The Alleged Class 2a Prefix bɔ in Eton: A Plural Word

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Fund for Scientific Research - Flanders / K.U. Leuven

0. Introduction
Since the beginnings of Bantu linguistics, the extended gender system of the Bantu languages has received a lot of attention.¹ The focus of this attention has been mainly comparative-historical, sometimes to the detriment of careful synchronic analysis. This paper focuses on the morpheme bɔ in the Cameroonian Bantu language Eton (A71), which should be identified as the nominal prefix of class 2a according to the traditional criteria and terminology. It will be shown that this morpheme is not a prefix but a word, probably a proclitic. Its function is to pluralize a following genderless word. Since the most typical genderless words are proper names and deictically restricted kinship terms (e.g. tādd ‘my father’), the result is usually an associative plural. This explains how the succession of the locative preposition d and the plural word could grammaticalize into the complex preposition dbɔ ‘chez’. The behaviour of bɔ in Eton confirms some observations that Dryer (1989) made in his typological study on plural words. The end of this paper presents a brief comparative overview of the class 2a marker in other Bantu languages.

1. The Noun Class System
Eton is a previously undescribed Narrow Bantu language spoken just north of the Cameroonian capital Yaoundé. It belongs to the Beti part of the Beti-Bulu-Fang dialect cluster (also called Pahouin). Its closest relatives are Ewondo and

¹ I interpret noun class and gender as alternative terms for the same phenomenon. In Bantu studies the term noun class is usual, but I follow Corbett (1991) in using the term gender, except when explicitly referring to the Bantuist tradition. Moreover, I will use the term class 1a for the set of nouns that is traditionally analysed as a subgender of gender 1, but that I analyse as a group of genderless words in Eton (idem for class 2a). I wish to thank Dmitry Idiatov and my informants Pie-Claude Ondobo and Désiré Essono for their help. Vertical bars mark morphophonological notation. In this notation accentuated syllables are underlined and all morpheme boundaries are marked as follows: # word boundary, = clitic boundary, - affix boundary. The following glosses are used: AT augment; CON connective; DEM demonstrative; DIM diminutive; IMP imperative; PL plural; PRES present; SF suffix. Arabic numbers are used for nominal gender prefixes in the glosses, Roman numbers for agreement prefixes.
Mengisa. Eton has a typical gender system with ten genders, but lacks locative genders. Table 1 gives an overview. The numbers in the first column refer to the genders reconstructed for Proto-Bantu of which the current Eton genders are the reflex. The second column gives the nominal gender prefix (NPt), and the third column the verbal prefixes (VPt). The gender prefixes have variable forms depending on the form of the following morpheme. In genders 1 and 3 the nominal prefix is a syllabic homorganic nasal. Before a vowel the homorganic nasal is represented by the phoneme /m/, as in the gender 1 noun m-îngâ ‘woman’. The prefix is not syllabic in that case. Genders 9 and 10 historically had a homorganic nasal nominal prefix. This nasal is only preserved before voiced stops, but there are no morphological arguments for treating it as a prefix in present day Eton. The CV-prefixes of genders 2, 4, 6 and 8 are reduced to C- or CG- before morphemes that begin in a vowel. The preconsonantal and prevocalic forms of the gender 5 and gender 7 prefixes cannot be reduced to one morphophoneme and must be described as allomorphs. The forms in the two rightmost columns of Table 1 are suppletive agreement targets. The connective morpheme (Con) is a proclitic that relates a head noun to a modifying noun, as in (1). The choice between the segmental and the tonal form of the connective depends on the syllable structure of the modifying word. The double accent ” symbolizes the morphotentem D, which is represented by a high tone, except if preceded by a high tone. In the latter case D is represented by a low tone.

(1) /mélMo mé bêwôgô/
  lmé-lî # mé=bê-wôg-âI
  6-car     V1CON=2-hear-SF

 ‘the attention of the audience’ (lit.: ‘the ears of the hearers’)

(2) Table 1: The Eton gender prefixes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>NPt</th>
<th>VPt</th>
<th>Con</th>
<th>Dem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>n̤e</td>
<td>d̥e</td>
<td>d̥/H</td>
<td>n̥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>d̥e</td>
<td>b̥e</td>
<td>b̥/H</td>
<td>b̥a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>n̤</td>
<td>ú</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>n̥  / vî</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d̥</td>
<td>ú</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>n̥  / vî</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>m̥i</td>
<td>m̥i</td>
<td>m̥i/H</td>
<td>m̥</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>ēd̥</td>
<td>ēd̥</td>
<td>ē/H</td>
<td>ē</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>m̥̒e</td>
<td>m̥̒e</td>
<td>m̥̒/H</td>
<td>m̥̒</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>i̯</td>
<td>i̯</td>
<td>i̯/H</td>
<td>yî</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>b̥i</td>
<td>b̥i</td>
<td>b̥i/H</td>
<td>b̥ı</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>φ</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i̯/φ</td>
<td>n̥ı</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>φ</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>i̯/H</td>
<td>n̥ı</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Example (3) illustrates how a connective, a demonstrative and a finite verb agree with a class 6 controller noun.

(3) /məɛ bwad məbɔd mə kəfɔ kwɔn/
    li-mə-buíd # mə=bi-ẽ # mə # mə-Ltɛ # Lkuɔn!
    AU-6-thin VI:CON=2-person VI:DEM VI-PRES be.ill
'These slender people are ill.'

Note that three types of nouns belong to gender 3: nouns with a nasal prefix (3n), nouns with the prefix ñ- (3u) and nouns that take the prefix ñ- (3a). The plurals of gender 1 nouns belong to gender 2. Gender 9 words can form their plurals freely in gender 10 or 6. Other common gender pairings are 3n/4, 5/6, 7/8, 3a/6 and 3u/5.

One set of nouns is not represented in Table 1. These are the nouns that have no gender prefix and that trigger the same agreement pattern as gender 1 nouns, as in (4). Their plurals are marked by bɔ and trigger agreement pattern II, the agreement pattern that is also associated to gender 2, as in (5).

(4) dɔwbɔ ñtɛ kwɔn
    doctor I-PRES be.ill
'The doctor is ill.'

(5) bɔ dɔwbɔ bɛ-ntɛ kwɔn
    PL doctor II-PRES be.ill
'The doctors are ill.'

These sets of nouns are traditionally called class 1a and class 2a respectively in Bantu studies. Class 1a is treated as a subgender of gender 1, because it has the same agreements, and class 2a as a subgender of gender 2. These subgenres were first signalled by Doke (1927), who observed that they typically contain kinship terms, proper names, the question word ‘who,’ and borrowings from European languages. This is also the case in Eton.

(6) a. mbɔn wɔmɔ ñtɛ zɔ
    'My co-wife is coming.'
   b. bɔ mbɔn bɔmɔ bɛntɛ zɔ
    'My co-wives are coming.'

(7) a. cɔlɔ ñtɛ zɔ
    'Tsala is coming.'
   b. bɔ cɔlɔ bɛntɛ zɔ
    'Tsala and his family are coming.'

(8) a. zɔ ñtɛ zɔ?
    'Who is coming?'
   b. bɔ zɔ bɛntɛ zɔ?
    'Who are coming?'

(9) a. lɛŋkɔd wɔmɔ
    'my raincoat'
   b. bɔ lɛŋkɔd bɔmɔ
    'my raincoats'

It appears to be impossible to reconstruct a form for the class 2a marker in Proto-Bantu. Meeussen (1967:100) tried baa-, but could not decide on the tone. Some scholars (e.g. Maho 1999:156, Poulos and Louwrens 1994:16) distinguish between class 2a and class 2b based on the form of the marker. Class 2b has a
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marker with a back vowel (ə or o) and is found in most languages of zone S (roughly South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho and parts of Zimbabwe and Mozambique), in some zone K languages and in some northwestern Bantu languages, such as Eton. The marker of class 2a has the vowel a and is found elsewhere (see the map in Maho 1999:155). I will not make this distinction here for two reasons. First, there are many more lines along which the form of the class 2a/2b marker differs among languages than just vowel quality. Second, the crosslinguistic difference in vowel quality does not reflect any difference in function and morphosyntactic status of the class 2a marker.

2. **bɔ is a Plural Word in Eton**

Contrary to what one expects from a Bantu gender marker, bɔ turns out to be a word in Eton, not a prefix. Its word status can be easily established by means of phonological criteria. This is because the first syllable of every word stem is accentuated. Accentuated syllables have a prominent initial consonant, i.e. a consonant that is longer than the others in intervocalic position and that is not subject to lenition rules. Moreover, they can carry two structural tones, whereas non-accentuated syllables can carry only one. The plural word bɔ clearly differs from prefixes in this respect. In (10)-(11) two plural nouns are preceded by the locative preposition a, which, according to the general tone rules, copies its high tone onto the following word. Since bɔ is accentuated, it can carry two structural tones, so that the copied high tone can simply add to the original low tone and form a falling tone (10b). The gender 8 prefix bi-, on the other hand, is not accentuated. It is not the first syllable of a stem. Therefore it cannot carry both the copied high tone and the original low tone. Consequently, the copied high tone pushes the low tone of the nominal prefix to the right, where it downsteps the high tone of the noun stem le ‘tree’ (11b).

(10) a. bɔ kàlɔdà ‘books’
    b. á bɔ kàlɔdà ‘in the books’

(11) a. bi-lè ‘trees’
    b. á bi-lè ‘in the trees’

The phonetic notation in (12) shows that the initial /b/ of bɔ is not subject to lenition in intervocalic position, contrary to the initial /b/ of the gender prefix bi-.

(12) a. [abɔkɔlɔdə] ‘in the books’
    b. [ɔbii’lɛ] ‘in the trees’

The phonotactic generalization that mid back vowels never occur in prefixes provides additional evidence for the word status of bɔ.

The important formal differences between bɔ and prefixes such as bi- raise the question of whether both have the same function. The answer is no. In Van de Velde (forthcoming) I argue that the nouns commonly referred to as class 1a are
outside of the gender system.® Gender and number are intimately linked. Whether a noun is singular or plural is determined by its gender membership. Therefore, genderless nouns need independent number marking. Their singular is zero-marked, and their plural is marked by means of bó, which is not a gender marker, but a plural word.

The argument is most easily illustrated by means of proper names. These can be derived from nouns, noun phrases or even clauses by means of the suffix -a. The harmonic vowel lal is represented by a vowel phoneme identical to that of the preceding stem vowel, except if the latter is close. In that case the harmonic vowel is represented by /a/. If the stem has a structural succession of lal and lal, the harmonic vowel is represented by /s/, according to the regular rules of vowel coalescence in Eton.

(13) a. iguliag → /ngwāg/ ’stone’
   [9]stone
b. iguliag-á → /ngwāgś/ ’Stone’ (proper name)
   stone-śf

Usually the suffix has a low tone, but when it is attached to a monosyllabic noun stem with a rising tone, the high part of the stem tone attaches to the suffix.®

(14) a. dū́ád → /dwaśd/ ‘furuncle’
   5-furuncle
b. dū́ád-á → /dwaśdś/ ’Furuncle’ (proper name; elicited, not attested)
   furuncle-śf

During the derivation, the source noun is also lifted out of the gender system. The original prefix is incorporated into the stem, the original agreement pattern is replaced by agreement pattern I and the original plural formation by change in gender is replaced by the preposition of bó. This is true for all proper names, not only names for persons.

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5 Developing the arguments here would lead us too far afield. The claim is made for Eton only, but might prove to be valid in other Bantu languages as well. Note that I do not use the absence of a gender prefix on class 1a words as an argument. As has been said, gender 9 and 10 nouns do not have a prefix either. In order to accept the possibility of genderless nouns, it is important to acknowledge that agreement patterns can have multiple functions. In Van de Velde (forthcoming) I show that agreement pattern i marks agreement either with nouns of gender 1 or with nouns that are less in need of referential disambiguation. Proper names are a prototypical example of the latter, because they are strictly referential.

® This peculiar tonal behaviour is historically explainable. Final stem vowels eroded in Eton and the surrounding languages, except in proper names, which tend to be conservative. The final vowel of proper names has been morphologically reinterpreted as a suffix. Rising tones on monosyllabic stems are the result of the historical loss of the final vowel of CVC-stems with a low-high tone pattern.
The examples in (16–18) of proper names for plant species are for different reasons morphosyntactically challenging, but they all confirm the analysis of bɔ as a separate word used to pluralize a genderless element. The name for mimosa in (16a) is a phrase containing an imperative and its object. The plural of this phrasal name is formed by bɔ in (16b). The high tone on the gender prefix of the object is due to high tone copy from the previous verb form. The following downstep shows that (16a) is not a compound. If there were no word boundary between wú and ṭswánɔ, then the copied high tone would have deleted the low tone on the following prefix instead of pushing it to the right.

The names in (17–18) are noun phrases. In (17) the gender 5 noun ʃ-ɔn ‘hand of bananas’ is followed by the numeral ‘one’, which should normally agree in gender, but which here takes a form of agreement pattern I instead of V. Interestingly, the pluralization of the phrasal name involves the pluralization of the head noun and the addition of the plural word before the entire phrase. The numeral remains in its singular form. Something similar occurs in the name for a kind of chili pepper (18). This is a connective construction with a head noun expressing a property followed by the connective proclitic (H=) plus a dependent noun. In the plural the head noun is pluralized and the connective morpheme still agrees with it. It is not clear whether the second noun is pluralized, since the plural form of zid does not differ from the singular. Anyhow, the pluralization of its constituents does not suffice to derive the plural of the phrasal name. The plural word must again be added.

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(18) a. /rito:w n zʊdə/  
    #H-N-ti:ən  # H=zʊd-ɬ  
  ʔ-3-long  III.CON=[9]buttock-SF  
  ‘chili plant (sp.), Capsicum frutescens’ (lit.: ‘long buttock’)  

b. /bə min twain mi zʊdə/  
   #bə # mIN-ti:ən  # mi=zʊd-ɬ  
   PL  4-long  IV.CON=[9]buttock-SF  
  ‘chili plants (sp.)’

As seen in the translation of (15b), the plural word usually has an associative meaning when combined with the name of a person. Via this associative meaning bɔ could combine with the general locative preposition ɗ to form the preposition ɗbɔ, which means ‘chez’ (at or to somebody’s place). In present-day Eton the locative preposition ɗ is incompatible with nouns or pronouns that have human reference, whether genderless or not. If bɔ were a gender prefix, it could not have combined with a preceding preposition.

(19) zʊɡə ɛːj ɲɛ ɗbɔ mɑ, mɛyəŋ ɲɛ  
    come with him to me 1SG.heal him  
  ‘Bring him to me, so that I heal him.’

Interestingly, the origin of this preposition is reflected in Cameroon French. When speakers tell me that a certain form is used in the dialect of a person we both know, for instance somebody called Désiré, he would tell me ‘that is how they say it chez les Désiré(s),” with a plural article before the first name of that person.

3. A Minor Part-of-Speech Category

This section discusses the grammatical status of the plural word and provides a brief comparison with plural words in other languages. The plural word is always immediately followed by a genderless noun, which may be a phrasal name. It cannot be used in isolation, e.g. deictically or anaphorically. Nothing can be inserted between the plural word and the noun it pluralizes. This is because the order in nominal constituents is strictly head-before-dependent in Eton. From a syntactic point of view the plural word is the head of the noun it pluralizes. It is the plural word that determines gender agreement, not the following noun, which is genderless. Moreover, the augment is prefixed to the plural word, not to the following noun. The augment is a morpheme that is prefixed to the head of a nominal constituent if this head is modified by a demonstrative or a relative clause or if the head is normally a nominal modifier.
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(20) /bɔ kālādā bā/
   ll-bɔ # kālādā # bāl
   AU-PL book 2-DEM
   ‘these books’

Since b- is the prefix of gender 2 before vowel-initial stems, bɔ might be analyzable as b-ɔ.

There is one word in Eton that behaves similarly, viz. the diminutive proclitic m-ɔH, plural b-ɔH. This word can be put in front of any noun in order to form a diminutive or singulative. A combination of the diminutive word and a noun triggers gender 1 agreement in the singular and gender 2 agreement in the plural.

(21) a. /mɔ ēlēn ātē kū/
    lm-ɔH=ē-lēn # ā-Ltē # lēkūl
    1-DIM=5-palm.tree 1-PR fall
    ‘The small palm tree falls.’

b. /bɔ mēlēn bētē kū/
    lb-ɔH=mē-lēn # bē-Ltē # lēkūl
    2-DIM=6-palm.tree 2-PR fall
    ‘The small palm trees fall.’

c. /bɔ mejwāgī/
    lb-ɔH=mē-juagī
    2-DIM=6-wine
    ‘some wine’

Thus, the plural word forms a minor part-of-speech category with the diminutive word. These words have in common with nouns that they determine concord, i.e. they belong to a gender and that they occupy the initial position in the noun phrase. They differ from nouns in their limited distribution and syntactic dependence and in their grammatical meaning.4

The Eton data confirm some observations that Matthew Dryer makes in a typological study on plural words (Dryer 1989). In a sample of 307 languages, Dryer found 48 languages in which the category plural is indicated by means of a separate word. These languages lack number as an inflectional category on the noun. Only two of these 48 languages are spoken in Africa, viz. Gbeya (Adamawa-Ubangi) and Yoruba (Benue Congo). The grammatical category of these plural words varies. In some languages the plural word is a numeral or an article. In others, plural words belong to a minor category or constitute a one-word category of their own.

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4 The plural word might be a proclitic as well, but the difference between words and proclitics is only visible in Eton if they carry a final high tone.

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Dryer found two languages in his sample in which the plural word belongs to a minor category of noun modifiers: Hixkaryana (a Carib language) and Gbeya. In Hixkaryana, there are four other words in the category: a diminutive *tsko* meaning ‘small’ or ‘good’; an augmentative, meaning ‘big’ or ‘bad’; a word indicating ‘loss of value’, and a word which means either ‘dead’ or ‘set of’. In Gbeya there are three other words in the category that also contains the plural word (which is *ô*): ‘even, also, just’, ‘big, real’, and ‘a, some, certain, few’. Thus, as in Eton, these minor part-of-speech categories contain a word for ‘small’ and/or ‘big’. Dryer further notes that in a number of other languages in his sample the category to which the plural word belongs (either articles or numerals) also contains a diminutive word.

Dryer also raises the issue of word order. He compared the order in the pair Plural word - Noun to that in the pair Verb - Object and found that in all VO languages the plural word precedes the noun (as in Eton), whereas the plural word follows the noun in the great majority of OV languages. Dryer proposes two possible explanations for this pattern: either plural words usually are the head of the noun phrase in which they occur, or this pattern confirms his claim that there is no general tendency for modifiers to follow the noun in VO languages and to precede in OV languages. The former explanation, i.e. that the plural word is the head of the following noun (in terms of dependency grammar), turns out to be correct in Eton.

4. The Class 2a Marker in Other Bantu Languages

A superficial glance at descriptions of Bantu languages reveals that the so-called class 2a prefix very often differs from the other nominal gender prefixes. In many cases the differences are formal, e.g. a high tone, as in Lega (Botne 2003:427) or a long vowel, as in Mongo (Hulstaert 1965). In Yao the class 2a marker *aši*- is bisyllabic and in Karanga there are several forms, including *madzi-* and *vadzi-*. In Luganda the class 2a marker is a clitic, rather than a prefix (Hyman and Katamba, to appear). In Myene-Nkomi, finally, the class 2a marker is the only gender prefix that lacks an augment (Rekanga 2000). Often also the class 2a marker has specific meanings such as honorific or associative plural. Examples of the latter can be found in Mongo (22) and Xhosa (23).

(22) a. baa Byeka ‘Byeka and his family/pupils/followers...’
   b. baa mêsá ‘tables and similar things; tables, for instance’
      (Hulstaert 1965:145)

(23) a. oontlanzi < oo + iintlanzi ‘fish and similar things’
   b. oozingwe < oo + izingwe ‘leopards and similar things’
   c. omaRhini < oo + amaRhini ‘Grahamstown and environment’
   d. ookulamba < oo + ukulamba ‘hunger and similar feelings’
      (Hendrikse 1990:391)
The honorific meaning can be found for instance in Venda, as in (24), where who is the class 2a prefix.

(24)  Who-Vele vha khou qa
     'Vele is coming.' (Poulos 1990:20)

In some cases the class 2a marker spread to become a general plural marker, replacing or reinforcing markers of plural genders. This happens when the noun class system is disintegrating, as in Kinshasa Lingala (Aikhenvald 2000:388). It can also occur to some extent in language acquisition, as is illustrated by the data in Table 2. These are the results of an experimental study by Kunene (cited via Demuth 1985:311) on SiSwati in which children from 4.5 to 6 years old were given novel word forms and SiSwati nouns out of context and asked to provide the corresponding plural form of the noun. The right column show that young children overgeneralize the class 2a marker bo as a plural marker. It replaces the gender 2 and gender 4 prefixes and adds to the prefixes of genders 14 and 15.

(25) Table 2: Gender markers in the acquisition of SiSwati.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Siswati</th>
<th>Experiment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>umu/ba</td>
<td>umu/bo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a/2a</td>
<td>Ø/bo</td>
<td>Ø/bo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>umu/imi</td>
<td>umu/bo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/6</td>
<td>li/ema</td>
<td>li/ema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7/8</td>
<td>siti</td>
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<tr>
<td>9/10</td>
<td>ini/tin</td>
<td>ini/ti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/10</td>
<td>lut/in</td>
<td>li/ema</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>bu</td>
<td>bu/bu-bu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>ku</td>
<td>ku/bu-bu</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The forms and uses of the class 2a marker in the Bantu languages are in need of a thorough comparative study. In the meantime this brief overview suggests that the plural word analysis advanced for Eton might be valid for many other Bantu languages as well. A comparative study should also clarify the origin of the class 2a markers. Denis Creissels (p.c.) suggests that in Tswana the class 2a marker bó is the result of the coalescence of ba and ga, where ba is the connective morpheme of gender 2 and ga the connective of gender 17. The original meaning of bó N was 'the people at N’s place'. This is a very attractive hypothesis for Tswana. However, it is not valid for Eton, since the plural word has a low tone, whereas all connectives have a high tone, except that of gender 1.

5. Conclusion

Based on phonological criteria and the insight that there is a group of genderless nouns in Eton, the morpheme bó could be recognized as a plural word. According
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to traditional criteria, however, it would be incorrectly analyzed as the prefix of class 2a, which is said to be a subgender of gender 2. The plural word analysis explains how b3 was able to combine with the preposition a in order to form a new independent preposition ab3 ‘chez’ and how it can pluralize idioms such as the phrasal names in (16)-(18). It is likely that a plural word analysis of the class 2a marker works for other Bantu languages as well. In that case, plural words are not as rare in Africa as Dryer’s typological survey suggests. The fact that the plural word belongs to a minor part-of-speech category together with a diminutive word in Eton confirms some of Dryer’s typological observations.

References


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