

The Bantu Preprefix, Morphology, Phonology or Syntax?

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Abstract

Bantu languages are characterized with the presence of an initial element that appears after a noun class prefix. This initial element (also known as initial vowel, pre-prefix or augment) has attracted the attention of most Bantuists. One issue of concern with regard to this initial element (hereafter called the preprefix) is related to its form, its distribution and its function. A question often asked is concerned with what triggers its occurrence in Bantu languages. This paper seeks to examine the preprefix in Bantu so as to come to grips with what triggers its occurrence in different Bantu languages. The findings indicate that the preprefix in Bantu may be associated with phonology, morphology and syntactic contexts. It has been revealed that in some cases, the preprefix in Bantu is triggered by its phonological context, morphology in some contexts and syntax in other contexts. It has been revealed that of all these three criteria (i.e morphology, phonology and syntax) syntax plays a greater role in the manifestation of the preprefix. However, in this paper it is concluded that the occurrence of the preprefix cannot be associated with a single aspect.

Keywords: preprefix, initial vowel, augment, prefix, noun class

1. Introduction

One interesting part of the Bantu noun which has raised unending debate amongst Bantuists (cf. De Blois, 1970; Dewees, 1971; Mould, 1974; Hyman and Katamba, 1993, Visser, 2010); among others is the initial element (usually a vowel in most Bantu languages or a consonant plus a vowel in few languages). This initial element has been identified with different names: *augment*, De Blois (1970) *initial vowel*: Mould (1974). *preprefix*: Gregersen (1967) etc. The least used term is: *article* (Bourguin 1946). Some of these different labels are named based on the *form* of this element (initial vowel as it occurs as an initial vowel in most languages,), *distribution* (preprefix since it occurs before a noun prefix) or its *function* (article since in most languages it is reported to indicate specificity or definiteness in certain constructions). However, the preprefix is not found in all Bantu languages. The following Bantu languages have no preprefix: Kiswahili (G42), KiN-kutsu (C73) and Kimatuumbi (P13), among others (Maho 1999). No study has provided a satisfactory answer as to why the preprefix does not surface in other Bantu languages.

One important observation about the preprefix is that in all Bantu languages in which it occurs, it varies considerably both in its shape and function (Nurse and Phillipson, 2003). This paper seeks to examine the different contexts in which the preprefix occurs in order to determine whether or not the occurrence of the preprefix is associated with a single factor. The present study adds to the existing knowledge on the preprefix in Bantu by adding data from other Bantu languages.

2. The Form of the Preprefix and its Location in a Noun

The most occurring preprefixes in Bantu languages are *i*, *u* and *a*. The vowels *e* and *o* occur in a few languages. In Otjiherero, for example, the preprefix appears as either [o] or [e], both of which are mid vowels. The pre-prefix in Noun class 9/10 varies considerably in Bantu languages. The following patterns can be observed in different Bantu languages V, CV, VCV (V). The majority of these languages have no initial consonant which makes the remaining vowel identical with the pre-prefix vowel in classes 4, 7, 8 and 9. Examples of these languages are: Nyoro [J11], Sukuma [F21], Bena [G63], Nilyamba F[31], Sango [G61], Toro[J12], Nkore [J13], Pangwa [G 64] (DeBlois 1970). A couple of languages have the preprefix appearing as an initial vowel before the nominal prefixes of classes 9 and 10.

Languages that have CV pre-prefix realised as *zi*, *tsi*, *ji*, or *chi* and whose vowel is always *i* include: Liogole [E41], Kutu [G37], Ruguru [G35], Gusii [42], Gogo [G11], Zaramo [G33] etc. Some Bantu languages fall under the type CVCV (V0). DeBlois (1970) considers this combination to have been a result of combination of the V and the CV. He supposes that the initial V is an addition to the original CV which was probably treated as belonging to the nominal prefix in a later stage. In some languages, the pattern CVCV is followed by a third vowel a or o. These languages are: Nande [J42], Kobi [J40], Nyanga [D43], Kuria [E43], Zigula [G31], N-Mbundu [H21], Lala [M 52], Herero [R 31], Xhosa [S 41], Zulu [S 42], Ronga [S 54].

In most Bantu languages the preprefix may appear overtly in other noun dependents like adjectives, possessives etc. The following examples from Shinyiha [M23] (1a,b,c) and Nyoro [J 11] (1 d,e) are illustrative:

- (1) a. u -mu -ntu u -mu -inza
 Ppf 1 -person ppf 1 good
 ‘a good person’
- b. I -shi -tengo i -shi -piti -i -shi -ilu
 Ppf -7 -chair ppf 7 big -ppf 7 black
 ‘a big chair’
- c. u -mu -ana u -mu -inza
 Ppf- 1 -child ppf 1 good
 ‘a good child’
- d. Leta e- bi takuli e- bingi
 bring ppf 8-potato ppf many
 ‘Bring many potatoes’
- e. U -mw -enda un -samamu
 Ppf - 3 cloth ppf -red
 ‘red cloth’

The following are possible structures of the preprefix in Bantu.

- (2) a. pre-prefix + prefix + root *o-mu-ntu* ‘person’ (Runyambo) Rugemalira (2005)
 b. pre-prefix + \emptyset + root *u-kaleza* ‘dull’ (Shinyiha) (Goodness 2013)
 c. \emptyset + prefix + root *mu-ntu* ‘person’ (Runyambo) (Rugemalira 2005)

The data in (2) shows that a noun may consist of all the three morphs, two morphs or no morph

Since the shape of the preprefix varies from language to language, one would wish to trace its origin. In most Bantu languages the pre-prefix appears as an initial vowel like in Isizulu and Otjiherero (Maho, 1999, p.61) or in a few languages as a consonant plus a vowel like Bukusu (Maho ibid: 61). As regards its origin, it is argued by some Bantuists that the pre-prefix is the morphological segment from an earlier Proto Bantu CV form (Chagas 1977, p.35, De blois (1970). The widespread occurrence of the pre-prefix in Bantu languages may result into the conclusion that the preprefix was initially CV then after some morphophonological processes had taken place, the consonant was lost remaining with an initial vowel. However, the issue of the origin of the pre-prefix is beyond the scope of this paper.

Another issue of concern with regard to the form of the pre-prefix is whether or not to regard it as a separate entity. There are different views on how to treat the preprefix. Some morphologists regard the pre-prefix as part and parcel of the class prefix (Yukawa, 1989). Taking an example of Runyambo [E21] (Rugemalira 2005), the following nouns would look like this:

- (3) *omu* *omu-ntu* ‘person’
(4) *aba* *aba-ntu* ‘people’
(5) *omu* *omu-ti* ‘tree’

According to this view, the pre-prefix and the class prefix are treated as one morpheme, they occupy the same slot. However, most Bantuists treat the preprefix and the class prefix as two different morphemes. Following this view, examples 3, 4 and 5 are normally treated like this:

- (6). *o-mu-ntu*
(7). *a-ba-ntu*
(8). *o-mu-ti*

Since morphologically the two items are separable, and each morpheme has a specific function to perform, we treat them as two different morphemes. Treating the two morphemes as one is rather confusing. In most cases, the preprefix follows vowel harmony rules that make it identical to the vowel of the noun class prefix. Simply put, in most Bantu languages, the preprefix is always **V** while noun class prefixes are typically **CV**.

3. Pre-Prefixless Nouns

In most Bantu languages, the pre-prefix is disallowed in locative classes 16, 17 and 18. Examine examples (9) from Shinyiha below.

- (9) *pa-nyumba* ‘at the house’ (near) cl.16
 ku-nyumba ‘at the house’ (far) cl. 17,
 mu-nyumba ‘in the house’ cl.18.

The nouns in classes 16, 17, 18 indicate location, commonly known as locative nouns. None of them is amenable for modification. These nouns are a result of secondary classification, thus making them atypical. However, in Kisimbiti [J40], noun class 16 carries a preprefix a- (See Mreta, 2008: xii). Secondly, in Bantu languages with pronominal quantifiers, for example, *Shona* (Mpofu 2008;), *Shinyiha* (Goodness 2014), the preprefix does not surface on nouns preceded by a universal quantifier: every, each etc. as in the following Shinyiha examples;

- (10) *kilu muntu* ‘every person’,
 kilu lisiku ‘every day’

kilu mwana ‘every child’ etc.

Fourthly, a preprefix does not surface when a demonstrative occurs before the noun as shown in Shinyiha examples below:

(11) a. *aβa va-na*

These 2 - child

‘these children’

b. *i-shi shi-ntu*

ppf -this 7 -thing

‘this thing’

The examples in (11) are marked. The demonstrative can precede the noun in the focused constructions. In examples (11), the preprefix and the demonstrative are in opposition in the sense that the presence of one excludes the other. Hence, they are in complimentary distribution. In other words, the demonstrative causes the preprefix on the noun to drop. What is being assumed here is that the demonstrative and the preprefix perform the same function and syntactically, they both occupy the same syntactic position. In most Bantu languages, the preprefix is retained when the demonstrative follows the noun as in the following examples from Shinyiha.

(12) a. *a -va -ntu aβa*

Ppf -cl2 -person these

‘these people’

b. *i- shi- ntu ishi*

ppf -7 -person this

‘this thing’

The preprefix is also omitted following an absolute pronoun as shown in Shinyiha example (13) below:

(13) *Ine mu-lindu ni- kaz- ile shi- tengo*

I cl.1 girl sc1 buy- T/A cl7- chair

‘I, the girl bought a chair’

In example 13 above, the presence of the pronoun *ine* ‘I’ causes the preprefix on *mulindu* ‘girl’ to drop.

4. Phonological, Morphological and Syntactic Contexts

This section examines the different linguistic levels that may be used as a clue to the occurrence of the preprefix.

4.1 The Phonological Clue

Some Bantuists wonder whether or not the preprefix is triggered by phonological context. For example, in most Bantu languages, the preprefix and the vowel of the noun class form a total vowel harmony as in the following examples from Shinyiha (Goodness, 2013).

- (14) **u-mu-ntu** ‘person’
 u-mu-ana ‘child’
 i-shi-tengo ‘chair’

In the examples above, there is a vowel harmony between the preprefix and the vowel of the noun class prefix. The preprefix is not affected by any phonological change that might occur in the noun class prefix. Examine the following examples of gliding and deletion in Shinyiha (Goodness 2013):

- (15) a. **u-mu-ana u-mw-ana** ‘child’ (gliding)
 b. **u-mu-ene u-mw-e:ne** ‘chief’ (gliding)
 c. **i-shi-ana i-sha:na** ‘child’ (dim.) (deletion)

Examples (15) above indicate that the glide [w] does not affect the form of the preprefix. Here the gliding rule does not trigger another rule on the preprefix. This implies that the underlying form is psychological in that it remains in the minds of the speaker when the physical form is pronounced. Even though the noun class prefix undergoes phonological change, like that of deletion, the other noun dependents will carry the preprefix in their appropriate constructions. Observe the following examples from Shinyiha.

- (16) a. **u -mw -ana** **u -mw -inza** **u -mu- zelu**
 Ppf -1 -childn ppf -1 good ppf -1 -white
 ‘a good white child’
 b. **a -ha -na** **a -hi -nza**
 ppf -12 child ppf -12 -good
 ‘a good child (dim.)’

In examples (16a) above, the adjective *u-mu-zelu* carries the preprefix *u*. Likewise, in *u-mw-ana* ‘child’ and *u-mw-inza* ‘good’ the preprefix is maintained. In (16b), the phonological process affecting the noun class is deletion. The underlying representation is

ahainza ‘good’ but the preprefix ‘a’ is maintained in the surface structure.

In a few languages, the pre-prefix and the vowel of the noun class prefix form a partial vowel harmony. Examine the following examples from Runyambo (Rugemalira 2005).

- (17)
- | | | |
|----|----------|------------------|
| a. | o-mu-ntu | ‘person’ |
| b. | a-ba-ntu | ‘people’ |
| c. | e-mi-ti | ‘trees’ |
| d. | e-ci-ntu | ‘thing’ |
| e. | o-tw-ana | ‘small children’ |
| f. | o-ku-tu | ‘ear’ |

Examples (17) in Runyambo reveal the following agreements

o agrees with *u* as they are both back rounded vowels

e agrees with *i* as they are both front unrounded vowels

In most languages, the pre-prefixes that display partial vowel harmony are mid vowels [e] and [o]. In examining examples (17) above, one wonders if the occurrence of the preprefix is triggered by phonology.

4.2 Syntax: Manifestation of the Pre-Prefix in NPs

In most Bantu languages, the preprefix appears not only on nouns but also on adjectives and possessives. All these are elements that appear with the head noun in a noun phrase. There is an extensive preprefix agreement between the noun and other constituents in the noun phrase. The following examples in Shinyiha are illustrated below for adjectives.

- (18)a. *a- ma -kwi a- ma -piti ga -guy -e*
 Ppf - cl.6 -tree ppf cl.6 tall SC6 -fall -T/A
 ‘Tall trees have fallen’
- b. *I -shi -tengo i- shi -inza i- shi -lu shi -tez -ile*
 ppf -cl.7 -chair ppf -cl.7 good ppf -cl.7 black SC.7 lose T/A
 ‘A good black chair is lost’

In Kisimbiti [E44] adjectives also carry a preprefix. Examine the following examples from Mreta’s (2008) lexicon:

- (19) a. o-mo-kong’u ‘great’

- b. i-ki-shomeru ‘sweet’
c. e-ke-bhese ‘uncooked’

It is worth mentioning that in Bantu languages, the preprefix cannot agree with the verb. It is the class prefix that commands agreement with the verb as in the following Shinyiha examples:

- (20). a. *U-mw-ana u -mu -inza u-mu-tali a -βin -ile*
ppf-1 -child ppf-cl.1 good ppf-cl.1-tall SC1 -become sick -T/A
‘A good tall child has become sick’
- b. *U -mu-ntu u -mu-piti a -hoβos -ile*
ppf -1 -person ppf-cl.1-big SC1 -become happy -T/A
‘A big person has become happy.’

Like adjectives, possessives take a preprefix in Bantu. The following examples in Shinyiha are illustrative:

- (21) a. *u-mw-ana u-vane* ‘my child’
b. *u-mw-ana u-vaho* ‘your children’
c. *u-mw-ana u-wakwe* ‘his children’
d. *u-mw-ana u-witu* ‘our children’
e. *umwana u-winu* ‘your children’

Moreover, the preprefix appears on borrowed nouns in most Bantu languages. For example: in Shinyiha the following borrowed nouns take the preprefix: *ivideo* ‘video’, (English through Kiswahili) *ibulanketi* ‘blanket’, (English through Kiswahili), *ikalamu* ‘pen’ (Kiswahili), *igari* ‘car’ (Kiswahili), *imeza* ‘table’ (Kiswahili) etc. The preprefix modifies the borrowed noun in order to make it fit the Bantu noun system.

4.2.1. Manifestation of the Preprefix at the Clausal Level

At the clausal level, a number of issues emanate with regard to preprefix. First, in most Bantu languages the preprefix is dropped in the post-verbal nouns. Thus, when the noun occurs post verbally, it loses its preprefix. Observe the following examples in Shinyiha (Goodness 2008):

- (22). a. *maβwira na- mw- enyizy-e mu -ntu*
yesterday I -OC1 -see- T/A cl.1-person
‘Yesterday I saw a person’

b. *maβwira n -ta- mw -enyizy- e- mu- ntu*
 yesterday I- not -OC1 - see- T/A cl.1-perso

‘Yesterday I did not see a person’

c. *maβwira na -kaz- -ile shi -tengo*
 yesterday I -buy- T/A cl.7- chair

‘Yesterday I bought a chair’

The noun *muntu* in (22a-b), for example, occurs postverbally and without a preprefix. Likewise, the preprefix does not appear in sentences 22(c) in the noun *shitengo*.

In most Bantu languages, the preprefix does not occur in the negative constructions (cf. Visser 2010). In Nata (Gambarage 2007) as well, the preprefix cannot occur in the domain of negation or other scope bearing element. In negative declarative sentences, the occurrence of the preprefix depends on whether the noun in question occurs preverbally or postverbally. When the noun occurs postverbally in negative constructions, it loses its preprefix. This is clearly shown in the following examples from Nata (23) (Gambarage 2007) and Shinyiha (24) (Goodness 2013) respectively:

23. N- te korisi mw -ana
 1perf NEG -feed NPx1-ST

‘I will cause the child to eat’

24. a. *maβwira n- ta- mw -enyizy- e- mu- ntu*
 Yesterday I- not -OC1 - see- T/A cl.1-person

‘Yesterday I did not see a person’

b. *maβwira n- ta- kaz- ile shi- tengo*
 yesterday I- not buy- T/A cl.7- chair

‘Yesterday I did not buy a chair’

c. n- ta- βa- gan- ile βa- lindu
 I not OC2- love - T/A cl.2- girl

‘I do not like girls’

The absence of the preprefix in negative constructions is consistent in other constructions. For example, when the noun occurs after the copula 25(a, b) and in wh-questions 25(c), it loses its preprefix: Examine examples 25 (a, b, c)

(25). a. *βula te mu -ntu*

that not cl.1 person

‘that is not a person’

b. *u- mu -lindu te mu- lim- i*

ppf -cl.1- girl not cl.1 cultivate -nom.suf

‘the girl is not a farmer’

c. *umw- ana woni a- ta- kw-anza shi-tengo*

cl.1- child- which - SC1- not T/A- want cl.7 chair

‘which child does not want a chair?’

The occurrence of the noun preverbally in negative declarative sentences without the preprefix renders the sentence unacceptable. When the noun appears after the copula it loses its preprefix, no matter whether the sentence is affirmative or negative. The following Shinyiha sentences are illustrative:

(26). a. *βula ne mu- ntu*

that is cl.1- person

‘that is a person’

b. *βula te mu- ntu*

that not cl.1 person

‘that is not a person’

c. *βula- a- m- ile mu- ntu* ‘

that- cl.1C- be- T/A cl.1- person

‘that was a person.’

*d. *βula te u- mu -ntu*

that not ppf - cl.1 person

‘that is not a person’

Sentence 26(d) is not acceptable.

In *wh-questions* a noun occurring preverbally or post verbally, does not bear a preprefix as in the following Shinyiha sentences:

(27). a. *mw-ana woni a- kw- anza shi-tengo?*

cl.1-child -which -SC1- T/A- want cl.7- chair

‘which child wants a chair?’

b. *mw- ana woni a -ta- kw-anza shi-tengo?*

cl.1-child –which -SC1- not T/A-want cl.7-chair

‘Which child does not want a chair?’

c. *mu- ntu woni a- kw- inza?*

cl.1 person which SC-T/A-come

‘Which person is coming?’

*d. *u- mw -ana woni a-kw - anza I - shi- tengo’*

ppf-cl.1-child which SC1-T/A- want aug-cl.7 chair

‘Which child wants a chair?’

*e. *u -mw -ana woni a -ta -kw- anza i -shi -tengo?*

ppf-cl.1- child -which -SC1 -not- T/A- want ppf -cl.7 chair

‘Which child does not like a chair?’

Sentences 27 (d, e) are unacceptable. In interrogative Yes/No questions, when the noun occurs post verbally it retains its preprefix as shown in Shinyiha examples (28) below:

(28). a. *u- mw- ezizy -e u- mw- ana?*

You -OC1 -see- T/A ppf - cl.1 -child

‘Have you seen the child?’

b. *u- ta- mw- ezizy- e u- mw- ana?*

you-not-OC1-see- T/A cl.1-child

‘Have you not seen the child?’

In the affirmative sentences, the presence or absence of the preprefix depends on the position of the noun. It depends on whether the noun occurs preverbally or postverbally. When a noun occurs preverbally in affirmative declarative sentences, it takes the preprefix in most Bantu languages. This is clearly indicated in the following Shinyiha examples:

(29) a. *u - mu- lindu nu mu- lim- -i*

ppf -cl.1 - girl be cl.1 -cultivate - nom.suf.

‘the girl is a farmer’

b. *i- shi- tengo isho shi- n- ile shinza*

ppf-cl.7- chair that SC7 be-T/A good

‘That chair was good’

c. *a- βa -lindu βa- ku- gana ku- izya*
ppf -cl.2 -girl SC2 -T/A love to play

‘Girls like to play’

*d. *mu- lindu nu mu- lim- i*
cl.1- girl be cl.1- cultivate - nom.suf.

‘The girl is a farmer’

All nouns occurring preverbally in 29(a-c) take a preprefix. In sentence 29(a), the preprefix *u* in *u-mulindu* specifies the noun in question. The speaker and the hearer have the prior information of the person in question. The preprefix *a* in the noun *a-βa-lindu* in 21(c) does not specify the noun in question.

When the noun occurs preverbally it bears its preprefix as shown in the following Shinyiha examples:

(30). a. *i- shi- tengo isho shi- ta- m- ile shinza*
ppf -cl.7- chair that SC7 not be T/A good

‘That chair was not good’

b. *a- βa-lindu βa- ta- gan-ile ku- izya*
ppf-cl.2- girl SC2- not- love- T/A to-play

‘Girls do not like to play’

*c. *shi- tengo isho shi- ta- m- ile shinza*
cl.7- chair that SC7-not-be- T/A good

‘That chair was not good’

*d. *βa-lindu βa- ta- gan- ile ku- izya*
cl.2-girl SC2-not- love T/A to- play

‘Girls do not like to play’

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the Bantu pre-prefix and paid attention to morphological, phonological and syntactic contexts. I have surveyed the different contexts where the preprefix occurs obligatorily. I have also surveyed contexts where the preprefix cannot occur. The findings indicate that the occurrence of the Bantu preprefix can be associated with morphological, phonological and syntactic issues. The findings bear an implication that the various meanings that may refer to pragmatic issues such as definiteness and specificity are

not consistent in all constructions. Therefore pragmatic factors bear no significant influence on the occurrence of the preprefix. Syntax seems to play a greater role in the manifestation of the preprefix in Bantu. Where a preprefix has been used to refer to pragmatic use, it is a matter of coincidence.

Abbreviations

Cl class

OC Object Concord

SC Subject Concord

T/A Tense/Aspect

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