

“I think that they have gone to the herd”

Here the verb “foog” is used with the first singular person; which means that the speaker is involved in the relation

3. Probability

The notion of probability is a key concept that is mainly found in epistemic modality. The latter concerns an indication of the estimation of the chances that the state of affairs expressed in the clause applies in the world or not, or, in other words, of the degree of probability of this state of affairs. Seereer language uses some operators to express this probability.

3.1 Phrases Expressing Probability

3.1.1 Fadna

Fadna is an operator used in Siin Seereer language when the enunciator presents the validation of the predicative relation in terms of a calculation done on the degree of the event probability, as coming from an absolute necessity. Let’s consider the following sentences.

- ✓ Fadna a qooq ala a pare’a

phrase - c.m- noun-Def- Prn-verb-Acc

“They must have finished growing.”

- ✓ Fadna ekol ke mbeeta

phrase- schools- Def- verb Acc

“Schools must have started”

In these sentences, the phrase “fadna” is used at the beginning of the sentences. It expresses the notion of probability in Siin Seereer language. In other words, the speaker expresses or establishes or evokes the chances of the realization of the predicative relationship. But this is not surprising in so far as the operator in question can be said to be derived from “fad”. The latter is a verb which means “to arrive or to beat” in English. So, combined with “na” which is a morpheme expressing the notion of “accomplished aspect”, the phrase expresses probability or certainty.

Furthermore, apart from being used in initial position, the operator “fadna” is always followed by a noun; unlike English operators which are always placed between the grammatical subject and the predicate (in affirmative sentences) to express probability. Thus, whether the noun is in singular or in plural, the operator remains invariable. It is not going to undergo any shift. But in negative sentences, what will happen? Let’s take into account the following examples.

- ✓ Fadna refe mbind na

Phrase be-Unacc-home-Def

“(s)he may not / cannot be at home”

- ✓ Fadna dod’and o maad

Phrase-elect-Unacc-c.m-king

“(s)he may not/ cannot have been elected as a king/ keen

These examples show that the phrase on question remains unchanged as far as its position and morphology are concerned. It is always placed at the beginning of the sentence. The only shift that is pointed out is on the verb, which is combined with the negative morphemes “e” (in the first sentence) and “and” (in the second sentence). These two morphemes expressing negation are different in Siin Seereer language. The former is used when the enunciator shows that the grammatical subject has not realized the predicate. It also shows the unaccomplished aspect. As for “and”, it is used when the grammatical subject has not undergone the action of the realization of the predicate. However, the enunciator is expressing the probability of the non- realization of the predicative relation. In other words, (s)he wants to show that there are not many chances for the grammatical subject to undergo the action of the predicate.

So, the enunciator, focusing on his/her knowledge of facts infers that the grammatical subject (he/she) is not likely to *be at home* (first sentence). Maybe they have seen him/her going somewhere or (s)he is not used to being at home at that time of speaking. In the second example, the same observation is made. The enunciator shows that they are certain that the grammatical subject (s)he has not been elected. Perhaps, (s)he has not got the capacity or the ability or the possibility or the knowledge etc. of being elected. Anyway they have focused on something from their observation of facts.

3.1.2 Moc' o foog

Moc' o foog is a phrase used in Siin Seereer language to express the enunciator point of view about the chances of the realization of the predicative relationship. It is a compound word composed of three morphemes. The first one (Moc') is a verb which can mean "to be better". The second one (o) is a predicative operator. It is different from "o" as a class marker. The last one (foog) is a verb expressing the possibility or the thought of the speaker. It can be translated into English by "to think". The whole compound is a phrase which is used to express probability.

- ✓ Moc'am o fooge Waagaan o maad a ref'u

verb-subj-op think-Rp- noun-c.m-king-Prn-be Acc

"Waagaan might be/ must have been a king"

- ✓ Moc'am o fooge a wey ngaara

verb-subj-op-think-Rp-Prn-come

"they might be coming"

In these sentences, we have noticed that the phrase is placed at the beginning of the statement. The enunciator is expressing his/her opinion about the relation between the grammatical subject and the predicate. For him/her there are some chances that the grammatical subject ("Waagaan" in the first sentence and "a" in the second one) realizes the predicate. In other words, Waagaan is likely to have been a king and "a" (they) is probably coming. But, be that as it may, the concept under study is placed at the beginning of the sentence.

4. Conclusion

Possibility and probability are two main concepts in Siin Seereer language and whose study requires much attention, for they are semantically and syntactically close one another. In this study, we have pointed out that there are some verbs which are used to express possibility and that can also express probability by being combined with other verbs or words. It is the case of the verb "foog", which is used to express possibility. But if it is combined with the verb "moc'" (moc' o foog) it expresses probability.

The study has also shown that almost all the verbs or phrases used to express possibility and probability are placed at the beginning of the sentence. Thus, the enunciator, focusing on his/her observation of facts, shows the possibility that the grammatical subject has to realize the predicate. In other words, he/she accounts the possibility of the realization or the non-realization of the predicative relationship (possibility). That is, the speaker expresses the character of what may be done, or exist, or happen even if it was not certain to happen. Furthermore, we have noticed that the enunciator, through a calculation or through his/her knowledge of facts, can indicate the estimation of the chances that the state of affairs expressed in the clause applies in the world or not, or, in other words, of the degree of probability of this state of affairs. He/she expresses the chances of the realization of the predicative relation (probability).

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