

Assignment of Noun Classes to Acronyms in Kiswahili: A Study of Acronym-nouns in Kiswahili Newspapers

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Abstract

Kiswahili, like other Bantu languages, has a noun class system as each noun in the language belongs to a particular class. This paper attempts to show how nouns in the form of acronyms are treated in Kiswahili. The data are drawn from Kiswahili newspaper headlines. To determine the noun class to which a particular acronym is assigned, we pay attention to agreement marking affixes on verbs, which reflect the nouns to which they refer. We also argue that some acronym nouns are treated differently from other non-acronym nouns. Indeed, the paper observes that such nouns are regarded as a different category of nouns. Moreover, the data show that one acronym noun may be assigned to more than one noun class. However, one noun class is normally dominantly associated with a certain acronym noun. Interestingly, some acronyms are assigned to noun classes differently from the head noun in acronyms when they are spoken/written in full. It is concluded that this special treatment of acronym nouns is an indication that semantic criteria are crucial in deciding how agreement should be. It is also a sign of an on-going language change that affects the number of noun classes in the language.

Keyword: *Kiswahili, Bantu languages, noun class system, acronym nouns*

Introduction

Most Bantu languages have nouns that belong to different noun classes. These classes are like noun genders. Among other things, noun classes help one to determine whether a noun is singular or plural. It is the class to which a noun belongs that gives that noun its semantic and syntactic characteristics and, of course, morphological properties as well. For example, each noun class has its agreement pattern marked on a verb. There are essentially slots for subject and object marking, among other slots, in the Bantu verb morphology. Each noun class has its own subject and object markers. Kiswahili, which has eighteen noun classes, marks subjects and objects as follows:

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Table 1: Kiswahili Noun Classes

Noun Class	Class Prefix	Subject Marker	Object Marker	Example
1	m-	a-, yu-	-mu	<i>Tumaini a-me-mu-on-a Amani</i> Tumaini SM-Perf-Object- see-FV Amani 'Tumaini has seen Amani.'
2	wa-	wa-	wa-	<i>Wa-toto wa-na-wa-pend-a wa-limu wao</i> 2-child SM-Pres-Object-love-FV 2- teacher their 'Children love their teachers.'
3	m-	u-	-u-	<i>M-ti u-me-u-gus-a m-lima</i> 3-treeSM-Perf-Object-touch-FV mountain 'The tree has touched the mountain.'
4	Mi	i-	-i-	<i>Mi-lima i-na-i-pend-esh-a mi-ji</i> 4-mountain SM-attract-intens- causative-FV 4-town 'Mountains make towns look attractive.'
5	ji-/T	li-	li-	<i>Ji-cho li-na-li-on-a jibu</i> 5-eye SM-Pres- Obj-see-FV answer 'The eye sees the answer.'
6	ma-	ya	ya	<i>Ma-cho ya-na-wash-a</i> 6-eye SM-Pres-itch-FV 'Eyes are itching.'
7	Ki	ki	ki	<i>Ki-su ki-li-ki-kat-a ki-chwa</i> 7-knife SM-Past-OM-cut-FV 7-head 'The knife cut the head.'
8	Vi	vi	vi	<i>Vi-tabu vi-me-chanik-a</i> 8-book SM-Perf-tear-FV 'Books are torn out.'
9	N-	i-/ya	-i	<i>N-yumba i-me-haribik-a</i> 9-house SM-Perf-destruct-FV 'The house has been destroyed.'
10	N-	zi	zi	<i>Wa-tu wa-ta-zi-nunua n-yumba zi-le</i> 2-person SM-Fut-9-buy 9-house SM- those 'People will buy those houses.'
11	U-	u-	u-	<i>U-kuta u-me-u-anguk-i-a m-lango</i> 11-wall SM-Perf-Obj-fall-Appl-FV 3- door 'The wall has fallen on to the door.'

12*	Ka-*	ka-	ka-	<i>Ka-shamba ka-le tu-li-ka-nunu-a juzi</i> 12-farm 12-that we-Past-Obj-buy-FV the day before yesterday 'That small farm, we bought it the day before yesterday.'
13	Tu-*	tu-	tu-	<i>Tu-shamba tu-le tu-na-pendez-a</i> 13-farm 13-those 13-Progressive-look good-FV 'Those small farms look good.'
14	U-	u-	u-	<i>Tu-me-u-vunj-a u-moja wao</i> We-Perf-Obj-break-FV SM-unity their 'We have broken their unity.'
15	Ku-	ku-	ku-	<i>Ku-ji-shughul-ish-a kwake ku-na- onekan-a</i> 15-self-be committed-Caus-FV his SM- Present-be seen-FV 'His commitment to work is evident.'
16	Pa-**	pa	pa	<i>Pa-le nyumbani pa-me-chafu-k-a</i> 16-there at home SM-Perf-dirty-Stativ- FV 'It is dirty (there) at home.'
17	Ku- *	ku-	ku-	
18	M-**	m-	m-	<i>M-le chumbani m-na mende</i> 18-there in the room SM-be cockroach 'There are cockroaches in the room.'

* means not acceptable in Standard Kiswahili, although many speakers of the language use the prefixes in informal communication. Kihore et al. (2003:96) say that such prefixes are a Bantu influence on Kiswahili and that they have not been accepted in Standard Kiswahili. Why these scholars arrive at that conclusion may be questioned by inquisitive scholars, especially by those who believe that Kiswahili is a Bantu language. They might not see the reason why Kiswahili should be excluded from the Bantu languages group.

** shows that the class prefixes are no longer attached to Kiswahili nouns. They, however, manifest themselves in sentences as they are attached to verbs, adjectives and demonstratives.

It should be noted that Kiswahili, like most other Bantu languages, follows the Bleek-Meinhof numbering system (cf Lobben, 2012: 133), in which singular and plural classes are usually paired. Lobben (ibid.) emphasizes

that plural classes may also have other functions. This shows that there are also semantic bases for the existence of the noun classes. Among other things, in this paper, the interplay between semantic and other factors governing the noun classes is discussed. It should be expected that some of the morphological properties of acronyms are semantically motivated.

Previous Studies on Acronyms

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010) defines an acronym as a word formed from the first letters of the name of something. Hartmann and Stork (1972) give reasons for the existence of acronyms in languages (which they treat as synonymous with abbreviations) as they say that acronyms are used to save the time and effort spent both in speech and writing. This is mainly because acronyms are shorter than the phrases from which they are formed. So, they save energy, space and time.

Katikiro (2014) also talks about saving time and space as the major reason for the use of acronyms both in speech and writing. Katikiro wonders why acronyms are not given their due treatment in Kiswahili dictionaries, although they are words just like other words found in a language. Katikiro (2014:23) also observes that some nouns in the world's languages exist as acronyms. Additionally, he says the creation of acronyms is predominantly a property of written language. That means only a language that is written is likely to have acronyms in it. Languages that are not written may hardly contain acronyms. Since Kiswahili is both spoken and written, it has quite a good number of acronyms.

Like Katikiro, Massamba (2000) talks about acronyms and abbreviations in relation to Kiswahili. However, Massamba focuses on how acronyms and abbreviations of foreign origin are translated when Kiswahili is the target language during translation. Unlike the foregoing two papers, the current paper studies how nouns that are acronyms are accommodated and incorporated into the Kiswahili noun class system.

It should be noted that nouns have their properties. One of such properties is manifested in Bantu languages (like Kiswahili), each of which has a noun class system in which every noun belongs to a certain noun class (i.e. gender). The rules that govern where newly formed nouns that enter the language (Kiswahili) as acronyms will be placed need to be explained. This is the goal which this paper seeks to achieve. One might think that the exercise of assigning acronyms to noun classes is easy because acronyms have words that head them (i.e. each acronym has a head noun) and every noun has a class to which it belongs. That assumption may be based on the fact that acronyms are essentially noun phrases and, as a general rule, each noun phrase (and of course, each phrase) has a head word. So, one

might simply say that the assignment of acronyms to noun classes ought to follow the class of the head noun in a phrase. That would automatically mean that the entire acronym would behave like its head. Since an acronym is a noun phrase, then it will have the same agreement patterns as those of the head noun. As we shall soon see, that is not always the case with acronyms in Kiswahili.

How Class Membership is Assigned to Acronyms in Kiswahili

As pointed out earlier, acronyms are words formed from the combination of initials (i.e. the first letters of certain words) or the first syllables of constituent words. The following table exemplifies this:

Table 2: Assignment of Class Membership to Acronyms

Acronym	Long Form	Head Noun	Gloss
MKUKUTA	Mkakati wa Kukuza Uchumi na Kupunguza Umasikini Tanzania	Mkakati (class 3)	Strategy for Economic Growth and Poverty Alleviation in Tanzania
BAKITA	Baraza la Kiswahili la Taifa	Baraza (class 5)	The National Kiswahili Council of Tanzania
CCM	Chama cha Mapinduzi	Chama (class 7)	The Revolutionary Party
UWT	Umoja wa Wanawake Tanzania	Umoja (class 14)	The Union for Women in Tanzania
BMT	Baraza la Michezo la Taifa	Baraza (class 5)	The National Sports Council
JWTZ	Jeshi la Wananchi Tanzania	Jeshi (class 5)	The Tanzanian People's Defence Force

When acronyms like those in the table are used in sentences, they follow certain agreement patterns. As pointed out earlier, each noun class has its own agreement patterns. Lusekelo (2013) calls the agreement pattern on the verb as verb external agreement just because the agreement is a manifestation of noun features outside the noun phrase. The agreement pattern an acronym shows is determined by the way the acronym is perceived by the speakers of the language. That may seem to be a non-issue, but it is an issue because there are some variations. Sometimes, some speakers treat acronyms by considering the class to which a head word in the acronym belongs. There are cases where language users ignore the class of the head noun and use completely different agreement patterns, something that entails different class assignment). This is the problem that this paper attempts to address. The following section examines noun class assignment to various acronyms.

Acronyms Referring to People

The acronyms that refer to people follow the agreement patterns of classes 1/2 in Kiswahili, i.e. they have **a-** and **wa-** in the subject marker position of the verb. Class 1 acronyms have **m-** in the object marker slot of the verb, while class 2 ones retain the form **wa-** for both the subject marker and object marker positions in the verb. The following exemplify this:

1. *DC a-me-ondok-a leo*
DC SM- Perf-leave today
'The District Commissioner left today'
2. *Ma-DC wa-me-it-w-a na rais*
6-DC SM-Perf-invite-Passive-FV by president

'The District Commissioners have been invited by the President'
3. *MEK a-li-wa-shauri wa-limu ku-fany-a kazi kwa bidii*
Ward Education Coordinator SM-Past-Obj-advise 6-teacher
infinitive-do work with effort
'The Ward Education Coordinator advised the teachers to work hard'
Note: MEK is an acronym for Mratibu Elimu Kata.
4. *MM a-ta-end-a Arusha kesho*
Associate Director SM-Fut-go-FV Arusha tomorrow
'The Associate Director will go to Arusha tomorrow'

Note: MM refers to Mkurugenzi Mshiriki.

Although some of the acronyms referring to people used in the foregoing examples are not established (standardized, since some of them are foreign as they have been borrowed from English), the acronyms have the agreement patterns like those of people's names. Since the agreement patterns observed in the acronyms referring to people observe the rules of classes 1 and 2, we can confidently argue that a semantic criterion is used in assigning class membership to acronyms. As a rule, nouns referring to people in Bantu languages are put in classes 1 and 2. Therefore, it seems that people look at an acronym and determine in advance whether or not it refers to human beings. Demuth (2000:283) argues that human noun classes demonstrate relatively high semantic productivity in that new noun classes referring to human beings show the semantic properties of classes 1 and 2. When speakers have established that new nouns (including new acronyms) refer to human beings, they assign them to classes 1 and 2 and such nouns automatically show the agreement patterns of these classes. That criterion does not seem to be relevant to all the

acronyms referring to non-human entities. The following sections discuss various acronyms and how they are assigned class membership.

Acronyms Referring to Non-human Entities

While we have seen that the acronyms referring to human beings do not pose any problem with regard to class assignment, other types of acronyms pose certain problems. The following table lists some acronyms that are taken from newspaper headlines.

Table 3: Acronyms with Kiswahili Head Nouns

	Headline with Acronym(s)	Gloss	Head Noun	Its Noun Class	Noun Class in the Acronym	Evidence
1	<i>JK: CCM inaweza kung'oka 2015</i> (Mwananchi 26 th Oct 2013)	CCM may be defeated in the 2015 elections.	Chama 'party'	7/8	9/10	The use of i as SM
2	<i>Chadema yaitikisa CCM</i> (Tanzania Daima, 9 th Feb 2014)	Chadema shakes CCM	Chama 'party'	7/8	9/10	The use of ya in the SM and i in OM positions in the verb
3	<i>CWT yaanzisha kitengo maalumu kwa ajili ya walimu wanawake</i> (Mwananchi, 17 th Feb 2014)	CWT launches a special unit for female teachers	Chama 'union'	7/8	9/10	The use of ya in SM
4	<i>Mgeja atamba CCM ipo imara hakuna wa</i>	Mgeja boasts that CCM is firm, no one	Chama 'party'	7/8	9/10	The use of i in SM and OM

	<i>kuiyumbisha</i> (Mwananchi, 10 th February 2014)	can shake it				
5	<i>Bomani: CCM isivuruge mchakato wa katiba</i> (Rai, 6 th March 2014)	Bomani: CCM should not disrupt the constitutional review process	Chama 'party'	7/8	9/10	The use of i in SM
6	<i>CCM wapiga magoti kuomba kura Kalenga</i> (Mwananchi, 3 rd March 2014)	CCM kneel as they ask for votes in Kalenga	Chama 'party'	7/8	2	The use of wa in SM
7	<i>Chadema wataka JK aingilie kati Bunge the Katiba</i> (Mwananchi, 3 rd March 2014)	Chadema want JK to intervene in the Constituent Assembly	Chama 'party'	7/8	2	The use of wa in SM
8	<i>Chadema kimeshindwa kwa mengi uchaguzi madiwani</i> (Mwananchi, 22 nd Feb 2014)	Chadema lost the councilors' election for various reasons	Chama 'party'	7/8	7/8	The use of ki as SM
9	<i>Suma JKT yapongezwa kuimarisha ulinzi</i>	Suma JKT appreciated for maintaining	Shirika 'corporation'	5/6	9/10	The use of ya as SM

	(Tanzania Daima, 27 th Feb 2014	security				
10	<i>JUKATA yalalamikia uteuzi wa JK</i> (Tanzania Daima, 13 th Feb 2014)	JUKATA criticizes JK's nomination	Jukwaa 'forum'	5/6	9/10	The use of ya as SM

In the examples, some acronyms headed by the word *chama* 'party' or 'union', which is a class 7/8 noun as its agreement affixes are *ki/vi*, which when palatalized become **ch** or **vy** are consistently assigned to new noun classes. In the last two cases, where acronyms are assigned to class 2, it is clear that the writer thought of a political party as a group of individuals. Although a political party is mentioned, reference is made to the followers or leaders of that particular political party. This is not a big problem because one may simply say semantic consideration dictates the choice of an appropriate noun class. One may wonder what exactly happens to the acronym JUKATA (Jukwaa la Katiba Tanzania), which is headed by the noun *jukwaa* 'forum', a class 5/6 noun. Why does it have the agreement pattern of classes 9/10?

What may trigger more questions is the fact that the majority of acronyms are placed in classes 9/10. This will be explained later. Let us, at this point, look at acronyms whose constituent words are in English to see how they are treated as far as class assignment is concerned. These acronyms have their Kiswahili equivalents, and therefore have Kiswahili head nouns (although they're not in the acronyms). The following table illustrates this point:

Table 4: English based Acronyms

	Headline with Acronym(s)	Gloss	Head Noun	Its Noun Class	Noun Class in the Acronym	Evidence
1	<i>WWF yashauri elimu ya uwekezaji kwa jamii</i> (Mwananchi,	The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) recommends investment	Mfuko 'fund'	3/4	9/10	The use of ya as SM

	4 th March 2014)	in community education				
2	<i>NEC yaanza kuboresha daftari</i> (Tanzania Daima, 5 th March 2014)	NEC starts updating the voters' register	Tume 'commission'	9/10	9/10	The use of i in the SM and OM
3	<i>TFF yalaani vurugu Yanga vs Al Ahly</i> (Tanzania Daima, 5 th Feb 2014)	TFF condemns violence that occurred during Yanga vs Al Ahly	Shirikisho 'federation'	5/6	9/10	The use of ya in SM
4	<i>NEC isimamie demokrasia</i> (Tanzania Daima, 9 th Feb 2014)	NEC ought to safeguard democracy	Tume 'commission'	9/10	9/10	The use of i in SM
5	<i>TFF yaanika wajumbe kamati</i> (Tanzania Daima, 9 th Feb 2014)	TFF announces committee members	Shirikisho 'federation'	5/6	9/10	The use of ya in SM
6	<i>DART yawatoa hofu wanaotaka zabuni</i> (Tanzania Daima, 6 th March 2014)	DART clears tender bidders' fear	Wakala 'agency'	14	9/10	The use of ya in SM
7	<i>TBS yatunukuu vyeti bora</i>	TBS awards certificates of excellence	Shirika	5/6	9/10	The use of ya in SM

	<i>kampuni 50</i> (Mwananchi, 10 th Feb 2014)	to 50 companies	'corporation'			
8	<i>TFF ingefanya haya kupata uzoefu</i> (Mwananchi, 10 th Feb 2014)	This is what TFF should do to gain experience	Shirikisho 'federation'	5/6	9/10	The use of i in SM
9	<i>TSA yapigwa jeki</i> (Mwananchi, 10 th Feb 2014)	TSA gets support	Chama 'association'	7/8	9/10	The use of ya in SM
10	<i>TCD yashauri mapendekezo 16</i> (Mwananchi, 17 th Feb 2014)	TCD makes 16 suggestions	Kituo 'centre'	7/8	9/10	The use of ya in SM

As the examples in the table indicate, most of the acronyms (including those containing English words) are placed in classes 9 and 10.

Why are most Acronym-nouns placed in Classes 9/10?

The following are possible explanations for the dominance of classes 9/10:

- Acronyms are treated independently of the words constituting them. So, they are accommodated as borrowed words and classes 9/10 are considered to be host classes where most borrowed nouns are accommodated in most Bantu languages. Demuth (2000) refers to classes 9/10 as default classes. That means classes 9/10 are for accommodating any new nouns that do not fit in the other classes. This is attested in many Bantu languages. In Shinyiha, for example, words like *isimu* (phone), *ikompyuta* (computer), *itelevisheni* (television), *ifeni* (fan) are accommodated in classes 9/10 (cf. Asheli, 2013:40). One may then be tempted to argue that in Kiswahili acronyms have the same status as borrowed nouns. It seems that Kiswahili speakers perceive acronym-nouns as loanwords and

therefore accommodate them in classes 9/10. We cannot say different speakers of the language make mistakes consistently; but if one says those are mistakes, then how many times should a mistake be a mistake before it is given the status of a new version of a particular language? In my view, treating the use of the class 9/10 agreement pattern as a mistake is the same as correcting people who use regular forms in English where irregular ones are expected. Think of a person who says ‘*He goed to school yesterday’. We want them to say ‘went’ instead of ‘goed’. By doing that, it seems we have allowed irregular forms to be regular.

What seems strange, as far as host classes are concerned, is the fact that there are acronyms whose head nouns belong to classes 5/6 but which are assigned to classes 9/10. That is strange because classes 5/6 are also host classes because some borrowed nouns are accommodated here, and normally when there is a conflict over where a borrowed noun should be placed the ‘war’ is between classes 5/6 and 9/10. For example, we would expect *BMT*, which has the word *baraza* as a head noun that belongs to classes 5/6, to have the agreement patterns of class 5/6. Strange as it may seem, we have seen *BMT* having the agreement patterns of classes 9/10. This strengthens the argument that this language treats acronyms as borrowed words whose host classes are 9/10, no matter the class to which the head word in an acronym belongs (with the exception of human acronyms).

- Another explanation could be: The noun class system is changing from irregular to regular. It should be noted that the complex noun class system in Bantu is an irregular system. McMahon (1994) talks of regularity principle as something that governs the direction of language change. In which case, language is said to change from irregular to regular. So, one may argue that a day will come when most, if not all acronym-nouns, will be in classes 9/10. What this essentially means is that language speakers prefer regular forms. In my view, speakers are the main stakeholders in determining the direction of change. Those who stick to standards may succeed in controlling things for a period of time. However, the power of language speakers is enormous in determining what the trend is like. It is my humble submission that language standardizers should harmonize their rules with how people speak a particular language. The challenge for language standardizers lies in what to do when language changes. This explanation is supported by the fact that there is evidence for a reduced number of noun classes in Bantu languages. Demuth (2000:287) argues that at least some parts of Bantu noun class will persist over time. As suggested by the data

presented in this paper, classes 9/10 are among those that will persist. Maho (1999) gives Mbatia and Kako as Bantu languages whose noun classes have been reduced to 2 and 3 noun classes, respectively. The way acronyms are treated in Kiswahili may prompt one to think that certain noun classes are disappearing gradually.

- If one wants to be neutral about what happens, as far as the assignment of noun class to acronyms in Kiswahili is concerned, one would argue that there are two correct forms of agreement involving acronyms. One form takes the agreement markers of classes 9/10 and the other takes that of the head noun in an acronym. This kind of explanation would imply that there are at least two varieties of the language in question.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to look at how the existing acronym-nouns are assigned noun class membership in Kiswahili. It has been argued that acronyms are put into the noun class system following the referent (for human acronyms) and the acronym stem in some cases. However, the majority of acronym-nouns are put in classes 9/10. It may be concluded that acronym-nouns pose a challenge as far as the assignment of class membership to them is concerned. The trend shows that noun classes 9/10 are increasingly becoming more accommodating than the other noun classes, which perhaps shows an on-going language change towards the regularization of the language. That may imply that the process of reducing the number of noun classes in Kiswahili is at work. A change in the number of noun classes has been attested in some Bantu languages. While Proto-Bantu had more than twenty noun classes, most of the existing Bantu languages have less than twenty noun classes. However, there are classes that resist this change.

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