

2014

Luganda Nouns: Inflectional Morphology and Tests

Elizabeth Baertlein
St. Cloud State University

Martin Ssekitto
St. Cloud State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/stcloud_ling



Part of the [Applied Linguistics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Baertlein, Elizabeth and Ssekitto, Martin (2014) "Luganda Nouns: Inflectional Morphology and Tests," *Linguistic Portfolios*: Vol. 3 , Article 3.

Available at: https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/stcloud_ling/vol3/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by theRepository at St. Cloud State. It has been accepted for inclusion in Linguistic Portfolios by an authorized editor of theRepository at St. Cloud State. For more information, please contact rswexelbaum@stcloudstate.edu.

LUGANDA NOUNS: INFLECTIONAL MORPHOLOGY AND TESTS

ELIZABETH BAERTLEIN AND MARTIN SSEKITTO

ABSTRACT

Koffi (2010) proposes four diagnosis tests for identifying, classifying, and categorizing words in the lexicon of any language. The four tests are the semantic test, the morphological test, the syntactic (or distributional test), and the functional test. In this paper, we put the four tests to a test to see how well they can help identify words in Luganda, a language spoken in Uganda. We find that, though, Luganda is from a different language family than English, the four tests hold well. We conclude that understanding how to use these tests provide teachers with additional insights not only in English, but also in their students native languages.

1.0 Introduction

Luganda is a language of the Bantu class of languages of east-central Africa, and it is the main language of Uganda, with approximately ten million speakers. Luganda is used for instruction in primary schools while children undergo the process of learning English, which is the official language of Uganda. In Luganda all the words in a sentence must agree with the noun, making it a noun-centric language (Luganda, n.d.). This paper will discuss the types of grammatical information that nouns can carry based on their inflectional prefixes. Based on this information, the various ways of testing for nouns in Luganda will be discussed, and pedagogical implications will be drawn.

2.0 Inflectional Morphology of Nouns

2.1 Noun Classes

Luganda, like other Bantu languages, has different classes of nouns, which are roughly based upon degrees of animacy. In sentences of double-object construction, the noun of a more animate class must precede the noun of the less animate class (Ssekiryango, 2006). There are two different ways of counting the classes of nouns in Luganda. One of the ways divides the nouns into ten classes, with the singular and plural of each class being counted as part of the same class. If the singular and plural are counted as separate classes, then there are 17 classes, with “two pairs of classes with identical plurals and one class with no singular-plural distinction” (Luganda, n.d.). The ten class method is generally used in discussing the Luganda language, but the 17 class method is more commonly used when discussing the Bantu family of languages. Therefore, since this paper discusses Luganda in the general context of languages, the ten class method will be used. Even within the ten class system, there are differing viewpoints on how the classes should be ordered. This paper uses the system proposed by Ssemakula (n.d.). Each class has prefixes associated with it, which are detailed in Table 1. One prefix is used for the singular nouns in that class, while the other is used to form the plural. Unlike English, Luganda has no inflectional suffix for plural nouns. Instead this information is carried in the prefix.

Class	Singular Prefix	Plural Prefix	Meaning
Class I	mu-	ba-	contains mainly people, although some inanimate nouns can be found in this class: <i>musajja</i> ‘man’
Class II	mu-	mi-	contains all sorts of nouns but most of the concrete nouns in Class II are long or cylindrical: <i>muti</i> ‘tree’
Class III	li-	ma-	contains mainly (but not exclusively) large things and liquids: <i>lintu</i> ‘giant’ (from <i>muntu</i> ‘person’)
Class IV	ki-	bi-	contains inanimate objects and is the class used for the impersonal ‘it’: <i>kitabo</i> ‘book’
Class V	ka-	bu-	contains mainly small things: <i>kabwa</i> ‘puppy’ (from <i>mbwa</i> ‘dog’)
Class VI	ku-	ma-	is commonly used for body parts: <i>kutu</i> ‘ear’
Class VII	gu-	ga-	is rarely used but can be used to create pejorative forms: <i>gusajja</i> ‘big ugly man’
Class VIII	lu-	n/m-	contains many different things including the names of most languages: <i>Luganda</i> ‘Luganda’, <i>Luzungu</i> ‘English language’
Class IX	n/m-	n/m-	also contains many different types of concepts but most animals fall into this class: <i>mbwa</i> ‘dog’
Class X	tu-		has no singular–plural distinction, is used for mass nouns, usually in the sense of ‘a drop’ or ‘precious little’: <i>tuzzi</i> ‘drop of water’ (from <i>mazzi</i> ‘water’)

Table 1: Luganda noun classes and meanings.
Sources: Ssemakula (n.d.) and Luganda (n.d.)

3.0 Article Prefixes

As is illustrated in the table above, the noun class prefixes are not the first part of a noun, as each noun begins with a vowel. This is because, in Luganda, articles are not separate words from the nouns. Instead, articles are attached as a prefix to a noun. The three article prefixes in Luganda are a-, o-, and e-. All three of these articles mean the same thing, but the article used for a certain noun depends on the class of that noun, whether the noun is singular or plural, and whether the noun carries adjectival prefixes (to be discussed). The same article carries both definite and indefinite meaning, with the meaning derived from context. The following example shows how the prefixes o- and e- are added to the noun *muti/miti* as articles.

Example 1:

- *muti*- tree
- *miti*- trees
- *omuti*- a/the tree
- *emiti*- the trees

Example 2 shows how *omuti* can be used in a sentence to mean “the tree” rather than “a tree” because of its context.

Example 2:

Language example:	Ogogwoka	omuti	mulungi.
Gloss:	Only	a/the tree	is beautiful.
Translation:	The only tree is beautiful.		

Whenever a noun is used in a sentence, it must be accompanied by an article prefix. However, there is a way for nouns to stand without an article prefix, as in Luganda a noun can form a complete sentence, carrying with it subject and verb information (Stevick and Kamoga, 1970, p. 22). For example *essomero* means a/the school, and it is almost always accompanied by its prefix e-. However, in the following example, *ssomero* can stand alone without its prefix:

Example 3:

Language example:	Ssomero.
Gloss:	School.
Translation:	It’s a school.

4.0 Adjectival Prefixes

Like article prefixes, certain adjectival prefixes can be attached to nouns in Luganda, though most adjectives are separate from the nouns they modify and come after the noun. In the case that an adjectival prefix is attached to a noun, it replaces the usual noun class prefix. The semantics and class of the noun determines which adjectival prefixes, if any, it can take. The adjectival prefixes of Luganda are presented in Table 2.

Prefix	Singular/Plural	Meaning	Example
ka-	singular	small	akawala- small girl
bu-	plural	small	obuwala- small girls
tu-	singular/plural	extremely small/ beautiful	otuwala- small beautiful girl
ki-	singular	large	ekintu- big thing
bi-	plural	large/many	ebintu- big/many things
gu-	singular	extremely large/ugly	oguwala- big ugly girl
ga-	plural	extremely large/ugly	agawala- big ugly girls
tu-	plural	quantifier a little of	otunyo- little bit of salt
ku-	singular/plural	quantifier- some	kumazzi- some water
ma-	plural	quantifier- a lot of	amazzi- a lot of water

Table 2: Adjectival prefixes in Luganda

As is seen in Table 2, an article prefix must come before the adjectival prefix in most cases, with the exception of certain instances of quantifiers being applied to noncount or plural nouns. It is interesting to note that these same prefixes also function as adverbs, as they must

be attached to any adjectives that follow the noun in order for the adjective to agree with the noun, as seen in Example 4.

Example 4:

Language example:	akawala	akalungi
Gloss:	a small girl	small beautiful
Translation:	a small beautiful girl	

5.0 Testing for Nouns

Based on what we know of Luganda nouns from their inflectional morphology, we can now discuss the various tests that can be applied to determine if a word is a noun. Some of the tests that can be applied to English can also be applied to Luganda, some of the tests must be modified, and some of them cannot be applied at all. In this section, the noun tests presented by Koffi (2010) that must be modified to apply to Luganda or do not work in Luganda will be discussed. The tests that are the same in English and Luganda, namely the functional tests and the [+/- common] and [+/- thematic role] varieties of the semantic test, will not be discussed.

5.1 Inflectional Morphology Test

The prefixes associated with singular and plural can be used to identify nouns in Luganda. However, this is not the best test to use because the same prefixes that serve as singular and plural prefixes also serve many other purposes in the language. Also, adjectives must carry the same prefix as the noun in a sentence, so this test may cause some confusion between adjectives and nouns. This potential for confusion will be important in considering which tests to teach students. Unlike in English, where the genitive suffix can be used to test for nouns, in Luganda there is no genitive morpheme. Instead, possession is expressed by using a prepositional phrase.

5.2 Derivational Morphology Test

Derivational morphology tests cannot be used to determine whether or not a word is a noun in Luganda. This is because the same suffixes and prefixes can mean different things depending upon what type of word they are attached to, as illustrated in Example 5:

Example 5:

mugoba- (noun) driver	mugende- (verb) to go
kugoba- (verb) to drive	kutu- (noun) ear

There is no set pattern as to how the prefix of a noun changes when it becomes a verb and vice versa.

5.3 Semantic Test

As in English, in Luganda, “any lexical item that has the feature [+/- count] is most likely a noun” (Koffi, 2010, p. 140). In English, any noun that is [+count] “can be preceded by cardinal and ordinal numbers” (Koffi, 2010, p. 140). The difference in Luganda is that

numbers follow the noun instead of precede it, and sometimes there is a preposition between the noun and the adjective, as is seen in Example 6.

Example 6:

Language example:	ekitabo	kyo	kusatu
Gloss:	the book	of	third
Translation:	the third book		

5.4 Pronominalization Test

According to Koffi (2010, p. 146), “any word or group of words that can be replaced by a pronoun qualifies as a noun phrase.” This is true for Luganda as well, but in Luganda the noun phrase can be completely deleted from the sentence in some cases, and the sentence is still grammatical, with the pronoun implied, as is illustrated in Examples 7 and 8.

Example 7:

Language example:	Amazzi	ga	nyogoga.
Gloss:	The water	is	cold.
Translation:	The water is cold.		

Example 8:

Language example:	Ga	nyogoga.
Gloss:	Is	cold
Translation:	It (the water) is cold.	

5.5 Syntactic Test

Applying the English parts of speech to Luganda can be a bit confusing because so much syntactic information is carried by one “word.” This phenomenon has led to some debate about what can actually be considered a “word” in Luganda (Hyman and Katamba, 2001). In Example 9, the word “tetúlikibágùlira” is translated into English, showing that this one “word” contains pronouns, an auxiliary, a verb, and a preposition.

Example 9:

Language example:	te- tú- lí-	kí- bá-	gùl- ir-	a
Gloss:	not we future	it them	buy applicative	infl suffix
Translation:	We will not buy it for them.			
	(Hyman and Katamba, 2001)			

Since an entire sentence can be contained in a Luganda “word,” writing phrase structure rules for Luganda becomes problematic, as parts of speech traditionally refer to a full word. What would be called simply a “noun” in English carries the determiner and possibly an adjective in Luganda. Therefore, it is not entirely acceptable to refer to this word only as a “noun.”

Instead, it might be more coherent to consider the prefixes of nouns as “words” in themselves when talking about Luganda parts of speech.

6.0 Pedagogical Implications

The description of Luganda noun formation and comparisons with English tests for nouns that have been presented in this paper are relevant to teaching English to native speakers of Luganda. It is important for English learners to become aware of how the syntax of their native language differs from the syntax of English. When teaching English to native speakers of Luganda, it will be best to begin by teaching those elements of language which are similar in both languages. For example, the teacher could begin by instructing students how to identify nouns using the thematic roles and functional tests that are the same when applied to English or Luganda. Then, as learners acquire more command of grammatical terms, the differences between Luganda and English should be addressed. It will be especially important for teachers to emphasize aspects of noun formation that vary widely between Luganda and English, for example, articles and plural affixes. The information in this paper can assist teachers in identifying the differences between the formation of nouns in English and in Luganda, and the teacher can make pedagogical choices based on this information.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Elizabeth Baertlein received her MA TESL/Applied Linguistics Program degree from SCSU.

Martin Ssekitto received his MA/TESOL in May 2012. Information about Luganda that is not cited comes from the knowledge of co-author Martin Ssekitto, a native speaker of Luganda.

Recommendation: This paper was recommended for publication by Professor Ettien Koffi, Ph.D., English Department, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN. Email: enkoffi@stcloudstate.edu

References

- Hyman, L.M. and Katamba, F.X. (2001). The word in Luganda. *University of California-Berkeley Linguistics*. Retrieved from http://www.linguistics.berkeley.edu/~hyman/Luganda_Word_Paper.pdf
- Koffi, E. (2010). *Applied English syntax: Foundations for word, phrase, and sentence analysis*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt.
- Luganda. (n.d.). Retrieved from the Wikipedia wiki: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luganda>
- Ssekiryango, J. (2006). Observations on double object construction in Luganda. *Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, ed. Arasanyin, O.F. and Pemberton, O.A. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project.
- Ssemakula, M.E. (n.d.). A basic grammar of Luganda. *The Buganda Home Page*. Retrieved from <http://www.buganda.com/ggulama.htm>
- Stevick, E.W. and Kamoga, F.K. (1970). *Luganda pretraining program*. Washington D.C.: Foreign Service Institute.