Book Review

James Essegbey. 2019. *Tutrugbu (Nyangbo) language and culture*. Grammars and sketches of the world's languages: Africa. Leiden: Brill. ISBN: 978 -90- 04-98698 -2

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/jall-2021-2019>

The book reviewed here is the first grammar of Tutrugbu (also called Nyangbo), a language spoken by less than 5,000 people in eastern Ghana. Tutrugbu is one of the Ghana-Togo-Mountain (GTM) languages, usually classified as part of the Kwa family. The book is based on language documentation work in the Nyangbo community by the author, James Essegbey. In this review I first discuss the organization of the book, then discuss some strengths of the book, including its attention to semantics, pragmatics and culture, then turn to a few weaknesses of the book before concluding.

The organization of the book is clear and mostly follows established conventions of grammar writing. The book contains the following chapters: 1 Introduction, 2 Phonology, 3 Morphology, 4 The Noun Phrase, 5 The Verb Phrase, 6 Adpositional Phrases and Locative Constructions, 7 Constructions, 8 Sentence Types, 9 Information Structure, 10 Routine Activities. Perhaps a bit unusual is the chapter on morphology, as the topics discussed here (reduplication, inflection, noun classes, derivation and compounding) are more commonly discussed in chapters dedicated to specific word classes, mostly nouns and verbs. This means that some information ends up divided over different chapters, such as the discussion of verb prefixes, which are partly discussed here and partly in chapter 5 on the verb phrase. The morphology chapter also includes the section on noun classes, which one might expect to find in the chapter on the noun phrase. Other than these minor issues, the structure of the book is clear and any information I tried to look up was easy to find using the table of contents and index. The only thing I could not look up were the abbreviations used in the glosses, a list of which is missing from the book.

The book stands out in its attention to semantics and pragmatics. An example is chapter 6 on adpositional phrases and locative constructions. Rather than focusing on a specific aspect of linguistic structure, it focuses on a particular semantic domain (spatial location), covering both how this domain is syntactically realized as well as what semantic distinctions are made within the domain. The semantics of locative verbs and postpositions is discussed in detail, the former

encoding the relation between figure and ground and the latter the search domain. Another example is the discussion of the imperative in chapter 8, which is not limited to providing the forms, but also discusses the fact that, unlike in English, Tutrugbu imperatives are commonly used to make requests and are not considered a threat to the addressee's face.

Culture plays an important role in this book. This can be seen in the chapter on 'routine activities' which discusses greetings and provides brief ethnographic descriptions and Tutrugbu texts related to various cultural practices. Including this kind of information in a grammar enables readers not only to construe grammatical sentences but also to develop an understanding of how the language is used. Cultural information is not only provided in this chapter, but also highlighted in various places throughout the book. The elaborate linguistic examples, often taken from natural discourse, frequently exemplify not only specific linguistic phenomena but also aspects of culture. In various places, Essegbey adds explanations on the cultural contexts in which the examples occur. For example, in the section on two-place verbs, Essegbey (184–185) mentions the verb **ta**, which can be translated as 'throw', 'kick', 'shoot' or 'play', depending on the object it occurs with. Examples show the verb **ta** with objects referring to children's games, such as football and **ampe**, a game played all over Ghana. These examples are followed by a description of how **ampe** works, which is relevant for understanding the semantics of **ta**, as the game involves forward movement of the legs. I enjoyed coming across these little elaborations on cultural and communicative practices while reading the book, as they provide nice glimpses into Tutrugbu life and the context in which the language is used. At the same time, examples such as these show that cultural information is not only something "extra", but of fundamental importance to understand the language itself.

Another strength of this book is that it is written from a "Kwa-centric" perspective, placing the linguistic description of Tutrugbu in the context of related and neighbouring languages. The book is informed by literature on other Kwa languages, which shows up, e.g., in the discussion of whether the language encodes tense, the description of serial verb constructions and the section on information structure. Throughout the book Essegbey frequently notes whether Tutrugbu conforms to or departs from areal and genetic trends and also points out when words and constructions are borrowed from the areal lingua franca Ewe.

The analyses in this book are generally sound and convincing. They are mostly based on typological and functionally-oriented frameworks and are easy to follow for people not previously familiar with the specific theoretical concepts. Wherever necessary, Essegbey explains the theory and refers to the relevant literature. One example of a well-described and interesting aspect of the language is the Tutrugbu focus construction. Like many Kwa languages, Tutrugbu places focused elements

in a clause-initial position, preceding the subject. However, unlike most Kwa languages, it does not have a dedicated focus marker or any kind of focus-related marking on the verb. Instead, the language makes use of independent subject pronouns. These are normally only used for emphasis, but in focus constructions they seem to serve as boundary markers, occupying the subject position and thereby clearly separating the clause-initial focused element from the remainder of the clause.

A part of the book that is less convincing is the discussion of the tone system. Essegbey argues that Tutrugbu has four contrastive tone levels. However, not all contrasts are equally clearly demonstrated. Essegbey provides pitch contours of (near-)minimal pairs in isolation to show tonal distinctions. But in the low versus mid contrast, the pitches of the two tones differ very little whereas the mid tone in another example is much higher. In general, the pitches of the mid and high tones vary quite a bit across the examples and it would have been good to see the tones in contexts where they can be compared relative to each other. The way tones are orthographically marked in the book is also unclear: some vowels in the examples are unmarked and others carry an acute accent, but it is not explained what these accents represent.

A slightly confusing aspect of the book is its treatment of subject marking on the verb. Tutrugbu verbs usually come with a subject prefix, which either marks agreement or has a pronominal function. The way these prefixes are described in the book suggests there are two different sets: agreement markers when there is a subject NP and dependent subject pronouns when the prefix has a pronominal function. The glosses in the examples also consistently make this distinction. However, in almost all cases, these two types of prefixes actually have the same form, that is, the same prefix is used as agreement marker and as dependent pronoun. This is crosslinguistically common and does not come as a surprise. The unexpected part is that there is one noun class for which the two forms differ: the *ɔ*-class, which includes, among others, plants and “stick-like body parts”. This interesting finding could have been discussed more, as well as the decision to treat all other subject prefixes as essentially polysemous including glossing them differently depending on the presence or absence of a subject NP.

Missing from the book is a discussion of word classes. There is no general overview of the word classes of Tutrugbu and their properties. The properties of nouns, verbs, adjectives, determiners, demonstratives, intensifiers and adpositions are treated to some extent in the various sections devoted to these classes, but there are no sections on adverbs and ideophones. In the section on adjectives, some ideophones are described as being non-derived adjectives, suggesting that ideophones are not considered a separate word class. Even so, explicit discussion

of this issue would have been helpful, as well as a clear overview of the word classes of the language.

In conclusion, the book reviewed here forms a very welcome addition to the growing literature on the GTM languages. It offers a comprehensive overview of the grammar of the language with special attention to semantics and pragmatics as well as the cultural contexts of language use. It will be of interest to specialists in Kwa languages and languages of the wider area as well as linguistic typologists and researchers interested in cultures of Ghana or (West-)Africa more generally.