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Patterns of Noun Class System Attrition in Kwa

It is generally assumed that Proto-Niger-Congo had an extensive system of nominal classification whereby pairs of affixes were consistently used with fixed groups of noun stems in singular and plural forms, also triggering concord/agreement on a number of targets inside and outside a noun phrase. However, various types of noun class systems are attested in modern Niger-Congo languages (cf. Givón 1970, Welmers 1973, Demuth el al. 1986, Good 2012 among numerous others). The two basic language types are sometimes contrasted in literature – the largely isolating Kwa-type with occasional relics of nominal classification and the largely agglutinating Bantu-type with robust nominal classification; most Niger-Congo languages being somewhere in between – cf. Hyman (2004), Good (2012). Clearly, not all Bantu languages are close to the canonical "Bantu type", and, crucially, some Kwa languages have extensive noun class systems bringing them closer to the Bantu-type rather than the Kwa-type. However, the less "Bantu-ish" Bantu have been studied much more (see Maho (1999), Katamba (2004) for some discussion and references) than the less "Kwa-ish" Kwa languages.

Rich noun class systems are characteristic of two groups within Kwa family – the Guang languages (Snider 1988) and the so-called Ghana-Togo Mountain languages (GTM, Heine 1968, Blench 2009). It is highly probable that Proto-Guang as well as Proto-GTM had rather complex systems of nominal classification, which have undergone various types of attrition in modern languages (Heine 1968:182; Snider 1988:138). Also, given the rich noun class system reconstructed for proto-Benue-Congo (de Wolf 1971), one may reasonably assume that a complex noun class system could be present in proto-Kwa, but it was lost in most modern groups of the family. Although Heine (1968) and Snider (1988) provide plausible reconstructions of nominal class markers in proto-GTM and proto-Guang respectively, they mostly focus on the phonological shape of the markers paying little attention to historical processes of morphosyntactic simplification attested in modern languages to various degrees. Also, while there is a brief discussion of class agreement in proto-GTM in (Heine 1968), Snider (1988) does not touch upon this topic in his reconstruction of proto-Guang noun classes.

In this paper we present an overview of noun class systems and class concord[1] in modern Kwa with special attention to diachronic patterns of change resulting in the simplification of a presumably rich proto-system, its complexity being comparable with the Bantu-type nominal classification. Our study is based on the existing grammatical descriptions of Ghana-Togo Mountain languages, Guang languages as well as Akanic idioms. An overwhelming majority of languages within the former two branches demonstrate more or less robust noun class systems; and the latter linkage only shows relics of nominal classification.

The general properties of noun class systems in Kwa are as follows. In most languages class markers are prefixes; however, Akebu employs both prefixes and suffixes for class marking. Most languages have about ten unique class markers, but there is seldom one-to-one correspondence between singular and plural markers. Concord usually occurs on numerals and determiners (definite and indefinite markers, demonstratives meaning 'this' and 'that'). Adjectival concord is much less common.

We have revealed the following patterns of diversion from the "robust" nominal classification system in modern Kwa languages:
(a) animacy-based affix overgeneralization in plural formation as well as concord marking, e.g. in Lelemi (Allan 1973), Tuwuli (Harley 2005), Igo (Gblem 1995);

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[1] The term *concord* is used here to denote class marking on nominal modifiers within a noun phrase, usually adjectives, numerals, demonstratives and definiteness markers. Verbal and pronominal marking are beyond the scope of this paper.

(b)   optional class marking on nouns (attested in Nyangbo, Essegbey 2009) or optional concord, e.g. concord on numerals from 2 to 6 in Lelemi, (Allan 1973);

(c)   loss of class marking for some nouns in singular, e.g. in Akan (Osam 1993);

(d)   number rather than class concord, e.g. on adjectives in Tuwuli (Harley 2005);

(e)   productive or residual nominal class marking with no concord – Efutu (Obeng 2008), Ikposo (Subrier 2013);

(f)   categorial restrictions on class concord, e.g. only numerals showing concord in Akebu (Storch & Koffi 2000, Makeeva & Shluinsky 2015), only adjectives marked for class in Akan (Osam 1993);

(g)   "vocalic" and tonal rather than full prefixal concord whereby in concord prefixes with CV- structure the consonant remains invariable for all classes and it's only the vowel and the tone which change depending on the nominal class, e.g. in Avatime and Nyangbo (Schuh 1995; Essegbey 2009).

Most patterns of diversion from a canonical nominal classification system presented here largely correspond to diachronic phenomena discussed for some Bantu (Katamba 2003), non-Bantu Bantoid languages (Good 2012) as well as Kru and Cross River languages in Demuth et al. (1986). However, categorial restrictions on concord (f) appear to pattern differently in Kwa as opposed to Kru and Cross River languages. While numeral concord is very robust in Kwa as opposed to restricted adjectival concord, it is most often lost in Kru and Cross River languages, which are more likely to preserve adjectival concord (Demuth et al. 1986). Also, "vocalic" concord (g) attested in closely related Avatime and Nyangbo seems quite unusual – we are not aware of any similar cases reported for other Niger-Congo languages.

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