

Some Structural Changes in Bantu Languages
Due to Their Specific Communicative Functions

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O. Abstract

If one compares certain Bantu languages which are closely related, one can conclude that structural features of a language are determined to a great extent by its communicative-functional status. This is especially noticeable when comparing some links of grammatical structures typologically universal for all of the Bantu languages, in those ones whose communicative-functional status shows opposite characteristics.

Comparison of the concord-class systems in the two directions (content vs. expression) shows that formal levelling of concord patterns, as well as desemantization of classes, proceeds differently depending on whether a given language is used as a more or less wide means of inter-ethnic communication or its use is limited to a narrow region.

When studying the processes in question, one should take into account not only the modern communicative-functional status of a language, but also the factor of time, i.e., how long a language has been used as a means of wide communication, since structural changes due to certain extra-linguistic factors are operative just in time. Thus, the modern communicative-functional status of Lingala is not identical to that of "standard" Swahili. The functions of the latter are more wide, especially in the states where Swahili become the national language (Kenya, Tanzania), but structural changes in Lingala are equivalent to, and in some links even more significant than, those in Swahili.

Contrastive analysis of the concord-class systems in some languages allows us to draw a tentative distinction between three stages of evolution of the grammatical category in question, the complete system of noun classes (as it has been described by C. Meinhof and M. Guthrie) being taken as an *étalon*.

The most conservative stage of evolution of the concord system is presented in those languages which function only as a narrow intra-ethnic means of communication, e.g., Gogo (Bantu language of the Eastern zone). In this language, the semantic criterion of class identification is very operative; each loan word is included into certain class according to its semantics and takes the prefix of that class, the formal patterns of class agreement being also steady and consistent.

A more advanced stage of evolution of the noun class system is found in languages such as Zulu. Functions of that language when used as a means of inter-ethnic communication, are limited to some specific communicative spheres. In Zulu, although a semantic principle is still operative in the noun classification, a definite subset of classes is chosen to assimilate the loans irrespective of their semantics. However, the morpho-syntactic assimilation is strictly performed.

Finally, the third and highest degree of evolution of the system in question is presented in languages such as "standard" Swahili and Lingala. In the former, semantics of classes has lost its identificational value; the classes partially intersect. Morpho-syntactic rules of agreement, however, are still obligatory for the main classes, although there are many nouns which can follow several models of class concord. Furthermore, a new system of noun classification is developing based on the feature "animate-inanimate", and this affects the whole class system.

The Lingala noun class system seems to be evolving in somewhat similar way, the main difference being in that there is more significant levelling of morpho-syntactic characteristics of concord classes accompanied with their desemantization.