



# Beyond derivation: Creative use of noun class prefixation for both semantic and reference tracking purposes

Michelle E. Morrison \*

University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language, United States

Received 8 June 2017; received in revised form 6 October 2017; accepted 7 October 2017

Available online 2 November 2017

## Abstract

Bantu languages are notorious for their noun class systems. Much of the research on Bantu noun classes has primarily focused on their formal properties and their usefulness for historical classification. Much less attention has been paid to the functions of the noun class system, particularly within a discourse context. While many scholars recognize that noun classes are at least partially semantically motivated and that they play a role in reference tracking, the complexities of the interactions between these functions and the ways speakers may manipulate the noun class system creatively within discourse has largely been ignored. This paper focuses on the behavior of the noun class system in a Bena (Bantu, G63) discourse context. I show that choice of noun class is a complex combination of factors, including (but not limited to) denotative and connotative semantics and discourse factors such as reference tracking and participant disambiguation. Further, this paper challenges the entire notion of noun class as an inherent feature of a Bantu noun. Instead, the class assigned to a particular entity emerges from the discourse context and prefixing elements are themselves referentially significant, serving to index particular entities (rather than simply inheriting their class from a controlling noun).

© 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Noun classes; Bantu; Semantic functions; Pragmatic functions

## 1. Introduction

One of the hallmark features of Bantu languages<sup>1</sup> is a noun class system, a phenomenon in which singular and plural nouns are assigned to different noun classes, which then participate in a complex system of agreement (or concord). Bantu languages may have as many as 21 different noun classes, though some have significantly fewer (Maho, 1999; Katamba, 2003). Note that sometimes the term “gender” is used for this phenomenon (e.g., Comrie, 1999; Van de Velde, 2006); however, in this paper the term “noun class,” or simply “class” will be used. Within the Bantu languages, a noun’s class is typically marked on the noun via a noun class prefix (NCP), as in the Swahili data presented in (1); in these examples, the break between prefix and stem has been indicated with a hyphen to assist the reader:

- (1) a. *m-tu* ‘person’ Class 1 e. *wa-tu* ‘people’ Class 2  
b. *ki-su* ‘knife’ Class 7 f. *vi-su* ‘knives’ Class 8  
c. *m-ti* ‘tree’ Class 3 g. *mi-ti* ‘trees’ Class 4  
d. *ki-ti* ‘chair’ Class 7 h. *vi-ti* ‘chairs’ Class 8

\* Correspondence to: 7005 52nd Ave, College Park, MD 20742, United States.

E-mail address: [mmorriso@umd.edu](mailto:mmorriso@umd.edu).

<sup>1</sup> The term “Bantu” (or “Narrow Bantu”) refers to a group of languages that constitute a branch of the Niger-Congo language family. Bantu languages are spoken across East, Central, and Southern Africa (Nurse and Philippson, 2003).

As is shown in (1), the NCP can indicate whether a given noun is singular or plural; furthermore, as shown by comparing (1c) with (1d) and (1g) with (1h), a given prefix may affect the lexical meaning of a stem in other ways.

Other elements in the sentence (adjectives, numerals, demonstratives, verbs, etc.) are inflected for the class of the relevant noun; this is generally referred to as nominal concord:

- (2) a. *M-tu m-moja yu-le a-na-kuj-a.*  
 1-person 1-one 1-DIST 1-PRES-COME-FV  
 ‘That one person is coming.’  
 b. *Wa-tu wa-wili wa-le wa-na-kuj-a.*  
 2-person 2-two 2-DIST 2-PRES-COME-FV  
 ‘Those two people are coming.’

According to Corbett (1991), the *controller* is the element that determines the agreement (the singular noun *mtu* ‘person’ in 2a and the plural noun *watu* ‘people’ in 2b). The *target* is the element whose form is determined by the agreement (*yule* ‘that’ in 2a and *wale* ‘those’ in 2b). In a given language, agreement may be based on semantic principles, syntactic ones, or a combination of the two (Corbett, 1991; Aikhenvald, 2000). Importantly, under this model, agreement is not generally subject to variation for an individual noun. However, as will be shown below, such an approach is inadequate and presents, at best, only a partial account of the behavior of a noun class system.

In most Bantu languages, it is generally acknowledged that noun class assignment is partially, but not fully, semantically motivated (Maho, 1999; Katamba, 2003). For example, in many Bantu languages, Classes 1 and 2 typically include human nouns, and in fact, for some Bantu languages, Classes 1 and 2 contain exclusively human nouns.<sup>2</sup> There is much less consistency in other classes, though some semantic tendencies may exist. For example, it is common to find certain plants in Classes 3 and 4, but Classes 3 and 4 typically also include many other nouns that are not related to plants at all. Some classes do not have any “inherent” members and are, instead, reserved for particular semantic purposes. Class 20, for example, serves as an augmentative class in many Bantu languages, and Classes 12 and 13 are often diminutive, with few or no inherent members.

Within the literature, several competing approaches have been proposed to explain the semantic properties of Bantu noun classes, both those classes that very obviously have semantic motivation, and those for which the semantics is more subtle. Denny and Creider (1986) provide an analysis of proto-Bantu noun classes, characterizing them depending on whether they indicate *kinds* of entities (e.g., animals, plants, or tools), and those which are *configurational* in nature (that is, describing particular shapes). Noun classes which denote kinds of entities include Class 1/2 (humans), Class 9/10 (animals), and Class 7/8 (instrumental artifacts). Configurational classes include Class 3/4, which contains extended solid figures (such as roots, tails, legs, fingers, and trees), Class 5/6, which contains non-extended solid figures (e.g., spots, the sun, eggs, and knees), and Class 9/10, which contains non-extended outline figures (e.g., pots, drums, and tree hollows). Importantly for their analysis, a single class may include both “kinds” and “configurations.” For example, Class 9/10 includes animals as well as non-extended outline figures. Denny and Creider note, however, that there are many nouns that do not seem to cleanly fit within these categories. Importantly, however, the work of Denny and Creider underscores the principle that semantics does play some role in noun class assignment.

Hendrikse and Poulos (1992) propose a different approach, critiquing the notion that noun class membership consists of a series of discrete categories. They argue instead that noun class membership should be seen as a continuum, and that this continuum is related to an underlying conceptual continuum. Hendrikse and Poulos identify four fundamental semantic parameters that they believe to be underlying the entire system: concreteness, attribution, spatial orientation, and abstractness. They place each of these parameters along a continuum, with concreteness at one end and abstractness at the other. Nouns which are experienced using all five of the senses are the most concrete, and those which are experienced with none of the five senses are abstract. While their approach acknowledges that categorization of noun classes may not be as discrete as that proposed by Denny and Creider (1986), the continuum proposed by Hendrikse and Poulos involves meta-level organization of the noun classes themselves, and not membership of individual nouns; they still seem to assume that a single noun belongs to a single class, and class membership can only be changed through a derivational process. Hendrikse (2001) then extends this analysis, arguing that noun class prefixes themselves are polysemous and multidimensional, in an attempt to account for varied semantic properties of nouns found in individual classes.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, I follow the noun class numbering principles that are commonly used within Bantu linguistics and are summarized in Maho (1999). These principles were originally devised by Bleek (1862/1869); numbering of the classes and their reconstruction in proto-Bantu has gone through several modifications, most notably by Meinhof (1906, 1932), Guthrie (1948, 1971), Meeussen (1967), and, most recently, Maho (1999).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7297679>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7297679>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)