

Language Teaching and Semantic Interpretation in Kiswahili Classes

Assibi A. Amidu

(Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim)

Assibi A. Amidu. 2003. Language Teaching and Semantic Interpretation in Kiswahili Classes. *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal*, 11(3), 103-121. Interpreting language requires a constant update of the linguist's knowledge of linguistics. This is especially important for the foreign language teacher who is also an interpreter of other people's thoughts and world views reduced to linguistic texts. In this study, I demonstrate that there is a relationship between grammatical description, language teaching and semantic interpretation. I demonstrate my claim by examining some of the weaknesses of semantic and agreement assignment rules in Kiswahili Bantu.

Key words: Kiswahili, language teaching, interpretation, animacy, gender

1. Introduction

In my view, semantic rules of traditional and current Bantu classes give rise to conclusions in Bantu grammatical analyses that are linguistically untenable. The conclusions are also unfavourable to the Bantu world view of natural kinds. My goal is to show that the shortcomings I identify reflect the fact that many of us Bantuists and linguists have, perhaps, failed as interpreters of Bantu languages and thought in the sense of Davidson (1975). I conclude that it is essential for a good interpreter to understand the relationship between language, thought and culture. My study will look at one main issue, namely the problem of semantic and agreement assignment rules in Kiswahili class descriptions.

2. Semantic interpretation in Kiswahili classes

Amidu (2002) looked at the semantic arrangement of Kiswahili and Bantu classes. It was found that Kiswahili classes describe different semantic categories of object such as human, tree, thing, abstract, locative, etc. For Kiswahili, Ashton (1947, p. 10) states that:

Thus Nouns with M-WA- as the distinguishing prefixes for singular and plural respectively express the names of human beings. **m**-tu person, pl. **wa**-tu. Words in other classes are associated with more than one underlying idea. [...]. It must not, however, be imagined that nouns are marshalled into their classes strictly in accordance with these ideas. Consequently in all classes, nouns will be found which do not conform to the general tendency of the class concerned.

Ashton's description is problematic. If the affixes M-WA "express the names of human beings", then it is a self-evident contradiction to suggest at the same time that nouns "do not conform to the general tendency of the class concerned" even when they bear the affixes M-WA. Self-contradictions of this type are a major problem in Bantu class semantics. In order to avoid the pitfall of self-contradiction, some Bantuists and linguists have gone to the other extreme. They assert that classes 1/2 MU1/WA are only human classes. For example, Hurskainen (1999, p. 674) writes that "Classes 1/2 are exclusively human". The assertion excludes Ashton's modifications. We also find examples in Demuth, et al. (1986, p. 456), Denny and Creider (1986), Demuth (2000), Aikhenvald (2000) and others. The claim about an exclusive class of human beings is false, especially in Kiswahili which is often cited as a typical language that exhibits this exclusive pattern. Another group of Bantuists and linguists suggests that the classes 1/2 MU1/WA are classes that comprise humans, their kinship terms, and other types of animates, such as animals and insects (Corbett, 1991, Carstens, 1993, Demuth, 2000, and others). Demuth's views are ambivalent. Mutaka and Tamanji (2000, p. 151) also write that "Classes 1-2 consist of personal nouns, a few other animate nouns, rarely

inanimates." Mutaka and Tamanji (2000), however, give no example of a rare inanimate noun in the classes 1/2 MU1/WA of 'Narrow' Bantu. They also provide no illustration of the implications of having such nouns in classes 1/2, if indeed they are found in the classes. In typological studies, Comrie (1989, p. 187) notes that animacy "is not an absolute universal" and so, he says, "we must not be surprised to find individual examples in individual languages that go against the general trend." Comrie's conclusion is, in one sense, flawed. It does not exclude negative implications about animacy that arise from going against the general trend. I shall illustrate some of these problems.

Let us first examine the claim by Hurskainen (1999) and others to the effect that classes 1/2 or Ashton's M-WA classes are exclusively human classes or are classes of only human and other animates. For example, the word for a 'doll', in Kiswahili Bantu, is *mwanasesere*. It is a lexical word and not a phrase. It inflects as *wanasesere* 'dolls' in Kiswahili, and it is, *a fortiori*, a noun of the classes 1 MU1 and 2 WA. Kiswahili has the noun phrase *mwana wa tumbako* 'stub of tobacco', lit. 'Cl. 1 it-child Cl. 1 it-of Cl. 3 it-tobacco' and it inflects as *wana wa tumbako* 'stubs of tobacco', lit. 'Cl. 2 they-child Cl. 2 they-of Cl. 3 it-tobacco' (Amidu, 1997, for discussions). Kiswahili and Bantu class affixes are not sex denoting markers. Selection of the gloss *she* or *he* is done arbitrarily, except where the lexical word is itself sex denoting, i.e. [+male] or [male]. The terms above have the features [-human, -animate]. The nouns or phrases are, therefore, inanimate denoting strings. In Kiswahili, *mwana* means 'child' or 'child-like' and *wana* means 'children' or 'children-like', and so, both are [\pm animate] nouns. From the point of view of protoBantu roots, "*-jána 'child'" is one of the roots of classes 1/2 known in Bantu languages (Creissels, 1999, p. 305). The root appears in Kiswahili as *-ana* 'child', and the same form is found in Tswana (Creissels, 1999). Consider also the proverb in (1), taken from TUKI (1981: 321), and its alternative (2).

- (1) *Mw-ana w-a yungi hu-lewa seuze w-a m-limwengu*
Cl. 1 it-child Cl. 1 it-of Cl. 5 it-water lily Cl. 1 SM

∅-HABITUAL-be drunk-PASS-MOD. ADV.-how much more
Cl. 1 it-of Cl. 1 he-human being.

“The young of the water lily gets drunk, how much more the
child of a human being”

- (2) a. *Mw-ana w-a yungi a-nalewa seuze w-a m-limwengu*

Cl. 1 it-child Cl. 1 it-of Cl. 5 it-water lily Cl. 1 SM
it-PRESENT-be drunk-PASS-MOD. ADV.-how much more
Cl. 1 it-of Cl. 1 he-human being.

“The young of the water lily gets drunk, how much more the
child of a human being”

- b. **Mw-ana w-a yungi u-nalewa seuze w-a m-limwengu*

Cl. 3 it-child Cl. 3 it-of Cl. 5 it-water lily Cl. 3 SM
it-PRESENT-be drunk-PASS-MOD. ADV.-how much more
Cl. 1 it-of Cl. 1 he-human being.

“The young of the water lily gets drunk, how much more the
child of a human being”

(1) has no overt SM because it is absorbed by the habitual tense marker {hu}. The alternative (2) shows overt class 1 SM {a} or class 3 SM {u} in the verb. Note that (2b) is ungrammatical because the noun phrase *mwana wa yungi* ‘young water lily’ takes the SM {u} of class 3 MU2, the tree or plant class, when in fact it belongs to class 1 MU1 as in (1)-(2a). The maximal string of *wa mlimwengu* ‘of human being’ is *mwana wa mlimwengu* ‘child of human being’. Abdulaziz Y. Lodhi of the University of Uppsala who is from Zanzibar verified the data. I thank him sincerely for his assistance. *Mwana wa yungi* refers clearly to a [-human, -animate] object, while (*mwana*) *wa mlimwengu* refers to a [+human, +animate] object.

Kiswahili also has the phrase *mtoto wa mgomba*. It means ‘shoot of banana plant’, lit. ‘Cl. 1 it-child Cl. 1 it-of Cl. 3 it-banana plant’. The word *mtoto* of class 1 MU1 in the phrase means a ‘shoot’, a clearly [-human, -animate] object and it inflects as *watoto* ‘shoots’ of class 2 WA, also clearly [-human, -animate] objects. Consequently, the phrase *watoto wa mgomba* is a class 2 WA inflectional string which means

'shoots of a banana plant', lit. 'Cl. 2 they-child Cl. 2 they-of Cl. 3 it-banana plant', and both nouns *mtoto/watoto* are nouns of classes 1 MU1 and 2 WA. In like manner, the phrase *mtoto wa mpishi* means 'the cook's child', lit. 'Cl. 1 it-child Cl. 1 it-of Cl. 1 she-cook', and, here, *mtoto* means 'child' and this is a clearly [+human, +animate] object. *Mtoto* inflects as *watoto* 'children' and so the phrase *watoto wa mpishi* means 'the cook's children', lit. 'Cl. 2 they-child Cl. 2 they-of Cl. 1 she-cook'. *Mtoto* and *watoto* are, therefore, [\pm animate] terms.

Given the polysemy of words in Bantu classes 1/2, the claim that the classes are exclusively human classes is untenable. Furthermore, as a linguistic generalization, the claim by some Bantuists to the effect that the classes 1/2 are only classes of human, kinship and other animate terms is equally untenable. Terms in protoBantu had and have a variety of uses. For example, the word **-jánà* 'child' was, in protoBantu, either polysemic in meaning, or else it has undergone semantic innovations and extensions of its meaning since that period. I suggest, therefore, that Bantuists should pay attention to polysemic functions whenever they discuss or teach topics on animacy in Bantu.

3. Semantic Assignment Rules in Bantu with Reference to Kiswahili

How do Bantu grammarians justify the animacy hypothesis noted above? Bantu grammarians justify the exclusive animacy hypothesis through semantic assignment rules. They distinguish between a semantic assignment rule system and a morphological assignment rule system. The systems are designed to explain how agreement rules operate in Bantu. These assignment rules are described by Gregersen (1967), Wald (1975), Corbett (1991), Bokamba (1993) and Aikhenvald (2000). Corbett's (1991, p. 47) rule is stated below.

(3) Semantic assignment

- a. augmentatives belong to gender 5/6, e.g. *j-oka* 'giant snake';

- b. diminutives belong to gender 7/8, e.g. *ki-toto* 'baby', *ki-j-oka* 'tiny snake';
- c. remaining animates belong to gender 1/2, e.g. *mw-alimu* 'teacher', *m-jusi* 'lizard', *jogoo* 'rooster', *ki-pofu* 'blind person', *ki-faru* 'rhinoceros', *tembo* 'elephant', *nyoka* 'snake'.

Predication-sentences (Pn-Ss) that illustrate (3) are:

(4) *J-oka li-le kubwa li-mekufa*

Cl. 5 it-huge snake Cl. 5 it-that Cl. 5 it-big Cl. 5 SM
 it-RECENT PAST-STRESS AFX-die-MOD.
 'That huge snake is dead'

(5) *Ki-toto ki-le ki-kubwa ki-mekufa*

Cl. 7 it-small infant Cl. 7 it-that Cl. 7 it-big Cl. 7 SM
 it-RECENT PAST-STRESS AFX-die-MOD.
 'That big infant is dead'

(6) *N-dovu yu-le m-kubwa a-mekufa*

Cl. 9 it- snake Cl. 1 it-that Cl. 1 it-big Cl. 1 SM it-RECENT
 PAST-STRESS AFX-die-MOD.
 'That big elephant is dead'

(4) satisfies Corbett's augmentative rule, i.e. the agreement affixes belong to class 5 JI; (5) satisfies the diminutive rule, i.e. the agreement affixes belong to class 7 KI, and (6) satisfies Corbett's remaining rule, i.e. the agreement affixes belong to class 1 MU1 even though the noun allegedly belongs to class 9 NI1. (3) is no doubt a useful pedagogic rule. However, it is of little use as a scientific generalization. The problem with (3) is that it sees a necessary and obligatory link between morphological affixes and the reality of natural kinds of object in the Bantu universe of reference. This linkage is flawed (Amidu, 1997, see also § 2. above). I examine below two problems associated with (3).

Firstly, words like *kitoto* 'baby' in (3) may have class 7 KI

agreement concords or class 1 MU1 agreement concords, and sometimes a mixture of both. Such constructions are perfectly grammatical in Kiswahili contrary to the claims of Corbett (1991), Bokamba (1985, 1993), and others (Amidu, 1995, 1997, for example, for illustrations). In addition, the agreements of words like *kitoto*, whether of Cl. 7 or Cl. 1, have exactly the same meaning, i.e. [+animate, +small], in strings (Amidu, 1980, 1997, Mohamed, 1988). For example, *ki-toto ch-angu* 'my child' versus *ki-toto w-angu* 'my child', have exactly the same semantic meaning, syntax and grammatical description, i.e. animate noun plus possessive modifier. Sometimes the choice of concord is dialectal, i.e. northern versus southern Kiswahili (Amidu, 1980, 1997). It follows, therefore, that change in the AGR from class 7 *ki-* to class 1 *w-* in the possessives, i.e. *ch-angu* → *w-angu*, and, vice versa, from class 1 *w-* to class 7 *ki-*, namely *w-angu* → *ch-angu*, changes class markers, but it changes nothing else semantically and syntactically about the NPs. We have here clear evidence that mere class distinctiveness does not always change meaning or syntactic relationships and functions in Bantu languages. Possessive lexids and the adnominal genitive {a} lexid are particularly prone to choice of class affixes in Kiswahili (Amidu, 1997). Linguists miss these insights when they see class morphemic units as causally linked to fixed semantic functions.

Secondly, as we have seen in § 2., inanimate words abound in the classes 1/2 MU1/WA. This is true of words based on generic terms like *mtoto* 'child, child-like', *mwana* 'child, child-like'. Linguists have also found inanimate terms in so-called animate classes of Grassfield Bantu, e.g. Babungo and Mankon, but they have not examined their formal implications for (3) (Schaub, 1985, Croft, 1995, Aikhenvald, 2000, Mutaka and Tamanji, 2000).

3.1. The Problem of Semantic Assignment Rules in Kiswahili Classes

The semantic rule (3) confronts us with a problem of theoretical adequacy and explanatory relevance in Bantu linguistic analysis. The

problem is that (3) cannot handle inanimate denoting words found in the morphological classes 1/2 of a Narrow Bantu language Kiswahili, especially the fact that the inanimate denoting nouns generate agreement concords of classes 1/2 MU1/WA. To put this another way, inanimacy has apparently no impact on well-formedness in classes 1/2 MU1/WA and so, inanimate or not, the nouns generate classes 1/2 agreement concords. In addition, note how inanimate denoting words or phrases of classes 1/2, e.g. *mwanasesere* 'doll', *mtoto wa meza* 'table drawer', *mwana wa yungi* 'young water lily', do not generate the agreements of other classes, such as classes 3/4, 5/6, 9/10, etc. We see clearly that there is no obligatory and causal relationship between meaning and morphology in Bantu, exactly as we have asserted above. But more important to our generalization is the fact that since inanimate words exist in the classes 1/2, there is no grammatical motivation for (3) based on a feature [+animate] in data like (6) or (4)-(5). It is self-evident that a semantic rule cannot demonstrate that the agreement markers generated in the classes 1/2, see for example datum (2), arise solely in virtue of semantic animacy, interpreted as [+animate] exclusively, rather than [-animate] exclusively. Under (3), (2a) will be wrongly generated as ungrammatical, even though it is good grammatical Kiswahili. Agreement markers in (2) illustrate clearly that either the feature [\pm animate] is marginal to Bantu syntactic well-formedness or alternatively, there is an interdependence between agreement markers and the features [+animate] and [animate] taken together. Apart from Amidu (1997), this paradox of animacy is not referred to by any Bantuist or linguist (Comrie, 1989, Corbett, 1991, 2000, Aikhenvald, 2000, Hurskainen, 1999).

3.2. Choice of Agreement Marking and Semantic Assignment Rules in Kiswahili

Are there choices between [+animate] and [animate] agreement marking in Kiswahili? In recent usage, first noted in Amidu (1997), a few words of classes 1/2 MU1/WA, such as *mwanamimba* 'ailment of

the womb', have begun to allow a choice between classes 1/2 agreements and classes 3/4 agreements (Issak, 1999). This gives us a choice between class 1 *mw-anamimba hu-yu* 'this ailment of the womb' and class 3 *mw-anamimba hu-u* 'this ailment of the womb'. Native speakers prefer increasingly the latter string. Similar choices apply to words like *kitoto* 'baby' examined above and data like (4)-(5) (Amidu, 1997, on choices). The crucial insight here is that there is sometimes a choice of agreement pattern in Kiswahili. The choice of agreement marking does not, however, change meaning. Observe that the choice is not determined by the feature [+animate] or [-animate] but by style (Amidu, 1997).

We have seen above that terms like *mwanandani* 'grave chamber', *mwana wa mgomba* 'shoot of banana plant', *mwanamimba* 'ailment of womb', *mwana wa yungi* 'young water lily' do not obligatorily inflect for agreement in other classes, e.g. class 3 MU2 as in (2b), even when (3) is applied to them. This outcome suggests that there are no semantic barriers in principle or theory against any class having inanimate denoting words in its matrix in Bantu (Amidu, 1997). It is self-evident, therefore, that choice cannot be explained in absolute terms as either morphological or semantical in Bantu. And so, in the end, choice or non-choice falsifies the semantic rule (3) of Bantu grammarians.

4. Animate Control Over Inanimate Concords and Agreement Strategies

Following from § 3.-3.2., we do not expect, for example, animate denoting terms of classes 1/2 MU1/WA to generate concords of other classes which are allegedly non-animate classes even in the name of agreement strategies (Corbett, 1991, 2000). And yet in Kiswahili, animate nouns of classes 1/2 MU1/WA may govern the concord {i} of class 9 NII in serial predicate constructions of the type AUX plus MAIN VERB. Let us look at (7)-(8) below.

- (7) a. *M-pishi i-japokuwa a-napika*
 Cl. 1 she-cook Cl. 9 it-CONCESSIVE-STRESS
 AFX-be-MOD. Cl. 1 she-PRESENT-cook-MOD.
 'Although the cook is cooking'
- b. *M-pishi a-japokuwa a-napika*
 Cl. 1 she-cook Cl. 1 she-CONCESSIVE-STRESS
 AFX-be-MOD. Cl. 1 she-PRESENT-cook-MOD.
 'Although the cook is cooking'
- (8) a. *Wa-pishi i-japokuwa wa-napika*
 Cl. 2 they-cook Cl. 9 it-CONCESSIVE-STRESS
 AFX-be-MOD. Cl. 2 they-PRESENT-cook-MOD.
 'Although the cooks are cooking'
- b. *Wa-pishi wa-japokuwa wa-napika*
 Cl. 2 they-cook Cl. 2 they-CONCESSIVE-STRESS
 AFX-be-MOD. Cl. 2 they-PRESENT-cook-MOD.
 'Although the cooks are cooking'

(7a) and (7b) are synonyms, and (8a) and (8b) are also synonyms. The SM {i} of class 9 NII behaves like a 'portmanteau' affix. It functions as an allomorph of class 1 MUI concord {a}, and also functions as an allomorph of class 2 WA concord {wa} in the serial predicates AUX plus MAIN VERB (Amidu, 1997, Matthews, 1972, 1974). Firstly, we see that animacy by itself does not bar an animate denoting term from taking 'inanimate concords' like {i}. Secondly, the choice of agreement marker is not determined or triggered by any need for an agreement strategy. Thirdly, the data represent a case of number neutralization. It operates over the affix {i}. Without neutralization, we would be obliged to claim that the so-called Bantu plural noun *wapishi* 'cooks' generates and governs a singular affix {i} in AUX and a plural affix {wa} in the MAIN VERB of the same predicate constituent (PC). A singular concord generated by a plural noun is regarded as an anomaly or a default number pattern in grammars. The pattern is, however, not uncommon in languages of the world (Corbett, 2000). It is

only unusual when both singular and plural markers occur within a single structure in a class that is allegedly a singular or a plural class. In (8), it is clear that {i} is number neutral, hence its ability to pattern with a so-called plural noun (Amidu, 1997, 2002).

4.1. Interpretation and evaluation of language data

Now, let us consider the datum (12) of Amidu (1997, p. 16) which is renumbered below as (9) for ease of reference.

(9) *Au ni kujiri hitilafu ya moto yale mali ikiwa yalikuwa katika nyumba na ile nyumba imewaka moto.*

'Or it's an accident with fire, and those goods were in a house and the house caught fire'

In (9), we observe that *yale mali* 'those goods' is the subject of the serial predicate *ikiwa yalikuwa* 'if they were'. A structural description of the relevant string is given in (10).

(10) *Ya-le mali i-kiwa ya-likuwa katika nyumba*
 Cl. 6 they-that Cl. 6 they-property Cl. 9 SM
 it-CONDITIONAL-be-MOD. Cl. 6 SM they-PAST-STRESS
 AFX-be-MOD. Cl. 17/26 in Cl. 9 it-house
 'If the goods/property were/was in a house'

The significant grammatical feature is that (10) is ambiguous. It is singular denoting or plural denoting according to the speaker's communication intention (Amidu, 2002). *Mali* is, therefore, not exclusively a plural word in class 6 MA1. Observe, however, that, in (9), *mali* is plural denoting. And yet, even though the subject NP belongs morphologically to class 6 MA1 of the class system, it generates a class 9 NI1 {i} agreement in the AUX *ikiwa* 'if it be', and only generates class 6 MA1 {ya} agreement in the MAIN VERB *yalikuwa* 'they were'. As we have seen above, the concord {i} of class 9 NI1 is allegedly a singular prefix in

traditional Bantu grammars. The concord {ya} of class 6 MA1, on the other hand, may be a singular or a plural denoting affix (Amidu, 2002). Normally, the serial PC, i.e. AUX + MAIN VERB, would be *yakiwa yalikuwa* 'if they/it were', in which the subject NP *yale mali* generates class 6 MA1 concord {ya} in both the AUX and the MAIN VERB. On the analogy of (7)–(8), we conclude that if classes are semantically exclusive in terms of gender or genetic categories, a class 6 MA1 NP could not generate agreements into another class system without an override rule that is syntactically and semantically motivated. And so, even if affixes are systemic number markers, a number ambiguous word *mali* 'goods/property', unless it is also gender neutral, would still not be able to govern a singular prefix {i} and a singular cum plural affix {ya} in an AUX plus MAIN VERB structure across class boundaries. The general patterns in (9)–(10) and in data like (7)–(8) suggest that class affixes or words containing them may be number neutral. In (9)–(10), number neutralization occurs over the affix {i} of class 9 NI1 and the affix {ya} of class 6 MA1 taken together (Amidu 1997, 2002). The {i} and {ya} are allonominal concords. They are examples of "allonominality" and non-number or central number in Kiswahili (Amidu, 1997, p. 18, 2002).

A Bantu language teacher may wish to refute the analysis in (7)–(10). He or she may argue that I ignore the fact that class 6 is not only a plural class, but also a mass/liquid uncountable class. The teacher may point to words like *maji* 'water' and *mavumbi* 'dust' to support his or her claim. The Bantu teacher may also argue that class 6 MA1 is a merger of two Benue–Congo classes, one of which is a plural class and the other a mass/liquid class. He or she could then conclude that the loanword *mali* in (9)–(10) fits perfectly into the group of class 6 MA1 mass/liquid nouns of the grammar. The language teacher could further argue that my description is weakened by the fact that *mali* belongs to the group of loanwords where the phonetic form of the first syllable in the donor language coincides with the phonetic form of one of the Kiswahili noun class markers. The Bantu teacher may then conclude that *mali* as well as *mamlaka*, *maktaba*, *kitabu*, *kioski*,

and so, introduce a conflict of classification because of their phonetic shapes. On the basis of the argumentations above, the Bantu teacher may assert that (9)–(10) do not suggest that singular versus plural distinction is insignificant or that there is an absence of semantic motivation in the noun class system.

Firstly, if 'mass-ness' is the agreement strategy for words such as *mali* in Kiswahili and Bantu, then the claim that 'phonetic shape' is also an agreement strategy of the same class of words must be false. Likewise, if 'phonetic shape' is the agreement strategy for words such as *mali*, then the claim that 'mass-ness' is also an agreement strategy of the same class of words must be false too. The reason is that 'mass-ness' and 'phonetic shape' have nothing in common grammatically in Bantu. That is, they have no common grammatical motivation that goes to explain how two grammatically unrelated features motivate and generate the same agreement markers for words like *mali* in exactly the same way in Bantu strings. Secondly, (10) illustrates that words like *mali* are number neutral and hence polysemic in class 6 MA1. For this reason, any assertion to the effect that the grammatical class 6 MA1 is exclusively a plural class in Kiswahili or Bantu grammar is a chicken and egg argumentation. It contributes no insights to the l.u.d. or linguistic theory (Amidu, 2002). This view is supported in the next sentence. Thirdly, when we compare (7)–(8) with (9)–(10), we discover that the Bantu words *mpishi* 'cook' and *wapishi* 'cooks' behave exactly like the Bantuized word *mali* 'property' or 'properties, goods' and the reverse is equally true. That is, *mpishi*, *wapishi* and *mali*, irrespective of number or animacy or both, generate and govern the class 9 NII so-called singular affix {i} in the same way in (7)–(10). Namely, {i} is motivated by an allomorphic rule. The operation is called allonominality, i.e. allonominal allomorphy (Amidu, 1997).

The evidence in data like (7)–(10) demonstrates one thing clearly, namely, neither etymology, nor historical mergers, nor a phonetic versus a mass-ness strategy explains how all the nouns above, both animate and non-animate, native and non-native, generate the same so-called

singular prefix {i} in Kiswahili. The best way to describe {i} in data such as (7)–(10) is through i) syncretism and ii) allonominality.

5. Two social consequences of animacy rule in Bantu

We have seen above that Hurskainen (1999) claims that the classes 1/2 MU1/WA are exclusively human classes. There are social shortcomings in this kind of assertion. I will highlight only two of them. Firstly, a claim to the effect that Kiswahili Bantu classes 1/2 MU1/WA are exclusively animate classes forces us to assert that words like *mtoto wa bandia* 'doll' occur in classes 1/2 MU1/WA because the speakers treat them semantically as human beings or animals or insects. Self-evidently, it was not the intention of the formulators of (3) that it should be interpreted in this way. Nevertheless, the fact remains that any linguist may interpret the rule in such a manner, if he or she so wishes, either for the purpose of social propaganda or anti-Bantu sentiments. The assertion could even be expanded further. A linguist could claim that the same metaphor explains the grammatical agreements of the strings in classes 1/2 MU1/WA. For this reason, words like *mwana wa tumbako* 'stub of tobacco' in Bantu are also treated by the Waswahili as semantically or metaphorically human or animate beings, hence their place in classes 1/2.

The semantic assignment rule (3), based on the thesis of an exclusive human being or animate Bantu class, implies, even unintentionally, that within Bantu language philosophy and social thought, inanimate objects only occur in classes 1/2 when they are treated by its speakers as semantically human or animate beings. If we extend this philosophy of Bantu language to God, the capitalized *Mungu* of class 1 MU1, he or she becomes semantically or metaphorically no more than a human, animal or insect being. Semantic assignment rules in Bantu classes contain, therefore, negative social implications for Bantu speakers. For a linguist, (3) affirms, directly or by inference, that the morphological affixes that words of classes 1/2 MU1/WA bear reflect a social reality

such that inanimate denoting lexical items in the classes connote, semantically or metaphorically, human or animal or insect beings. The formulators of (3) did not foresee this kind of reading of the rule, namely it allows for possible misinterpretation and misrepresentation of Bantu thought and Bantu world view. Davidson (1975, p. 21) has observed that,

What makes interpretation possible, then, is the fact that we can dismiss *a priori* the chance of massive error. A theory of interpretation cannot be correct that makes a man assent to very many false sentences: it must generally be the case that a sentence is true when a speaker holds it to be. So far as it goes, it is in favour of a method of interpretation that it counts a sentence true just when speakers hold it to be true. But of course, the speaker may be wrong; and so may the interpreter. So in the end what must be counted in favour of a method of interpretation is that it puts the interpreter in general agreement with the speaker: according to the method, the speaker holds a sentence true under specified conditions, and these conditions obtain, in the opinion of the interpreter, just when the speaker holds the sentence to be true.

An interpreter ought to take the speaker's view of what is true in his or her language into account in writing a grammar. For example, the Waswahili and Bantu do not hold the view that strings containing lexical words or phrases which mean *dolls*, *cigarette butts*, *banana shoots*, *young of water lily*, etc. are also semantically or metaphorically human, or animal, or insect beings just because they bear formal morphological affixes of Bantu classes 1/2. In the same way, the Waswahili and Bantu do not hold the view that strings containing lexical words or phrases which mean animate beings are also semantically or metaphorically inanimate objects just because they bear formal morphological affixes of Bantu that do not belong to classes 1/2. In my view, the exceptions and multi-layered motivations used to account for animacy in linguistics also allow its negative consequences to go unchecked (Comrie, 1989).

Secondly, to contain the negative implications in (3), Bantuists and

linguists have excluded inanimate denoting words of classes 1/2 from all Narrow Bantu grammar books. Kiswahili grammar books, for example, are packaged to support (3) at the expense of any counterexample. The practice began with the first Kiswahili grammar of 1850. Learners leave school unaware that there is major gap and anomaly in the received grammar. Later on, when the graduate finds entries of inanimate terms with classes 1/2 affixes in dictionaries, linguists assure them they are exceptions and a mere handful of words. Surely, the problem is not whether the words are a mere handful in classes 1/2. The question is how, given (3), inanimate denoting nouns generate animate concords in Kiswahili. The most logical answer, per (3), is that Bantu speakers believe that the words denote and connote semantical or metaphorical animate beings. In my view, we should put an end to a rule that permits a cynical linguistic interpretation and use of language material.

6. Conclusion

I have demonstrated in this study that morphological affixes do not necessarily determine the animacy of nouns in Bantu, and rightly so, since morphological units are really grammatical elements without causal lexical signification. The fact that morphs have meaning, and have taxonomic functions, is a matter of use and contingent necessity. I have also shown that there are inanimate nouns in the so-called animate classes of Bantu. In addition, we have seen that animate nouns may generate inanimate concords in strings. A good interpretation of language is the key to cultural and linguistic understanding. And so, firstly, a deficient semantic rule should not be propped up through selective grammatical teaching and the exclusion of vital information, and secondly, a deficient semantic rule that could be misused or abused ought to be replaced by one devoid of controversy.

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Assibi A. Amidu
Department of Language and Communication Studies
Norwegian University of Science and Technology
N-7491 Trondheim, Norway
E-mail: assibi.amidu@hf.ntnu.no

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