

Prefixhood in the Bantu Noun Class System: A look at the Grassfields Borderland

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Abstract

As is well known, Bantu nouns typically consist of a stem each with an overt or covert prefix arranged in classes of singular and plural pairs called genders. In this article, I find interest in gender pairs in which both classes lack an overt prefix. A singular class with a covert prefix may form a gender with a plural one with an overt prefix, as typically illustrated by Gender 1/2 in many Bantu languages as in Babanki (Hyman 1979), Bafut (Tamanji, 2014) and Ngamambo (Achiri-Taboh, 2014). Cases where both classes take covert prefixes are certainly intriguing.

Achiri-Taboh (2014) makes a distinction between two forms of the attributive adjective in Ngamambo, namely, one with a low/rising tone used with a noun that takes a covert marker as in (1), and the other with a high/falling tone used with a noun that takes an overt marker as in (2).

(1)	a.	ønép	øzòǀí	/	ønép	*øzòǀí	‘dry house’
		9house	9dry		9house	9dry	
	b.	øwə̀d	øfiri	/	øwə̀d	*øfiri	‘black man’
		1man	1black		1man	1black	
	c.	ømben	øzù	/	ømben	*øzù	‘cold bush’
		9bush	9fresh		9bush	9fresh	
(2)	a.	ʒtúy	ʒzòǀí	/	ʒtúy	*ʒzòǀí	‘dry head’
		3head	3dry		3head	3dry	
	b.	ibâp	ifiri	/	ibâp	*ifiri	‘black wing’
		5wing	5black		5wing	5black	
	c.	rítíʔì	riʒù	/	rítíʔì	*riʒù	‘cold parcels’
		13parcel	13cold		13parcel	13cold	

With this observation, he establishes the Noun-Adjective Concord (NAC) Generalization, with the prediction that a noun class prefix is replicated on any modifying attributive adjective. By means of the NAC Generalization, it is demonstrated that, contra previous thoughts (see Asongwed and Hyman 1976), Ngamambo Gender 9/10, usually taken to exhibit a homorganic nasal prefix, actually takes no overt prefixes at all. Whatever the case, an important question that should be answered is: how are the plural nouns in such genders known? It is suggested in Achiri-Taboh (2015) that in order to mark their plurality, nouns of any plural class without an overt prefix like Class 10 must take an overt marker of another plural class on loan as a last resort – a class with which it shares the same concord consonant. This does not overtly show on a Ngamambo Class 10 noun but it does on any predicative adjective that modifies it. Thus, with the prediction of the NAC Generalization, Class 10 nouns are modified by the high/falling form of the adjective rather than the low/rising form as seen in (3).

(3)	a.	ønép 9house	øzòǀsi ‘dry house’ 9dry	/	ønép 10house	rizóǀsí ‘dry houses’ 13dry
	b.	øŋgap 9antelop	øzù ‘fresh antelope’/ 9fresh		øŋgap 10antelop	rizù ‘fresh antelopes’ 13fresh
	c.	øtoʔ 9cup	økyen ‘big cup’ 9big	/	øtoʔ 10cup	rikyén ‘big cups’ 13big

In other words, in Ngamambo, Class 10 nouns share the same concord consonant [t] with Class 13 nouns as in the plural forms in (4) and (5).

(4)	a.	ønép 9house	ze ‘the house’ the	/	ønép 10house	te ‘the houses’ the
	b.	øŋgap 9antelop	ze ‘the antelope’ the	/	øŋgap 10antelop	te ‘the antelopes’ the
(5)	a.	fitíʔi 12parcel	fe ‘the baskets’ the	/	ritíʔi 13parcel	te ‘the parcels’ the
	b.	fitám 12seed	fé ‘the seed’ the	/	ritám 13seed	té ‘the seeds’ the

In the present article, I seek to extend the prediction of the NAC Generalization to cover the entire Bantu Grassfields. Specifically, I examine another Momo language and sample two Ring languages for the Western Grassfields and a fourth from the Ngemba language group for the Eastern Grassfields, and then show that (a) some classes that have previously been thought to exhibit overt class markers actually do not; (b) like in Ngamambo, nouns of Class 10 do take the plural marker of another class to show plurality; and (c) while the loan marker may appear covert on Ngamambo Class 10 nouns, it may actually be overt in other languages.

References

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