

## How meaning changes grammar – animacy and the agreement system of the Bantu language Ndengeleko.

This paper aims to illustrate how the Ndengeleko noun class system deviates from the ‘traditional’ Bantu grammatical agreement system in a number of ways, and to give an explanation for this: is it a general tendency among Bantu languages towards reduction in the noun class system, or is it a shift towards an equally intact system, but one in which semantic considerations play an increasing role?

Prototypical Bantu noun class systems are characterized by a categorization of the lexicon, so that each noun can be identified as belonging to a certain set of nouns, i.e. a given noun class. This identification is mainly based on the prefix attached to the nominal stem, or the absence of such a prefix; combined with the agreement used on adnominals and verbs.

Many Bantu languages employ strict grammatical agreement - all concords are governed by the inherent noun class of the head noun. In a language like Kagulu, for example, a noun of noun class 5 triggers agreement of noun class 5, even though this noun is animate (Petzell 2008): *di-bwa di-swani di-kudia* (5-dog 5-good 5-eats) ‘The good dog eats’. Ndengeleko, an endangered and previously undocumented language of Tanzania, however, treats nouns with animate referents differently than nouns with inanimate referents, resulting in a concord system which is partly grammatical, partly semantic. This is exemplified by ‘the squirrel’ in the following sentence, which takes a noun class 1 (animate) subject marker instead of the subject marker of noun class 7, to which it belongs (and which would have been *ki-*):

**kinduuli a-butuka kuloka balabaala**

7.squirrel 1SM-run to cross 9.road

*The squirrel ran across the road*

Maho (Maho:122-126) calls the phenomenon General Animate Concords (GAC). It is especially common among languages of the upper east coast of the Bantu speaking area (Wald 1975).

The way GAC-languages pay attention to animacy differs from language to language, even between closely related languages. Swahili is the most documented language in this respect. In this language, simply put, animate nouns all take agreement of noun classes 1/2. The exception is nouns referring to human relationships, like ‘sister’, which take animate agreement except with possessives (Contini-Morava 2008). Ndengeleko has its own set of restrictions. For example, animate plurals in noun class 6 take grammatical agreement of that class with subjects and adnominals, but take the agreement of class 2 with the object marker, as seen in the following examples.

**makúle ga- butuki pa-kiinza**

6.rats 6SM- run.PERF 16-kitchen

*The rats have run into the kitchen*

**ni- a- bulige g- aa makúle**

1sSM-2OM-kill.PERF 6Cd-that 6.rats

I have killed those rats.

Another interesting aspect of the noun class system, is that the plural classes 4 and 6 are used as plurals of nouns of almost any singular class, for some speakers, possibly developing into “poly-plural classes”. This would point to a reduction in the complexity of the noun class system of Ndengeleko. The importance of animacy, however, does not have to imply that the system is becoming simplified. Rather on the contrary, it increases the complexity of agreement in this language. Being an unstudied and endangered language, it is especially important that details of the agreement system are described before they are (further) influenced by the dominating language of the area, i.e. Swahili. I will analyze the peculiarities

of GAC as well as plural marking in Ndengeleko, and put it into the framework as developed by Maho (1999), which attempts to explain how Bantu noun class systems and their corresponding concords undergo change.

Contini-Morava, Ellen [Lee]. 2008. Human relationship terms, discourse prominence, and asymmetrical animacy in Swahili. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 29:127-171.

Maho, Jouni Filip. 1999. *A comparative study of Bantu noun classes, Orientalia et africana gothoburgensia, n 13*. Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.

Petzell, Malin. 2008. *The Kagulu Language of Tanzania: Grammar, Texts and Vocabulary*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.

Wald, Benji [Victor]. 1975. Animate concords in northeast coastal Bantu: its linguistic and social implications as a case of grammatical convergence. *Studies in African linguistics* 6 (3):267-314.