

Semantic Classification and Chichewa Derived Nouns

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1. Introduction

Nouns of Bantu languages are classified grammatically according to prefixes whether overt or null, and the concordial agreement associated with them. It has been observed that noun classes can also be semantically classified. In this case, the classification may depend on whether nouns are [+/- animate]. This entails that all animate nouns with similar features should belong to classes 1/2. Classes 1/2 are also characterised by the prefixes /mu-/ and its variants /m-/ , /mw-/ or null /ø-/ in the singular and /a-/ in the plural, yet there are other nouns with the prefix /mu-/ that do not belong to these classes. Although it is believed that nouns in classes 1/2 are recognized by the semantic feature [+animate], and prefix /mu-/ or its variants, there are other nouns with the prefix /na-/ , or /ka-/ which belong to classes 1/2. In this paper, I will demonstrate why nouns with features not meant for classes 1/2 can belong to classes 1/2. The paper is divided into three sections: section 1, the introduction, section 2.0 deals with *interalia*, noun derivation, finally, section 3.0 explores semantic reclassification of nouns. In order to account for the semantic classification, Morris' (1980/84) will be exploited. The paper restricts itself to classes 1/2, classes which are generally regarded as being semantically classified.

2. Class 1 Nouns with /mu-/ or null Prefixes

This class typically contains nouns which refer to human beings and animals. Whether the noun is a human being or not, does not matter so long as it is [+animate]. Additionally, nouns are in class 1 because they have the prefix /mu-/ or its variants /m-/ , /mw-/ or null /ø-/.

(1)	Mu- Prefix		Zero Prefix	
	m-lendo	'visitor'	ø- galu	'dog'
	m-phunzitsi	'teacher'	ø-fisi	'hyena'
	m-lenje	'hunter'	ø-bakha	'duck'
	m-bale	'relative'	ø- nyani	'monkey'
	mu-nthu	'person'	ø-bulu	'donkey'
	mw-ana	'child'	ø-kambuku	'leopard'

2.1 Problems in Characterizing Classes

Although it is claimed that typical class 1 nouns are recognized by /mu-/ or its variants /m-/ , /mw-/ , there are other nouns with these prefixes but which do not belong to this class.

2.1.1 Other Nouns with /mu-/ Prefix

There are other nouns with the same prefix /mu-/ but are not in class 1. These nouns belong to class 3. For instance:

(2)	mtolo	‘bundle of things’	mtsutso	‘debate’
	mtengo	‘tree’	mphika	‘clay-pot’ (for cooking)
	mkuwo	‘shout/loud cry’	mitsitso	‘slope’
	mtsuko	‘clay- pot’ (for storing water)	mwendo	‘leg’
	mulu	‘heap’	mwezi	‘month’
	munda	‘garden’	mwala	‘stone’

Semantically, also, the nouns in (2). cannot belong to class 1 because they have the feature [– animate]. Thus /*mu-*/ prefix cannot be used as the sole indicator for class 1 nouns.

2.1.2 Other Class 1 Nouns without /*mu-*/ Prefix.

Morphologically a noun with neither /*mu-*/ nor zero prefixes should not belong to class 1 as the mnemonic term *Mu-A* class suggests. But there are other nouns with prefixes /*ka-*/ and /*na-*/ which belong to class 1, for example:

(3)	kadziwotche	‘moth’
	kabwerekwere	‘jailbird’
	kasoze	‘spy’
	nankafumbwe	‘weevil’
	napweri	‘albino’
	namalira	‘bereaved person’
	nakubala	‘parent’

These nouns are derivatives i.e. they are derived from verbal roots. Below is a more detailed list of nouns and verbs from which they derive.

(4)	Verbs	Derived Nouns		
	wotcha	‘burn’	kadziwotche	‘moth’
	soza	‘spy’	kasoze	‘spy’
	bwera	‘come’	kabwerekwere	‘jailbird’
	fumbwa	‘weevil’	nankafumbwe	‘weevil’
	pwera	‘reddden’	napweri	‘albino’
	lira	‘cry/weep’	namalira	‘bereaved person’
	bala	‘bear’	nakubala	‘parent’
	lira	‘cry/weep’	nakulira	‘bereaved person’
	mata	‘stick’	nalimata	‘small lizard’
	londola	‘follow’	namlondola	‘small stick’
	tuluka	‘get out’	namtuluka	‘newly initiated person’
	fa	‘die’	nafadala	‘insect that pretends to die’
	banthira	‘jump’	kabanthira	‘insect that jumps’
	bulika	‘get out with force’	kabulikire	‘type of mouse’
	bwata	‘boil’	kabwata	‘chicken with short legs’
	chenjera	‘be clever’	kachenjede	‘degree holder/clever person’
	deruka	‘appear in flash’	kaderuka	‘very mobile person’
	dya	‘eat’	kadyansonga	‘giraffe’
	meta	‘cut hair’	kadzimete	‘chicken with no hair on neck’
	papalala	‘thin’	kampapalala	‘very slim person’

The fact that they are derived nouns is not the reason why the nouns belong to class 1. Rather they belong to class 1 because they have a feature [+ animate]. For example, *kadziwotche*, *nankafumbwe*, *kadzimete*, *kadyansonga*, *kampalala* etc. refer to either insects, animals or to persons. This classification adopts Morris' folk classification. Morris claims that Chichewa nouns are classified according to the concept of *moyo*, animacy. He states that all Chichewa nouns are classified into two categories namely; *chopuma* [+life] and *chosapuma* [-life]. The *chopuma* category is also divided into *munthu* (human) and *nyama* (animal) categories. The *nyama* animal basic category has subordinate categories ranging from *nyama* (edible or unharmed animal) to *chirombo* (inedible or harmful animal). This depends on whether native speakers of Chichewa consider them useful or useless. Insects belong to either of them i.e. the *nyama* or *chirombo* categories, depending on how the native speakers view them. If the insects are useful then they would belong to *nyama*. If useless or destructive as the case is of *nankafumbwe* 'weevil' it belongs to *chirombo*. The *munthu* category is also divided into subcategories of *mwamuna* (male) *mkazi* (female) and *chirombo* (harmful or useless). A *kasoze* 'spy' is always held in suspicion and is considered a negative force in society since s/he may bring enmity between people. A *kabwerekwere* 'jailbird' is destructive and not wanted in a community. Thus both *kasoze* and *kabwerekwere* would belong to *chirombo* category. Malinowski (1946), cited by Morris (1984), claims that native speakers think through the stomach because they classify things according to their utilitarian significance. Thus, native speakers are able to categorise according to edibility/inedibility, usefulness/uselessness of any object. Thus, native speakers' classification is determined by their culture i.e. according to their beliefs/environment, what they eat and what they use. If utility is a major factor in folk categorization, then man's response to environment is correlated to perception and if perception changes then categorisation changes too. For example, if one culture allows people to eat lion's meat, then lion would not be in the category of *chirombo* as the case is among the Chewa.

Additionally, there is a transparency of meaning between most verbs and derived nouns and regularity of morphology providing substantial reasons as to why those nouns derive from those particular verbs.

However, one cannot conclude that all nouns with prefix /ka-/ or /na-/ are animate. There are other nouns which have these same prefixes, /ka-/ or /na-/, that belong to class 1 but which do not have the feature [+ animate]. For example:

(5)	tema	'cut'	katemo	'sickle'
	tuta	'pick'	katutu	'ridge for planting crops'
	mwa	'drink'	kamwachale	'very big clay pot'
	limba	'harden'	kalimba	'musical instrument on flat hard wood'
	lasa	'pierce'	kalasawene	'shrub with thorns'
	chesa	'brew'	kachesa	'clay pot (for keeping brewed beer)'
	budula	'trim'	kabudula	'short'
	saka	'hunt'	nakasaka	'spear with hooks'
	kamba	'say/tell'	nakambe	'musical instrument'
	gona	'sleep'	namgoneka	'creep'
	wisika	'be fresh'	nankawisi	'green maize'
	sema	'shape'	kasemasema	'small axe'
	tserenga	'mould'	natsereanga	'piece of clay- pot'

kulunga	'wrap'	nankulunga	'basket' (woven)
loza	'point'	kalozera	'contour ridge'
da	'blacken or make dirt'	kadamsana	'eclipse of the sun'

These nouns are inanimate and this presents a problem for the argument that class 1 nouns have the feature [+ animate] as their basis. Obviously this requires an explanation. It would appear that these nouns are in class 1 because they are personified. It seems that the prefixes /ka-/ and /na-/ are used to personify inanimate objects. However, there are other nouns which are not personified in the same way, for example the following:

- (6)
- | | |
|--------|---|
| nsansi | 'musical instrument stringed on flat wood' |
| zeze | 'tradition stringed musical instrument' |
| kwenga | 'traditional drum for announcing messages' |
| gubu | 'traditional gourd-like musical instrument' |
| kwenje | 'traditional drum for announcing the death of a chief or impending war' |

Why should these purely musical instruments be in class 1? To answer this question, it is important to consider the traditional role of these instruments. For instance, *kwenga* is a drum used to broadcast different types of messages in the village including death. As such it plays the role of a town-crier. It may be assumed that some of these instruments imitate the sound of humans / animals hence acquiring animate connotations. The presence of these nouns in class 1, therefore, cannot be merely accidental. It is this personification that makes them belong to class 1. This is amply shown by the demonstrative prefixes that they take. For example:

- (7)
- | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| munthu uyu | 'this person' |
| galu uyu | 'this dog' |
| nakubala uyu | 'this parent' |
| kalozera uyu | 'this contour ridge' |
| kadziwotche uyu | 'this moth' |
| kwenga uyu | 'this traditional drum' |

Thus, all the nouns above take the same demonstrative *uyu* 'this one'. These nouns are mentioned and used as if they all refer to human beings. Thus, although they are inanimate, they are allocated to class 1 because of their personification. This phenomenon has also been observed in Dyrbal. Dixon (1972), for example, observed that birds in Dyrbal are in the same class as women because they are regarded as dead female human beings and so birds and women, both belong to his class II.

3. The Semantic Reclassification of Class 1 Nouns

As explained above, class 1 nouns are grammatically supposed to have prefix /mu-/ or its variants, or zero prefix. It has also been shown that there are some other nouns which do not have those features but have /ka-/ and /na-/ instead. However, among the zero prefix nouns, there are other nouns which are reclassified. They are reclassified from class 1 into class 5. For example;

(8)	Class 1		Class 5	
	tambala	‘cock’	tambala	‘coin’ (Malawi currency)
	fulu	‘tortoise’	fulu	‘big tall handleless gourd’ (for water)
	gompho	‘underground insect’	gompho	‘extremely short trousers’
	godi	‘porcupine’	god	‘hole of board game’
	bulu	‘donkey’	bulu	‘uncooked ball’ (of nsima)
	gwala	‘lazy person’	gwala	‘bush route’
	guni	‘wild dog’	guni	‘clay pot with two necks’
	khwangwala	‘crow’	khwangwala	‘bushy route’
	likumba	‘crooked person’	likumba	‘wall’
	lumbe	‘type of bird’	lumbe	‘slice of bamboo’ (for weaving baskets)
	phambo	‘greedy person’	phambo	‘whip’
	leza	‘witch’	leza	‘razor’

These words have the same spelling and pronunciation (i.e. also tone) but belong to different classes. Besides, morphologically, whether they are in class 1 or 5 they both have a zero prefix. Those in class 1 have their plurals in class 2 with prefix /a-/ while those in class 5 have their plurals in class 6 with prefix /ma-/. This is illustrated (9) below using the examples in (8).

(9)	Class 1		Class 5	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
	tambala	a-tambala	tambala	ma-tambala
	fulu	a-fulu	fulu	ma-fulu
	gompho	a-gompho	gompho	ma-gompho
	godi	a-godi	godi	ma-godi
	bulu	a-bulu	bulu	ma-bulu
	gwala	a-gwala	gwala	ma-gwala
	guni	a-guni	guni	ma-guni
	khwangwala	a-khwangwala	khwangwala	ma-khwangwala
	likumba	a-likumba	likumba	ma-likumba
	lumbe	a-lumbe	lumbe	ma-lumbe
	phambo	a-phambo	phambo	ma-phambo
	leza	a-leza	leza	ma-leza

When the nouns are in class 1 they are animate. But when they reclassify themselves to class 5, they become inanimate and as such belong to class 5, a class of non-living things. The reclassification of the nouns seems to be triggered by the change in the meaning of the words. Thus with Bantu languages like Chichewa, there is a possibility of nouns reclassifying themselves depending on the change of the semantics of the word.

3.1 Class 2 Nouns

Morphologically nouns in class 2 are recognized by the prefix /a-/ regardless of whether they refer to inanimate or animate objects, derived or not. None-the-less, there is a difference morphologically between the derived nouns with prefixes /ka-/

and /na-/, and others. Class 1 nouns with prefix /mu-/ when they pluralise, drop the /mu-/ and take /a-/ as a primary prefix, for instance:

(10)	Singular		Plural	
	mu-nthu	‘person’	a-nthu	‘persons’
	m-bale	‘relative’	a-bale	‘relatives’
	m-phunzitsi	‘teacher’	a-phunzitsi	‘teachers’
	m-lendo	‘visitor’	a-lendo	‘visitors’
	m-lenje	‘hunter’	a-lenje	‘hunters’

However, those with /ka-/ and /na-/ take /a-/ as a primary prefix in the plural and retain the /ka-/ and /na-/ as secondary prefixes. For example;

(11)	Singular		Plural	
	ka-soze	‘spy’	a-ka-soze	‘spies’
	ka-lozera	‘contour ridge’	a-ka-lozera	‘contour ridges’
	na-malira	‘bereaved person’	a-na-malira	‘bereaved persons’
	na-nkawisi	‘green maize’	a-na-nkawisi	‘green maize’

A question arises whether all nouns of class 1 belong to that class because they all have plural /a-/ in class 2. The problem here is that grammatical classification treats the classes as independent of each other i.e. class 2 being independent of class 1. It does not recognize the fact that *munthu/anthu*, *mlendo/alendo*, *nyani/anyani* are semantically related.

All in all, for a noun to belong to class 1 the prefix /mu-/ and the concordial agreement prefixes are not enough as a criteria, the concept of animacy also plays a significant role.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion then, it would appear that from the very fact that the same semantic principles apply across the classes, the view has emerged that linguistic classification overtly categorises the world in terms of various types of interactions that human beings carry out with objects of their environment. These interactions could be social, physical or functional interactions as noted in this paper. In this paper, I have demonstrated, for the first time, that noun classes in Chichewa can, and are best accounted for by exploiting folk categorisation. In this way, a clearer picture of the nature of categorisation in human cognition emerges. All in all, folk categorization seems to depend upon the interest and purpose of that object or noun being categorized by native speakers. It demonstrates the native speaker’s response to his/her environment (Allan 1977). Folk categorization is not a matter of identifying essences but simply a reflection of social convenience and necessities. Different necessities produce different categorizations, as Hayakawa (1984:182) argues. For example, if hides are used for making shoes, then the manufacturer of shoes would categorise cattle differently from a butcher. From the discussion above semantic classification seems to be prior to the grammatical one because native speakers do categorise according to utility, environment etc. and linguists come in and classify the same nouns into classes. Thus, linguists just translate what is already presented by native speakers.

Appendix

Chichewa Noun Classes and their Concordial Agreement Prefixes (Mchombo and Bresnan 1987).

Class	Example	Gloss	SM	OM
1, 1a	mjenje	hunter	a-, u-	-mu-
2	alenje	hunters	a-	-wa-
3	mkango	lion	u-	-u-
4	mikango	lions	i-	-i-
5	phiri	mountain	li-	-li-
6	mapiri	mountains	a-	-a-
7	chipewa	hat	chi-	-chi-
8	zipewa	hats	zi-	-zi-
9	njuchi	bee	i-	-i-
10	njuchi	bees	zi-	-zi-
12	kamwana	small child	ka-	-ka-
13	tiana	small children	ti-	-ti-
14	ulalo	bridge	u-	-u-
6	maulalo	bridges	a-	-a-
15	kuimba	to sing/singing	ku-	-k-
16	pamsika	at the market	pa-	-pa-
17	kumudzi	to the village	ku-	-ku-
18	mnyumba	in the house	mu-	-mu-

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