

Multifunctional agreement patterns in Bantu and the possibility of genderless nouns

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Abstract

It is generally assumed that all nouns belong to a gender in gender languages and that this constitutes a fundamental difference between gender systems and systems of noun classifiers. An analysis of gender and agreement in the Cameroonian Bantu language Eton challenges this assumption. Gender assignment cannot be predicted on semantic grounds in Eton, except for proper names and deictic kinship terms. Although these nouns trigger the same agreement pattern as nouns of gender 1, their behaviour differs too much from the other nouns for them to be analysed as gender 1 words. It is argued that they form the core of a set of genderless nouns. The agreement pattern they trigger is a multifunctional one: it marks agreement with gender 1 words and with genderless words. It will be shown that multifunctionality is a typical characteristic of agreement patterns in Bantu.

Keywords: *agreement, animacy, article, Bantu, borrowing, Eton, gender, kin term, noun class, number, proper name, referentiality*

1. Introduction

The Bantu languages often serve as a reference point in typological studies on gender and agreement, since they provide a typical example of a regular, pervasive, and highly grammaticalised system. In a recent effort to integrate Amazonian systems of nominal classification into a general typology, Grinevald & Seifart (2004) point out that typological publications and introductions to African languages tend to focus on regularities of their gender systems, creating an idealised picture. Consequently, the contrast with the recently described nominal classification systems of the Amazonian languages, which look much more “untidy”, is exaggerated. They correct this view by comparing aspects of the Amazonian systems to similar features in Bantu and by summing up a

number of irregularities that are frequently found in Bantu. These irregularities are well known to Bantuists, as Grinevald & Seifart point out, and do not challenge the traditional analyses of gender and agreement in Bantu.

This article aims to contribute to the discussion by focusing on two related descriptive problems that are more challenging for the traditional analysis, which is too much concerned with identifying genders in contemporary languages as reflexes of the genders of Proto-Bantu. First, I will shift the descriptive attention from the genders to the agreement patterns. It will be shown that the semantics of the system is in the agreement patterns rather than in the gender distinctions. Agreement patterns are multifunctional, since they do not always mark gender agreement. This will be illustrated by a wide array of examples in which a certain agreement pattern is selected because of its semantics rather than by a mechanic agreement mechanism based on gender. Second, I will argue that in at least one Bantu language, namely Eton, there is a set of genderless nouns. The possibility of genderless nouns is in contradiction to all or most published definitions of gender (e.g., Greenberg 1978: 52, Dixon 1986: 105, Grinevald & Seifart 2004: 246). The reason seems simple: a gender is defined by the group of nouns that trigger the same agreement pattern. Every noun has a certain agreement pattern in gender languages. Hence, every noun must belong to a gender. Yet, in Eton the group of nouns traditionally called “class 1a” is very different from the other genders in ways that impose a division of the Eton nouns between those that belong to a gender and those that are outside the gender system, the traditional class 1a nouns. The genderless nouns trigger the same agreement pattern as gender 1, viz. agreement pattern I, not because they belong to the same gender, but because agreement pattern I is a multifunctional one. This will be proved by means of independent evidence from other Bantu languages.

Many of the descriptive facts adduced here are not new to Bantuists, but are in need of an integrated analysis that makes sense of them rather than summing them up as exceptional phenomena. I hope the result is an alternative view on gender and agreement in Bantu that will facilitate comparison with other systems of nominal classification and that might contribute to an understanding of the functions and origins of gender.

The structure of the article is as follows. In Section 2, I introduce the Bantu gender system, illustrated by Eton data. The description is strongly inspired by the typological literature on the subject, most notably Corbett (1991). Section 3 discusses the functions of agreement patterns. Examples from different Bantu languages will illustrate that the same agreement prefix can be selected for different reasons, only one of which is agreement in gender. This leads to the conclusion that some agreement patterns can fulfil multiple functions, an insight that will prove to be crucial for the discussion on genderless nouns in Section 4. Section 4 first provides a description of how class 1a nouns differ

from the others in Eton and formulates the hypothesis that they are genderless. It is then explained why proper names, deictic kinship terms, and borrowings are genderless, and my analysis is contrasted to an earlier analysis by Greenberg (1978). In the final sections the perspective is widened to the Bantu family.

Following Corbett (1991) I take “noun class” and “gender” to be alternative names for the same phenomenon and I will use the term “gender” only. Note that “noun class” is the usual term in Bantu linguistics, but that “gender” is sometimes used with reference to pairs of noun classes, one of which typically contains the plural forms of the other. I will call such pairs “gender combinations”. The following terminological conventions are taken from Corbett (1991). The element that determines the agreement is called the CONTROLLER and the element whose form is determined by agreement is the TARGET. The term AGREEMENT FEATURE indicates in what respect there is agreement. An agreement feature has several VALUES: [singular] and [plural], for instance, are values of the feature NUMBER. Finally, antecedent-anaphor relations will not be distinguished from (local) agreement.

2. The Bantu gender system

2.1. Introduction

There is an abundant literature on gender in the Bantu languages (see, for instance, Meeussen 1967, Corbett 1991: 43–46, Rebuschi 2000, Katamba 2003, and references in the latter). I will illustrate the Bantu gender system by means of a brief description of gender in Eton (*itón*), which will be used as the starting point for the discussion of some theoretical problems. All Eton data are taken from Van de Velde (2006).

Eton is spoken just north of the Cameroonian capital Yaoundé. It is referred to as A71 in Guthrie’s classification of the Bantu languages and is part of a dialect continuum called Beti-Bulu-Fang (also Pahouin). Its closest relatives are Ewondo and Mengisa. Eton has a typical Bantu gender system, but lacks locative genders. The verbal morphology is less typical for the Bantu languages, in that it is much less synthetic than in Proto-Bantu (Meeussen 1967: 108). There are three structural tones: low (L), high (H), and dissimilating high (D). D is represented by a low tone when preceded by a high tone, and by a high tone elsewhere. It is marked by a double high tone accent on the vowel (*ǎ*). Tones can combine into rising and falling patterns on the surface and high tones can be downstepped. Many morphemes contain floating tones or consist of a floating tone only. High tone copy is a pervasive tone rule. Although other descriptions of Beti-Bulu-Fang languages do not describe accent, the notion of accent is essential to understand the phonology and tonology of these languages. In this article, a practical orthography is used that neutralises some less important distinctions. Thus, *e* represents /e/ and /ə/. The labiovelar /gb/ and the succes-

Table 1. *The Eton gender prefixes*

Gender	Nominal prefix	Verbal prefix	Pronominal prefix	Connective	Demonstrative
“1a”		à	ù	à / Ø	pɔ̃
1	ṇ	à	ù	à / Ø	pɔ̃
“2a”		bé	bě	bé / H	bǎ
2	bè	bé	bě	bé / H	bǎ
3n	ṇ	ù	ũ	H	pũ / vĩ
3a	à	ù	ũ	H	pũ / vĩ
3u	ù	ù	ũ	H	pũ / vĩ
4	mì	mí	mĩ	mí / H	mĩ
5	è / d	é / d	ě / dD	é / H	ďĩ
6	mè	mé	mě	mé / H	mǎ
7	ì / j	í	ĩ	í / H	yĩ
8	bì	bí	bĩ	bí / H	bĩ
9	Ø	ì	ì	ì / Ø	pĩ
10	Ø	í	ĩ	í / H	pĩ

sion of /g/ and /b/ are both written as *gb*. *ŋm* always represents a labiovelar nasal /ŋm/, since there are no sequences of /ŋ/ and /m/. Following the general guidelines for the spelling of Cameroonian languages /tʃ/ is noted as *c*, /dʒ/ as *j* and /j/ as *y*.

Eton has ten genders, numbered from 1 to 10. As is usually the case in the Bantu languages, it is impossible to predict to which gender a noun belongs on the basis of its semantics (see Section 2.3). Gender is marked by a prefix on nouns (the controllers) and on nominal modifiers, pronouns, and finite verbs (targets). There are three series of gender prefixes in Eton: nominal prefixes (on nouns), verbal prefixes (subject marking on verbs), and pronominal prefixes (on pronouns and modifiers of the noun). There is no object-verb agreement in Eton, contrary to Eastern and Southern Bantu languages. Table 1 provides an overview of the gender morphemes of Eton. As will become clear in Section 2.2, such a table gives a good presentation of the relevant data, but should not be interpreted as an accurate analysis of the gender system. Not all elements listed under Gender in the first column have equal status, for instance.

Typically, all nominal gender prefixes have a low tone. The verbal prefixes are high, except in genders 1 and 9. The gender prefixes have variable forms depending on the form of the following morpheme. In genders 1 and 3, the nominal prefix is a syllabic homorganic nasal. Before a vowel the homorganic nasal is represented by the phoneme /m/, as in the gender 1 noun *m-òd* ‘person’. The prefix is not syllabic in that case. Genders 9 and 10 historically had a homorganic nasal nominal prefix. This nasal is only preserved before voiced stops,

but there are no morphological arguments for treating it as a prefix in present day Eton. The CV-prefixes of gender 2, 4, 6, and 8 are reduced to C- or CG- (where G represents a glide) before morphemes that begin in a vowel, in accordance with the general rules of hiatus resolution in Eton. The preconsonantic and prevocalic forms of the gender 5 ($\dot{\text{e}}\text{-}/d\text{-}$)¹ and gender 7 ($\dot{\text{i}}\text{-}/j\text{-}$) prefix cannot be reduced to one morphophoneme and must be described as allomorphs. The forms in the two rightmost columns of Table 1 are suppletive agreement targets. The connective morpheme (CON) is a proclitic that relates a head noun to a modifying noun, as in (1). The choice between the segmental and the tonal form of the connective depends on the syllable structure of the modifying word.

- (1) *mè-ndím mé=zóŋ*
 6-water VI.CON=[9].eggplant
 'eggplant soup'

Table 2 illustrates the agreements by means of a pronominal prefix on the possessive modifier and a subject prefix on the verb. The examples in Table 2 also show that there is a close link between gender and number. The even genders contain only plural nouns, and the odd genders only singular nouns, with the exception of gender 5, which in Eton contains both singular and plural nouns. Nouns can be classified according to their gender combinations, i.e., the gender they take in the singular and in the plural. Note that these combinations are not always pairs. There are pluralia tantum and singularia tantum. Moreover, the majority of gender 9 nouns (e.g., *kó* 'tuber') in Eton have two plurals, one of gender 10 (e.g., *kó*) and one of gender 6 (e.g., *mè-kó*), without any difference in meaning (2).

- (2) a. *í kó jû ì-té d̥id*
 AU [9].tuber IX.this IX-PRES be.heavy
 'This tuber is heavy.'
- b. *í kó jû í-^hté d̥id*
 AU [10].tuber X.this X-PRES be.heavy
 'These tubers are heavy.'
- c. *í mé-kó mâ mé-^hté d̥id*
 AU 6-tuber VI.this VI-PRES be.heavy
 'These tubers are heavy.'

1. The form before the slash appears before stems with an initial consonant.

Table 2. Examples of gender agreement in Eton

1a	<i>kálâdâ</i>	<i>w-âmâ</i>	<i>â-té</i>	<i>kù</i>		'My book is falling.'
	book	I-my	I-PRES	fall		
2a	<i>bâ</i>	<i>kálâdâ</i>	<i>b-ámâ</i>	<i>bé-⁴té</i>	<i>kù</i>	'My books are falling.'
	PL	book	II-my	II-PRES	fall	
2	<i>bè-yéglê</i>	<i>b-ámâ</i>	<i>bé-⁴té</i>	<i>dī</i>		'My teachers are eating.'
3n	<i>m-mùŋ</i>	<i>w-ámâ</i>	<i>ú-⁴té</i>	<i>kù</i>		'My cassava tuber is falling.'
3a	<i>â-púb</i>	<i>w-ámâ</i>	<i>ú-⁴té</i>	<i>jáb</i>		'My field is large.'
3u	<i>ù-vwón</i>	<i>w-ámâ</i>	<i>ú-⁴té</i>	<i>kù</i>		'My axe is falling.'
4	<i>m-bùŋ</i>	<i>my-ámâ</i>	<i>mí-⁴té</i>	<i>kù</i>		'My cassava tubers are falling.'
5	<i>è-kòŋ</i>	<i>d-ámâ</i>	<i>é-⁴té</i>	<i>kù</i>		'My lance is falling.'
	<i>d-ǝ</i>	<i>d-ámâ</i>	<i>é-⁴té</i>	<i>mâ yâbnì</i>		'My hand hurts (me).'
	<i>è-vwón</i>	<i>d-ámâ</i>	<i>é-⁴té</i>	<i>kù</i>		'My axes are falling.'
6	<i>mè-kòŋ</i>	<i>m-ámâ</i>	<i>mé-⁴té</i>	<i>kù</i>		'My lances are falling.'
	<i>mè-púb</i>	<i>m-ámâ</i>	<i>mé-⁴té</i>	<i>jáb</i>		'My fields are large.'
	<i>mè-ndógô</i>	<i>m-ámâ</i>	<i>mé-⁴té</i>	<i>kù</i>		'My mangoes are falling.'
7	<i>ì-bwàn</i>	<i>y-ámâ</i>	<i>í-⁴té</i>	<i>dí</i>		'My lover is eating.'
	<i>j-ǎd</i>	<i>y-ámâ</i>	<i>í-⁴té</i>	<i>kù</i>		'My basket is falling.'
8	<i>bì-bwàn</i>	<i>by-ámâ</i>	<i>bí-⁴té</i>	<i>dí</i>		'My lovers are eating.'
9	<i>ndógô</i>	<i>y-ámâ</i>	<i>ì-⁴té</i>	<i>kù</i>		'My mango is falling.'
10	<i>ndógô</i>	<i>y-ámâ</i>	<i>í-⁴té</i>	<i>kù</i>		'My mangoes are falling.'

The following is an overview of all gender combinations:

- (i) major gender combinations (each more than 5 % of all nouns):
7/8 (22 %); 3/4 (18 %); 9/10~6 (15 %); "1a/2a" (13 %); 5/6 (9 %)
- (ii) minor gender combinations (each between 1 and 5 % of all nouns):
6 (4 %); 3u/5 (3 %); 9 (3 %); 5 (2 %); 3u (2 %); 3a (2 %); 1/2 (2 %); 3a/6 (1.5 %); 7 (1 %)
- (iii) marginal gender combinations (each less than 1 % of all nouns):
3n; 4; 3u/6; 8; 5/2a; 7/5; 9/10~2a; 9/2a; 3a/2a; 2; 3/10~6; 9/6~2a

2.2. Genders and morphological classes

Although there are only ten agreement patterns, Tables 1 and 2 have fourteen rows. This is because not all nouns that trigger the same agreement pattern have the same prefix. In gender 3 the homorganic nasal is only one of three alternative prefixes, the others being *â-* and *ù-*. The choice between these prefixes is not phonologically conditioned. Moreover, there are differences in gender combinations. Gender 3 words with an [ñ-] prefix have a plural of gender 4, those with *â-* and *ù-* have a plural of gender 6 and 5 respectively. Some examples are given in (3). There is also a set of nouns without gender prefix and with the same agreement pattern as gender 1. The plural of these words is formed

by *bð* and has the same agreement pattern as gender 2 words, whose prefix is *bè-*.

- (3) a. *m-mà w-ámô, w-ó ú-kû*
 3n-drum III-my III-SUB III-PST.fall
 'It is my drum that fell.'
- b. *ù-kèŋ w-ámô, w-ó ú-kû*
 3u-knife III-my III-SUB III-PST.fall
 'It is my knife that fell.'
- c. *m-mbà m-ámô, m-ó m-kû*
 4-drum IV-my IV-SUB IV-PST.fall
 'It is my drums that fell.'
- d. *è-kèŋ d-ámô, d-ó é-kû*
 5-knife V-my V-SUB V-PST.fall
 'It is my knives that fell.'

There are two different approaches to these facts in Bantu studies. One is based on Kadima's (1969: 82) definition of gender distinctions in the Bantu languages, which is as follows:

Deux classes sont distinctes: 1° s'il y a une différence dans leurs accords, 2° si, en cas d'identité d'accords, leurs PS et appariements sont simultanément distincts.
 [Two classes are distinct: (1) if there is a difference in their agreement patterns, (2) if, in the case of identical agreement patterns, both their nominal class prefixes and their singular-plural pairings are different.]

According to Kadima's definition, the noun *m-mà* in (3a) does not belong to the same gender as *ù-kèŋ* in (3b), although they have the same agreement pattern. The word for 'drum' has a syllabic homorganic nasal prefix, while the word for 'knife' has a prefix *ù-*. Moreover, their plurals belong to different genders (3c, d). The second part of Kadima's definition makes it possible that the number of genders exceeds the number of different agreement patterns. In theory this definition does not exclude gender distinctions in a language in which all nouns trigger the same agreement pattern. Moreover, some gender languages, such as French, do not have gender marking on the noun (i.e., overt gender) and/or have gender coalescence in the plural. The second part of Kadima's definition cannot be applied to such languages. From a typological point of view, the second part of Kadima's definition must therefore be rejected.

The other, more generally accepted approach, which I will follow, is to distinguish as many genders as there are agreement patterns. The sets of nouns referred to as 3n, 3a, and 3u in Table 1 are then usually called subgenders of gender 3. The term "subgenders" should be avoided in this case, because it has another use in the typological literature, viz. that of agreement classes which

Table 3. *Genders, morphological classes and agreement patterns in Eton*

Example	Morphological class	Gender	Agreement pattern
<i>kálâda</i>	Ø	genderless	I
<i>ndógô</i> (PL)	Ø	10	X
<i>ndógô</i> (SG)	Ø	9	IX
<i>à-púb</i>	à	3	III
<i>bè-yéglê</i>	bè	2	II
<i>bì-bwàn</i>	bì	8	VIII
<i>d-ô</i>	d	5	V
<i>è-kòŋ</i>	è	5	V
<i>ì-bwàn</i>	ì	7	VII
<i>j-ăd</i>	j	7	VII
<i>mè-púb</i>	mè	6	VI
<i>mì-bùŋ</i>	mì	4	IV
<i>m-mùŋ</i>	ñ	3	III
<i>jà-jéglê</i>	ñ	1	I
<i>ù-vwón</i>	ù	3	III

control minimally different sets of agreement (Corbett 1991: 163). According to this definition, there are no subgenders in Eton. Instead, nouns will be classified into MORPHOLOGICAL CLASSES based on their form, i.e., their prefix, and into GENDERS based on their agreement pattern. Table 3 shows this double classification. It is sorted in ascending alphabetical order according to morphological class. The nouns in the first column are the same as those in Table 2. It will also prove useful to name the agreement patterns involved, as is done in the right-hand column (with Roman numbers). Note that the sets of nouns called 1 and 1a in Table 1 have not been merged into one gender, contrary to 3n, 3a, and 3u (see Section 4). Conversely, 1a and 2a are conflated to genderless. Genderless nouns trigger agreement pattern I in the singular. In the plural they are preceded by a plural word, which determines the agreement pattern.

There is an obvious link between genders and morphological classes in the Bantu languages.² One can predict the gender of a noun by looking at its prefix. This prediction is at best statistical, however. Nouns of morphological class ñ- can be of gender 1 or 3. In this case it suffices to derive the plural of these nouns.

2. A discussion of the complexities of the link between gender and morphological class falls outside of the scope of this article. For the interested reader I can cite two facts that complicate the picture. First, research on the acquisition of the South African Bantu language SeSotho has shown that noun-modifier agreement is productive before the systematic marking of nouns (Demuth 1988). Second, in some Bantu languages, the nominal prefix can be dropped if the noun is accompanied by an agreeing modifier (Demuth 1988: 310, Grinevald & Seifart 2004: 249).

If the plural is a gender 4 word, one can be sure that the singular belongs to gender 3, since there is a bidirectional relation between these genders (called “gender combination 3/4”). However, even this does not always work in Eton. Compare (4) and (5). The words *swáŋɔ̃* ‘aunt’ and *kál* ‘sister of a male person’ belong to the same morphological class and so do their plurals. Nevertheless, they trigger different agreement patterns.

- (4) a. *swáŋɔ̃ w-àmɔ̃ àté yǎ ʔj-á*
 aunt I-my I-PRES sing 7-song
 ‘My aunt is singing.’
 b. *bɔ̃ swáŋɔ̃ b-ámâ béʔté yǎ ʔj-á*
 PL aunt II-my II-PRES sing 7-song
 ‘My aunts are singing.’
- (5) a. *kál y-àmâ ité yǎ ʔj-á*
 sister IX-my IX-PRES sing 7-song
 ‘My sister is singing.’
 b. *bɔ̃ kál b-àmâ béʔté yǎ j-á*
 PL sister II-my II-PRES sing 7-song
 ‘My sisters are singing.’

In some Bantu languages, but not in Eton, there seems to exist a gender assignment rule that further strains the relation between gender and morphological class. Consider the following typical KiSwahili examples.³

- (6) a. *Ki-kapu ki-kubwa ki-moja ki-lianguka.*
 7-basket VII-big VII-one VII-fell
 ‘One large basket fell.’
 b. *Ki-boko m-kubwa a-meanguka.*
 7-hippo I-big I-has.fallen
 ‘The big hippopotamus has fallen.’
 c. *M-tu m-kubwa a-meanguka.*
 1-person I-big I-has.fallen
 ‘The big person has fallen.’
 d. *Vi-kapu vi-kubwa vi-tatu vi-lianguka.*
 8-basket VIII-big VIII-three VIII-fell
 ‘Three large baskets fell.’
 e. *Vi-boko wa-kubwa wa-meanguka.*
 8-hippo II-big II-have.fallen
 ‘The big hippos have fallen.’

3. Examples (6a, b, d) are cited via Corbett (1991: 44, 43, 48), who took them from Welmers (1973). The other examples are mine. I thank George Mertens for checking them.

- f. *Wa-tu* *wa-kubwa* *wa-meanguka*.
 2-person II-big II-have.fallen
 ‘The big persons have fallen.’

The subject noun in (6a) has the same nominal prefix as that in (6b), but the same agreement pattern as that of (6c). The same discrepancy between morphological class and gender can be found in the plural of *kiboko* (6e), as compared to the “regular” situation in (6d) and (6f). As is well known, all nouns with animate reference display this behaviour in KiSwahili. Whatever their nominal prefix, their agreement pattern is I in the singular and II in the plural. Corbett (1991: 47) concludes that there are two types of assignment rule in KiSwahili: semantic assignment and morphological assignment. The former takes precedence over the latter.⁴ This account of gender assignment in KiSwahili contains some oversimplification (Corbett 1991: 252), which will be discussed in Section 3.1. But first we have to address the semantics of the Bantu genders.

2.3. *The semantics of the Bantu genders*

The suggestion that there is a semantic assignment rule in KiSwahili brings us to the question of whether Bantu genders have a semantic basis. The traditional Bantuist view is that there are at most some tendencies, with a huge amount of exceptions. The following list provides an overview of the traditional consensus on the broad semantic characteristics of Bantu genders (abbreviated from Katamba 2003: 115, who cites Hendrikse & Poulos 1992: 199). I have omitted the plural genders, except in cases where some specific semantic features are attributed to them.

- 1 human beings
- 3 natural phenomena, animals, body parts, plants
- 5 natural phenomena, animals, body parts, collective nouns, undesirable people
- 6 (plural of genders 5 and 14), time references, mannerisms, modes of action
- 7 animals and insects, body parts, tools, languages, diseases, outstanding people, amelioratives, derogatives, augmentatives
- 9 animals, people, body parts, tools
- 11 long and thin entities, languages, body parts, natural phenomena, implements
- 12 augmentatives, derogatives, diminutives, amelioratives

4. Corbett (1991: 47) points out that diminutive and augmentative nouns with animate reference are not assigned to gender I and gives rules that correctly describe gender assignment in these cases.

- 14 abstracts, collectives
- 15 infinitives, body parts
- 16, 17, 18, 23 locatives
- 19 diminutives
- 20 derogatives, augmentatives, diminutives, amelioratives, mannerisms
- 21 augmentatives, derogatives

There is obviously a considerable amount of overlap, which makes it impossible to predict to which gender a noun belongs on the basis of its meaning. Thus, nouns for body parts in Eton are spread over all genders except gender 1, with no gender clearly being preferred to the others. Moreover, it is hard to find any coherence in the enumerations given for each gender, except for gender 1. In Eton seventeen out of eighteen gender 1 nouns are human, but only 29.5 % of all human nouns are of gender 1. The other human nouns are in gender 3 (32.5 %), 7 (20 %), 9 (10 %), 5 (1.5 %), and 2 (1.5 %). The remaining five percent are genderless borrowings.⁵ After similar calculations on a number of Northwestern Bantu languages, Idiata et al. (2000) conclude that any semantic basis for the Bantu gender system is a myth. But the only valid conclusion that can be drawn from their data is that the predefined semantic categories they adopted from the tradition are inappropriate.

There have been several attempts to arrive at a more coherent semantic description of the Bantu genders. A thorough discussion of all of them is not possible here, but some must be briefly mentioned. Denny & Creider (1976), for instance, divided the Proto-Bantu genders into those that indicate kinds of entities and those that indicate spatial or formal configurations. The former are gender 1/2 (persons), 7/8 (instruments), and 9/10 (animals). The configurational classes are 3/4 and 5/6 (solid shape) on the one hand, and 9/10 and 11/10 (outline shape) on the other. I do not find this account convincing for several reasons. First, choosing a protolanguage to test a hypothesis of which the validity is doubted even in existing languages is a rather questionable approach.⁶ Very many nouns are reconstructed without certainty about their gender assignment in Proto-Bantu. Second, the most basic semantic distinction in the gender system is supposed to be that between kinds and configurations, but genders 9 and 10 are semantically characterised in terms of both kinds (animals) and configurations (non-extended outline figures) (see also Van den Eynde & Mufuta 1994: 96). Third, the semantic criteria that make up the basic

5. Deictic kinship terms have not been counted here. They are all genderless (see Section 4).

6. Except perhaps if one assumes that the system was purer in Proto-Bantu than it is now, but I see no reasons to assume this.

classification cannot be applied in a principled way. It suffices to look at some of the reconstructions that are presented as evidence for the semantic characterisation of the Proto-Bantu genders. For gender 5 [configuration, non-extended] these include the Proto-Bantu words for 'spider (bulbous body)', 'axe (i.e., the head)', 'fish hook', 'banana (by extension from other fruits)', and 'nape of neck (bunch of muscle)'. The word for 'spider' can of course also be classified as [kind, animal] (should be gender 9), the words for 'axe' and 'fish hook' as [kind, artefact] (gender 7). I would classify bananas, necks, and axe heads as [extended] (gender 3) rather than [non-extended]. Note that these words are presented as unproblematic examples. There are many exceptions as well; e.g., 'oil-palm', 'wing', 'field', 'arrow shaft', 'feather', and 'spear'. Finally, Denny & Creider adduce indirect evidence for their analysis by pointing out that other classifier systems have a similar semantic organisation. They give examples of languages with numeral classifiers. But Grinevald (2000: 71–74) pointed out that different types of classifier systems tend to have different semantic alignments. Systems of numeral classifiers indeed include some classification by physical characteristics such as shape, but noun classifier systems tend to have generic semantics.

With the development of prototype theory in cognitive semantics, the quest for the underlying semantics has reached a higher level of sophistication. None of the results is entirely convincing, however, since for most genders it is impossible to identify a concrete prototypical core, contrary to the situation in many Australian languages. The prototypical core in Contini-Morava's (1997: 608) semantic description of gender 3 in KiSwahili, for instance, is formed by "entities with vitality (neither human nor prototypically animal)". This core is too vague for a recognisable prototypical category. The Aristotelian solution for defining large and less coherent categories (a large extension thanks to a small intension) has to be combined with a prototype theoretical solution in order to make sense of the semantics of Bantu genders, which is unacceptable. If the core of a category is 'male humans', for instance, semantic extensions by means of metaphor (e.g., big things), metonymy (e.g., activities performed by men) and generalisation (e.g., male animals) are objectively identifiable. But if the core of an alleged category is vague, these semantic extensions can lead anywhere.

The high quality and sophistication of the studies briefly reviewed in this section make it improbable that a more convincing semantic description of the Bantu genders will be proposed. The only basic gender that is semantically coherent across the Bantu family is gender 1, which contains nouns with human reference.⁷ I will argue below that the semantic basis of the system lies in the

7. By "basic gender" I mean any gender except the cumulative ones, which add their prefix

agreement patterns rather than in the genders. Nevertheless, the most important conclusion is that gender assignment can never be predicted on the basis of the semantics of a noun, even if one assumes that gender assignment can be semantically motivated.

3. Multifunctional agreement patterns

3.1. Introduction

The description of gender assignment in KiSwahili at the end of Section 2.2 did not take into account examples like those in (7), where the controller nouns have a homorganic nasal prefix, i.e., they belong to the morphological type associated with gender 9 in the singular and gender 10 in the plural. According to the rules, the nouns in (7) should be assigned to gender 1, because of their animate reference. However, their agreement pattern appears to be mixed. Possessive determiners obligatorily take a prefix of agreement pattern IX after nouns denoting humans. After nouns denoting animals, the choice between an agreement pattern I prefix or one of pattern IX is free. All other agreement targets take the expected I/II prefixes.

- (7)
- | | | | |
|----|--------------------------|---------------|----------------------|
| a. | <i>N-dugu</i> | <i>y-angu</i> | <i>a-meanguka.</i> |
| | 9-brother | IX-my | I-has.fallen |
| | <i>*N-dugu</i> | <i>w-angu</i> | <i>a-meanguka.</i> |
| | 9-brother | I-my | I-has.fallen |
| | 'My brother has fallen.' | | |
| b. | <i>n-dugu</i> | <i>z-angu</i> | |
| | 10-brother | X-my | |
| | 'my brothers' | | |
| c. | <i>n-dege</i> | <i>w-angu</i> | <i>n-dege y-angu</i> |
| | 9-bird | I-my | 9-bird IX-my |
| | 'my bird' | | |
| d. | <i>n-dege</i> | <i>z-angu</i> | |
| | 10-bird | X-my | |
| | 'my birds' | | |

Corbett correctly compares such nouns in Bantu languages to nouns like *Mädchen* 'girl' in German. On formal grounds, *Mädchen* is assigned to the neuter gender, because of its diminutive suffix. But due to its semantics, the agreement pattern it triggers is optionally mixed, as in (8).

before the prefix of another gender in order to derive a locative noun or a noun with diminutive or augmentative meaning.

- (8) *Schau dir dieses Mädchen an, wie gut sie/es Tennis spielt.*
 look you this.NEUT girl at how good she/it tennis
 plays
 'Do look at this girl, see how well she plays tennis.' (Batliner 1984: 849, cited via Corbett 1991: 228)

In (8) the demonstrative has neuter gender agreement. The personal pronoun can be taken either from the agreement pattern associated with neuter gender or from that of the feminine gender. Because of their mixed agreement pattern, nouns like *ndugu* and *Mädchen* are called HYBRID NOUNS. Agreement as predicted by the morphological class of a word is called SYNTACTIC AGREEMENT (i.e., agreement patterns IX and X in example (7) and neuter in example (8)) and agreement as predicted by the semantics of the controller is called SEMANTIC AGREEMENT (agreement patterns I and II and feminine in the examples). An Agreement Hierarchy (Corbett 1979, 1991: 226) successfully predicts which agreement targets are likely to have syntactic agreement and which rather have semantic agreement, cf. (9). "As we move rightwards along the hierarchy, the likelihood of semantic agreement will increase monotonically (that is, with no intervening decrease)" (Corbett 1991: 226).

- (9) attributive < predicate < relative pronoun < personal pronoun

Although the notions of semantic agreement and syntactic agreement are widely used, their exact place in a model of agreement tends to remain unclear. Is the choice between syntactic and semantic agreement a choice between two different values of a single feature (10a), or is it a choice between alternative agreement features, e.g., gender and animacy (10b)?

- (10) a. alternative values:
N-dugu *y-angu* *a-meanguka.*
 9-brother IX-my I-has.fallen
 feature: GENDER feature: GENDER
 value: [9] value: [1]
- b. alternative features:
N-dugu *y-angu* *a-meanguka.*
 9-brother IX-my I-has.fallen
 feature: GENDER feature: ANIMACY, NUMBER
 value: [9] value: [animate, singular]

The idea of hybrid nouns, as I understand it, implies the first view, i.e., that of alternative values for the feature GENDER. The reason for a mixed agreement pattern is sought in the gender assignment of the controller, which, in the case

of hybrid nouns, has two values due to conflicting assignment rules (morphological and semantic). This approach could only be successful if similar cases of semantic agreement can be explained similarly. In the remainder of this section, I will argue that this is not the case. I therefore agree with Moravcsik (1988: 98) that “the rivalry of semantic and syntactic agreement” involves essentially separate agreement features.⁸ The most important consequence of this analysis is that different agreement features can trigger elements of the same agreement pattern.

3.2. Case study: The semantics of agreement patterns in CiLuba

For evidence in favour of the existence of alternative agreement features we can turn to CiLuba, a Bantu language spoken in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Van den Eynde & Mufuta (1994) show that the agreement system of CiLuba is hierarchically organised and that the semantic basis of CiLuba genders should not be sought in the morphological classes, but rather in the agreement patterns, more specifically in the agreement behaviour of interrogatives, demonstrative pronouns, and indefinite pronouns. The form of these agreement targets is always selected according to the semantics of the controller noun. We can illustrate this by means of the demonstrative pronouns. The primary distinction in this domain is between locative *apa* ‘here’, a form of agreement pattern XVI, and non-locative *eci* ‘this’, a form of agreement pattern VII. The locative demonstrative *apa* permits a further specification by the demonstratives *eku* and *emu*. The stem of the former is an agreement morpheme of pattern XVII and has a directional meaning. The latter is a form of agreement pattern XVIII and means ‘herein’. If the pattern XVI form *apa* is opposed to the other forms, it no longer has a general locative meaning, but rather a superpositional meaning (‘hereon’). Figure 1 shows the hierarchical structure of the locative demonstrative pronouns in CiLuba. The agreement pattern to which they belong is given in brackets. Every controller that can trigger a form lower on the hierarchy can alternatively trigger the form higher in the hierarchy, e.g., when less precision is needed or wanted.

The non-locative demonstrative *eci* ‘this’ also permits further specifications. A demonstrative from agreement pattern XII (plural XIII) can be used with reference to small things. The non-diminutives in turn split into [+human] (pattern I [–plural], pattern II [+plural]) and [–human]. The latter finally divides

8. This does not mean that the existence of hybrid nouns must be rejected. Possible candidates in the Bantu languages may be nouns with a secondary locative prefix. In KiKongo (Democratic Republic of Congo) the gender 17 noun *kuunzo* ‘at the house’ is derived from the gender 9 noun *nzo* ‘house’. The nominal ‘at this house’ can be freely translated as *kuunzo jii* or as *kuunzo kuu*, with a demonstrative determiner of gender 9 and 17 respectively (Creissels 1991: 49).

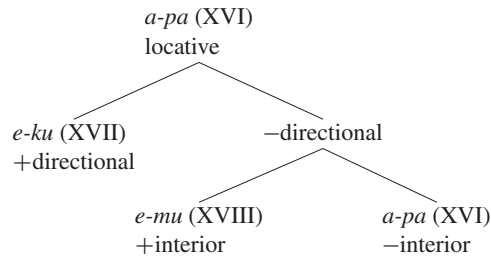


Figure 1. The hierarchy of locative agreement patterns in CiLuba

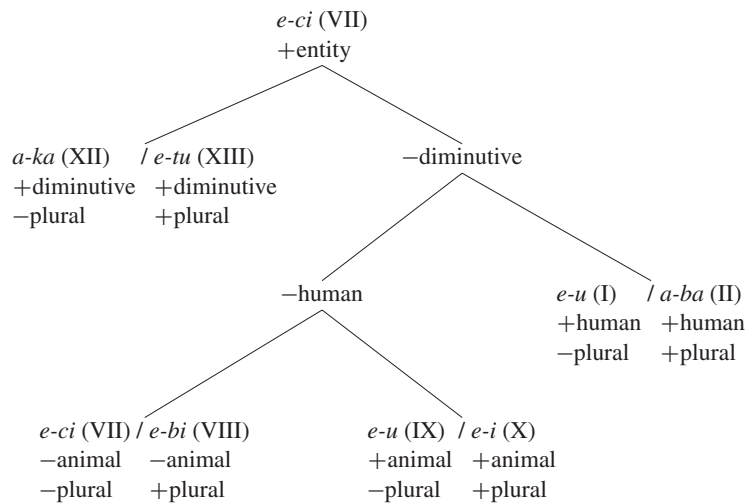


Figure 2. The hierarchy of non-locative agreement patterns in CiLuba

into [+animal] (patterns IX and X) and [−animal] (patterns VII and VIII). Thus, a noun that can trigger a form of pattern I, IX, or XII can also trigger a demonstrative of pattern VII. This gives the hierarchy of Figure 2.

Agreement with interrogatives, demonstrative pronouns, and indefinite pronouns is ALWAYS semantic in CiLuba. The gender of the controller is irrelevant for the choice of an appropriate agreement form here, only the semantics of the controller counts. Demonstrative pronouns, indefinite pronouns, and interrogatives never have a form of agreement patterns III, IV, V, VI, XI, or XIV, since these patterns do not have a proper semantic specification, except for number [±plural]. Now consider the examples in (11) and (12), which illustrate some

of the agreement options between a demonstrative pronoun and a locative controller.⁹

- (11) a. *A-pa tu-di ku-n-zubu.*
 XVI-here 1PL-COP 17-9-house
 'Here we are on the way to the house.'
- b. *E-ku tu-di ku-n-zubu.*
 XVII-here 1PL-COP 17-9-house
 'Here we are on the way to the house.'
- (12) a. *A-pa tu-di pa-n-zubu.*
 XVI-here 1PL-COP 16-9-house
 'Here we are on the house.'
- b. **E-ku tu-di pa-n-zubu.*
 XVII-here 1PL-COP 16-9-house
 'Here we are on the house.'

With the controller *kunzubu* there are two options, either a demonstrative of agreement pattern XVII or one of agreement pattern XVI. The controller *panzubu*, on the other hand, triggers only one agreement option. The reason for the different behaviour of *panzubu* and *kunzubu* has to be sought in the agreement system, not in their respective gender assignments. The specific meaning of *panzubu* [+location, +superposition] "accidentally" triggers the same agreement pattern as its general meaning [+location]. The specific meaning of *kunzubu* [+location, +direction] triggers another agreement pattern than its general meaning [+location]. *Kunzubu* is in no way hybrid as compared to *panzubu*. Rather, the alternative agreement features GENERAL MEANING and SPECIFIC MEANING trigger a different agreement pattern in the case of *kunzubu* and the same one in the case of *panzubu*. Similarly, a CiLuba noun with human reference can control a demonstrative or interrogative of agreement pattern I when there is agreement in SPECIFIC MEANING [+entity, –diminutive, +human]. In case of agreement in GENERAL MEANING agreement pattern VII will be selected, based on the value [+entity]. The alternative agreement features are also available when the controller refers to a utensil, for instance, but SPECIFIC MEANING [+entity, –diminutive, –human, –animal] and GENERAL MEANING [+entity] both trigger agreement pattern VII. If this had to be explained in terms of hybrid nouns, then all CiLuba nouns had to be hybrid, except those with inanimate non-diminutive reference. The alternative forms of the pronominal target in the German example in (8) also reflect alternative agreement features. In German pronouns, the alternatives are not GENERAL

9. Unfortunately, Van den Eynde & Mufuta (1994) give no examples with non-locative controllers.

MEANING and SPECIFIC MEANING, but rather GENDER and SEX. As in CiLuba, values of different features can trigger the same agreement pattern, e.g., GENDER [+feminine] and SEX [+female]. We saw that in KiSwahili possessives allow the alternative agreement features GENDER and ANIMACY. The latter only has the opposition [\pm animate]. The other targets must agree in ANIMACY if they can, otherwise they agree in GENDER. Again, different values can trigger the same agreement pattern. Both GENDER [1] and ANIMACY [+animate] trigger agreement pattern I. To summarise: CiLuba, German, and KiSwahili have in common that some types of agreement targets (e.g., pronouns and/or possessive modifiers) allow agreement according to alternative agreement features and that values of different features can trigger the same agreement forms.

3.3. Gender resolution and enforced agreement

Another kind of semantic agreement in the Bantu languages is found in gender resolution. The following examples show that a form of agreement pattern II is used as subject prefix if one of two coordinate subject nominals is human in the Tanzanian Bantu language Haya (Katamba 2003: 114). In the case of coordinate nominals with inanimate reference, agreement pattern VIII is chosen.¹⁰

- (13) *omusháfja n' émbwá bá-á-genda*
 man and dog II-PST-go
 'The man and dog went.'

- (14) *omutí n' ékyaalo ni-bí-hya*
 tree and village PRES-VIII-burn
 'The tree and the village are burning.'

In LuGanda the situation is similar, except that all conjuncts have to be human in order for agreement pattern II to be selected, otherwise pattern VIII is chosen, or one of the strategies that avoid gender resolution.

Corbett & Mtenje (1987) provide an elaborate description of gender resolution in the Malawian Bantu language ChiChewa. The major rules can be summarised as follows (adapting their terminology to the one used in this article).¹¹ The first rule takes precedence over the others.

10. There are also strategies for avoiding gender resolution in this kind of situation. Sometimes the verb agrees only with the last nominal in a coordinate structure. Alternatively, a comitative strategy can be used, e.g., 'he came with his dog' instead of 'he and his dog came'. Katamba does not give a morphological analysis of the nouns in these examples. The nouns in (13) are most probably of gender 1 ('man') and 9 ('dog') and those in (14) of gender 3 ('tree') and 7 ('village').

11. For the sake of brevity, I have left out two additional rules concerning infinitive conjuncts (of gender 15) and locative conjuncts. They pose no problems for the analysis.

Rule 1

If all conjuncts are plural and belong to the same gender, then there is gender agreement (or “syntactic agreement”). However, gender resolution (semantic agreement) with agreement pattern VIII is usually accepted as well.

- (15) *anthu ndi abakha a-ku-thamanga*
 2.people and 2.ducks II-PRES-run
 ‘People and ducks are running.’ (Corbett & Mtenje 1987: 33)

Rule 2

If all conjuncts denote a human, agreement pattern II is used.

- (16) *mkazi ndi mfumu a-ku-yenda*
 1.woman and 9.chief II-PRES-walk
 ‘The woman and the chief are walking.’ (Corbett & Mtenje 1987: 31)

Rule 3

If none of the conjuncts denotes a human, agreement pattern VIII is selected.

- (17) *mpeni ndi mphika zi-ku-sowa*
 3.knife and 3.pot VIII-PRES-be.missing
 ‘A knife and pot are missing.’ (Corbett & Mtenje 1987: 19)

Rule 4

The conjunction of nouns denoting humans and nouns denoting non-humans is unacceptable for some speakers, except where Rule 1 applies. Other speakers accept such conjunctions and select agreement pattern VIII.

Corbett & Mtenje noted some uncertainty in the application of Rule 3 when one of the conjuncts belongs to gender 12 (plural: 13), the gender to which nouns are derived in order to give them a diminutive meaning. Agreement pattern VIII is the only option in this situation, but it is selected with reluctance.

- (18) *?ukonde ndi kakhasu zi-li uko*
 14.net and 12.little.hoe VIII-be there
 ‘The net and the little hoe are there.’ (Corbett & Mtenje 1987: 19)

Rules 2 and 3 illustrate that the agreement patterns of ChiChewa have their own clearly defined semantics. As in CiLuba, agreement patterns VII and VIII are used with reference to nouns denoting non-human entities, and I and II with human nouns. For some ChiChewa speakers, the opposition human/non-human is asymmetric. That is, in the case of a semantic conflict the non-human

agreement pattern wins. For the other speakers, conjoined human and non-human subject nouns are unacceptable since they lead to a fatal clash between human and non-human agreement. The uncertainty about agreement resolution where diminutive conjuncts are involved suggests that agreement patterns XII and XIII have a diminutive meaning. This is consistent with what Van den Eynde & Mufuta (1994) found for CiLuba. Rule 1 is perhaps the most interesting one. It shows that conjoined subject nominals do not necessarily lead to gender resolution. Gender agreement can take place if the conjuncts are of the same gender. However, agreement patterns appear to be specified for number (again, as in CiLuba) so that the singular agreement patterns I, III, V, VII, and XII are incompatible with a conjoined subject. Consequently, the conjoined gender 3 nouns in (17) do not trigger a subject prefix of pattern III.¹² We may conclude by pointing out that the term “gender resolution” is somewhat misleading, since there is no resolution when gender is involved (as in Rule 1) and gender is irrelevant in the case of resolution.

The question of semantic agreement is related to that of enforced agreement. If an agreement target CAN agree, then typically it MUST agree (Corbett 1991: 204), also when no controller is present, or in the case of an untypical controller such as an interjection. When no controller noun is present in Eton, targets that obligatorily carry agreement markers are marked by a prefix from pattern V or VII, as for instance the copula in the cleft sentences in (19).

- (19) a. *í-nê/é-nê ndógô y-ò ì-té kù*
 VII-be/V-be [9].mango IX-SUB IX-PRES fall
 ‘It is the mango that falls.’
 b. *í-nê/é-nê ndógô y-ó í-⁴té kù*
 VII-be/V-be [10].mango X-SUB X-PRES fall
 ‘It is the mangoes that fall.’

According to Corbett (1991: 206), the selection of the neutral agreement form is usually semantically motivated, in the sense that agreement patterns linked to human genders are avoided. Thus, in languages like German, it is the neuter gender that is used for neutral agreement. In Bantu languages, any singular agreement pattern could in that case be selected for neutral agreement, except I. Yet, in ChiChewa non-prototypical controllers such as interjections trigger an agreement form of pattern I. Corbett (1991: 208) finds this a perplexing choice.

12. Note that this provides evidence against collapsing singular and plural genders into controller genders such as 3/4, which would lead one to expect an agreement form of pattern IV in (17).

- (20) a. “aaa” *a-na-mv-eka*
 “aaa” I-PST-hear-PAS
 ‘An “aaa” was heard.’
 b. *a-na-mu-mva* “mayo”
 I.SUBJ-PST-I.OBJ-hear crying.sound
 ‘He heard a crying sound.’

In the preceding paragraphs it has been shown that some agreement patterns have semantic specifications, which permits them to assume functions other than mere gender agreement. Pattern I is typically one of these patterns, whereas pattern III, for instance, is not. It is therefore more likely that pattern I is selected for enforced agreement than pattern III. I will show in Section 4 why ChiChewa could have preferred pattern I to pattern VII for enforced agreement.

3.4. *Summary and typological discussion: Multifunctional agreement patterns*

An analysis of gender and agreement in a Bantu language must include a description of the functions of the agreement patterns. We saw that some agreement targets in CiLuba never agree with their controller in gender. Nevertheless, they select a prefix from one of the agreement patterns that are used to mark gender agreement on other targets. There are no special agreement forms for marking semantic agreement. In other words, even though CiLuba indefinite pronouns never agree in gender with a controller noun, they clearly belong to an agreement pattern that is normally used to mark gender agreement.¹³ The same observation is valid for so-called gender resolution strategies and rules of enforced agreement. The default agreement patterns for semantic agreement with a human controller are I and II throughout the Bantu family. The default pattern for non-human controllers is not the same in all languages, but it is my impression that VII (plural: VIII) is by far the commonest, followed by IX (plural: X). The choice for a neutral agreement pattern, to be used in case of enforced agreement, goes between the agreement patterns that can function as markers of semantic agreement, i.e., usually between I and VII (or IX). The

13. This evidently complicates the relation between genders and agreement patterns. If we do not accept a mixed or hybrid gender assignment, then we need a way to determine the gender assignment of a controller that triggers a mixed agreement pattern. I do not find this a very important problem as long as agreement is well described and the number of genders does not exceed the number of consistent agreement patterns (see Corbett 1991: 179 for this notion). I prefer to analyse KiSwahili words like *ndege* ‘bird’ and *ndugu* ‘brother’ as gender 9 nouns and *kiboko* ‘hippo’ as a noun of gender 7, because the pattern I agreements they trigger are entirely predictable from their semantics, unlike their morphological form and the agreement form they trigger on possessive targets.

default option here is the inanimate one, viz. VII (or IX). Why some languages have preferred pattern I will become clear in Section 4.

The multifunctionality of the Bantu agreement patterns is most probably not typologically exceptional. We already saw an example of German, where the pronoun *sie* 'she' can mark either gender agreement with a controller of the gender called "feminine" or agreement with a controller that refers to a female human being, irrespective of the gender assignment of the latter. These are two functions of the agreement form *sie* that should not be confounded. Another non-African example is the Australian Mayali (or Bininj Gun-wok) dialect cluster. Evans' (1997) description of gender and agreement in Mayali shows that agreement patterns are multifunctional in these languages as well.¹⁴ An important difference between Mayali and Bantu is that gender assignment is clearly semantic in Mayali. The dialects with the most complete gender system have four genders: 1 (masculine), 2 (feminine), 3 (vegetable), and 4 (neuter). Certain targets, most notably plural demonstratives, always take a marker of agreement pattern I, irrespective of the gender of the controller. That is, agreement pattern I does not only mark gender agreement, it also provides the default prefix for certain targets. Evans calls this "superclassing". There are also some cases of discrepancy between morphological classes and agreement patterns, quite similar to the KiSwahili examples in (10). Evans calls this "quirky agreement". Moreover, some nouns allow alternative agreement patterns depending on the context in which they are used. Thus, *delek* 'white ochre' takes agreement of pattern III in contexts where it is not associated with art and of pattern I in association with painting, a typically male activity. Both quirky agreement and contextual agreement are limited to agreement patterns I and III, which Evans (1997: 133) calls unmarked. Finally, words for animals that belong to gender 1 can trigger agreement pattern I or II, according to the biological gender of their referent. The same is true for gender 2 nouns for animals. Hence, three of the four agreement patterns are multifunctional. Agreement pattern IV is restricted to marking agreement with controllers of gender 4. Between the other agreement patterns there are hierarchical relations similar to those described for CiLuba by Van den Eynde & Mufuta (1994).

The recognition of multifunctional agreement patterns also calls for a reassessment of the rarity of so-called combined gender systems (Corbett 1991: 184). Such a system is found in Dongo (Ubangi, Niger-Congo), where a system similar to the Bantu type coexists with a system distinguishing four members: male human, female human, animal, and inanimate. Verbs agree in animacy, whereas adjectives agree in gender (Corbett 1991: 184, citing Tucker & Bryan 1966 and Pasch 1986). What is exceptional about Dongo is not that different

14. I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this description to my attention.

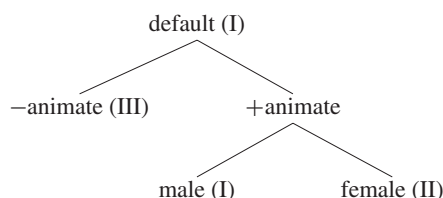


Figure 3. *The hierarchy of agreement patterns in Mayali*

targets agree according to different agreement features (gender and semantics), but rather that different agreement features control different sets of agreement patterns.

4. The nominal split and agreement pattern I

4.1. Introduction

In Table 3 above, Eton nouns such as *kâlâdâ* ‘book’, which belong to morphological class \emptyset , trigger agreement pattern I, and form their plural by means of the morpheme *bɔ̃*, were not assigned to a gender. In this section I explain why. At first sight, the difference between these nouns and the other nouns seems to be one of morphological class, and that is how they are treated in comparative and descriptive Bantu studies. The singular nouns are traditionally analysed as “class 1a”, a subgender of gender 1, whereas the plural nouns are categorised as “class 2a”, a subgender of gender 2. The consensus about the contents of class 1a¹⁵ is that it contains proper names, kinship terms, borrowings from European languages, names of animals (in all probability originally personified), and the interrogative pronoun meaning ‘who?’ (Doke 1927). Section 4.2 points out that class 1a is fundamentally different from the genders in Eton, both in assignment rules and in plural formation, and gives a functional explanation for the existence of genderless nouns. This analysis is contrasted to an earlier account of class 1a in Bantu by Greenberg (1978). In Section 4.3, class 1a is briefly considered from a comparative point of view. It will be shown that class 1a nouns display exceptional morphosyntactic behaviour throughout the Bantu family. Finally, Section 4.4 provides a brief comparative overview of agreement pattern I in the Bantu languages.

15. Throughout this section, I will continue to use the term “class 1a” as a label for this set of nouns in comparative Bantu perspective. Using the term “genderless nouns” would extend my analysis of the Eton data to the entire Bantu family, which is premature.

4.2. Genderless nouns in Eton

4.2.1. *Exceptional features: Assignment and plural marking.* I have argued in Section 2.3 that the semantics of a noun does not allow one to make predictions about its gender assignment in Eton. There are two important exceptions: proper names and deictic kinship terms. The latter are relational nouns like those in (21), which contain information on both participants involved in the kinship relation. One participant is defined by means of a concept (e.g., FATHER), the other is deictically identified in terms of discourse participants. Proper names and deictic kinship terms are always of class 1a in Eton.

- (21) a. *mɔ̌ʔjáŋ* ‘my same-sex sibling’
 mɔ̌ʔpɔ̌ŋ ‘your same-sex sibling’
 mɔ̌ʔpáŋ ‘his same-sex sibling’¹⁶
 b. *tàdà* ‘my father’
 íʔsɔ̌ ‘your father’
 íʔsá ‘his/her father’

Proper names can be derived from any common noun or from a phrase or clause by means of a vocalic suffix /-à/, as in (22).¹⁷ See Van de Velde (2003) for a typology of Eton proper names. The gender prefix of the source noun, if there is one, is incorporated in the stem of the proper name.¹⁸

- (22) *ŋgwàgɔ̌* < *ŋgwàg* ‘stone’ (9)
 ùbàmà < *ù-bàm* ‘sparrow hawk’ (3u)

16. Note that these forms are synchronically not compounds. The first element *mɔ̌* that the three words share is most probably a former diminutive derived from the word for ‘child’. Today it is part of the stem.

17. This is an underspecified vowel. The suffix vowel is the same as that of the preceding stem, except when the latter is close (/i/ or /u/). In that case the suffix vowel is -a. The same suffix is used to derive agentive nouns from verbs. Yvonne Bastin (personal communication) suggests that it may be the trace of a former final stem vowel. I agree, but this trace has been reanalysed as a suffix, because it can be added to any word in current day Eton in order to form a proper name. Note that a structural succession of /u/ and /a/ can be subject to two different rules of hiatus resolution: glide formation to *wa* and coalescence into *ɔ̌*. In non-accentuated positions glide formation never applies, hence the form *ŋgwàgɔ̌* in (26).

18. This is a very common process of proper name formation in the Bantu languages. Formal evidence for the fact that the gender prefix of the source noun is incorporated into the proper name stem can be found in Shona, among other languages. Shona gender prefixes show certain characteristic sandhi effects on the final vowel of preceding words. “In Shona, when a proper name is formed, the prefix remains, but it ceases to affect either the concords or the sandhi” (Gleason 1959: 29). Gleason tries to account for some of the peculiarities of class 1a in the Bantu languages by arguing that class 1a has a zero-prefix rather than no prefix. The analysis presented in the current article contradicts this. Nonetheless, Gleason also argues that nouns are divided between class 1a/2a nouns and the other classes. I agree with that.

Given that the form of a noun usually is a good indication of its gender membership and that semantic agreement with human controller nouns is non-existent in Eton, the fact that there is not a single exception to the rule that proper names belong to class 1a is extremely remarkable. Every proper name, personal or not, is assigned to class 1a, irrespective of whether it is an improvised nickname or an ancient hydronym. If 1a were a gender like the others, one would expect that at least some older names (e.g., clan names or place names) would have left it in favour of other genders, notably under pressure of their morphological form, i.e., the incorporated gender prefix. The exceptionless assignment of the deictic kinship terms to class 1a is in itself perhaps less remarkable, since it is a rather small and closed set of words. Nevertheless, non-deictic kinship terms often belong to other genders: *ì-vúvúmní* 'family member' (7), *kál* 'sister' (9), *ndóm* 'brother of a girl' (9), *jà-cĩ* 'in-law' (1), *ɲ-ɲál* 'wife' (1).

A second characteristic that sets class 1a nouns apart is their plural marking. We saw that gender and number are intimately linked. Therefore, it is to be expected that nouns that are outside of the gender system must behave differently as to number marking as well, which is exactly the case in Eton. The morpheme *b̀̀* is not a gender prefix, but a plural word. Words can be easily separated on phonological grounds alone in Eton. This is because the first syllable of every stem is accentuated. Accent is not realised by means of intensity, pitch, or vowel length, but by a number of other means. First, accentuated syllables have a prominent initial consonant.¹⁹ A prominent consonant is not subject to shortening and/or lenition in intervocalic position. Second, accentuated syllables can carry two structural tones, whereas non-accentuated syllables can carry only one. Finally, there are phonotactic restrictions on non-accentuated syllables. For instance, prefixes never contain non-high back vowels, but this argument cannot be used in the case of *b̀̀* without a danger of circular reasoning. The plural word *b̀̀* is clearly accentuated, whereas the noun class prefixes are not. This can be most easily illustrated by means of the difference in their tonal behaviour. In (23) two plural nouns are preceded by the locative preposition *á*, which, according to the general tone rules, copies its high tone onto the following word. Since *b̀̀* is accentuated, it can carry two structural tones, so that the copied high tone from the preposition can simply add to the original low tone and form a falling tone (23a). The gender 8 prefix *b̀̀-*, on the other hand, is not accentuated (it is not the first syllable of a stem). Therefore, it cannot carry both the copied high tone and the original low tone. Consequently, the copied high tone pushes the low tone of the nominal prefix to the right, where it downsteps the high tone of the noun stem *lé* 'tree' (23b).

19. Note that differences in consonant prominence are only relevant in intersegmental position. Before or after a pause or discontinuity of speech all consonants behave the same.

- (23) a. *bò kálâdà* 'books'
 á bô kálâdà 'in (the) books'
 b. *bì-lé* 'trees' (8)
 á bí-⁴lé 'in (the) trees'

The alleged class 2a prefix differs phonologically and morphosyntactically from the real class prefixes in very many Bantu languages. See Van de Velde (to appear) for discussion.

4.2.2. *Deictically restricted reference.* Let us turn to a possible functional motivation for the existence of genderless nouns. Such a motivation is ideally based on a characteristic that the prototypical genderless words have in common and that sets them apart from the other nouns. An important semantic characteristic that proper names and deictic kinship terms have in common is that their extension is deictically restricted. Proper names have inherent reference. They do not refer via a concept, but “are assigned an *ad hoc* referent in an *ad hoc* name-giving act” (Van Langendonck 1999: 95).²⁰ The deictic kinship terms do have a conceptual content, but this does not suffice to identify a possible referent. One always needs contextual information about the speaker, the addressee, or a definite 3rd person. In ordinary common nouns this deictic specification must be provided by modifiers of the noun, whereas in deictic kinship terms it is part of the noun stem. Hence, proper names and deictic kinship terms are more inherently referential than other nouns. Their lack of a class prefix can be explained from the perspective of William Croft’s typological characterisation of parts of speech. This makes use of internal properties – structural marking – and external properties – pragmatic function and semantic class. “There is an unmarked correlation between the semantic class of object and the function of reference so that a word denoting an object is unmarked in the function of reference but marked in other functions. A similar pattern holds between properties and modification and between actions and predication” (Croft 1991: 55). Following Van Langendonck, it can be concluded that proper names should be considered prototypical nouns (see also Creissels 1991: 41). “By contrast, common nouns are less prototypical nouns since they contain a predication, which is in the first place a verbal feature” (Van Langendonck 1999: 131).

20. Van Langendonck (1999) distinguishes between “proprial lemmas” and “proper names”. Proprial lemmas are entries in the lexicon that are typically used as proper names. However, they can also function as common nouns, e.g., in sentences like *There are two Peters in my class* or *Which George are you talking about*. In English, personal proprial lemmas cannot take a determiner when they function as proper names. Inherent reference is a property of proper names, not of proprial lemmas.

The fact that proper names and deictic kinship terms are not specified for gender in Eton can be related to Greenberg's universal tendency, which says that if a language has gender distinctions in the 1st person, it also has them in the 2nd or 3rd person, or in both (Greenberg 1963: 96). In Eton the 1st and 2nd person do not have gender distinctions. Corbett's explanation (1991: 131) for this tendency is convincing and equally offers an explanation for the existence of genderless nouns in Eton:

There is a functional explanation for the greater likelihood of gender differentiation within the third person, namely that third person forms are the most likely to be referentially ambiguous. The first and second persons are defined in terms of speaker and addressee respectively, while the third person is neither of these. Hence it is the third person which is the most in need of further means to ensure referential clarity, and gender can fulfil this role.

This explanation applies equally well to differences in referential ambiguity within the 3rd person. Proper names and deictic kinship terms are as much referentially unambiguous as 1st and 2nd persons, therefore they can behave as 1st and 2nd persons as far as the absence of gender distinctions is concerned.

4.2.3. *Borrowings.* So far I have only discussed the types of nouns that form the prototypical core of class 1a. Another major category are borrowings from European languages. Half of these borrowings are genderless.²¹ When words are borrowed into a Bantu language, there are several mechanisms of gender assignment. In some rare cases, the assignment is semantic, but more often it proceeds on a morphological basis. In Eton, the solution is more straightforward thanks to the existence of a category of genderless nouns. The majority of borrowed words simply remain genderless after insertion into the Eton lexicon.

4.2.4. *No prefix or zero prefix?* I also feel obliged to say something about nothing. In Table 1 the zero-symbol \emptyset symbolises the absence of an overt gender 9 and gender 10 prefix, whereas an empty space stands for the absence of a gender prefix before genderless nouns. Thus, two types of indiscernibles – zero and nothing – are opposed to each other. However, they do not contrast, which would be inadmissible (McGregor 2003). The zero prefix of gender 9 and 10 contrasts with the overt prefixes of the other genders inside the paradigm of nouns that are specified for gender. The absence of a prefix before genderless

21. Proper names, deictic kinship terms, and borrowings make up the large majority of genderless nouns. There is a small set of genderless nouns that do not fit into these three categories, some of which might be borrowings that I have not been able to identify as such. Nevertheless, all these nouns are formally exceptional, either tonologically, phonotactically, or with respect to their syllable structure.

nouns contrasts only with the presence of the plural word *bɔ̌*. A zero singular word or prefix cannot be accepted because the category singular is never uniquely expressed by means of an overt morpheme in Eton. Note that Mel'čuk & Bakiza (1987: 308) make the same distinction for Rundi.²² They posit a zero prefix for genders 5, 9, and 10, and no prefix before proper names. However, they make the difference because an augment or preprefix appears before zero prefixes, but not where there is no prefix.

4.2.5. *Greenberg's account of class 1a.* It is useful to discuss Greenberg's explanation for the existence of class 1a in the Bantu languages (Greenberg 1978). His explanation is diachronic and sticks to the traditional view that class 1a words are gender 1 words without a class prefix. He only explains why these words do not have overt gender. Therefore, many questions remain unanswered in his account. Greenberg argues that gender markers ultimately evolve from demonstratives. This evolution involves three stages. First, the demonstrative develops into a definite article (a stage I article); this in turn becomes a so-called stage II article, "which includes, along with possibly other uses, both definite determination and non-definite specific uses" (Greenberg 1978: 62). Finally, the stage II article develops into a noun marker (a stage III article). Stage I articles are not relevant here. In some Bantu languages noun stems are preceded by a so-called augment or preprefix and by a gender prefix. The former does not appear in all circumstances. The augment is a stage II article, whereas the gender prefix is a stage III article. Evidently, the gender prefix must have been a stage II article at a given point in history.

In languages with stage II articles, the articulated form (i.e., that with the article) has become the normal form of the noun. It is easier to list the cases where the articulated form is not used than to try to sum up all the cases in which the stage II article appears. According to Greenberg (1978: 64), the non-articulated form is typically used if the noun is inherently determined or if it has a determiner, or if it is used generically. The origin of class 1a is then explained as follows. At a given point in time, the current noun prefix developed from a stage II article into a stage III article (Greenberg 1978: 69):

[...] during the second stage there is a decreasing set of environments in which there is direct contrast between the articulated and non-articulated form. [...] In the absence of significant contrast, there is an analogical tendency for one of the forms, usually the articulated, to spread to all the remaining environments so that,

22. The agreement patterns of proper names in Rundi are very interesting and confirm Van Langendonck's claim that proper names have a basic level meaning (Van Langendonck 1999). Whatever the common noun from which they are derived, names for people trigger agreement pattern I (as the common noun for 'person'), names for cows tend to have agreement of pattern IX (as the word for 'cow'), etc.

ferences between class 1a nouns and the other nouns. The idea of a group of nouns that is not specified for gender offers such an explanation. However, one might object that class 1a nouns cannot be genderless because they trigger gender 1 agreement. We saw in Section 3 that the formulation of this possible objection is misleading, since agreement by means of agreement pattern I is not necessarily gender 1 agreement. Remember the principle that an agreement target that can agree typically must agree, also when no controller is present or when the controller is not specified for gender, e.g., interjections, but also genderless nouns. Agreement pattern I is typically one of the multifunctional agreement patterns in the Bantu languages. In Eton it marks agreement with genderless nouns, as well as gender agreement with nouns of gender 1. Section 4.4 provides comparative data that can explain why agreement pattern I was selected for this task, but first I will provide some comparative evidence for the exceptional status of class 1a as opposed to the genders.

4.3. “Class 1a” in comparative perspective

A superficial look at some Bantu grammars uncovers a very large amount of differences between class 1a and the “other” genders, which make it impossible to see class 1a as a subgender of gender 1. This is not a comparative study, so that it falls outside of the scope of this article to provide a description and an explanation of all these differences. The following is just a brief selection of descriptive facts.

A first difference between class 1a nouns and the others concerns locatives formed by means of a secondary prefix of gender 16, 17, or 18. Grégoire (1975: 23) remarks that in the Bantu language Songye (Democratic Republic of Congo) ‘chez somebody, at somebody’s place’ can be translated either as *ku-mû-ntu* [17-1-person] or as *kwa-mû-ntu*, where *kwa* is the gender 17 prefix *ku-* followed by the connective morpheme *-a*. This can be translated as ‘at the person’s’. With proper names, however, *kwa* is the only possible form, e.g., *kwaMwése* ‘at Mwése’s’. According to Grégoire, this is a trace of an ancient incompatibility between the locative noun prefixes and nouns of class 1a. The extent of this incompatibility and the reason for it are in need of further investigation. A simple semantic explanation in the sense that humans cannot easily be conceptualised as locations is unsatisfactory, as is shown by Songye *ku-mû-ntu* ‘chez somebody’. On the other hand, it seems logical, though not necessary, that a noun that is not integrated into the gender system cannot simply receive a locative gender prefix.

Gleason (1959: 30) argues that the nouns of Bantu languages are divided between class 1a/2a nouns and the others. Both systematically differ in their behaviour in possessive constructions (or more precisely, both require different constructions for the expression of possession). “There are quite generally

differences from the 'normal' pattern both when the 1a noun is possessor and when it is possessed" (Gleason 1959: 31). Interestingly, these differences often involve a locative element.

Another difference is signalled by Welmers (1973) with respect to identificational utterances in Shona. In this South African Bantu language, a noun meaning 'x' can be turned into an utterance meaning 'it is x' by replacing the initial low tone of the noun by a high tone, or by prefixing *í-* to the noun.²³ "With class 1a nouns and [...] independent pronoun forms, however, a morpheme /ndí/ is used as a prefix for identification" (Welmers 1973: 323). The identical behaviour of class 1a nouns and pronouns is interesting because pronouns are purely referential (they do not refer via a concept).

These facts are supportive of an analysis that treats "class 1a" nouns as radically different from the others, not as a subgender that only distinguishes itself by the absence of an overt prefix. As has been said, the list is non-exhaustive and many phenomena are still in need of explanation.

4.4. *Agreement pattern I in comparative perspective*

This section explains why agreement pattern I was selected for marking agreement with genderless nouns in Eton. I will first discuss the functions of agreement pattern I in Eton and some other Bantu languages, and then turn to some of its formal characteristics.

4.4.1. *The semantics of agreement pattern I.* We saw that nouns with animate reference trigger agreement pattern I in KiSwahili, also if they do not belong to gender 1. The explanation is that this agreement pattern has semantic values of its own, viz., [+animate] (or [+human], according to the language) and [–plural]. Independent evidence from semantic agreement and so-called gender resolution in other Bantu languages supported this analysis. The nouns that form the prototypical core of the genderless class in Eton have in common that they are not in need of referential disambiguation. Therefore, it may be necessary to add a third possible function that agreement pattern I can fulfil in the Bantu languages to the two we already know:

- (24) Agreement pattern I can mark agreement with controllers that:
- (i) belong to gender 1;
 - (ii) have human (or animate) reference;
 - (iii) are not in need of referential disambiguation.²⁴

23. I thank Dmitry Idiatov for pointing this out to me. This initial morpheme might be an augment.

24. These are also the controllers that typically lack a stage II article in languages that have such an article. "These non-articulated uses derive from the two ends of the determination spectrum. They may lack the article because they are automatically definite [...]. On the other

There is independent evidence for this. Consider the following examples involving presentative demonstratives in Eton. The 1st and 2nd person controllers in (25) trigger a demonstrative of pattern I (plural II). Obviously these personal pronouns are not specified for gender. Agreement pattern I is not selected because of the human reference of the controllers either, as the examples in (26) illustrate. The 3rd person controllers of genders 3 and 9 in (26) strictly agree in gender with the demonstrative, although they have human reference. Unique reference (at discourse level) provides an explanation for the choice of agreement pattern I in the examples in (25).

- (25) a. *mà pɔ́*
I I.this
'Here I am.'
- b. *wò pɔ́*
you I.this
'Here you (SG) are.'
- c. *bî bá*
we II-this
'Here we are.'
- d. *mîn bá*
you II-this
'Here you (PL) are.'
- (26) a. *ɲm-ɲméɲméb vî*
3-thief III.this
'Here is the thief.'
- b. *w-ô ví*
3-he III.this
'Here he is.'²⁵
- c. *kál jî*
[9].sister IX.this
'Here's his sister.'
- d. *y-ô jí*
9-she IX.this
'Here she is.'

hand the unarticulated form often survives in various generic uses [...]" (Greenberg 1981: 106). I did not find an existing term that covers these ends of the determination spectrum. The description that probably suits them best is "controllers that are not in need of referential disambiguation". The cut-off points of this category on the scale of determination differ from language to language. In Eton, for instance, generic controllers do not trigger agreement pattern I.

25. Note that *jî pɔ́* (1.he I.this) is also possible here. In this case, the anaphoric pronoun shows semantic agreement (with the feature human) with its antecedent and the demonstrative agrees in gender with the pronominal controller.

The most convincing evidence that agreement pattern I is sometimes used to mark agreement with controllers that are not in need of referential disambiguation in the Bantu languages comes from LoMongo (Democratic Republic of Congo). Contrary to Eton, proper names in LoMongo belong to the same gender as the noun from which they are derived. Only deictic kinship terms and the question word *ná* ‘who, what’ are genderless (gender 9/2a in the description of Hulstaert 1965: 142). Moreover, LoMongo does not select agreement pattern I for concord with genderless controllers, but pattern IX.²⁶ This choice is not surprising. We saw that IX is the default pattern in some Bantu languages, together with or instead of VII. The plural of genderless nouns is marked by *baa-*, which Hulstaert calls the gender 2a prefix. This is the only prefix in the LoMongo language that has a long vowel, and it seems that it is better analysed as a clitic, or even an independent word. “Gender 2a” nouns trigger agreement pattern II. Just as the alleged gender 2a prefix in some other Bantu languages this *baa(-)* can be put in front of any noun in order to express associativity: *baa Byeka* ‘Byeka and his family/pupils/followers ...’, *baa méśá* ‘tables and similar things; tables, for instance’ (Hulstaert 1965: 145).

Moreover, LoMongo has a set of rather complicated rules for “absence of agreement”, in Hulstaert’s (1966: 7) terms. By this, Hulstaert means that a noun that does not belong to gender 1 triggers pattern I agreement. “Absence of agreement” is most likely to occur on verbs. On nominal modifiers it only occurs with connectives and relative clauses. One type of absence of agreement is already familiar from the discussion of KiSwahili: nouns with human referents have semantic agreement in LoMongo. A difference between LoMongo and KiSwahili is that in LoMongo, there is semantic agreement only on verbal and pronominal targets, which is in line with Corbett’s agreement hierarchy. On modifiers and non-verbal predicates involving a copula, gender agreement prevails (Hulstaert 1966: 10–15). However, not all types of “absence of agreement” can be explained in terms of human reference. Proper names always trigger a pattern I subject prefix, not only when they are person names (27).

- (27) *I-binja á-kola ba-nto ntúkwífé*
 19-name I-embark 2-people twenty
 ‘The Ibinja (a boat) can embark twenty passengers.’ (Hulstaert 1966: 21)

26. Interestingly, proper names never belong to gender 1 (Hulstaert 1965: 52, 55). If they are derived from a gender 1 common noun, they shift to gender 3. Note that genders 1 and 3 have the same nominal prefix, but different agreement patterns in LoMongo.

When proper names are head of a connective construction,²⁷ they agree in gender with the connective morpheme, as expected (28a). But when the connective is non-restrictive, i.e., when it is not needed to retrieve the referent of the head word, and only gives additional information, the connective morpheme has a prefix of pattern I (28b).

- (28) a. *I-lumbé y-ă bo-kúnji*
 19-(name) XIX-CON 1-harpist
 'Ilumbe the harp player (not another person called Ilumbe)'
 b. *I-lumbé ō-a bo-kúnji*
 19-(name) I-CON 1-harpist
 'Ilumbe, the harp player' (Hulstaert 1966: 7)

The same agreement rules exist in relative clauses, with the difference that the antecedent does not have to be a proper name.

- (29) a. *ńbánga mbúla ě-řita tóma*
 1SG.fear [9].rain IX-damage things
 'I fear the rain that damages things (not inoffensive types of rain).'
 b. *ńbánga mbúla ō-řita tóma*
 I.fear [9].rain I-damage things
 'I fear the rain, which damages things.' (Hulstaert 1966: 8)

Most interestingly, common nouns in generic use trigger agreement pattern I on the verb (pattern II in the plural).

- (30) a. *mpulú é-tóngá júmbu*
 [9].bird IX-build nest
 'The bird is building a nest.'
 b. *mpulú á-tóngá júmbu*
 [9].bird I-build nest
 'Birds build nests (general truth).' (Hulstaert 1966: 17)

In all these cases, the use of agreement pattern I signals that the controller is not in need of referential disambiguation. This also makes the use of agreement pattern I for enforced agreement in ChiChewa less perplexing (see example (20) in Section 3.3).

27. A connective construction is a construction comparable to genitive constructions in Indo-European languages. It links two nominals to each other by means of a relational morpheme that agrees with the first noun. The nature of the relation expressed by the connective morpheme depends highly on the semantics of the elements which are linked to each other.

Table 4. *Proto-Bantu agreement markers (abbreviated from Meeussen 1967: 97)*

Classes	NP	PP	VP	Infix ^a
1	<i>mu</i>	<i>ju</i>	<i>u, a</i>	<i>mu</i>
2	<i>ba</i>	<i>ba</i>	<i>ba</i>	<i>ba</i>
3	<i>mu</i>	<i>gu</i>	<i>gu</i>	<i>gu</i>
4	<i>mi</i>	<i>gi</i>	<i>gi</i>	<i>gi</i>
5	—	<i>di</i>	<i>di</i>	<i>di</i>
6	<i>ma</i>	<i>ga</i>	<i>ga</i>	<i>ga</i>
7	<i>ki</i>	<i>ki</i>	<i>ki</i>	<i>ki</i>
8	<i>bǐ</i>	<i>bǐ</i>	<i>bǐ</i>	<i>bǐ</i>
9	<i>n</i>	<i>ji</i>	<i>ji</i>	<i>ji</i>
10	<i>n</i>	<i>jǐ</i>	<i>jǐ</i>	<i>jǐ</i>
11	<i>du</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>du</i>	<i>du</i>
12	<i>ka</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>ka</i>
13	<i>tu</i>	<i>tu</i>	<i>tu</i>	<i>tu</i>

a The term “infix” refers to the marker of object agreement, which comes after all other verbal prefixes.

4.4.2. *Formal peculiarities of agreement pattern I.* Agreement in the Bantu languages is highly alliterative, i.e., the same marker is used for the controller and for different agreement targets. Due to sound changes, morphological reinterpretations, and other diachronic processes, the alliterative pattern has become less regular in some places, most notably in the agreement patterns the marker of which contains or contained a nasal consonant (patterns I, III, IV, VI, IX, and X). Pattern I, however, often presents irregularities that cannot be traced back to sound changes, particularly on targets at the right hand side of the agreement hierarchy. Compare the agreement markers of Proto-Bantu in Table 4 with those of Eton in Table 1.

The nominal prefix of genders 1 and 3 was *mu-* in Proto-Bantu and evolved to a homorganic syllabic nasal in Eton. The vowel *u-* of agreement prefix III in Eton is the regular reflex of the Proto-Bantu prefixes, which all had a vowel /o/ (*u* in Meeussen’s notation). In the connective this vowel was dropped, leaving only a floating high tone. In agreement pattern I the situation is more complicated. In Eton the verbal prefix and the connective have *a-*, and the stem of the demonstrative is *ɔ* instead of *u*. In Proto-Bantu, agreement pattern I is the only one for which two formally unrelated verbal prefixes have to be reconstructed.

The formal incoherence of agreement pattern I is even stronger in the pronouns. Table 5 gives the forms of the substitutive and the anaphoric modifier in Eton. These pronouns are regularly formed by means of a fixed stem preceded by the pronominal prefix, except in agreement pattern I, where their form is en-

Table 5. *Some Eton pronouns*

	Substitutive	Anaphoric modifier
I	<i>ɲɛ</i>	<i>ì-tè</i>
II	<i>b-ʒ</i>	<i>bé-tè</i>
III	<i>w-ʒ</i>	<i>ú-tè</i>
IV	<i>my-ʒ</i>	<i>mí-tè</i>
V	<i>d-ʒ</i>	<i>é-tè</i>
VI	<i>m-ʒ</i>	<i>mé-tè</i>
VII	<i>y-ʒ</i>	<i>í-tè</i>
VIII	<i>by-ʒ</i>	<i>bí-tè</i>
IX	<i>y-ð</i>	<i>ì-tè</i>
X	<i>y-ʒ</i>	<i>í-tè</i>

Table 6. *Proto-Bantu subject pronouns (Meeussen 1967: 105)*

<i>ì-n-e</i>	'I, me'	<i>u-e</i>	'you (SG)'	cl. 1 <i>u-é</i>
<i>ì-cú-e</i>	'we, us'	<i>ì-ɲú-e</i>	'you (PL)'	cl. 2 <i>bá-o</i>
				cl. 3 <i>gú-o</i>
				etc. (viz. <i>PP-o</i>)
				cl. 16 <i>pá-o</i> (<i>póo</i>)
				cl. 17 <i>kú-o</i> (<i>kóo</i>)
				cl. 18 <i>mú-o</i> (<i>móo</i>)

tirely unpredictable. Again, this irregularity of agreement pattern I goes back to Proto-Bantu, as is illustrated by Meeussen's reconstruction of the substitutes reproduced in Table 6. Whereas all other agreement patterns have the stem *-o* preceded by the pronominal prefix, pattern I presents a stem that is also found in the forms of the 1st and 2nd person.

The formal incoherence of agreement pattern I suggests that the original pattern of gender 1 agreement was intruded by other agreement forms. The origin of these forms can only be established by means of a thorough comparative study. One hypothesis that is worth pursuing is that the foreign, historically non-alliterative forms in agreement pattern I are reflexes of agreement forms that existed before the rise of the Bantu gender system. This can also lead to an explanation of why agreement pattern I can be used to mark agreement with controllers that have no gender specification and/or that are not in need of referential disambiguation.

4.5. *Typological significance*

It is likely that controllers that are not in need of referential disambiguation behave differently from the other controllers in many languages with nominal

classification. In the Amazonian language Miraña, for instance, some nouns denote non-individuated concepts or generic terms for biological species when used without a class marker (Grinevald & Seifart 2004: 265). Unfortunately, this subject has received little attention. Proper names, for instance, do not figure in the index of any of the recent major works on gender and classifiers that I consulted (e.g., Aikhenvald 2000). A typological analysis might uncover resemblances between different kinds of classifier system and contribute to a better understanding of the functions and origins of nominal classification.

5. Conclusion

Bantu linguistics has a great comparative tradition that strongly influences the description of individual languages, sometimes to the detriment of a careful synchronic analysis. When class 1a was recognised as a separate category in comparative Bantu studies, it was treated as a subgender of gender 1. The two main reasons for this are their identical concord and some semantic similarities. This analysis has been reproduced in most descriptions of contemporary Bantu languages. Consequently, fundamental differences between the so-called class 1a and the “other” genders have been overlooked. Moreover, partly due to a lack of attention for proper names, the semantic characterisation of the core of class 1a has never gone beyond the relatively irrelevant observation that class 1a nouns have human referents. Nouns with human referents can be found in all genders in Eton, as in many other Bantu languages. Inherent determination is a much more salient semantic characteristic of class 1a nouns in Eton, to the extent that ALL nouns with inherent determination are automatically assigned to class 1a. I have argued that the exceptional behaviour of these nouns results from the fact that they are not specified for gender. This conclusion cannot be extended to other Bantu languages without careful analysis of gender and agreement in these languages. Such an analysis must take into account questions of gender assignment based on non-formal criteria as well as the multiple functions of agreement patterns. Furthermore, where class 1a nouns display exceptional morphosyntactic behaviour this must be explained.

The most important conclusion for a general theory of gender and agreement is that some nouns can be outside of the gender system in gender languages. Gender systems may have emerged out of a need to provide referential disambiguation on anaphoric markers. Therefore, it is no surprise that the nouns that remained outside of the system are those that are not in need of referential disambiguation, e.g., because their reference is deictically restricted. Very often agreement targets have to agree even if there is no agreement controller or if the controller is not specified for gender. Languages can recuperate existing agreement patterns for this task, also when these agreement patterns usually mark gender agreement. It is therefore essential that agreement patterns be de-

scribed in their own right and not only as the formal manifestation of gender distinctions in the lexicon.

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Abbreviations: AU augment; CON connective; COP copula; NEUT neuter; OBJ object; PAS passive; PL plural; PRES present; PST past; SG singular; SUB substitutive; SUBJ subject.

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