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Speaker-Selected Noun Class

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Noun class is an integral part of many languages the world over. The distinctions that determine what class different nouns belong to can vary greatly, such as how European, Afro-Asiatic, and Indic languages use a sex-based gender system, how Algonquian and many other North American languages using an animacy-based system—Navajo in particular uses shape and consistency in addition to animacy—and, particular to this paper, how Bantu have up to over 20 noun classes that draw all sorts of distinctions. The unifying factor among all these disparate systems is the way in which they each affect the grammar of their respective languages. At its simplest, noun class is a system of agreement or concord that aids in referent tracking and reinforces syntactic relationships. Different syntactic relationships will be reinforced by different languages, but they all use some form of agreement. Adjectives, for instance, may agree with their head nouns in class, determiners may similarly agree with their complement nouns, and verbs may agree with their arguments in class as well. The first 2 of these basic sorts of agreement can be observed in example (1), and the third in example (2):

- (1) a. *ne blauw-e man.* (Flemish)
 M.INDF.ART blue-M man[M]
 ‘a blue man.’
- b. *e blauw-Ø manne-ke.*
 N.INDF.ART blue-N man-DIM[N]
 ‘a little blue man.’
- (2) a. *Hu katab-a.* (Arabic)
 3ms write.PST-3ms
 ‘He wrote.’
- b. *Hi katab-at.*
 3fs write.PST-3fs
 ‘She wrote.’

Meanwhile, referent tracking is accomplished by using proforms that agree in class with their referents. Observe how the pronoun usage changes the meaning between examples (3a-b), and how (3c) is ambiguous when class cannot be used to distinguish between the referents:

- (3) a. *John_M saw Jane_F and he_M liked her_F.*
- b. *John_M saw Jane_F and she_F liked him_M.*
- c. *John_M saw Jane_F and they_C liked them_C.*

In examples (3a-b), the class agreement patterns bring a level of redundancy that allows listeners to fill in the gaps should they mishear or not catch something. For instance, in example (3a), if the listener were to not catch the name ‘Jane’, then the use of ‘her’ later in the sentence would signal that the position of ‘Jane’ is filled by a feminine referent, which may be enough to figure out that the referent is Jane in the given context. Likewise, in example (1b), if the listener were to not catch the diminutive suffix on *manneke*, then the article and adjective marking would inform them that *man* has likely been diminutised.

Recall that noun class is usually conceptualised to be drawn across some sort of semantic distinction, at least after a fashion. As previously mentioned, Indo-European languages like to use a sex-based gender noun class system, as evidence by my use of the terms ‘common’, ‘neuter’, and ‘feminine’ in describing examples (1) and (3). However, this semantic distinction quickly begins to break down when looking more closely. For instance, why is *manneke* considered neuter when it could refer to the same entity as masculine *man* could? And peering deeper, why would 2 near synonymous nouns in Dutch/Flemish, *hoofd* and *kop*, both broadly meaning ‘head’, have different genders (the former neuter, the latter common) when their semantic fields are near perfect overlaps in some dialects? This is all to say that noun class is inherent to the noun. Whilst logical semantic distinctions may be able to be drawn in many systems, such as words to describe male humans usually existing in a noun class contrary to that for female humans in languages with sex-based gender systems, the class itself is not necessarily semantically assigned and is instead a feature of the noun itself. Work published by Morrison (2011, 2018) challenges this basic notion that noun class is necessarily an inherent feature of a noun in describing how Bena speakers may assign noun class, rather than the nouns assigning their own class.

I discovered Morrison’s grammar of Bena (2011), a Bantu language spoken in southwestern Tanzania, after reddit user CaoimhinOg referenced the paper in a comment under a post of mine that details an introductory grammar to Varamm (Soetaert, 2022), a conlang of mine I continue to develop. The reddit user specifically noted that the noun class system in Varamm reminded them of the system in Bena. Before reading Morrison’s work, I also co-developed a different conlang, D!odzäsä, as part of a speedlang challenge with reddit user PastTheStarryVoids (2022) that took heavy inspiration from Nguni languages, a subfamily of the Bantu languages that includes Zulu and Xhosa, and inadvertently arrived at some similar features described by Morrison in Bena. I have been yet unable to find any sort of linguistic description of anything similar to the speaker-assigned noun class described in Morrison’s work on Bena, aside from my own con-linguistic descriptions, so Bena appears to be an outlier in this respect with the feature able to be written off as a quirk particular to Bena. However, through my con-linguistics on conlangs I developed before ever reading any work on Bena, I mean to demonstrate that speaker-assigned noun class may be broader than a Bena-specific quirk, and that, if I can begin to develop such systems as a novelty within the linguistic playground of my own conlanging, then perhaps similar systems are present in other natural languages (natlangs), even beyond the broad foundations that Bantu provides Bena.

To start, I will review noun class in Bena, before detailing the similar features in Varamm & D!odzäsä. Morrison finds 19 noun classes in Bena which are marked via obligatory prefixation and trigger concord with other elements in the noun phrase through prefixing the same class morpheme the head noun takes (2011). Also, in typical Bantu fashion, plural marking is often accomplished through noun class substitution. Example (4) exhibits this concord as well as this plural class substitution:

- (4) a. Mw-ana mu-debe. (Bena)
 CL1-child CL1-small
 ‘Small child.’
- b. Va-na va-debe.
 CL2-child CL2-small
 ‘Small children.’

Subject marking is also accomplished on the verb with the same prefixation that elements in the noun phrase take, as can be seen in example (5):

- (5) Va-na va-i-kin-a. (Bena)
 CL2-child CL2-PRS-play-FV
 ‘The children are playing.’

These 19 noun classes roughly align with semantic domains, and Morrison notes that they align with the other Bantu languages (2011). For instance, classes 1 and 2 are for human, animate nouns, however a few human nouns, such as *hyaali* ‘infant’, belong to class 7 (2011), which shows that noun class still broadly operates as a feature of the noun; classes 5/6 is also particularly difficult to semantically define with many disparate nouns included in the class (2011). However, Bena accomplishes an extensive degree of derivation and nominalisation through the respective substitution and addition of the class prefixes (2011). These alternations can be seen in examples (6-7):

- (6) a. hi-gwiingwi (Bena)
 CL7-centipede
 ‘average-sized centipede’
 b. li-gwiingwi
 CL5-centipede
 ‘large-sized centipede’
 c. ha-gwiingwi
 CL12-centipede
 ‘small-sized centipede’
- (7) a. -debe (Bena)
 -small
 ‘small.’
 b. wu-debe
 CL14-small
 ‘smallness’

In example (6), the class 7 prefix for small animals in (6a) is substituted with the class 5 prefix for large animals in (6b) to produce an augmentative form, and it is conversely substituted with the class 12 prefix for diminutives in (6c) to produce a diminutive form. Meanwhile, the addition of the class 14 prefix with the adjective *-debe* in example (7) is able to derive a noun with the meaning ‘the quality of X’. This productive substitution and addition of noun class prefixes in Bena is foundational to Bena’s speaker-assigned noun classes.

Morrison describes how the particular noun classes used in class substitution was variable beyond the derivational uses touched on above. Specifically, this variable noun class usage is used to accomplish referent tracking between default like-class nouns, at least in part (2011). Example (8) shows how two different referents of the noun stem *-ngodofu* ‘frog’ are distinguished from each other through class substitution:

- (8) A-ha-ngodofu ha-doodo i-li-ngodofu li-komi (Bena)
 AUG.12-CL12-frog CL12-small AUG.5-CL5-frog CL5-big
 na-li li-bwa li-li baho na li-gobe.
 and-CL5 CL5-dog CL5-COP here and CL5-turtle
 ‘The little frog, the big frog, and the dog are here with the turtle.’

This class substitution also attaches semantic connotations to referents (2011), allows speakers to speak as a character in a story, and it allows for other nouns to be used as proforms of the referent (2018). The connotative use is illustrated in example (9):

- (9) a. li-sude (Bena)
 CL5-rabbit
 ‘rabbit’
 b. gu-sude
 CL20-rabbit
 ‘naughty rabbit’

Example (9) shows how the default noun class might be switched out not to aid in referent tracking, but to make a comment about the referent; here, class 20, which is an augmentative noun class, is used to attach a derogatory connotation to the referent, a semantic connotation Morrison notes is attached to the class (2011). Class 20, together with classes 12/13, also do not inherently contain any nouns and are used solely for augmentative and diminutive derivation, respectively, among other connotative uses (2011). These default empty noun classes may contribute to the ease in which Bena accomplishes noun-class referent tracking. Because Morrison notes that the way these pragmatic and semantic noun class substitutions differ from speaker to speaker and from context to context (2018), it would seem that these substitutions are entirely speaker determined, which is to say that Bena exhibits speaker-selected noun class.

As a partially Bantu-inspired conlang, D!odzäsä makes use of some similar patterns that Bena does. Central to this paper, it has a similarly robust class system marked with obligatory prefixes. Although D!odzäsä draws different semantic distinctions, the structure of the system is largely similar and D!odzäsä uses these noun classes in much the same way Bena does in deriving nouns from other nouns through class substitution. Example (10) shows derivations of *η!okimur* ‘small falling object’ through this method. Refer to the appendix for the novel glossing abbreviations used here.

- (10) a. *šo-kimur* (D!odzäsä)
 LIQ-falling_object
 ‘waterfall’
 b. *zij-kimur*
 LSTR-falling_object
 ‘spark’
 c. *!wha-kimur*
 NAT-falling_object
 ‘shooting star’

Like Bena, and other Bantu languages, D!odzäsä also uses its class prefixes in concord, and has its verbs agree in class with its arguments (though not necessarily through the same sort of prefixation), as shown in example (11):

- (11) Dzlä-ψux-os-!wlo=li †wo-x-ätlus-kof †wo-rin. (D!odzäsä)
 PROG.REAL-play-3.ANPL-APL=VIS ANPL-E-dragon-DIST.DEM ANPL-five
 ‘(I see) those five dragons are playing (a game).’

Despite the similarities to Bena in what Morrison might term as canonical class usage (2018), D!odzäsä does not go so far as to use its noun classes pragmatically and only uses the well-defined semantics of its classes in extensive derivation. Although, due to the strong semantic definitions of its noun classes, D!odzäsä does allow for the connotative usage illustrated in example (9) after some sort of fashion. The conlang does not exhibit the same sort of on-the-fly connotative class substitution that Morrison describes in Bena, but the derivational substitution does allow it to get close, such as in, say, elevating a human noun to a legendary noun to connotate a certain degree of reverence for the referent. However, the usage of this class substitution remains rigidly in place with the two nouns being regarded as separate lexemes, rather than one a modified instance of the other. This is to say that the story might contrast two referents by referring to one with the human and the other with the legendary class, similar to what’s shown in example (8), but only because one of them was already elevated to the legendary class and the nouns are canonically separated.

What I’ve described here for how D!odzäsä works was developed before reading anything on Bena. The similarities are largely due to the Bantu influence on D!odzäsä, but without any meaningful, in-depth knowledge on the Bantu languages beyond researching broad phonological tendencies and the presence of the large class system, my conlanging partner and I only arrived at the derivational and connotative similarities through our own innovation upon the basic feature of semantically-motivated noun class prefixes, likely just as Bena speakers did with the tools they had at their disposal. This may point to the speaker-assigned noun class present in Bena to simply be an innovation upon the Bantu condition, but I’ve managed to arrive at something similar through my own innovation.

To see how speaker-assigned noun class might be achieved beyond simply innovating upon Bantu structures, we need peer into Vamm. Whilst Vamm does take heavy influence from a handful of natural languages, none of them make great use of noun class and Vamm’s noun class system is wholly original, being generation three of a system developed over the course of two past failed conlanging projects. The semantic distinctions were originally based on origin, that is, where the nouns are most commonly found, with three classes for three broad ranges, and a fourth class for nouns that travel between these ranges. These different noun classes have also each acquired particular associated connotations beyond simply marking origin. Curiously, though, unlike Bena and the similar Bantu-flavoured D!odzäsä, Vamm has no overt or obligatory marking on its nouns but still makes use of class substitution in derivation, with nearly half the lexicon formed this way. To compensate for this lack of overt marking, particles in the verb phrase, case prefixes, definite suffixes, and some modifiers agree for noun class. Derivation through class substitution can be seen in example (12), wherein the class of *torranng*, which broadly refers to items commonly used in trade, is specified by class-agreeing definite suffixes. Refer to the appendix for the novel glossing abbreviations and more on the semantics of each noun class.

- (12) a. torranng-etr (Varamm)
 trade_good-ARB.DEF
 ‘the pottery’
- b. torranng-gî
 trade_good-BAS.DEF
 ‘the fabric’
- c. torranng-amm
 trade_good-TRNS.DEF
 ‘the coinage’

The connotative usage of noun class in Bena and D!odzäsä is near synonymous with this noun-noun zero-derivation in Varamm demonstrated above, but Varamm does not exhibit the pragmatic class substitution that Bena does in example (8), at least not in its common nouns. Varamm does exhibit something of the like in its pronouns, though. As one might expect, Varamm maintains its 4 noun classes in its third person pronouns, but it also assigns noun class to its first and second person pronouns. Initially, this developed as a repair strategy that co-opted the third person subject class agreement in the verb phrase to agree with person as well. By default, the second person was assigned class 4, the transversal noun class, as shown in example (13):

- (13) a. Ramm tre zor. (Varamm)
 hum[NPFV] PRS.TRNS 3s.TRNS.ABS
 ‘They are humming.’
- b. Ramm tre zosr.
 hum[NPFV] PRS.TRNS 2s.ABS[TRNS]
 ‘You are humming.’

However, a system has evolved that allows for substitution of the second person noun class to aid in referent tracking.

Just as the third person pronouns trigger agreement in the verb phrase, so too can second person pronouns to distinguish between multiple addressees. This system was initially inspired by the indirect second person pronouns in Formor’s C’ââr (2022). Rather than distinguish between a primary or direct addressee and other addressees, however, addressees are instead distinguished by noun class in Varamm, similar to how referents can be distinguished in Bena. What makes this system an example of speaker assigned noun class is that the class substitution of the second person pronoun is spontaneous and can be governed by different factors. For instance, the second person class agreement might mean to distinguish between a respected addressee in the summital class and another addressee in the default transversal class, but in another context the same referents might respectively be in the default transversal class and the basal class if the distinction that the latter referent is a foreigner is contextually more important than the former’s being a respected individual. This spontaneous class substitution, in conjunction with valency changing operations to ensure the second person pronouns remain in position to trigger verbal agreement, is shown in example (14) wherein (14a) places more respect on the first addressee, and (14b) instead marks the second addressee as a foreigner. Again, refer to the appendix for novel glossing abbreviations.

(14) a. Nezr zesong-ng **trerr** la-notr-etr esr_i kwer (Varamm)
 CNTG harvest-INSTR PRS.SUM ARB.ABS-food-ARB.DEF 2s.ERG DEO

ve nezr zrûr-am **tre** la-notr-etr esr_j kwer.
 and CNTG COOK-INSTR PRS.TRNS ARB.ABS-food-ARB.DEF 2s.ERG DEO
 ‘You_i ought to have collected the food, and thou_j ought to have cooked the food.’

b. Nezr zesong-ng **tre** la-notr-etr esr_i kwer
 CNTG harvest-INSTR PRS.TRNS ARB.ABS-food-ARB.DEF 2s.ERG DEO

ve nezr zrûr-am **twa** la-notr-etr esr_j kwer.
 and CNTG COOK-INSTR PRS.BAS ARB.ABS-food-ARB.DEF 2s.ERG DEO
 ‘Thou_i ought to have collected the food, and you_j ought to have cooked the food.’

Likewise, the same spontaneous substitution may exist in some of the first person pronouns if the speaker wishes to identify themselves in a particular way salient to the conversation. This may be to establish in what capacity they speak, such as identifying themselves with the basal class as a seafarer, as shown in example (15):

(15) a. Vîtr **tvetr** qo-nû-rr mwost. (Varamm)
 know PRS.ARB SUM.ABS-way-SUM.DEF 1p.EX.ERG
 ‘We know the way.’

b. Vîtr **twa** qo-nû-rr mwost.
 know PRS.BAS SUM.ABS-way-SUM.DEF 1p.EX.ERG
 ‘As seafarers, we know the way.’

Although Varamm does not make use of pragmatic noun class substitution as pervasively as Bena does, it still manages to accomplish something similar in its pronouns for all persons, however limited. The third person pronouns have always maintained the semantic distinctions inherent to each noun class and attribute their connotations to their referents, but the other persons have begun to do this as well, irrespective of what Bena accomplishes with its pragmatic noun class system. In fact, the class substitution in the first and second persons in Varamm may even be something that Bena cannot accomplish as it still agrees for person separate from class, unlike Varamm which does not have any dedicated person marking.

Through summarising Bena noun class and the pragmatic uses thereof, and through describing similar processes in my own conlangs, I hope to have demonstrated that speaker-assigned noun class may not only be something unique to Bena, but may be accomplished through other means than innovating upon the Bantu condition. If I managed to arrive at noun class patterns recalling that of Bena, especially in a language like Varamm, which takes no influence from Bantu languages whatsoever, and thereby does not have any of the same starting tools that D!odzäsä has to approach Bantu-like speaker-assigned noun class, then it may be that languages within other language families have arrived at similar pragmatic uses for their noun class system that are yet underrepresented, if not yet undocumented. Speaker-assigned noun class, or even just derivational noun class, are both fascinating features that I was surprised to learn exist outside of a conlang in natural language. There’s an old adage in the conlanging community: a natlang already did it even worse. If one natlang like Bena can do it worse, as it were, then why can’t others?

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Appendix

ARB	Arboreal, describes nouns from the slopes of mountains, as well as mundane or familiar concepts and entities.
BAS	Basal, describes nouns from the plains or oceans, as well as nouns associated with civilisation and foreign concepts or entities.
CNTG	Contiguous tense marker, situates an action within a moment immediately adjacent to the moment of speech, or immediately adjacent to a temporal adverbial phrase.
INSTR	Instrumental voice or goal focus, promotes an indirect object to subject position.
LEG	Legendary singular, describes objects and figures in myth and folklore.
LIQ	Liquid singular, describes liquids.
LSTR	Lustrous singular, describes objects that emit or reflect light.
NAT	Natural phenomenon singular, describes celestial bodies, weather, and fire.
SUM	Summital, describes nouns from around the peaks of mountains, as well as volant or aspirational entities, together with virtuous, spiritual, or religious concepts.
TRNS	Transversal, describes nouns that regularly travel between the zones described by the summital, arboreal, and basal noun classes, as well as describing nouns associated with trade and roaming or dispersal.