Noun Classes and Agreement in Lutsotso

Hellen Odera & Evaline Osore
Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology

How to cite:

Odera, H. & Osore, E. (2023). Noun Classes and Agreement in Lutsotso. *Journal of Linguistics, Literary, and Communication Studies, 2*(1), 17-27.

Abstract

One of the most noticeable grammatical features of Bantu languages, is the presence of noun classes. Although each noun (or noun stem) in the majority of Bantu languages is classified into one of 15–18 noun classes, Lutsotso language captures 21 classes. While it is frequently hard to distinguish between noun classes semantically, basic meanings or semantic trends of subsets of members may frequently be identified. Lutsotso nouns consist of a noun prefix and a root. The two elements of the Lutsotso nominal are crucial because the prefix, for example, denotes the class. Complex agreement morphology in the noun phrase and the sentence is controlled by class membership, which is indicated morphologically on the noun by a class prefix. As such, the prefix functions as a classifier. Agreement is a type of syntactic connection in which a word's or phrase's inflectional behaviour is dictated by the features of a nominal element to which it is closely connected. Number, person, case, and gender are examples of agreement markers. The class to which the head noun belongs must be reflected throughout the phrase in Bantu languages. This is accomplished through the use of concordial prefixes, which have distinct forms for the parts of speech to which they are attached. There is no discrete number morphology in Bantu languages, but the noun class system mediates number; numerous noun classes are paired according to number, forming singular-plural pairs. The Noun (N) component element of the simple sentence exists as a complex Noun phrase (NP) with nominal qualities indicated by affixes. Accordingly, concord prefixes control and impact the words connected with them in the Lutsotso noun phrase. The study discovered that concord prefixes sustain the grammatical relationship between the head noun and the rest of the noun phrase.

Introduction

This paper looks at the Lutsotso noun classes and agreement. Lutsotso is a dialect of the Oluluhya language, which belongs to the Bantu family of Niger-Congo, Masaba (E.32) (Eberhard et al., 2020). Lutsotso is spoken by the Batsotso people of Kakamega County. The Batsotso live in five areas: Butsotso North, Butsotso South, Butsotso East, Butsotso West, and Butsotso Central. However, for reasons such as economic pursuits, educational goals or family reasons like marriage, some of the

Batsotso speakers might have moved out of Butsotso region and settled elsewhere. According to the 2020 report of the Kenya National Population Census conducted in 2019, the population of Lutsotso speakers in Kakamega County was projected to be 162,822. Luisukha, Luidakho, Lukisa, Luwanga, Lunyala (North), and Lukabras are the Oluluhya languages that border Batsotso. The structure of most Bantu languages, including Lutsotso is agglutinative (Osore, 2017). This indicates that a word in Lutsotso has affixes that convey distinct information such as class, number, and person. The noun class is frequently designated by an affix in various African languages; however, this can be a prefix in one language, a suffix in another, an optional prefix or suffix in another, or both in one language (Odera 2021). The noun is the unit of analysis in this paper and so we will begin by looking at the structure of the Lutsotso nominal followed by a discussion on Lutsotso noun classes. We also discuss agreement in the feature, person, class and number markers. Finally, we discuss the concordial affixes in relation to the noun.

In addition to earlier researchers' observations (Lutz & Kula, 2007; Maw, 1992) that Bantu nouns belong to a class termed as noun class. Okombo (2000), when studying construction procedures in African languages, finds that bound roots are a common feature of Bantu languages.

Morphological features are referred to as inflectional categories (Bauer, 1983; Haspelmath, 2002, Barasa, 2017; 2022). These inflectional categories are number (singular and plural), person, and case agreement. These inflectional categories are also exhibited in Lutsotso language (Odera 2021). To categorize morphological features that constitute noun inflection, this study applies Bauer's (1983) and Haspelmath's (2002) tenet on inflectional morphology theory. The Noun Phrase (NP) is an important structural component of sentences in many languages. Maw (1992) remarks on the integrative foundation of Bantu languages that one of the primary features of Bantu languages is the grouping of nouns into categories based on prefixes. Additionally, these prefixes are employed to bring the many words in a sentence into agreement. They are known as concords when utilized in this manner. Noun prefixes in Lutsotso, as in many Bantu languages, convey information about morphosyntactic categories such as class, number, person, and agreement.

Methodology
The study uses a conceptual framework developed from Bauer and Haspelmath's Inflectional Morphology theory and Chomsky's Standard Theory to accomplish the specified aims. As a native speaker of Lutsotso, most of the material analysed in this study comes from an intuitive understanding and proficiency in the language. However, to concretise the findings, there were extensive conversations with other Lutsotso speakers and the use of relevant secondary material.

Structure of the Lutsotso nominal
When examining the morphological structure of the Lutsotso noun, the morphological parts should be the primary emphasis. As a result, Maho (1999) argues that in the examination of the structure of the noun in a Bantu language, it should be considered as constituting a noun prefix and a root. These parts of the Lutsotso nominal are significant because the prefix, for example, indicates the class. For that reason, the prefix serves as a classifier. As a result, affixes are added to the nominal root to generate the Lutsotso noun. Like the Ekegusii nominal (Basweti, 2005), Lutsotso nominal is realised as either simple or derived. Example 1 and 2 below illustrate two simple nouns.

1a) Singular   Plural
    ɔmu-xana   aβa-xana
    SG-girl   PL-girls
    'girl'   'girls'

b) i-nʄuku   tsi-nʄuku
  SG-nut   PL-nuts
  'nut'   'nuts'

Example 2 shows the derived nominals.

2a) Singular   Plural
   ɔmu-we-ji   a-βe-ji
   SG-dv-sweep PL-dv-sweep
   'sweeper'   'sweepers'

 b) ɔmu-te-ʃi   aβa-te-ʃi
   SG-dv-cook   PL-dv-cook
   'cook'   'cooks'

According to example 1 and 2 above, the Lutsotso noun has three affixes linked to the nominal root: pre-prefix, prefix, and suffix. The prefix is usually found in conjunction with the pre-prefix, which is always tied to the root. The prefix converts a stem into a noun by adding a morphological property such as number or gender (class). Leech and Svartik (1994) examine the idea of agreement, which they call "grammatical concord." Concord means that all grammatical parts of a phrase or sentence agree. As a result, the pre-prefix and prefix are class identifiers that differ in number. Singular noun forms are expressed by prefixes such as (ɔ-mu) and (i-), whereas plural forms are represented by prefixes such as (a-βa) and (tsi-).

Nouns Classes

Quirk (1985) states that nouns can be divided into two major syntactic classes. Count nouns like *book, chair and bottle* and non-count nouns like *bread, grass, warmth and music.* Count nouns can generally be singular or plural (*e.g. tool/tools*). Non-count nouns are inherently singular. (e.g. *equipment*).

Lutsotso nouns realised as symbols for entities such as abstract or concrete, countable or uncountable, animate or inanimate, human or non-human fall into classes distinguished by nominal prefixes. Some of these prefixes are paired to mark numbers but others are not because the item remains the same both in singular and plural form (Osore, 2009). This means that some noun classes may be grouped into two to mark the contrast in several nouns with the same meaning as in Examples 3a-c.

    Singular   Plural
3a) ɔmu-xana   aβa-xana
   SG-girl   PL-girl
   'girl'   'girls'

 b. li-pu:si   ama-pu:si
   SG-cat   PL-cat
   'cat'   'cats'

 c. eʃi-ndu   eβi-ndu
   SG-thing   PL-thing
   'thing'   'things'

Some of the nouns in Lutsotso cannot be thought of in terms of singular and plural as shown in examples 4a-4c.

4a)   ɔβu-heli – love
 b)   ɔβu-suma – ugali
 c)   ha-βundu – place

Based on the examples in (3 and 4) above the study found out that the nouns in Lutsotso may be split into groups called noun classes. The noun classes of Lutsotso are presented in table 1. The standard comparative enumeration (Marten, 2021) was used in class designation.

Table 1: Lutsotso Noun Classes

Class	Prefix	Root	Gloss
1.	ɔmu-	-ndu	Person
2.	aβa-	-ndu	People
3.	ɔmu-	-sa:la	Tree
4.	emi-	-sa:la	Trees
5.	li-	-hemβe	Mango
6.	ama-	-emβe	Mangoes
7.	eʃi-	-ndu	Thing
8.	eβi-	-ndu	Things
9.	i(N)	mɔni	Eye
10.	tsi	mɔni	Eyes
11.	olu	kulu	Range
12.	tsi	ngulu	Ranges
13.	axa	ana	tiny child
14.	ɔru	ana	tiny children
15.	ɔβu	heli	Love
16.	ɔxu	lima	to dig
17.	ha	ngɔ	at home
18.	mu	nzu	in the house
19.	xu	nzu	on the house
20.	ɔku	ndu	very big person
21.	emi	ndu	very big people

Source: modified from Osore 2009:31

We can see that 20 pairs of nouns in classes 1–14 differ in singular and plural because nouns in these classes are countable nouns. Class 15 (ɔβu-class) contains abstract nouns like oβuheli 'love' and collective nouns like 'ɔβusuma' (stiff porridge) that are only encountered in the single form. Class 16 comprises verbs in their infinitive forms employed as nouns, such as ɔxulima, which means "to dig," and ɔxweya, which means "to sweep." In Lutsotso, classes 17, 18, and 19 are locative prefixes that function as prepositions. As a result, these prefixes do not denote a number. We also see that the ɔmu-prefixes of class 1 and class 3 are similar. The distinction is because they do not share the same concord prefixes, as seen in table 2. Class 1's concord prefix is U, whereas class 3's concord prefix is Ku. Class 20/21 refers to extremely big things such as *okundu* which means "very big person," or *okucina* which means "very big stone".

Structural description of Lutsotso noun classes
The Lutsotso noun class system, like any other Bantu language (Basweti 2005), is based on a semantic requirement in the sense that classification is inspired by what the items(s)/object(s) are in the natural

world. Noun classes are often analysed as a form of nominal classification system and seen as belonging to the same domain as grammatical gender systems (Marten, 2021).

Class 1/2 nouns
These noun classes are normally represented by prefixes (omu-)/(aβa). omu- is a singular prefix marker. The two classes consist of human terms and other kinship genealogical terms as example 5 below illustrates:

Singular	Plural
5a) ɔmu-xana	aβa-xana
SG-girl	PL-girl
'girl'	'girls'
b) ɔmu-sjani	aβa-sjani
SG-boy	PL-boy
'boy'	'boys'

Class 3/4 nouns
This class 3/4 is also known as *ɔmu-emi* class and it is marked by prefixes *ɔmu-* in singular and *emi-* in plural. This class includes names of trees, plants, some parts of the body and some objects made from trees. This is illustrated in Example 6 below:

Singular	Plural
6a) ɔmu-xɔnɔ	emi-xɔnɔ
SG-hand	PL-hand
'hand'	'hands'
b) ɔmu-kanda	emi-kanda
SG-crowd	PL-crowd
'crowd'	'crowds'
c) ɔmu-sa:la	emi-sa:la
SG-tree	PL-tree
'tree'	'trees'

Class 5/6
The class 5/6 nouns are introduced by prefixes *li-* as the singular prefix marker and *ama-* as the plural prefix marker. These classes comprise a variety of nouns, which include body parts, objects and names of animals, as example 7 below illustrates:

Singular	Plural
7a) li-hemβe	ama-hemβe
SG-mango	PL-mango
'mango'	'mangoes'
b) li-chungu	ama-chungu
SG-rat	PL-rat
'rat'	'rats'

Class 7/8 nouns
Nouns in this class are characterized by the prefixes eʃi-/eβi-. These nouns usually indicate man-made things. Example 8 explains;

Singular	Plural
8a) eʃi-ndu	eβi-ndu

SG-thing	PL-thing
'thing'	'things'

b) eʃi-komβe   eβi-komβe
   SG-cup   PL-cup
   'cup'   'cups'

9a) i-mɔni   tsi-mɔni
    SG-eye   PL-eyes
    'eye'   'eyes'

b) i-mβusti   tsi-mβusti
   SG-goat   PL-goats
   'goat'   'goats'

Class 9/10

Nouns in this class are characterized by the prefixes *i(N)* and *tsi.* These nouns usually indicate parts of a body or names animals as illustrated in the following examples.

Class 11/12 nouns

This pair of nouns is characterized by the prefixes *ɔlu-* and *tsi-*. *Olu-* is the singular prefix marker while *tsi-* is the plural prefix marker. This class is usually representable of names of parts of the body as in (10a), *ɔlulimi* (tongue), (10b) *ɔlube:re* (breast), names of things made from trees as in (10c) *ɔlukwi* (firewood), (10d) *ɔlusaka* (branch).

Nouns in this class also indicate things that are long or tall in proportion to their width like in (10e) *ɔlusa:la* (stick) (10f) *ɔlukulu* (range), (10g) *ɔluɲali* (line), among others.

Singular	Plural
10 a) ɔlu-limi	tsi-limi
SG-tongue	PL-tongue
'tongue'	'tongues'
b) ɔlu-βe:re	tsi-mβe:re
PSG-breast	PL-breast
'breast'	'breasts'
c) ɔlu-xwi	tsi-xwi
SG-firewood	PL-firewood
'Firewood'	'firewood'
d) ɔlu-saka	tsi-saka
SG-branch	PL-branch
'branch'	'branches'
e) ɔlu-sa:la	tsi-sa:la
SG-stick	PL-stick
'stick'	'sticks'
f) ɔlu-kulu	tsi-ngulu
SG-range	PL-range
'range'	'ranges'
g) ɔlu-ɲali	tsi-ɲali

SG-line   PL-line
'line'   'lines'

Class13/14 Nouns
This class is also known as the diminutive class. Bantu diminutives have been explored in several prior works, either about specific languages like Zulu or Swahili (van der Spuy & Mjiyako 2015) or as part of a more comprehensive comparative analysis of the Bantu nominal system (Maho, 1999; Gibson et al., 2017). However, the structure and use of diminutives in Bantu languages have not been systematically studied (Gibson et al., 2017). There is variety in this respect, with certain languages, like Lutsotso, using a different class for constructing the single or plural forms, even though many languages, like Herero, utilize noun class 12 for the formation of diminutives. In Lutsotso, any noun may be put into this class by substituting the *axa-ɔru* prefixes for the normal class. These prefixes indicate that the thing being referred to is tiny or, in some cases, insignificant. To name a person or thing in the diminutive class e.g to call a man *axasa:tsa* (a tiny man), may be most insulting. But to refer to a young lady as *axa:na* (a tiny child) may be a term of endearment and almost of praise, as long as it does not seem to mean that it is abnormally small. This pair is mainly characteristic of the prefixes *axa-* (SG) and *oru-* (PL). Nouns in this class are illustrated in example (10) below.

10 a) axa-ana   ɔru-ana
     SG-tiny.child   PL-tiny.child
     'tiny child'   'tiny children'

  b) axa-njɔji   ɔru-njɔji
     SG-tiny.bird   PL-tiny.bird
     'tiny.bird'   'tiny.birds'

Class 15, (oβu-class) comprises abstract nouns such as *ɔβuheli* 'love' and collective nouns such as *ɔβusuma* (stiff porridge) that are only seen in a single form. Class 16 comprises infinitive verbs used as nouns, such as *ɔxulima,* which means "to dig," and *ɔxutexa*, which means "to cook." Classes 17, 18, and 19 in Lutsotso are locative prefixes that operate as prepositions. Class 20/21 refers to extremely big things such as *ɔkundu* which means "very big person".

Significance of class prefixes
These class prefixes are sparse and restricted in number compared to the multiple roots they might take. However, it is critical to recognise their role in connection to the root. These prefixes control and influence the words that are associated with them. Prefixes are important syntactically because they serve as controllers for the words that are associated to them. In some classes, prefixes mark number, as illustrated in example (11).

       Singular   Plural
11)   ɔmu-sjani   aβa-sjani
       SG-person   PL-person
       'boy'   'boys'

A change in prefix could have far-reaching consequences than a simple change in number. A shift in prefix can also indicate a more or less fundamental shift in meaning. Consider examples,

12 a) eʃi-ndu
     SG-thing

  b) eβi-ndu
     PL-things

c) axa-ndu
   SG-person

d) ɔku-ndu
   SG-person

In examples in (12a) and(12d), the root of the head noun is *-ndu*. The different prefixes added to the root *-ndu* result in different words with different meanings. In example (12a), the word *eʃindu* means 'thing' in singular, but now in example 12b, when the prefix changes to eβi-, the meaning changes to 'things'. In example (12c) and (12d), the words *axandu* and *ɔkundu* mean 'a tiny person' and 'a huge person', respectively. Furthermore, these class prefixes are appended to several roots in Lutsotso. Depending on their connection in a phrase and their occurrence with prefixes, these roots can be nominal roots like *-ndu* in *omundu* meaning 'person.' There are roots with different grammatical functions in addition to those having nominal purposes.

Examples (13a-13c) express the interrogative, possessive and proximity concepts, respectively.

13a) -ina   expresses an interrogative concept.
       ʃi-na?
       What/which INT
   b) -anje expresses the concept of possession.
       wa-nje
       my-POSS
   c) -nɔ expresses a demonstrative concept of proximity.
       u-nɔ
       this-DEM

As a result, we have NPs like the ones in numbers 14a-14c
14 a) ʃi-na?
       What/which INT
   b) wa-nje as in
       xɔtsa   wa-nje
       SM-uncle   POSS-my
       'My uncle'
   c) ɔ-mundu   u-nɔ
     SG-person   SG-this
     'This person'

The different types of roots will facilitate the understanding of the concordial affixes.

Concordial affixes
In Bantu languages, the class to which the head noun belongs must be reflected throughout the sentence (Osore, 2009; Wafula, Barasa & Mudogo). This is done by concordial prefixes with specific forms for the parts of speech to which they are affixed. The two sets of concordial affixes are given below in Table 2 for each noun class.

Table 2: Lutsotso concordial prefixes

Class	Primary Concord prefix	Secondary Concord prefix	Rel. conc
1.	ɔmu	u	ɔu
2.	aβa	ba	aβa
3.	ɔmu	ku	ɔku
4.	emi	chi	echi
5.	li	li	Lli
6.	ama	ka	aka
7.	eʃi	ʃi	eʃi
8.	eβi	bi	eβi
9.	i-n	ji	eji
10.	tsi-n	tsi	etsi
11.	ɔlu	lu	ɔlu
12.	tsi	tsi	etsi
13.	axa	xa	axa
14.	ɔru	ru	ɔru
15.	ɔbu	βu	ɔβu
16.	ɔxu	xu	ɔxu
17.	ha	ha	aha
18.	mu	mu	ɔmu
19.	xu	xu	ɔxu
20.	ɔku	ku	ɔku
21.	emi	chi	echi

Source: Data from the field.

For example, the root *-pu:si* 'cat' belongs to the 5/6 class, affecting the entire string. This means that the class prefix *'li-'* must be reflected in the entire string. In example 15 below, *Li-* is the prefix of class 5/6. This class contains mass nouns such as warmth, some animals, plants and body parts.

15. Li-pu:si   lixɔmeru   li-nɔ
    SG-cat   fat   SG-this
    'This fat cat'

Thus, the concordial approach maintains the grammatical link of the noun to the rest of the phrase. Each noun class is connected with two sets of concordial affixes: the main and secondary concordial affixes (Osore, 2017). With pronominal roots, secondary concordial affixes are applied. Pronominal roots include the demonstratives, the interrogatives and so on. They are referred to as secondary or pronominal because they are used with roots that can stand alone as pronouns. In example 16, u- is the secondary concordial prefix, *-nɔ* is the demonstrative prefix 'this' while in example 17, u-is the secondary concordial prefix which brings the concordial relationship with nouns like person.

16)   U-nɔ
        SAM-this
        'this'

17)   ɔmu-ndu   unɔ   nɔ-mu-laji
        SM- Person   this   is.good
        'This person is good.'

The primary concordial affixes in contrast are used with roots or stems used as nominal. These include nouns, locatives, numerals and adjective roots. Primary concordial prefix plus nominal root forms occur in the same slot and function in all ways as nouns. In example, 18 *ɔmu-* the primary concordial prefix of class 1 brings *-laji* meaning 'good', into a concordial relationship with *'sjani'*, which means 'boy'.

18. ɔmu-sjani   ɔmu-laji   unɔ
    SM- boy   SAM- good   SAM- this
    'This good boy.'

According to Angogo (1983) and Osore (2009), the distinction between the main concordial prefix and secondary prefix in the Oluluhya language is one between class prefix plus nominal root and non-class prefix plus pronominal root. In the preceding example, the major concordial prefix coincides with the prefix of the noun's class. In terms of form, the two are identical.

Conclusion

The study discovered that Lutsotso has 21 noun classes, unlike other Bantu languages with 18-19 classes. Complex agreement morphology in the noun phrase and the sentence is controlled by class membership, which is indicated morphologically on the noun by a class prefix. The study also revealed that the main word order of Lutsotso, like that of other Bantu languages, is subject-verb-object (SVO). The simple sentence's Noun (N) component element is a complex Noun phrase (NP) with nominal properties expressed by affixes. The Lutsotso NP has several nominal inflectional morphemes. The study reveals that concord prefixes control and influence the words associated with them in Lutsotso noun phrases. The study finds that concord prefixes preserve the head noun's grammatical link to the noun phrase's remainder.

References

Appleby, L. L. (1961). *First Luyia Grammar with Exercises.* The East African Literature Bureau.

Barasa, D. (2022). Pronouns and pronominal alignment in Ateso. *Arusha Working Papers in African Linguistics, 4*(1), 100-114.

Barasa, D. (2017). *Ateso Grammar: A Descriptive Account of an Eastern Nilotic Language.* (LINCOM Studies in African Linguistics 94). LINCOM.

Basweti, N. (2005). *Morphosyntactic analysis of agreement in Ekegusii in the minimalist program.* Unpublished M.A. Dissertation. University of Nairobi.

Bauer, L. (1989). *English Word-Formation*. Cambridge University Press.

Eberhard, D. M., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (Eds.) (2020). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World.* (Twenty-second edition). SIL International. Retrieved from http://www.ethnologue.com, 22-12-2020.

Gibson, H. (2017). Patterns and Developments in the Marking of Diminutives in Bantu, *Nordic Journal of African Studies, 26*(4): 344–383.

Haspelmath, M. (2002). *Understanding Morphology*. Oxford University Press.

Leech and Svartvik (2002). *A Communicative Grammar of English*. Routledge.

Maho, J. (1999). *A Comparative Study of Bantu Noun Classes*. Orientalia et Africana Gothoburgensia 13.

Marten, L. (2021). *26 Noun Classes and Plurality in Bantu Languages*. Oxford University Press.

Marten, L., & Kula, N. (2007). Morphosyntactic co-variation in Bantu: Two case studies. *SOAS Working Papers in Linguistics*, 15, 227-238.

Maw, B. (1991) "Swahili and the Bantu Languages" *in The World's Major Languages*. Routledge

Odera, H., Barasa, D. & Atichi, A. (2021). Inflectional Forms of Tense in Lutsotso. *International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation.* 4(1)https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2021.4.1.3

Odera, H., & Barasa, D. (2021). Aspectual forms in Lutsotso. *Research Journal in Modern Languages and Literatures*, 2(2). https://royalliteglobal.com/languages-andliteratures/article/view/579

Okombo, D. (2000). *Building Techniques in African Languages: African Voices.* Oxford University Press.

Osore, E. (2009). *An Analysis of the Internal Structure of Lutsotso Noun Phrase*. Unpublished M.A Dissertation. Maseno University.

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. Longman.

Radford, A. (1997). *Syntax A Minimalist Introduction*. Mass.: MIT.

Van der Spuy, A. & Mjiyako, L. (2015). *Evaluative morphology in Zulu*. In: N. Grandi and L. Kortvelyessy (eds.), *Edinburgh Handbook of Evaluative Morphology*, pp. 515–522. Edinburgh University Press.

Wafula, A., Barasa, D., & Atichi, A. (2023). A semantic analysis of Lubukusu Cut and Break verbs. *Nairobi Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7(1), 1-12.