

## **THE ZULU NOUN**

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### **I. Introduction**

The Zulu language (spoken by approximately nine-million six-hundred thousand people and mostly in South Africa)<sup>1</sup> is a member of the Bantu language family, the members of which exhibit a complex nominal morphology based around a system of noun classes and their corresponding prefix markers. While a semantic relationship may have been shared by the members of these classes in Common Bantu,<sup>2</sup> the function of noun class in Zulu is (somewhat) similar to that of grammatical gender in European languages, triggering agreement on verbs, adjectives, demonstratives, and (in the case of nouns engaged in the formation of relative clauses) other nouns.

### **II. The Class Marker on the Noun Itself**

The class of a noun in Zulu is essentially predictable from its prefix, affixed to the noun stem. The full forms of the prefixes as they appear on the dictionary forms of the nouns are as follows, along with words that belong one to each class.

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1 Ethnologue, web vers. 2005

2 Wald, 991 (from Comrie's *The World's Major Languages*, Oxford 1990)

(1)

1 • <i>umu-</i> ; <i>umuntu</i> "person"	2 • <i>aba-</i> ; <i>abantu</i> "people"
1a • <i>u-</i> ; <i>ubaba</i> "father"	2a • <i>o-</i> ; <i>obaba</i> "fathers"
3 • <i>umu-</i> ; <i>umuthi</i> "tree"	4 • <i>imi-</i> ; <i>imithi</i> "trees"
5 • <i>i[li]-</i> ; <i>i[li]xoxo</i> "frog"	6 • <i>ama-</i> ; <i>amaxoxo</i> "frogs"
7 • <i>isi-</i> ; <i>isibhakabhaka</i> "heaven"	8 • <i>izi-</i> ; <i>izibhakabhaka</i> "heavens"
9 • <i>in-</i> ; <i>inja</i> "dog"	10 • <i>izin-</i> ; <i>izinja</i> "dogs"
11 • <i>u[lu]-</i> ; <i>usuku</i> "day"	(12 • <i>izin-</i> ; <i>izinsuku</i> "days")
14 • <i>ubu-</i> ; <i>ubuhlalo</i> "beads"	
15 • <i>uku-</i> ; <i>ukuhamba</i> "walking / to walk"	

In general, a noun which in its singular form belongs to a particular odd-numbered noun class will its plural in the corresponding even-numbered noun-class; so *ixoxo* (C5) is "frog", and *amaxoxo* (C6) is "frogs". Some nouns belong to an odd-numbered class and yet have no expected 'singular' (ex. *amanzi* "water"). In some cases, a noun will take an unexpected class for its plural.(ex. *indoda* "man" is C9, *amadoda* "men" is C6). The plural for Class 11 seems collapsable with the Class 10 marker, and the two may perhaps collapse even further into Class 8; All of the words in Class 9 that take a Class 10 plural appear with a nasal in both forms.

Wald<sup>3</sup> suggests that the proto-Bantu marker for Class 9 may have been *\*ne-*, which taken into consideration along with the trend of forming the augment vowel out of

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3 *ibid.*

a copy of the vowel internal to the noun class prefix,<sup>4</sup> would posit *ini-* as a possible or proto-form. In any case, this form (which would yield *\*inija* for "dog") doesn't seem to be useable.

Alternate forms of the noun prefixes appear with the deleteable material in square brackets. Evidence for their existence can be found in older grammars, "Deep Zulu" or rural forms, and dialect-internal in the morphemes marking noun-class agreement on other parts of speech. In addition, the *-u-* internal to the prefixes of Classes 1 and 3 is deleted in standard speech except on words whose stems are monosyllabic (so *umsundu* "earthworm", but *umuthi* "tree"). It is kept in most writing.

### III. A Note on the Augment

The augment or preprefix is a copy of the vowel internal to the basic CV- form of the noun class prefix. In the case of C9, as we have mentioned, the augment may come from a historical *\*ne-* which by analogy with reconstructed *\*me-* for C4, would have at some time yielded a prefix whose internal vowel was *i* (ie. *\*ni-*).<sup>5</sup>

The distribution of the augment is not yet fully understood. It is nearly always present, except in the following cases:

- (2) • When the noun in question is used as a vocative, so:

*A-ba-fana*     *ba-ya-hamb-a.* = "(The) boys walk."     but

AUG<sub>C2</sub>-C2-boy    C2-LONG-walk-FIN.A

4 see sect. 3 on the augment vowel

5 Wald, 991 (from Comrie's *The World's Major Languages*, Oxford 1990)

*Hawu, ba-fana!* = "Hey, boys!"

EXCL C2-boy

- When the noun acts as a negative polarity item:<sup>6</sup>

*W-a-hamb-a u-mu-ntu.* = "(A/The) person walked" but

C1-PST<sub>remote</sub>-FIN.A AUG<sub>C1</sub>-C1-person

*A-ku-hamb-ang-a mu-ntu.* = "No person walked."<sup>7</sup>

NEG.A-C17-walk-NEG.PST<sub>recent</sub>-FIN.A C1-person

It will appear before the class prefix on the noun in most cases -- including when the noun acts as the subject of the sentence, and when it appears melded with the preceding vowel of a CV-form prefix modifier, ex.:

(3) *na-* "and" + *ijinjabhiya* "ginger beer" → *nejinjabhiya* [a + i → e]

#### IV. Noun Classes & Agreement

A verb in Zulu agrees with both its subject and object's noun classes. The template for verbal inflections is:

(4) [...-]SM-[...-](OM-)verb.root-[...]

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<sup>6</sup> Buell, 2005

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, verbs of which these "bare nouns" are the subject cannot take the noun class concord of that subject.

Subject markers for the various noun classes bare clear surface relationships to the noun class prefixes given above (classes 1a and 2a behave like 1 and 2 respectively for the purposes of agreement):

(5)

1 • <i>u-</i>	2 • <i>ba-</i>
3 • <i>u-</i>	4 • <i>i-</i>
5 • <i>li-</i>	6 • <i>a-</i>
7 • <i>si-</i>	8 • <i>zi-</i>
9 • <i>i-</i>	10 • <i>zi-</i>
11 • <i>lu-</i>	
14 • <i>bu-</i>	
15 • <i>ku-</i>	

The major difference between these prefixes and the ones found on nouns of the same classes is the absence of nasals in those prefixes that have them in the noun prefix forms (namely 1, 3, 4, 6, and 9).<sup>8</sup> If any morphological material ending in a vowel should precede these, vowel-initial morphemes must acquire syllable onset; Class 1 subject marker becomes *-ka-*, and all other markers have as their onset the glide corresponding to their particular vowel.

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<sup>8</sup> It's been suggested that the nasals in these prefixes are actually innovations.

- (6)  $a \rightarrow wa$   
 $u \rightarrow wu$   
 $i \rightarrow yi$

The object markers (being themselves necessarily not word initial, except in imperatives) have the same form as the internal subject markers, except in the case where the coreferent is a class 1 or 1a noun and is animate, at which point the *-m-* (presumably from the nominal prefix) reappears.<sup>9</sup>

Should a morpheme that consists of only a vowel follow a marker (for example, the past *-a-*) the prefixes will undergo a normal phonological mutation, by which any vowel but *u* is deleted, and all  $u \rightarrow w$ .

## V. Absolute Pronoun Construction & Adjectival Agreement

The noun class concords discussed in the last section appear again in the construction of absolute pronouns referring to nouns of the various classes. For this, the prefixes are added to a stem *-ona*, where they lose their inherent vowel. Class 1 however proves an outlier once again and yields the form *yena*. As of yet, I cannot find a sufficient explanation as to why. This is the paradigm followed with any stem that begins in *o* -- *-odwa* "one" and *-onke*, "all" provide examples.

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<sup>9</sup> This along with instances of the use of the *ba-* marker for plural non-C2 animate nouns in stories recorded during the Zulu Field Methods course may indicate that C1/C2 are becoming a sort of default animate 3rd person marker.

## VI. Relative Clauses and their Employment of Noun Class Agreement

When forming a relative clause out of object position in Zulu, we are left with two strategies. One necessitates no change to the noun class markers except the usual phonological ones, and has the potential for an optional expansion of the verb with a suffix *-yo*. Employing the other strategy, the subject of the relative clause may, instead of taking its usual noun class prefix, take a new prefix the form of which will be

(7) *a-* + [NC full prefix of the subject of the matrix clause]

So in the sentence

(8) *Isipho esibaba wabanika abantwana bakhe sikhulu.*

AUG<sub>C7</sub>.C7.gift REL<sub>C7</sub>.father C1.PST.C2.give AUG<sub>C2</sub>.C2.children C2.his C7.great

The gift which the father has given his children is great.

the prefix *esi-* on the word *esibaba* corresponds to the noun class of the word *Isipho* "gift". The subject agreement on the verb of the relative clause still maintains agreement with the words original C1, even though the marker is nowhere to be found on the noun itself.

## **VII. Summary**

The Zulu nominal system is governed by a complex but regular system of agreement as regards the class of the nouns in question. With few exceptions, there are two forms of the noun class prefixes; One appears only on nouns as their own proper class marker. The other appears on verbal agreement, adjectival agreement, the creation of pronouns, and in the marker assigned from the subject of the matrix clause to the subject of the relative clause thereunder.