

Re: any language without person/number marking you know?

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Helmut Richter wrote:

Seán O'Leathlóbhair:

Richard Herring wrote:

I wonder if you missed the "spoken" in the description above? It's a restatement of Jacques Guy's thesis that modern _spoken_ French can be analysed as agglutinative.

I spotted the spoken and it does indeed make a big difference.

I had inserted the "spoken" in order to use phonemic writing as first means for noting down the language. Apart from that, I do not think that spoken French is a different language from written French.

I thought that you wanted to point out that spoken French makes fewer distinctions than written. I would not enter into a discussion about whether that makes the two different languages.

Although the French pronouns je and tu cannot wander far from their verbs, they are not forced to immediately precede it. The subject and verb may be inverted, object pronouns may come between them, or the negative particle ne may also do so.

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Exactly as in Swahili where you also add object pronouns and negative particles:

Nitacheka. I will laugh.

Nitamcheka. I will laugh at him.

Hanitamcheka. I will not laugh at him.

Mtu nitakayemcheka. The person (mtu) at whom I will laugh.

An inversion is seldom but occurs as well (the relative pronoun –ye– going at the end):

Mtu nimchekaye. The person at whom I laugh.

The reason why I would call that agglutinative is not because the morphemes are written together (in at least one Bantu language I have heard of, they are written apart) but because

- most of them occur only in the context of verb conjugation
- their sequence cannot be interrupted by other words
- to some extent they depend on each other, and some combinations cannot occur (e.g., in future tense either relative pronoun or negation, but not both)

I see.

One point that would seem significant to me is whether the particles have morphology. If they don't then it would seem a purely orthographic choice whether they should be written as one word or not. If there is morphology, then it may make more sense to write them as one word. For example, it would probably not be helpful to try to write French verbs with the stem and ending as separate words.

Agglutinative maybe but I thought that the discussion was on person and number marking in verbs. Does agglutinative imply verb marking? Would you regard the French subject pronouns as verb markings? I guess that due to the limited number of particles that can come between the subject pronoun and the verb, they could all be regarded as verb markings and you could say that French verbs are marked for subject, object, and negativity. This is not an interpretation that I am familiar with but that means little and I am happy to be corrected.

It shows that "is marked" and "is not marked" is not a clear dichotomy but rather requires a definition of what kind of marking mechanisms one is willing to accept. The OP's question was even a lot more vague, not even saying what part of speech was to be marked for what. It is tempting to ask questions like "what languages in the world have xyz?" where "xyz" is some feature, e.g. gender or tense or case. Before asking

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one should ask "what features of a language would I accept as xyz?".

This lack of clear dichotomies makes many of these discussions difficult. It has taken me some time to get used to this since my background (mathematics) is quite different. Many terms do not have a universally agreed definition but there are usually not many variants and they can be clearly stated. If you read a work by an unfamiliar author, you may need to check which definitions he is using but is rarely a serious problem.

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Seán O'Leathlóbhair

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