

Proper names and noun class agreement in the Bantu languages

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Proper names tend to trigger specific agreement patterns in Bantu languages, whether they are based on proprial lemmas (lexical items such as *Ewa* or *Paul*, which typically function as proper names) or on appellative lemmas (lexemes typically construed as common nouns), see Van Langendonck (2007) for this distinction. Unlike with common nouns, the agreement patterns triggered by proper names cannot be predicted on the basis of their morphological form.

Throughout the Bantu family there are languages that consistently select agreement pattern I for proper names, i.e. the pattern triggered by controllers of class 1, which normally have human reference. Traditionally, such languages are said to have a subclass of class 1, called class 1a, which also tends to contain certain kinship terms, some borrowings and the interrogative pro-form ‘who’ (see, e.g., Doke 1927). Note that an analysis in terms of semantic agreement on the basis of human reference is not satisfactory, because place names and other types of proper names behave the same as personal names.

In other languages, such as the Gabonese language Orungu, proper names trigger mixed agreement patterns, unlike what can be found with common nouns (Van de Velde & Ambouroué, to appear). And in still other languages, such as Kinyarwanda, the agreement triggered by proper names is determined by their categorial presupposition (or basic level sense).

I will argue that these cases are all manifestations of the same phenomenon, viz. that proper names have no gender specification and that the agreement pattern they trigger is an instance of enforced agreement (see also Van de Velde 2006). Moreover, I will show that agreement properties can be used as a criterion to determine the boundaries of the grammatical category of proper names in the Bantu languages.

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