Lotta Harjula

The Ha Noun Class System Revisited

Abstract

Ha is a D60 Bantu language spoken in Western Tanzania, closely related to Rundi and Nyarwanda. In my PhD dissertation (Harjula 2004) I described the grammar of the language, including the noun class system. As pointed out by my opponent Prof. Thomas J. Hinnebusch, it might be possible to analyze the Ha noun class system with Givón's (1972) three gender system. This paper shows that some of the processes in the Ha noun class system, especially those with locative connotations, can be better explained with Givón's system than by trying to find common semantic nominators to all nouns.

1. The Ha language

Ha is an Interlacustrine Bantu language spoken in Western Tanzania, Kigoma region, with an estimation of about a million speakers (Gordon 2005). Ha, Rundi of Burundi, Nyarwanda of Rwanda, as well as some smaller languages spoken in Tanzania are classified by Guthrie (1967–71) as group D60 of the Bantu languages.

Ha is a typical Bantu language with a noun class system and fairly complex verbal morphology, both inflectionally and derivationally. The tonal system of Ha has been analyzed as a pitch-accent system (Harjula 2004).

2. Givón's Bantu noun class system applied to Ha

Givón (1972) has described the Bantu noun classes as a system of three types of gender: inherent, derived and propositional. The lexical description contains information of the inherent gender which also shows in the agreement elements of the sentence. The features associated with the inherent gender cannot be derived by rules. As the name suggests, derived

gender is acquired e.g. by nominalization or other general rules. Propositional (or locative) gender applies on the syntactic level.

2.1 Inherent gender

As typical for modern Bantu languages, the noun classes in Ha do not reflect clear semantic categorization of nouns, and the inherent gender has to be specified in the lexicon (Givón 1972). The semantic coherence of Bantu noun classes has been argued for in several works (e.g. Denny & Creider 1976, Contini-Morava 1997, 2000, Moxley 1998), and indeed some generalizations on the semantic contents of the noun classes can also be made in Ha (Harjula 2004). However, these generalizations do not apply to but a part of the nouns, e.g. classes 1 and 2 for nouns denoting human beings (1)–(2).[1]

(1)   *umu-áana*   *mu-iíza*
       CP1-child:1/2   AP1-good
       'good child'

(2)   *aba-áana*   *ba-iíza*
       CP2-field:1/2   AP2-good
       'good children'

Noun class prefixes 1, 3, 5, 7, 11, and 12 always convey singularity, and classes 2, 4, 8, and 13 plurality. Classes 6 and 14 convey plurality when alternating with one of the singular prefixes, but for noun stems that convey enumerables (class 6) or abstractions (class 14) there is no alternation. Class 15 conveys singularity when alternating with the class 6 prefix. Although the alternation between the classes expressing singularity and plurality seems to be quite complex, in practice the class prefixes for classes 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9 alternate fairly regularly with class 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10 prefixes, respectively. With the other classes there is more variation in the alternation (Figure 1). Thus, both the singular and plural class affiliations have to be specified in the lexicon.

---

[1] The inherent gender is marked with the noun stems, i.e. 1/2 means noun class 1 in singular and 2 in plural.
AP – adjective prefix, CON – connexive, CP – noun class prefix, DP – determiner prefix, FOC – verbal focus marker, FV – final vowel, LOC – secondary prefix (locative), NDER – deverbal derivation suffix, PERF – perfective marker, PRO – dependent pronoun
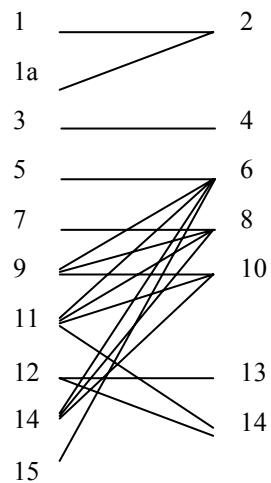
Figure 1. Ha noun class pairings

(3) *uru-toke*   *ru-tóoyi*
     CP11-finger:11/10   AP11-small
     'small finger'

(4) *in-toke*   *n-tóoyi*
     CP10-finger:11/10   AP10-small
     'small fingers'

(5) *uru-no*   *ru-tóoyi*
     CP11-toe:11/6   AP11-small
     'small toe'

(6) *ama-no*   *ma-tóoyi*
     CP6-toe:11/6   AP6-small
     'small toes'

2.2 Derived gender

Several different processes can be considered as derived gender in Ha. These are 1) productive noun class shifts, such as diminutives and infinitives; 2) restricted noun class shifts, such as the versatile *-ntu* stem; 3) nominalization; and 4) locative nouns.

2.2.1 Productive noun class shifts

The formation of diminutives is a typical example of derived gender. The class 12 prefix *aka-* (with class 13 *utu-* for plural) conveys diminutiveness, and these prefixes can be associated with noun stems inherently associated with any other class prefixes. Thus, diminutiveness is not inherently associated with noun stems, but the size features are shifted by a rule.

(7) *iki-jíko*
     CP7-spoon:7/8
     'spoon'

(8) *aka-jíko*
     CP12-spoon:7/8
     'small spoon'

Augmentatives and pejoratives can also be regarded as derived gender, but their semantic contents are not as regular as with diminutives, i.e. they are defined by the context. The noun class prefixes associated with augmentative and pejorative features, i.e. class 7 *iki-* and class 11 *uru-*, are also inherently associated with certain noun stems, without the shift of the features. Class 11 as a derived gender may also convey meliorativeness.

(9) *in-bwá*
     CP9-dog:9/10
     'dog'

(10) *iki-bwá*
      CP7-dog:9/10
      'big/bad dog'

(11) *uru-bwá*
      CP11-dog:9/10
      'big/bad/good dog'

Formation of infinitive forms is a regular process of nominalization. Here verbal stems that do not have inherent nominal features acquire these features by rules. Infinitives are formed with noun class 15 prefix.

(12) *uku-ragir-a*
      CP15-herd-FV
      'to herd, herding'

2.2.2 Restricted noun class shifts

Certain sets of nouns may undergo noun class shifts in Ha, as well as in many other Bantu languages. Probably the most common example of this type of relationship is the stem *-ntu* 'some' (Meeussen 1967:103). With class 1 prefix (*umuntu*) it has the feature 'human being', with class 7 prefix (*ikintu*) 'thing' and with class 16 (*ahantu*) 'place'. These nouns reflect the common semantic denominators of the classes they represent, i.e. class 1 contains human beings, class 7 concrete objects and class 16 is a locative class (Harjula 2004).[2] With nouns that undergo this type of class shift it may not be relevant, or even possible, to determine the inherent gender of the noun stem.

With noun stems that denote groups of people, class 1 prefix indicates a representative of the group, class 7 prefix the language of the group and class 14 the region of the group, as in *umuha* 'Ha person', *igiha* 'Ha language' and *Buha* 'Ha land'. Moreover, noun stems that denote trees in class 3 may be shifted to class 5. The meaning is then 'fruit of the tree', as in *umuchúngwa* 'orange tree' and *ichúngwa* 'orange'.

Abstract nouns can be derived from nouns inherently associated with other noun classes by shifting the noun class to 14 (13). Abstract nouns can also be derived from adjective stems, by prefixing the adjective stem with the class 14 prefix (14). Adjective stems can take other noun class prefixes as well, e.g. class 1 for human beings (15). The difference between the adjectives and their nominalized counterparts is the augment or initial vowel of the noun class prefix which does not occur with adjective prefixes (see examples (1) to (6) above).

(13) *ubu-áana*
      CP14-child:1/2
      'childhood'

(14) *ubu-iíza*
      CP14-good
      'goodness'

(15) *umu-iíza*
      CP1-good
      'good person'

---

[2] The stem *-ntu* may also be used with the locative prefix *ku-* to indicate manner (*kuntu* 'how'), but this seems to be the only instance where this derivation occurs.

2.2.3 Nominalization

Derived gender can also be acquired by nominalization of verbs. There are several derivational suffixes that are used, together with the noun class prefixes, in deriving nouns from verbal stems. Semantically, these suffixes can be defined only vaguely (Harjula 2004:83), except the suffix *-yi* with class 1 prefix which is often used to derive agent-like humans.

(16) *umu-ragir-yi*
CP1-herd-NDER
'shepherd'

2.2.4 Locative nouns

If the shift of noun stems between noun classes is considered a regular rule which changes the features of nouns, the locative class 16 does not have any inherent nouns. In Swahili, for example, there is only one noun in the locative class 16 (*mahali* 'place', a loan word from Arabic), but in Ha the word *ahantu* 'place' can be analyzed as having derived gender (see 2.2.2. above). This analysis is further consolidated by regular derivation where locative nouns are derived from verbal stems by prefixing the stem with the locative noun class prefix:

(17) *uku-bón-a*
CP15-see-FV
'to see, seeing'

(18) *aha-bón-a*
CP16-see-FV
'open place'

Although there are no inherent nouns in class 16, the full noun class agreement system, with subject and object marking on the verbs, is used with the class (19). Class 16 also has an independent substitutive (*heéne*) as well as the dependent substitutive (*hó*), relative pronoun (*ahó*) and all five demonstrative pronouns (*aha, aho, háno, hádya, háa*). Unlike the other locative classes (see below), class 16 prefix does not occur as a secondary prefix. Subject marking of class 16 is used in presentative and existential constructions, even with locatives of the other locative classes (20). Thus

class 16 functions as a proper noun class, except that there are no inherently class 16 nouns, as it seems to be the case with classes 12 and 13 as well.

(19) *keéra   ha-ra-ba-ye   umu-aámi*
     long ago   SP16-fOC-be-pERF   CP1-king:1/2
     'Once upon the time there was a king.'

(20) *ha-ri-mwó   aba-ntu   mu-uru-gereero*
     SP16-be-PRO18   CP2-some:1/2   LOC18-CP11-market:11/10
     'There are people at the market.'

2.3 Propositional gender

While class 16 functions as the other noun classes, classes 17 (*ku-*), 18 (*mu-*) and 23 (*i-*) mainly occur on the syntactic level. This means that all of these classes occur as secondary prefixes, prefixed to a noun class prefix, and they give the noun a locative meaning, resulting in a double prefix. Class 17 and 18 prefixes do not have the initial vowel. Class 17 denotes locativeness in general (examples (21) and (22)), class 18 being inside or among (22), and class 23 locatives with reference to home area or country (23).

(21) *ku-i-zíiko*
     LOC17-CP5-fire:5/6
     'to/on the fire'

(22) *mu-uru-sí*
     LOC18-CP11-ground:11
     'in the ground'

(23) *i-ubu-aámi*
     LOC23-CP14-king:1/2
     'at the king's place'

The secondary noun class prefixes differ from the primary prefixes, in addition to their position, also in agreement; interestingly enough, the modifiers of the nouns are inflected according to the primary prefix, not the secondary (24)–(25). An exception to this is the lexicalized locative

adverbs (e.g. *muusí* from the locative prefix *mu-* and the nouns stem *-sí* 'ground') whose agreement follows class 23 (26).

(24) *ku-umu-ríma*   *mu-tóoyi*
     LOC17-CP3-field:3/4   AP3-small
     'to the small fields'

(25) *ku-i-shíngwa*   *ri-á-in-ká*
     LOC17-CP5-horn:5/6   DP5-CON-CP9-cow:9/10
     'to the horn of the cow'

(26) *muusí*   *i-á-in-méeza*
     under   DP23-CON-CP9-table:9/10
     'under the table'

In addition to being used as secondary prefixes, class 17, 18 and 23 locatives occur as dependent substitutives and relative pronouns. They do not show up in the subject or object prefixes nor as independent pronouns, as class 16 does (see section 2.2.4. above).

3. Conclusions

As pointed out by Givón (1972), the gender system in Bantu languages is synchronically difficult to define by semantic criteria, but traces of the system based on semantic distinctions are still found in many modern Bantu languages, such as Ha. The inherent gender, including the noun class association, is specified in the lexicon. Some of the noun class associations are derived by rules, such as diminutives in class 12 or nominalized verbs. Locative class 16 is a proper noun class, though only with derived nouns, but the other locative classes function on the syntactic level as propositional gender. The three gender system labels the various functions of the noun class system and indeed helps to explain the differences in usage of the noun classes in the Ha language.

References

Contini-Morava, Ellen (1997) Noun classification in Swahili: a cognitive-semantic analysis using a computer database. In Robert K. Herbert (ed.) *African Linguistics at the Crossroads: Papers from Kwaluseni*, pp. 599–628. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.

—— (2000) Noun class as number in Swahili. In Ellen Contini-Morava & Yishai Tobin (eds.) *Between Grammar and Lexicon,* pp. 3–30. Current Issues in Linguistic Theory 183. Amsterdam & Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.

Denny, J. Peter & Creider, Chet A (1976) The semantics of noun classes in Proto-Bantu. *Studies in African Linguistics* 7.1: 1–30.

Givón, Talmy (1972) Studies in ChiBemba and Bantu grammar. *Studies in African Linguistics*, supplement 3.

Gordon, Raymond G. Jr. (ed.) 2005. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. 15th edition. Dallas, TX: SIL Inc.

Guthrie, Malcolm (1967–1971) *Comparative Bantu*: *An introduction to the comparative linguistics and prehistory of the Bantu Languages*. 4 volumes. Farnborough: Gregg International Publishers.

Harjula, Lotta (2004) *The Ha Language of Tanzania: Grammar, text and vocabulary*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.

Meeussen, A. E. (1967) Bantu Grammatical Reconstructions. *Africana Linguistica* III: 79–121.

Moxley, Jeri (1998) Semantic structure of Bantu noun classes. In Ian Maddieson & Thomas J. Hinnebusch (eds.) *Language History and Linguistic Description in Africa*, pp. 229–238. Trends in African Linguistics 2. Trenton, NJ & Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc.

Contact information:

Lotta Harjula
Institute for Asian and African Studies
P.O. Box 59 (Unioninkatu 38B)
FI-00014 University of Helsinki
lotta(dot)harjula(at)Helsinki(dot)fi