

# Noun class prefixes and early Bantu borrowing in East Africa

Maarten Mous, SocioBaGs, Aix-Marseille, 26 June 2025



Universiteit Leiden  
The Netherlands

# Added pfx on early loans

## 1. gwereta ‘he-goat’

> ngule/ata with added nasal pfx class 9

> vulata (8) Luguru

> i-vulati, di-vulata; mvulata 9.

> ngulati with added nasal pfx class 9

## 2. yaqamba ‘bull’

> njagamba 9 with added nasal pfx class 9

kambaku 9 > ili-kambaku 5

...

### 3. gonda ‘sheep’

> ŋgonda > ŋonda 9

> ondo regular for G-loss

gondi > gondi 5 > ŋondzi 9 with added nasal pfx

gondi > kondi > li-kondi

> ŋondi 9 with added nasal pfx 9 > ri-  
ŋondi 5 | > gi-ŋondi 7

...

4. kwer / kol 'sheep' > nkolo 9 with added nasal pfx 9  
kwer > fwele > mfwele 9 with add nasal pfx 9  
>mbele(le) > li-mbelele 5 with added pfx 5
5. moori 'calf'  
>moori 9 > ki-moori 7 with added pfx
6. dama > ndama 9 with added pfx

...

7. tigidi ‘donkey’ > ndigiri 9 with added pfx  
> ensikili | > isikili
8. dakw ‘donkey’ > ndakwi 9 with added nasal  
pfx 9
9. tasa ‘barren’ > tasa > ntasa 9 with added nasal  
pfx 9
10. iliba ‘milk’ > iZiBa reinterpreted as class 5 >  
shift to 6 ma-ZiBa

...

11. sakame 'leakage' > sakame/a 'blood' > nǝ/sakame  
with added nasal pfx

12. arigwa 'banana' > e-Rigo initial vowel reinterpreted  
as prefix 5

13. dima 'eleusine' > -duma 'maize' > li-duma 5, ma-  
duma 6 in Greater Luyia

(> tama) > mu-tama 3 'millet' with added m(u)- pfx  
3

> ntama with added nasal pfx 9 > mu-ntama 3

Nyaturu

...

14. dob > tupa 'rhino' > m-tupa 3 with added pfx 3  
> u-tupa

15. icabu 'louse' > < caWa CHAGA, Seuta-ECB >  
ncaWa in Sabaki-NECB

16. teeri 'cloud of dust' > tiiri CKB  
> ki-luli 7 with added pfx CHAGA  
> di-luli 5 with added/replace pfx di- in Kagulu  
> oru-teri 11 in Nyanza

...

17.fanku 'hoof' > i-hũngũ 5 Kikuyu

> hanko 5 Shambaa

> imbaak.ayu 9 Tiriki-Luyia with added pfx

20.kolo 'hoe' > e/a/o-koromo in Mara

> mu-kolo 3 with added pfx in Mwika

21.omi 'cow hump' > m-homi 3 in Southern Highlands

but li-homi in Ndamba G52 SH

22.luk 'war' > ubu-lugu 14 in F, SH, with added pfx but

li-lugu in Wanji G66

...

23.gele ‘foot’ > ki-gere 7 with added pfx in  
West Nyanza | lu-kele 11 with added pfx in  
Greater Luyia

24.yakwa ‘cattle’ > njeku 9 with added pfx

25.tangina ‘kid’ > ntangina 9 with added pfx  
CKB, Pare

26.subeni ‘ewe’ > subeni 9 / 5 in CHAGA, East  
Nyanza never added pfx

# Into which noun classes?

- Most: 9 (often added nasal), 5, 3  
Most (17/44) loans are domestic animals
- also: 7 11 14

# Non-Bantu > EA Bantu (LHEAf)

what we (+Nina van der Vlugt) did and are doing:

inventory of proposals (bias!): Ehret, Nurse, a.o.  
selection of promising cases 740 proposals >153  
items; + some additional  
building on Philippson 2013  
select for at least 3 Bantu language groups in EA  
> 44

# Context

- Bantu entry in East Africa roughly 2000 bp
- Great Lakes region crucial but not yet for us
- Cushitic: early in Kenya, late in Tanzania; other South Cushitic presence in K-Tz Mountains, Dahalo, Yaaku
- Nilotic: South, East and West, in that chronological order from North through the funnel Lake Turkana – Uganda
- intense contact pre-Tanzanian Cushitic and South Nilotic in East Nyanza (Lake Victoria)

...

- Hypothesis of East Nyanza as area where Bantu entered EA (K+Tz) and borrowed SC and SN words that travelled with them
- Only those groups can have SC or SN loans, or through Bantu>Bantu spread
- Other contact zones: KTz Mountain Cushitic (and pre-Dahalo) for Taita-Kilimanjario-Pare area
- But also Kuliak and “Earlier Eastern African” were sources for lexicon

# Bantu borrowing and noun class

- Into class with zero (or only vowel) as allomorph of noun class prefix
- sometimes reinterpretation of initial syllable of the source as noun class pfx, especially ki-?!  
?!

# parallel lexicon unconscious creation

<u>Ma'á IMb</u>	<u>meaning</u>		<u>Mbugu NMb</u>
<i>m-hé</i>	person	<i>class 1</i>	<b>m-nhtu</b>
<i>va-hé</i>	people	<i>class 2</i>	<b>va-nhtu</b>
<i>m-harégha</i>	arm	<i>class 3</i>	<b>m-kóno</b>
<i>mi-harégha</i>	arms	<i>class 4</i>	<b>mi-kóno</b>
<i>vu-basá</i>	face	<i>class 14.1</i>	<b>vu-shó</b>
<i>ma-basá</i>	faces	<i>class 6</i>	<b>ma-shó</b>
<i>lu-nábo</i>	rib	<i>class 11</i>	<b>lu-vaju</b>
<i>nábo</i>	ribs	<i>class 10</i>	<b>mbaju</b>
<i>lu-muťú</i>	rope	<i>class 11</i>	<b>lu-zíghi</b>
<i>muťú</i>	ropes	<i>class 10</i>	<b>ndíghi</b>
<i>lu-paé</i>	saliva, curse	<i>class 11</i>	<b>lu-té</b>
<i>mh-paé</i>	saliva, curses	<i>class 10</i>	<b>ny-óté</b>
<i>vu-huyé</i>	sorrow	<i>class 14.1</i>	<b>vu-kíva</b>

# Noun class prefix later addition

1900	Bumbuli	Rest	agree ment	meaning
<i>tíhe</i>	<i>tíhe</i>	<i>mtihé</i>	3	moon, month
<i>naró</i>	<i>naró</i>	<i>mnaró</i>	3	salt
<i>haráza</i>	<i>haráza</i>	<i>mharáza</i>	3	river
<i>lamé</i>	<i>(m-)lamé</i>	<i>mlamé</i>	3	lie
<i>basá</i>	<i>basá</i>	<i>vubasá</i>	14.1	face

# Replacement in language shift

- Mbugwe example:
- **chumbi** (10) < Swahili **chumvi**.
- Original Mbugwe **tónyo** (10)
  
- **chatu** 9 python | **ɲaroroda** 9
- **luga** 9/10 language | **ndoseka** 9
- **motómwa** 1/2 slave | **mosombwa** 1/2
- **mpiti** 1/2 hyena | **mólánda** 1/2
- **kɪbókɔ** 7/8 hippopotamus | **mwina**
  
- **PS: nsiyé** 9/10 fish; also **siyé**

- Was loan word adaptation different then?

# Projection to past?

- problematic in principle but what else?
- different sociolinguistic and political circumstances but limitations of historical sociolinguistics where there is no writing
  - borrow from colonial languages
  - different economies and societies
- boundaries of languages since colonial period: tribe formation. Both presence and absence of organised central power

# Kinds of borrowing

- additive, new concepts
- replacive
- additive to existing word  
[EA tribe = amalgamation of clans]
  
- What were new concepts?  
Revolution in animal husbandry
- Intense contact ('steal', 'refuse')

# Developments in pfx and class

- Apparent chronology
- *gondu* > CKB-Kikuyu *gondu* 9/5 and input for *ka-gondu*
- > *ɲondu* with added pfx and Meinhof's rule and now C1? As in Meru *ka-ɲondu*
- Apparent:  
*nda* 'louse' > *gata* 'small louse' (Englebretson & Jessica Li 2015:23)
- Kikuyu adds nasals to many recent loans from Swahili in class 9 and removes it too for shift to **ka-**

# Case study 1: gondi/u ‘sheep’

Source: Fehn: a relative of proto-Khoe-Kwadi  
\**g(w)uu* ‘sheep’ with m.sg suffix *-ndi*  
(allomorph after nasal vowels, assume *gũũ-ndi*  
‘sheep’)

Alternative/intermediate source: pTzC  
\**gwaandi/u* ‘ram’ *goondi* in Burunge,  
\**gwaandu* in NTzC. *wa>o* Burunge innovation;  
*i>u* irregular, possibly reinterpretation of  
number sfx. Retention if related to pEOT \**wan*  
‘ram’. Limited distribution in Cushitic.  
Difference in semantics.

# Bantu attestations

- nearly all with round vowel rather than *wa* in V1
- but *fwandi* 'he-goat' in Taita, possibly a spirantized version of *gʷandi*.
- some groups *u* as V2, most *i* as V2: different sources?
- Central Kenya Bantu: \**ŋondu* 9 with added nasal and Meinhof's rule *ŋg>ŋ*

...

CHAGA has the root in 5/ 6 *i-/ma-* and no initial N added. [complex history]

NECB: *i-(η)gonji* (5) regular palatalisation of C2. Different realisations of C1 point to assignment to 9 and later shift to 5 OR borrowing from CKB into 5 OR assignment to 5 and shift to 9 + internal reanalysis (below)

Most of Ruvu (the bulk of NECB) has a different Cushitic transfer

...

Nyamwezi+: not, instead other Cushitic transfer  
Corridor: *(i)ŋonzi* (9) with added nasal

Southern Highlands: not, 3 sporadic later Bantu transfers

Not further south

...

East Nyanza: North Mara & Suguti: **ci/iri+*ḡondi***

History of class 9 with added nasal and shift/assignment to 5 or 7 but South Mara: a-  
***ḡondu*** separate source and transfer event. All late developments.

Geater Luyia: ***li-ḡondi*** borrowed into 5 with CV pfx

Not further in Uganda.

# Giryama E72

ŋon<sup>d</sup>zi (Möhlig 2022)

but end 19th C (Taylor 1891)

**gondzi**, pl **ma-gondzi** 'sheep' +

**ŋondzi** 'sheep collectively' (Meinhof law)

one sheep: mbuzi ya ŋondzi (plur. za ŋondzi), as distinguished from mbuzi ya pee, a goat; ka-gondzi lambs of both sexes'; pl u-gondzi) (Taylor 1891)

Derivational shift to 9 for collective and later reinterpretation as default = one of the mechanisms of diachronic noun class shift

# chronology through sound laws

- Gogo **mvulati** 9/10 ‘he-goat’ from **gulati**: attributed to class 9 and addition of nasal after spirantisation of **g**.
- **fulati** (9?) in Claus 1911
- **ivulati** (5) in Rugemalira (2008)
- **mvulati** 9/10 ‘he-goat’ Rossel (1989) Two v’s v1 results in **mb** v2 in **mv** in 9. f<>mv difference East and West Gogo.

# \* SN kweR ‘he-goat’, kolo

- **Hehe** G62: ilikolo/amakolo  
Bena G63: inólo  
Kinga G65: inolo  
**Pangwa** G64: Pangwa nolo  
Wanji G66: nholo ‘sheep’  
Sangu: inxolo
- **Corridor Mwika**  
Pimbwe M11: imfwele  
Rungwa M12: infwele  
**Fipa** M13: infwele  
Rungu M14: nfwele  
Mambwe M15: infwele
  - **Nyakyusa** M31: fuele

# \* Later addition of nasal pfx

- Gogo
- Claus 1911: **kambaku** 'bull' (9) (interpreted)
- Rossel : **nkambaku** (9)
- Rugemalira : **ɲhambâ:ko** (9) ~ **ɲhambâ:ku** (5)  
'bull, castrated bull'

# Shift in LUK 'raid' (SN)

Kimbu            **uwu-lugu**; Masele: **wù-lúgù**

Sukuma        **bu-lugu**;

Nyamwezi     **βu-lugu**; **βù-lùgùú**

    Nyaturu    **u-rughu**; [Masele has a reflex of *vita* for  
    Nyaturu]

## 'war' in G60 (TLS)

Wanji G66     **li-lugu**;

Sangu G61    **uwu-lugu**;

# Mechanisms of n.cl. (pfx) change

1. (minor) derivational shift and reinterpretation
2. variation N~- for class 9 pfx and regularisation to added N- [(n)siye 'fish' in Mbugwe
3. “crazy rules”: lexical morphological magnets
4. (loss of distinction in agreement or noun prefix due to phonological rules)

# Lexical morphological magnets

- Enger's (2009) crazy rules
- Productivity: new and uncommon lexemes follow a central lexeme
- Semantic groups in noun class membership common.

# Gogo Rugemalira 2008 Claus 1911

**ng'ombe** [ng'ô:mbe] *n.* cow; bull;  
cattle.

**nyehe** [nyê:he] *n.* suckling calf.

**nzeku** [nzê:ku] *n.* young bull.

**ndama** [ndâ:ma] *n.* calf; heifer.

**nghongolo** [ng'hô:ngolo] *n.* large  
castrated bull.

**ngambako** [ng'hambâ:ko] *n.* bull;  
castrated bull.

-

**ngadada** [ngadá:da] *n.* mature cow.

**mbuguma** [mbugú:ma] *n.* animal  
(goat, cow) ready to be mated.

-

**ng'ombe nhasa** sterile cow

+

**suwate** [suwâ:te] castrated young  
bull. 9/10a

## **Rind *nombe***

–, Saugkalb ♂ ♀ *njdhe*

–, Kalb ♂ *nzdku*

–, Kalb ♀ *ndama*

–, verschnitten *nkóngolo*

–, Bulle *kambaku*

–, Bulle, der später noch  
kastriert wurde *nkalama*

–, ♀ nach dem ersten  
Kalben *ngadada*

–, ♀ nach dem zweiten  
Kalben *mbuguma*

–, ♀ die nie trächtig wurde  
*sāme*

–, ♀ die nie mehr trächtig  
wird *ntāsa*

# Fairly late loan No added nasal

## CHAGA

Mochi: suβeny ‘young female goat’

Kilema: suβenyi ‘young she-goat’

Dawida: subeni (must be loan because of implosive) ‘young ewe’

Rombo-Sud: suβéni ‘jeune chèvre’ (Montaluc)

Rwa: saβana ‘female goat’

Machami: suβana ‘female goat’

Kiwoso: suβana ‘young female goat’

Eastern Kilimanjaro: suβeni

Greater Luyia: Masaba JE31: isubini ‘young she-goat’ (Siertsema 1981), Bukusu  
isubeeni (only these two lg near Kalenjin on Mt Elgon) ‘young female goat’;

Mara: Simbiti: subhéni ‘heifer’ (Mreta).

# Reinterpretation of first syllable

- Luguru G35: **vulati** [8] (TLS) (but ti should go to s in Luguru: late transfer)
- \*iliba 'milk' > i-liba 5 still some lgs> ma-ZiBa 6

# Challenges

- No class indication in word lists
- ilikolo <> injolo 5 <> 9 with augment
- Different adaptations, different transfers
- Or transfer into SH 5, shift to 9, addition of voiceless nasal later voiced
- Mwika transfer from form close to source  
\*kweR with subsequent spirantisation and late adding nasal of class 9

# Conclusion

- Same strategy of zero allomorph at moment of transfer
- Strong tendency to add nasal for class 9
- Further shifts in class memberships with addition of n.cl pfx common
- Few re-interpretations of first syllable (note that the Cushitic or Nilotic sources often have “too many” syllables.