

## The Alleged Class 2a Prefix *bɔ̃* in Eton: A Plural Word

MARK L. O. VAN DE VELDE

*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.<sup>1</sup> The focus of this attention has been mainly comparative-historical, sometimes to the detriment of careful synchronic analysis. This paper focuses on the morpheme *bɔ̃* 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. *tàdà* ‘my father’), the result is usually an associative plural. This explains how the succession of the locative preposition *á* and the plural word could grammaticalize into the complex preposition *ábɔ̃* ‘chez’. The behaviour of *bɔ̃* 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

---

<sup>1</sup> 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: AU 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 (NPr), and the third column the verbal prefixes (VPr). 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-inngá* ‘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 morphotoneme *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) /mèl<sup>˥</sup> mé béwógó/  
 lmè-l<sup>˥</sup> # mé=bè-wóg-àl  
 6-ear VI.CON=2-hear-SF  
 ‘the attention of the audience’ (lit.: ‘the ears of the hearers’)

(2) Table 1: The Eton gender prefixes

Gender	NPr	VPr	Con	Dem
1	ṅ	à	à/∅	ɲɔ̃
2	bè	bé	bé/H	bǎ
3	ṅ	ú	H	ɲú / vǐ
	à	ú	H	ɲú / vǐ
	ù	ú	H	ɲú / vǐ
4	mì	mí	mí/H	mǐ
5	è/d	é/d	é/H	ǎ
6	mè	mé	mé/H	mǎ
7	ì/j	í	í/H	yǐ
8	bì	bí	bí/H	bǐ
9	∅	ì	ì/∅	ɲǐ
10	∅	í	í/H	ɲǐ

*The Alleged Class 2a Prefix bɔ̃ in Eton*

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

- (3) /ímébwád mébòd má mé<sup>+</sup>té kwàn/  
 lí-mè-búád # mé=b-òd # má # mé-Lté # Lkùànl  
 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 *ù-* (3u) and nouns that take the prefix *à-* (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 *bɔ̃* and trigger agreement pattern II, the agreement pattern that is also associated to gender 2, as in (5).

- (4) dwábdô à-té kwàn  
 doctor I-PRES be.ill ‘The doctor is ill.’  
 (5) bɔ̃ dwábdô bé<sup>+</sup>té kwàn  
 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 subgenders 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. mbán wámò àté zù ‘My co-wife is coming.’  
 b. bɔ̃ mbán bàmà bé<sup>+</sup>té zù ‘My co-wives are coming.’  
 (7) a. càlà àté zù ‘Tsala is coming.’  
 b. bɔ̃ càlà bé<sup>+</sup>té zù ‘Tsala and his family are coming.’  
 (8) a. zá àté zù? ‘Who is coming?’  
 b. bɔ̃ zá bé<sup>+</sup>té zù? ‘Who are coming?’  
 (9) a. lèŋkód wámò ‘my raincoat’  
 b. bɔ̃ lèŋkód bàmà ‘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

marker with a back vowel (ɔ 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. *bɔ̂* is a Plural Word in Eton

Contrary to what one expects from a Bantu gender marker, *bɔ̂* 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 *bɔ̂* clearly differs from prefixes in this respect. In (10)-(11) two plural nouns are preceded by the locative preposition *á*, which, according to the general tone rules, copies its high tone onto the following word. Since *bɔ̂* 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 *bì-*, 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 *lé* ‘tree’ (11b).

- (10) a. *bɔ̂ kálâdâ* ‘books’  
 b. *á bɔ̂ kálâdâ* ‘in the books’  
 (11) a. *bì-lé* ‘trees’  
 b. *á bí-<sup>1</sup>lé* ‘in the trees’

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

- (12) a. [ábɔ̂kálârâ] ‘in the books’  
 b. [áβí<sup>1</sup>lé] ‘in the trees’

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

The important formal differences between *bɔ̂* and prefixes such as *bì-* 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

*The Alleged Class 2a Prefix bɔ̂ in Eton*

outside of the gender system.<sup>2</sup> 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 *bɔ̂*, 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 |a| 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 |u| and |a|, the harmonic vowel is represented by /ɔ̂/, according to the regular rules of vowel coalescence in Eton.

- (13) a. lŋqùàgl → /ŋgwàg/ ‘stone’  
[9]stone  
b. lŋqùàg-A → /ŋgwàgɔ̂/ ‘Stone’ (proper name)  
stone-SF

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.<sup>3</sup>

- (14) a. lɔ̂-ùádl → /dwǎd/ ‘furuncle’  
5-furuncle  
b. lɔ̂ùád-A → /dwàdɔ̂/ ‘Furuncle’ (proper name; elicited, not attested)  
furuncle-SF

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 *bɔ̂*. This is true for all proper names, not only names for persons.

---

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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 CVCV-stems with a low-high tone pattern.

- (15) a. lm-ùádl → /mwăd/ ‘furuncles’  
6-furuncle  
b. lbô # dùád-Al → /bô dwâdô/ ‘Furuncle and his family/friends/people’  
PL furuncle-SF

The examples in (16-18) of proper names for plant species are for different reasons morphosyntactically challenging, but they all confirm the analysis of *bô* 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 *bô* 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 *úswánô*, then the copied high tone would have deleted the low tone on the following prefix instead of pushing it to the right.

- (16) a. /wú ú\*swánô/  
wú-H # ù-súán-Al  
die-IMP 3-shame-SF  
‘plant (sp.), *Mimosa Pudica*’ (lit.: ‘die of shame’)  
b. *bô wú ú\*swánô* ‘mimosa plants’

The names in (17-18) are noun phrases. In (17) the gender 5 noun *è-sàŋ* ‘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 *zùd* 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.

- (17) a. /è-sàŋ m̀mwágô/  
è-sàŋ # N-vúág-Al  
5-hand I-one-SF  
‘Horn plantain (sp.)’  
b. /bô m̀sàŋ m̀mwágô/  
lbô # m̀-sàŋ # N-vúág-Al  
PL 6-hand I-one-SF  
‘Horn plantains (sp.)’

*The Alleged Class 2a Prefix bɔ̃ in Eton*

- (18) a. /ńtwáŋ zûdà/  
 |H-N-túán # H=zùd-Àl  
 ?-3-long III.CON=[9]buttock-SF  
 ‘chili plant (sp.), *Capsicum frutescens*’ (lit.: ‘long buttock’)
- b. /bɔ̃ mĩntwáŋ mí zûdà/  
 |bɔ̃ # mĩN-túán # mí=zùd-Àl  
 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 *bɔ̃* could combine with the general locative preposition *á* to form the preposition *ábɔ̃*, which means ‘chez’ (at or to somebody’s place). In present-day Eton the locative preposition *á* is incompatible with nouns or pronouns that have human reference, whether genderless or not. If *bɔ̃* were a gender prefix, it could not have combined with a preceding preposition.

- (19) zùgá èèy ńé ábɔ̃ mă, méyáŋ ńé  
 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 Cameroonian 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.

- (20) /íbò káládà bá/  
 lí-bò # káládà # bá  
 AU-PL book 2.DEM  
 ‘these books’

Since *b-* is the prefix of gender 2 before vowel-initial stems, *bò* might be analyzable as *b-ò*.

There is one word in Eton that behaves similarly, viz. the diminutive proclitic *m-òH*, plural *b-òH*. 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. /mò élén àté kù/  
lm-òH=é-lén # à-Lté # Lkù  
 1-DIM=5-palm.tree 1-PR fall  
 ‘The small palm tree falls.’
- b. /bò mélén bé<sup>4</sup>té kù/  
lb-òH=mè-lén # bé-Lté # Lkù  
 2-DIM=6-palm.tree 2-PR fall  
 ‘The small palm trees fall.’
- c. /bò méjwág/  
lb-òH=mè-júágl  
 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.

---

<sup>4</sup> 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.



The honorific meaning can be found for instance in Venda, as in (24), where *vho* is the class 2a prefix.

- (24) Vho-Vele vha khou da  
 '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.

Class	Siswati	Experiment
1/2	<i>umu/ba</i>	<i>umu/bo</i>
1a/2a	$\emptyset$ / <i>bo</i>	$\emptyset$ / <i>bo</i>
3/4	<i>umu/imi</i>	<i>umu/bo</i>
5/6	<i>li/ema</i>	<i>li/ema</i>
7/8	<i>si/ti</i>	<i>si/ti</i>
9/10	<i>in/tin</i>	<i>i/ti</i>
11/10	<i>lu/tin</i>	<i>li/ema</i>
14	<i>bu</i>	<i>bu/bo-bu</i>
15	<i>ku</i>	<i>ku/bo-ku</i>

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 *bɔ̀* could be recognized as a plural word. According

### *The Alleged Class 2a Prefix bɔ̃ in Eton*

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 *bɔ̃* was able to combine with the preposition *á* in order to form a new independent preposition *ábɔ̃* ‘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**

- Aikhenvald, Alexandra. 2000. *Classifiers. A Typology of Noun Categorization Devices*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Botne, Robert. 2003. Lega (Beya dialect) (D25). In D. Nurse and G. Philippson, eds., *The Bantu Languages*, 422-449. London: Routledge.
- Corbett, Greville G. 1991. *Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Demuth, Katherine A. 1985. Noun classes and agreement in Sesotho acquisition. In M. Barlow and C. Ferguson, eds., *Agreement in Natural Languages: Approaches, Theories and Descriptions*, 305-321. Stanford: CSLI.
- Doke, Clement. 1927. The significance of class 1a of Bantu nouns. In *Festschrift Meinhof*, 196-203. Hamburg: Kommissionsverlag von L. Friederichsen & Co.
- Dryer, Matthew. 1989. Plural words. *Linguistics* 27:865-895.
- Hendrikse, A.P. 1990. Number as a categorizing parameter in Southern Bantu: an exploration in cognitive grammar. *South-African Journal of African Languages* 10(4):384-400.
- Hulstaert, Gustaaf. 1965. *Grammaire du lomongo. Deuxième partie: Morphologie*. Annales série in-8° sciences humaines n° 57. Tervuren: Musée Royale de l’Afrique Centrale.
- Hyman, Larry M., and Francis Katamba. To appear. The word in Luganda. (To appear in the Proceedings of Cologne Conference on Typology, June 2001.)
- Maho, Jouni. 1999. *A Comparative Study of Bantu Noun Classes*. Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.
- Meeussen, A.E. 1967. Bantu grammatical reconstructions. *Africana Linguistica* 3:81-121.
- Poulos, George. 1990. *A Linguistic Analysis of Venda*. Pretoria: Via Afrika.
- Poulos, George, and Louis J. Louwrens. 1994. *A Linguistic Analysis of Northern Sotho*. Pretoria: Via Afrika.
- Rekanga, Jean-Paul. 2000. Le système myene-nkomi (groupe B10). In D.F. Idiata, M. Leitch, P. Ondo-Mebiane and J-P. Rekanga, eds., *Les classes nominales et leur sémantisme dans les langues bantu du nord-ouest*, 61-69. München: LINCOM.

Mark L. O. Van de Velde

Van de Velde, Mark L. O. Forthcoming. Multifunctional agreement patterns in Bantu and the possibility of genderless nouns. *Linguistic Typology*.

Departement Linguïstiek  
Blijde-Inkomststraat 21,  
3000 Leuven (Belgium)

Mark.Vandevelde@arts.kuleuven.be