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What is the function of the pre-prefix in Kagulu?

Malin Petzell

Department of Oriental and African languages

Göteborg University

malin.petzell@african.gu.se

Abstract: This paper deals with the noun class prefixes of Kagulu and, more specifically, the pre-prefix. The paper constitutes a part of a dissertation in progress called 'A linguistic description of Kagulu'. This description is partly related to the project 'Languages of Tanzania' (LoT) which aims at contributing to the preservation of the minority languages in Tanzania.

The language data used in this paper was gathered by the author between 2002 and 2003 in the Kagulu area, Tanzania. Prior to this study, only a scarce number of Kagulu texts existed, but no reliable linguistic study has been made by others.

Kagulu is spoken in east-central Tanzania approximately 200 kilometres inland from Dar es Salaam on both sides of the main road to Dodoma. The exact number of Kagulu speakers is unknown but estimates range between 200.000 and 300.000. Beidelman (1971: 5) predicates that the number of speakers was 100.000 in 1971 and in the census in 1967, 113.831 persons were reported to be of Kagulu origin. Ethnologue gives the number 217.000 (SIL International 2003). My deduction based on the most recent census (Population and housing census 2002) reaches the figure 241.000, but since no questions about language usage or ethnic affiliation were included in the census, there is no way of knowing the exact number of Kagulu speakers today.

In referential sources, the Kagulu language is classified as G.12 (Guthrie 1971). In recent classifying works it has merged with the neighbouring languages into group G1 (Mann and Dalby 1987: 147). The language may also be called (Ki)Kaguru, mainly by Swahili speakers, Northern Sagara or (Chi)Megi. For further information on Bantu languages, see Nurse and Philippson (2003). For the sake of clarity, the Bantu language names without the prefixes are being used here.

1. Noun Classes

Below is a brief sketch of the noun class system in Kagulu. The Kagulu orthography is a somewhat modified version of the Swahili writing convention.

The nouns comprise of a stem and one or two bound prefixes. The morphological structure of the noun is given below:

(The pre-prefix (PrPr)) + nominal class prefix (NCP) + noun stem (NS)

Kagulu has three sets of class prefixes: the initial segment referred to here as pre-prefix, the nominal class prefixes and the agreement class prefixes. Since the pre-prefix is not always present, it is placed within parentheses. The nominal class prefix (NCP) is the affix that appears on the nouns themselves as well as on adjectives. The agreement class prefix (ACP) is predominantly used on determiners and possessives. The ACP is also used in the verb phrase as both subject marker (SM) and object marker (OM) except in class 1.

The nouns are allocated to 16 noun classes following Guthrie (1970), see table 1. Most nouns are assigned to two classes, one in singular and one in plural. Class one takes its plural in class two which is then referred to as classes 1/2. Classes 1-11 and 14 all comprise of countable nouns apart from class 6 which also consists of some mass nouns such as liquids. Class 15 holds the verbal nouns, the so called infinitives, and classes 16-17 are known as the locative classes. Class 16 contains the word *hanhu* 'place', but classes 17-18 do not contain any nouns of their own. Instead, the NCPs are put before the NCP of other classes as in *muchiya* 'in the pot'.

(1) mu- chi- ya
 18-LOC 7- pot

This is referred to as secondary classification as the locatives classify for time and space and not noun class belonging. Below is a matrix displaying all the noun classes and their prefixes.

Table 1
 Noun classes in Kagulu and their grammatical agreement

--- =absent in corpus
 - = non existent

class	example words	pre-prefix	nominal class prefixes (NCP)	agreement class prefix ¹ (ACP)
1 ²	<i>munhu</i> ³ , <i>mwana</i> ‘person, child’	i- ⁴	mu-, m ⁵ -	yu-
2	<i>wanhu</i> , <i>wana</i> ‘persons, children’	a-	wa-	wa-
3	<i>m(u)lango</i> , <i>mgulu</i> ⁶ ‘door, leg’	u-	m-	u-
4	<i>milango</i> , <i>migulu</i> ‘doors, legs’	i-	mi-	i-
5	<i>(d)igiso</i> , <i>dibiki</i> ‘eye, tree’	--- ⁷	i, di-	di-
6	<i>meso</i> ⁸ , <i>mabiki</i> ‘eyes, trees’	a-	ma-	ga-
7	<i>chinhu</i> , <i>chana</i> ⁹ ‘thing, small child’	i-	chi-	chi-
8	<i>finhu</i> , <i>fyana</i> ¹⁰ ‘things, small children’	i-	fī-	fī-
9	<i>singo</i> , <i>mhene</i> ‘neck, goat’	i-	N- ¹¹	i-
10	<i>singo</i> , <i>mhene</i> ‘necks, goats’	si-	N-	si-
11	<i>lusigi</i> ‘rope’	u-	lu-	lu-
14	<i>usalu</i> , <i>utamu</i> ‘pearl, disease’	- ¹²	u- ¹³	u-

¹ The ACP is also used as both subject and object markers except in class 1. In class 1, the NCP is used as the object marker and the subject marker is *ya-* in the present tense and *ka-* in the past.

² Class 1a is included in class 1 even though its nouns do not take the NCP.

³ The <nh> represents a voiceless nasal.

⁴ This is not governed by vowel harmony like the other pre-prefixes.

⁵ The /u/ is lost on the adjectives.

⁶ Half of the informants (not the youngest one) sometimes include a *u* in the NCP as in *mulango*. This never occurs on the adjectives however. This is also found in the nouns in neighbouring languages Luguru and Ngh’wele.

⁷ When the noun starts with an *i* it is most likely an abbreviated or alternative NCP and not the pre-prefix as some sources claim. The suggested pre-prefix + the full prefix as in **idigoda* ‘chair’ does not occur spontaneously in the sample, but was elicited from one informant.

⁸ The prefix *ma-* merges with the *i* in the stem and becomes *me-*.

⁹ In *chana*, vowel suppression (or deletion) takes place. *chi-+a* → *cha-*.

¹⁰ The /i/ becomes /y/ due to glide formation. The same goes for higher rounded vowels that become rounded glides when another vowel follows, i.e. /u/+/a/ → /wa/.

¹¹ The capital N- refers to a homorganic nasal, i.e. a nasal that changes according to the following consonant.

15	<i>kutola, kunywa</i> ‘to marry, to drink’	---	ku-	---
16	<i>hanhu</i> ‘place’	a-	ha-	ha-
17	(<i>hanhu</i>) ¹⁴	---	ku-	ku-
18	(<i>hanhu</i>)	---	m(u)- ¹⁵	m(u)-

2. Pre-prefix

The pre-prefix consists of the initial segment that emerges ahead of the nominal class prefix (NCP) ex. *imgeni* ‘guest’. It is generally found on nominals. The pre-prefixes vary greatly between the different Bantu languages and it is not viable to state general rules. The pre-prefix is a phenomenon that has enticed linguists through many years though surprisingly little is written about it. It occurs in quite a number of Bantu languages, but not in the most documented one, namely Swahili.

In Kagulu, in all classes but 1, 9 and 10, the pre-prefix is identical with the vowel of the NCP. In class 1 we find an *i*¹⁶, while the NCPs of classes 9 and 10 do not contain any vowel¹⁷. Originally the pre-prefix was most likely a CV construction (Blois 1970: 153). Blois presupposes a full form where the NCP is repeated as in the constructed Kagulu word **mimilangu* ‘doors’.

The pre-prefix has many different names. Some choose to call it ‘augment’, but since it may be confused with the term augmentative, that term is avoided here. In this case, it is only the pre-prefix itself that is augmented (hence the name) and not the noun or the semantics of the noun. Mkude (1974: 51) calls it ‘specifier’ and Batibo (1985: 246) ‘voyelle du défini’ ‘vowel of definiteness’. These terms are suitable to use when the segment actually functions as a definite article or involves specificity which is not always the case in Kagulu. It has also been called ‘initial vowel’ or ‘weak determiner’ which could be more appropriate here. In all cases but one, the segment is realised as a single vowel in Kagulu. In class 10 however, it is a full syllable and therefore pre-prefix is the most appropriate term to use in this study.

¹² The youngest informant gives *woga* as a class 14 noun and the older informants give *uwoga*. The initial *u* in the latter could be a pre-prefix.

¹³ The adjective prefix for class 14 is *m-*.

¹⁴ The prefixes for classes 17 and 18 are not found with the word *hanhu* but are attached to other words.

¹⁵ The /u/ is non syllabic and therefore it is mostly realised as [w].

¹⁶ This may somehow be related to the ACP (*yu-*) instead of the vowel quality of the NCP.

¹⁷ Instead, the NCPs consist of a homorganic nasal, i.e. a nasal that changes according to the following consonant.

Originally, the constructions with the pre-prefix are probably the unmarked ones and omission of the pre-prefix represent the marked constructions. Hyman and Katamba (1993) regard the constructions in Ganda without the pre-prefix as the marked one which needs to be explained. In Kagulu, this is changing today since its usage is becoming more optional and the markedness is disappearing.

2.1 Realization

The pre-prefix in Kagulu can be put on nouns, but probably also on determiners, numerals and on relatives (i.e. also ahead of the ACP) though this is not very common. Some examples are: *ayuno* ‘this’, *aweli* ‘two’, *awoile* ‘who are here’ and

(2) *Imhene imwedu iyuile kuya yangu.*

i-	mhene	imwedu	i-	y- ¹⁸	uile
PrPr9-	goat	9-one	PrPr	SM9	COP+REL
	kuya	yangu			
	DEM	9-POSS			

‘The one goat which is over there is mine.’

However, the pre-prefix never surfaces on adjectives or on adverbs. The pre-prefix preceding the ACP is always *a-* except for class 1, but before the NCP of the noun it is the reduced reduplicated NCP (see the preceding paragraph). The distribution is contrary to other languages where it seems to be more common for the pre-prefix to emerge on adjectives rather than on demonstratives. For examples, see the languages Ganda and Rundi (Hyman and Katamba 1993: 216)

A trace of the pre-prefix can be found in some forms of the *a* of association¹⁹. The constructions containing *a* of association often merges with the following pre-prefix when it is *i-* thus forming *we*, *dye*, *ge* instead of *wa*, *dya*, *ga*, etc. In some cases however, the pre-prefix is left on the following word cf. *mwe inyumba* ‘inside the house’. This is most likely a transitional stage preceding the full merger of the *a* and the *i-*. Cf. *ne* ‘with, by’ in Ganda where *na* merges with the following pre-prefix (Hyman and Katamba 1993: 244). Also in Kagulu, ‘with, by’ can be found with a trace of the pre-prefix:

¹⁸ The /i/ becomes /y/ due to glide formation.

¹⁹ A genitival construction typical of Bantu languages also referred to as connexive, genitive connector or *a* of relationship.

(3) *Mgunda ukulimigwa ne mfele.*

mgunda	u-	ku-	lim	-igwa	na+i-	mfele
3-farm	SM3	PRES	cultivate	PASS	PREP+PrPr	1-woman

‘The farm is being cultivated by the woman.’

As it is problematical to tell where the pre-prefix may occur, it is easier to state where it does not occur. In several Bantu languages, the pre-prefix is disallowed or dispreferred following a negative verb; it is not possible in the domain of negation or other scope-bearing element. This is not always the case in Kagulu where we find sentences like:

(4) *Sikulima umgunda wangu.*

si-		ku-	lima	u-	mgunda	wangu
SM1.SG+NEG		PRES	cultivate	PrPr	3-farm	3-POSS

‘I am not cultivating my farm.’

Since the farm is still there even if it is not cultivated, this is not the most excellent example of negative scope.

It is not only negation that generally disallows the pre-prefix, kinship terms often do not take the overt pre-prefix²⁰. Nonetheless, in Kagulu we find several kinship terms with the pre-prefix *imai* ‘mother’, *ikuku* ‘grandfather’ and *imutumba* ‘uncle’.

Apart from the domains above where the pre-prefix is dispreferred, there are some constructions in Kagulu where the pre-prefix is never allowed:

(5.1) In combination with the locative prefixes:

a. *Ikaya iya ina muhai.*

but: b. *Mukaya iya mwina muhai.*

a.	i-	kaya	iya	i-	na	muhai
	PrPr	9-village	DEM	SM9	have	1-witch

‘This village has a witch.’

b.	mu-	kaya	iya	mw-	i-	na	muhai
	18-LOC	9-village	DEM	18-LOC	SM9	have	1-witch

‘In this village there is a witch.’

²⁰ See Hyman and Katamba (1993: 235) and Mkude (1974: 108).

(5.2) On nouns preceded by the invariable element *chila* ‘each, every’:
chila mulango ‘every door’ or *chila ijua* ‘every day’ (The *i* is the short form of the NCP *di*.)

(5.3) On nouns to which the interrogative clitic *-ki* is attached
Ukudiaki? ‘What food?’

(5.4) When the meaning is ‘any’ or ‘anything’:
Imwana katowa munhu (wowose)?

i-	mwana	ka-	towa	munhu	wowose
PrPr1-	child	SM1+PAST	hit	1-man	any

‘Did the child hit anybody?’

2.2 Function

The function of the pre-prefix is somewhat complex. Its use may be related to several functions and these differ in the various Bantu languages. In many Bantu languages and especially in Ganda, the pre-prefix ‘particularizes the word to which it is affixed, and its use and omission are governed by the degree of particularization implied’ (Ashton, Mulira et al. 1954: 30). Though unusual, the term “particularizes” is to the point, and the quote above applies to Kagulu as well. For Kagulu, the function of the pre-prefix seems to be both syntactically and semantically conditioned. Östen Dahl (pers. com.) suggests that historically, the pre-prefix functioned as a pronoun or definite article in Kagulu. Its usage is connected to definiteness and specificity as well as clause initiality. These in turn are related to the notion of topic. Topic here is taken to mean given or presupposed information. When asked, the Kagulu speakers affirm that the pre-prefix is used for things that have been mentioned before.

The first sentence below can refer to any woman, while the second sentence refers to a particular woman. Also ‘her children’ are “particularized”.

(6) a. *Kutola mfele kuswanu.*

(6) b. *Imfele yakwambikila awanagwe chakudia.*

a.	kutola	mfele	kuswanu
	15-marry	1-woman	15-good

‘Marrying a woman is good.’

b.	i-	mfele	ya- k- w- ambik -ila	a-	wanagwe
	PrPr	1-woman	cook (see below)	PrPr	2-child-POSS

‘The woman is cooking for her children.’

(7) *yakwambikila*

ya-	k(u)-	w(a)-	ambik	-ila
SM1	PRES	OM2	cook	APPL

‘(she) is cooking’

2.2.1. Definiteness

Some authors regard the pre-prefix as a definite article. Unfortunately, this generalization does not hold true, neither in Kagulu nor in several other Bantu languages. In Ganda, ‘the partial pragmatic generalizations concerning definiteness...are instead limited to specific constructions and for that reason cannot serve as a general account of the phenomenon’ (Hyman and Katamba 1993: 218). It is too one-dimensional to claim that the pre-prefix functions as a definite article. For the Kerebe language ‘it is impossible to give a simple rule for the morpheme along the lines of the statement “the initial-vowel means ‘definite’” (Odden 2003). In the two sentences below, ‘the children’ are definite but the pre-prefix is only used in the second one:

(8) *Nikutandika masasi ga wana.*

ni-	ku-	tandika	masasi ga	wana
SM.1SG	PRES	spread	6-bed of	2-child

‘I make the children’s beds.’

(9) *Awana wang’hakonga kulila...*

a-	wana	wa-	ng’ha-	konga	kulila
PrPr2-child	SM2	COND	start	15-cry	

‘If the children start to cry...’

Here, the pre-prefix has got nothing to do with definiteness but topicality. In the second sentence, ‘the children’ is used anaphorically, referring to the children the informant introduced in the first sentence.

2.2.2. Focality

In Ganda, the absence of the pre-prefix is not only licensed by negation but also focus. The marked form without the pre-prefix is licensed by focus and is often distinguished by a stress pattern. It is hard to tell if it is focus since in Kagulu constituents are stressed differently. The language does not follow the intonation and stress patterns of, say, English. Therefore, focus can not be used to resolve the role of the pre-prefix in Kagulu. On the other hand, the pre-prefix may instead be defined as a topic marker used for given information. In Kagulu, the

pre-prefix can be used on proper names, which is in accordance with the notion of topic:

(10) *Ikalinde nho yakulonda imuke Wanyenda kwa mdala.*

‘Kalinde then took his wife Wanyenda from the old woman.’

2.2.3. Specificity

Most informants say that the pre-prefix is used when the noun in question is specified. One informant has a different idea; she alleged that the pre-prefix is only used when the noun is clause initial, i.e. it is conditioned by syntax. In Rundi, the pre-prefix ‘marks headness or initiality within the immediate NP’ (Hyman and Katamba 1993: 216) so this is not uncommon. One of the informants in this study came up with several sentences, and when I tried to elicit sentences where other informants used the pre-prefix on non-initial nouns, the informant said that the usage was wrong. The argument that the occurrence of the pre-prefix is syntax related is plausible. The initial segment in Ganda ‘is licensed not by the semantics or pragmatics, but rather by the syntax’ (Hyman and Katamba 1993: 255). The initiality is not however the only explanation. Apart from the aforementioned informant, several Kagulu speakers use the pre-prefix clause medially as well as clause initially. The presence versus absence of the pre-prefix correlate with topicality. The sentences the informant provided are not tenable for the argument that it is syntactically governed since there is a difference in specificity in the two sentences:

(11) *Ning’he muhogo nidiye.*

ni-	ing’he	muhogo	ni-	diye
OM1.SG	give+SUBJ	3-cassava	SM1.SG	eat+SUBJ

‘Give me cassava to eat.’

(12) *Umuhogo wouning’hile...*

u-	muhogo	u-	o-	u-	ni-	ing’h
PrPr3-	cassava	SM.2SG	REL	OM3	OM1.SG	give
	-ile					
	PAST+REL					

‘The cassava you have given me...’

The following example clearly shows the difference in usage of the pre-prefix correlates with a distinction in topicality and specificity. *Basi kowa munhu; imunhu yuya yeja yowa na...* ‘Once there was a man; this man had...’. In the first

sentence, a man is introduced and then with the help of the pre-prefix, he is referred to again.

(13) *Basi kowa munhu.*

basi	ka- ²¹	wa	munhu
once	SM17	COP	1-person

‘Once there was a man.’

(14) *imunhu yuya yeja yowa na*

i-	munhu	yuya	ya- ²²	ija	ya- ²³	wa na
PrPr	1-person	DEM	SM1	come	SM1	have

‘This man had...’

In the following sentence, the pre-prefix is again not clause initial, but it is referring to a specific child and it involves referentiality.

(15) *Ayu imwana nimleka ukaya.*

ayu	i-	mwana	ni-	m-	leka	ukaya
DEM	PrPr	1-child	SM.1SG	OM1	leave	at home

‘As for the child, I have left her at home.’

2.2.4. Deixis

In the conversation between two men in their thirties, one uses the pre-prefix and one does not. Here, the usage of the pre-prefix is conditioned by deixis and the man who uses it does so when the word in question is referring to something they are both familiar with.

(16) A. *Awanike fo wenuke na mdala?*

(16) B. *Kwa kweli wanike wenuka digoya.*

A.	a-	wanike	fo-	wa-	inuka	na	mdala
	PrPr	2-youth	how	SM2	wake	and	1-wife

‘How did kids and wife wake up?’

²¹ An underlying /u/ merges with *ka-* thus forming *ko-*.

²² *i+a _ e* is a common merger in Bantu languages.

²³ An underlying /u/ merges with *ya-* thus forming *yo-*.

B. kwa kweli wanike wa- inuka digoya
 in fact 2-youth SM2 wake fine

‘In fact, kids woke up fine.’

Even the first time *wanike* ‘youths’ is mentioned it already has the pre-prefix. This is because it is used deictically. The man is referring to the other man’s children and that is understood by both parties. One would think that the other man would answer using the same pre-prefix, but he does not. If this is because it is not necessary to use the referent again, or if it is because he is younger and thus not using the pre-prefix at all, is difficult to tell.

2.2.5. Optionality

Determining the function of the pre-prefix is further complicated by the fact that its usage is becoming optional in Kagulu. It is much less used by younger speakers as well as speakers living in the city who are influenced by Swahili.²⁴ When asked, informants claim that ‘you use it if you want to, for instance when you want to specify a little extra, but you don’t have to’. It is not only in Kagulu that the pre-prefix seems to be optional; also in Tonga it appears to have the same undecided function: ‘It cannot be assigned a place in the structure of the language, since there are no conditions under which its appearance is obligatory’ (Carter 1963: 42). Several informants have a clear intuition about the difference in meaning the pre-prefix creates, but find it challenging to describe that difference. Östen Dahl (pers. com.) supposes that the function is left behind even though the form is becoming optional.

3. Conclusion

The pre-prefix has to do with definiteness of the nominal phrase as well as specificity and these are in turn related to topicality. Its distribution is most likely the result of a combination of several factors. It is often used clause initially (as is topic) and may have an anaphoric or deictic function. The pre-prefix can only be used on things that are known or contextually given. This enables us to call it a topic marker.

It is assumed that definiteness functions the same way in all languages. That is not necessarily true. Definiteness may well be a western concept not applicable to Bantu languages and pre-prefixes may be clues how to deconstruct this. There are no definite articles in the Bantu languages but it has been suggested that the pre-prefixes can be translated as such. This is to simplify the issue. I believe that the pre-prefix can be interpreted as something similar to our (Germanic) definite articles, but it is more complex than that. What is certain is

²⁴ In Swahili the pre-prefix is not used at all.

that *imunhu* with the pre-prefix can never mean ‘any person’; since the pre-prefix always refers to something specific. The topicality may be grammatically expressed like in Japanese. This may seem exotic but it is common in many languages of the world. Creole languages function similarly. Here the definite article rather expresses specificity than definiteness.

Furthermore, what looks like the pre-prefix can be put on numerals, relatives and the determiners themselves, which is clearly not attributed to definiteness or specificity since these hosts are incapable of referentiality in Germanic languages. Therefore, the concepts of definiteness and specificity are most likely different in Bantu languages including Kagulu.

The debate of the function of the pre-prefixes languages does not end here. Further research is essential even for languages that are described. It must also be pointed out that the pre-prefixes have different functions in different languages and it may be hazardous to generalize. The analysis of this phenomenon would be easier if one could leave the commonplace way of looking at definiteness behind. The only thing we can say for sure is that in Kagulu, the pre-prefix is not mandatory and it has to do with topicality.

List of abbreviations

APPL = Applicative
ACP = Agreement Class Prefix
COND = Conditional
COP = Copula
DEM = Demonstrative
LOC = Locative
NEG = Negation
NCP = Nominal Class Prefix
NS = Noun Stem
OM = Object Marker
PASS = Passive
PAST = Past Tense
PL = Plural
POSS = Possessive
PRES = Present Tense
PREP = Preposition
PrPr = Pre-prefix
REL = Relative
SG = Singular
SM = Subject Marker
SUBJ = Subjunctive

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