The Phenomenon of Noun Class Systems: The Case of Bàtɔnū

Issa O. Sanusi

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1.0   Introduction

The unique systematic pattern of the nominal morphology of a noun class language is enough to attract the attention of a professional linguist in his morphemic analysis of such a language. Linguists working on African languages have observed the similarities and differences among various African languages that display the phenomenon of noun class systems, most especially the systems of noun-class marking and the various grammatical functions of such noun-class markers. Consequently, the need to make comparison among such noun class languages becomes professionally relevant taking this into cognizance, Welmers (1973: 185) expresses the view that:

> ...the similarities among the various noun class
> systems found in Africa today, apart from the
> specific morphemes involved, are so noteworthy,
> and the differences so interesting, that one is
> tempted to ask whether we cannot at least
> determine what the Proto-Niger-Kordofanian noun
> class system was like.

Thus, the present paper attempts (o compare and contrast the noun class system in Bat3nu with those of other functional noun class languages like
Kiswahili, Auga, and Igede.

1.1   Defining a Noun Class Language

A noun class language can be generally defined as a language in which nouns are systematically grouped into a number of semantically based classes, with each of the classes having its own distinct class marker. According to Trauth and Kazzazi (1996: 332),

> Languages with noun classes (such as Bantu, West
> Atlantic), with up to twenty classes are often
> grouped in singular/plural pairs often the
> classification is more or less semantically
> motivated, with the distinction between animate

and inanimate playing a major role.

Similarly, while discussing African languages, with functional noun class systems, Alexandra (1972: 39) observes that:

> The system of noun classes, characteristic of a large
>
> proportion of African languages, reaches its
>
> maximum development in the Bantu languages.

Myachina (1981:2) also confirms that, "A special peculiarity of the Bantu languages is their system of noun classes". For example, -within the Kiswahili noun class system we have the class of objects, (he class of human beings. (lie class of animals, the class of trees, and so on (see Welmeis 1973 Myachma 1981, and Carstens 1991).

It is also observable that in many noun class languages like Kiswahili. noun-class markers operate a distinct pattern of agreement on concord with the nouns and other grammatical constituents with which such noun-class markers co-occur, within a given construction.

1.2   Types of Noun Class System

Following Welmers' (1973) analysis of the various noun class systems among African languages, we can distinguish between functional and vestigial/remnant noun class systems. According to Welmers (1973:   184), Vestigial Noun Class languages are languages that have lost, some of the more complex characteristics of a system more like that of Bantu, and should rather be characterized as having "vestigial" or "decadent" noun class system.

It should be noted that some linguists have worked on certain Nigerian languages with apparent vestiges of an earlier noun class system. For example, Elugbe (1976) extensively discusses (he Noun Class Vestiges in Degema in Delta Edo language, spoken in the Rivers Slate of Nigeria.

Since our focus in the present paper is to compare and contrast the functional noun class system in Batonu with those of oilier languages, we shall therefore limit our discussions to languages with such functional noun class

systems.

1.3   Features, of Functional Noun Class Systems

Languages with functional noun class systems normally have their nouns co-occurring with regular and distinct noun-class markers, m such a way that native speakers are always conscious of the particular class marker that a particular noun selects. In other words, in any functional noun lass language. noun class markers are always morphologically distinct and never disappearing.

For example, existing literature on Bantu languages reveals that Kiswahili is one of the most popular Bantu languages with functional noun class system. The Kiswahili noun class system shows a distinctive pattern of agreement borne by noun modifiers, auxiliaries, as well as predicates, which are in relevant systematic relations to both (he head nouns and (lie corresponding noun-class markers. While discussing the issue of grammatical concord as, a peculiar feature of many Bantu languages. Outline (1970: 47) makes the following remarks:

> As is widely known, in Bantu languages grammatical concord is operated by means of prefix agreement, a fact which is moreover one of the criteria used to determine whether or not a given language is to be accepted as Bantu.

As empirical evidence, Carstens (1991:3) presents a list of representative examples of Kiswahili noun classes as in (I):

(1)   **Class prefixes:**

Classs	Example	Gloss
1	m-tu	person

2	wa - tu	people
3	m - ti	tee
4	mi ti	trees
5	gari	car
6	ma - gari	ears
7	ki - atu	shoe
8,	vi - atu	shoes
9	n yumba	house
10	n yumba	houses
11	u bao	board
14	u - kweli	truth
15	ku - soma	to read
16	mahab	specific place
17	"	general place
18	"	inside place

Welmers (.1973: 162) remarks that the Bantu noun classes must be distinguished and defined not simply by noun prefixes, but in addition by morphemes such as the subject pronoun prefixes which stand in agreement or "concord" with noun prefixes. As evident from

empirical data from Kiswahili (sec Carstens 1991: 3-4), concordial agreement between the noun - class markers and their head nouns, as well as noun qualifiers can be exemplified as in (2):

(2) a. m toto   huyu   wangu   in zuri   a - me - anguka
         1 child 1 this   1 my   I good   1 agr - perf-fall
         ' This my good child has fallen down'.

   b. wa toto.   hawa   wangu   wa zuri   wa - me - anguka
         2 child   2 this   2 my   2 good   2 agr - perf- fall
         'These my .good children have fallen down'.

   c. m ti   huu   wangu   in zuri   u - me - anguka.
         3 tree   3this   3 my   3 good   3 agr   perf- fall
         " This my good tree has fallen down'.

   d. mi ti   hii   yangu   m zuri   i - me - anguka.
         4 tree   4 this   4 my   4 good   4 agr - perf- fall
         'These   my   good trees   have   fallen down'.

   e. yai   hili   langu   zuri   li - me   anguka.
         5 egg   5 this   5my   5 good 5 agr -perf   fail
         'This   my   .good   egg   has   fallen down'.

   f. ma yai   haya   yangu   ma zuri   ya me - anguka.
         6 egg   6 tins   6 my   6 good   6agr- perf fall
         'These   my   good eggs   have   fallen   down'.
         (Adapted from Carstens (1991:3-4))

     Kabuya (1999: 94-7) also presents copious empirical data from a dialect of Kiswahili called - 'Lubumbashi Swahili' (which is otherwise referred to as Congo Copperfield Swahili), in which there is a clear evidence of concordial agreement in grammatical constructions.

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  c. m ti   huu   wangu   in zuri   u - me - anguka.

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    Similar to what obtains in Kiswahili (see (2) above), prefix noun - class markers in Auga exhibit concordial agreement with other grammatical constituents with which they co-occur within a given construction in the

language. This can be exemplified as in (5):

(5) a.   e u   ed   etiti   eha   e do   nol   e   welie

1 dog   I my I black   l one   I that I   sold lit   return

'My   dog   that   I   sold   has   returned[9]

b.   ohu   od   o riri,

2 tree   2 my   2 long

'My long   tree'

c.   u wcj   ud   u ri ri

3 hand 3 my 3 long

'My   long   hand.'

d. i hu   i   do   kol   i   hoi .

4 trees 4that   I   cut   4they dried

'The trees that I cut are dried.

e.   aa   a na   kol   a   ruo

5hands   5that   broke   5they healed-up.

Those broken hands   have   healed-up.

etc.

(b)   Evidence from lgede

Following Bennett and Sterk (1977) and Armstrong (1989) Willianison (1982: 103) classified Igede as an ldomoid language. The language is spoken in the Oju Local Government Area of Benue Slate, Nigeria Abiodun {1989-1) reports that:

Various scholars have revealed that the language is

a Noun Class language, where sets of nouns are

distinguished by means of affixes. Such affixes

further distinguish between singular and plural

nouns (Welmers, 1973).

Using a phonological approach Abiodun (1989: 55) postulates five noun

classes for Igede, based on the vowel harmony system in the language. According to him, Igede operates a vowel harmony system in winch vowels of the language are divided into two harmonic sets, viz:

Set I: [i, u, e, o]

Set II: [i, u, e, o. a]

The vowel harmony constraint in the language determines the use of prefixes that are used as noun-class markers. The five noun classes, as described in Abiodun (1989J, are stated in (6):

(6)	Classes	Class Marker		Prefixes 'I
	1	U-	:	u-/u-
	2	I-		i-/i
	3	E-		e-/ę-
	4	O-		o-/Ọ
	5a	a-		
	5b	a-		

In each of the noun classes, plural formation requires that the noun prefixes harmonize with the [ATR] feature of the root vowels as exemplified in (7):

(7)		Singular	Plural	Gloss
a	a ►e:	u - do	e - do	basket
		u - be	e - be	room
		u - kunogu	e-kunogu	bone

Similar to what obtains in Kiswahili (see (2) above), prefix noun - class markers in Auga exhibit concordial agreement with other grammatical constituents with which they co-occur within a given construction in the language. This can be exemplified as in (5):

(5) a.   e u   ed   etiti   eha   e do   nol   e   welie

         1 dog   I my   I black   l one   I that I   sold   lit   return

         'My   dog   that   I   sold   has   returned[9]

    b.   ohu   od   o riri,

        2 tree   2 my   2 long

        'My long   tree'

    c.   u wcj   ud u ri ri

        3 hand 3 my 3 long

        'My long   hand.'

    d.   i hu   i   do   kol   i   hoi .

        4 trees 4that   I   cut   4they dried

        'The trees that I cut are dried.

    e.   aa   a na   kol   a   ruo

        5hands   5that broke 5they healed-up.

         Those broken hands   have   healed-up.

                                         etc

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The major Batonu - speaking areas in Nigeria include Kosubosu, Okula, Gwanara, Yaslnkira, Ilesha, and Chikanda, while the major Batunu - speaking
areas in the Republic of Benin are located in the northern pail of the country. The areas include Parakou, Nikki, Kandi, and Natitingou.

2.1   The Batonu Noun Class System

Batonu, a non-Bantu language, is a noun class language Scholars who have worked on the language confirm that the language has seven prominent noun classes, where sets of nouns are distinguished by means of suffixes (see Welmers 1952, 1973, Togun 1982, Sanusi 1983. 2001. among others).

While noun-class languages like Kiswahili, Auga. and Igede display **prefixes** as noun-class .markers   whose   basic   grammatical   function   is   to distinguish between

singular and plural nouns; **suffixes** are employed in Batonu to mark noun classes. Each of the suffix noun-class markers in the language functions as a definite determiner meaning 'that'/ 'the', as exemplified in (S). (8)

8.	Class	Suffixes	Example	Gloss
	1	-wi	bii-we	the child
	2	-te	tire-te	the book
	3	-mE	nim-mE	the water
	4	-ge	boo-ge	the boat
	5	-ye	duma-ye	the horse
	6	-ni	gbere-ni	the corn/maize
	7	-si	yaka-si	the grass

With the exception of personal names and pronomials, nouns in Batonu" are structurally analyzable into stems and suffixes. Whenever nouns occur in citation form, they bear their noun Class Markers (hereafter, CM). Since the CM is a definite determiner, nouns with indefinite marker - ru, most especially in the ---te class, do delete such indefinite marker to allow the stem to take up the appropriate noun CM, as illustrated in (9):

(a) karu   /ka +   ru /⟶   [kaa   - te]
     a gourd   stem   Det   'gourd CM'
                                        'the gourd'

(b) kperu   /kpe +   ru /   [kpee - te]
     a stone   stem   Det   ⟶   'stone CM'
                                        'the stone'

(c) tireru   /tire +   ru /   [tire   - te]
     a book   stem   Det ⟶   'book CM'
                                        'the book

(d) bireru   /bire +   ru /   [bire   - te]

a basket   stem   Det   ⟶   'basket CM'

                                                    'the basket

The major Batonu - speaking areas in Nigeria include Kosubosu, Okula, Gwanara, Yasliikira, Ilesha, and Chikanda; while the "major Batonu – speaking areas in the Republic of Benin are located in the northern part of the country.' The areas include Parakou, Nikki, Kandi, and Natitingou.

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(8) Class   Suffixes   Example   Gloss

　　　1   -wi   bii - wi   the child

　　　2   -te   tire-te   the book

　　　3   -me   nim-mé   the water

　　　4   -ge   boo-ge   the goal

　　　5   -ye   duma-ye   the horse

　　　6   -ni   gbere-ni   the corn/maize

　　　7   -si   yaka-si   the grass

　　　With the exception of personal names and pronominals, nouns in Batonu are structurally analyzable into stems and suffixes. Whenever nouns occur in citation form, they bear their noun Class Markers (hereafter, **CM),** Since (he CM is a definite determiner, nouns with indefinite marker - ru, most especially in the -te class, do delete such indefinite marker to allow the stem to take up the appropriate noun CM, as illustrated in (9):

9   (a)   karu :   /ka   +   ru   / ⟶   [kaa - te]

　　　　　　 a gourd   stem   Det.   'gourd   CM'

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　'the gourd'

　　　 (b)   Kperu :   /kpe   +   ru /   ⟶   [kpee – te]

　　　　　　 a stone   stem   Det.   stone   CM

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　'the stone'

　　　 (c)   titeru: /tire   +   ru   / ⟶   [tire – te]

　　　　　　 a book   stem   Det.   book CM

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　'the book'

　　　 (d)   bireru: /bire   +   ru / ⟶   [bire – te]

　　　　　　 a basket   stem   +   Det.   basket CM

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　'the basket'

　　　 (e)   wekeru: /weke   +   ru / ⟶   [weke – te]

　　　　　　 a pot   stem   Det.   pot   CM

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　'the pot'

　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　 etc.

　　　　[toǹkùro$_i$ - wi   ū$_i$ weke – te   dwu - a]

　　　　woman   CM she   pot   CM   buy PAST

　　　　S   O   V

[OnkurSi - wi iij   weke - te   dwu - a] woman   CM   she   pot   CM   buy PAST S

O   V 'The woman bought a pot'.

'The woman bought a pot'.

as in (12) and (13) respectively.

(12)   Subject - NP Focus

[tońkùro¡ - wa   ū¡   weke – te   dwu - a]

woman   Foc   she   pot   CM   buy   PAST

S   O   V

'It's the women who bought a pot'.

(13)   Direct -Object NP Focus .

weke - ta tońkùro -wi   ū¡   t¡   dwu - a

pot   Foc   woman   buy   PAST

'It's a pot that the woman bought'.

As evident in (11) through (13) above, one can claim that focus construction is made possible in Batonu through the use of noun-class in the language.

3.0   Concordial Agreement between jNouns and Adjectives

From the available data on Batonu, it has been observed that abjectives that co-occur with nouns, in any of the noun classes in the language, always display suffixes similar to those of the nouns they qualify. It thus appears that there is concordial agreement between-nouns and the adjectives qualifying such nouns.

Examples of such concordial agreement between nouns and adjectives in (he language can be shown as in (14):

(14)   (a)   /duma + kpiki/   ⟶   [dum kpita]
                horse   white   'a white horse'

        (b)   /bireru + baka /   ⟶   [bire bakaru]
                basket   big   'a basket   big'

        (c)   /guno + baka /   ⟶   [guno bako]
                bird   big   'big bird'

        (d)   /tasu + baka/   ⟶   [tam bakasu]
                yam   big   'a big yam'

        (e)   /wekerjl + pii'bu /   ⟶   [weke piiburu]
                pot   small   'a small pot'

(f)   /bireru + gbere /   ⟶   [bire gbereru]

   basket empty   'a empty basket'

(g)   /tireru + kpiki /   ⟶   [tire kpikiru]

   book white   'a white book'

                etc.

4.0   Conclusion

Having defined the concept of noun class mat king, this paper acknowledged the existing fact in the literature that, in terms of noun classes, many African languages could be classified into either **functional** or **vestigial** noun class group. For the functional noun class systems, the number of noun classes varies from language to language. For instance, researchers have observed that Kiswahili has about **eighteen** classes. Auga has about **five** classes, **Igede** has about **five** classes and Batonu has **seven** prominent noun classes.

Using copious empirical data, we have revisited in this paper the phenomenon of noun class systems in Kiswahili, Atrga. Igcde and Batonu Our focus has been the need to use empirical data to show the differences between the nature of noun class marking in languages that exhibit prefixes like Kiswahili, Auga, and Igede and those that display suffixes for noun class marking like Batonu. We have also shown in this papei thai uhilc the basic grammatical function of noun-class markers in Kiswahili, Auga. ;iml [gede is in form **singular** and **plural**; the noun-class markers in Batonu are used basically as **definite determiner** meaning 'that'/ 'the', in the language.

However, despite the morphological differences among the two categories of functional noun class languages, there are similarities among them, in terms of general grammatical functions for which their noun-class markers are employed. For instance, in most cases, the noun-class markers, in the two categories of functional noun class languages, are used for **concordial agreement** between heads nouns and their qualifiers, and other grammatical constituents within a given construction. This has been illustrated, at different sections in this paper, with relevant examples fron all the languages under consideration. We have also provided evidence to prove that Batonu is really a functional noun class language. In this regard, examples of how its seven nounclass markers are used for other grammatical functions like focus constructions, resumptive pronouns or subject-agreement markers, among others, are provided.

In conclusion, we are of the view that, in thir co-occurrence with head nouns, noun-class markers in any functional noun class language, could be morpho-syntactically described as being either **pre-nominal** or **post-nominal.**

NOTES

*   A version of this paper was presented at the symposium in honour of Professor E.N. Emenanjo, held at the National Institute For Nigerian Languages, Aba, Abia Stale, Nigeria. This writer acknowledges the useful comments made by the participants.

1.   The name .'Swahili' is much more popular in the literature. However, Carstens (1991:1) footnote I, offers full explanation on Why the name **Kiswahili** is preferred lo Swahili. According to her the prefix noun-class marker - 'ki-' is the singular prefix of the gender containing nil language names. Kiswahili is often referred lo in English as Swahili, but native speakers report that this seems incomplete only the right gender specification distinguishes the name of the language from that of the people who speak it (Waswahili), and from the name for the area of their residence (Uswahili).

2.   As could be observed in (1), Myachina (1981;23) confirms that Kiswahili lacks certain classes which are found in other Bantu languages, especially classes **12, 13**, and N the class of nouns which in Kiswahili has coalesced with class **11**

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