ARE NOUN CLASS MARKERS IN KISWAHILI REALLY SUCH A LEARNING DIFFICULTY? A STUDY OF THE USE OF NOUN CLASS MARKERS BY PUPILS OF THE BUSIBI PRIMARY SCHOOL IN KENYA

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The purpose of this study was to establish the extent to which the Standard-Seven pupils of the Busibi Primary School in the Samia District in western Kenya would misuse the pairs of noun class markers A-WA-, LI-YA-, KI-VI-, I-ZI- and U-ZI- in their written Kiswahili. A sample of thirty pupils was used in the study. A grammar test consisting of nineteen sentences containing a total of forty mistakes was used. The respondents were required to write the correct version of each sentence in the spaces provided on the questionnaire. The study tested the hypothesis that the respondents would make over 50% mistakes for each of the five pairs of noun class markers. The hypothesis was based on the widespread belief, but yet to be tested, among users of Kiswahili in Kenya that the five pairs are a source of great difficulty in achieving agreement between them and the nouns they refer to. So, the study assumed that the difficulty would definitely manifest itself in the Kiswahili of primary school pupils, especially those from an area of Kenya far away from the main towns where Kiswahili is used on a daily basis. However, the results did not support the hypothesis. The highest number of non-corrected mistakes made was actually only 41%. The average was just 31%. These unexpected results may have to do with the type of test used.

1. INTRODUCTION

Several studies, typically in the form of postgraduate research, have been done on morphosyntactic mistakes involving the use of noun class markers in Kiswahili as a second language. Chepkwony (1993), for example, investigated mistakes made by native speakers of Nandi (a Kalenjin language of Kenya) when using Kiswahili. The following are examples (from p. 86) of some of the mistakes she pointed out:

1. (a) [SINGULAR] Kitabu hii ni ya Kimutai instead of Kitabu hiki ni cha Kimutai.
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[This book is Kimutai’s]

b. [PLURAL] Vitabu hizi ni za Kimutai instead of Vitabu hivi ni vya Kimutai. [These books are Kimutai’s]

The nouns *kitabu* (singular) and *vitabu* (plural) belong to the *KI-VI* classes, but in these examples they have been used as if they belonged to the *I-ZI* noun classes.¹ One of the examples illustrated with by Baya (1993: 20) is the following:

2. *Miti tatu imekatwa* instead of *Miti mitatu imekatwa.* [Three trees have been cut down]

In this example, the plural prefix *mi*- has been left out from the numerical adjective *-tatu* (‘three’). Rapando (2005) investigated morphosyntactic mistakes made by students in secondary schools in Nairobi in their written Kiswahili. Some of the frequent mistakes she observed are the following (from p. 68):


The mistakes in these two examples lie in the use of plural prefixes on nouns which must not take any such prefix in standard Kiswahili. That is, the nouns *kelele* and *askari* retain the same form both in the plural and the singular.

The current study sought to focus on one type of morphosyntactic error that seems to be very common in the Kiswahili of Kenya: the misuse of Kiswahili noun class markers. This is the type of error already illustrated in examples 1 (a) and 1 (b) above, where the mistakes involve noun class markers for what are commonly referred to as the *KI-VI* classes of nouns. From my experience as a Kiswahili teacher, I have noticed frequent mistakes involving four other singular-plural pairs of noun class markers, namely those commonly referred to as *A-WA, LI-YA, I-ZI* and *U-ZI.* So, I included them in my study, in addition to the

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¹ The *I-ZI* classes can be illustrated by the following examples:

**Singular:** *Nguo īmeraruka na ītashonwa leo.*
‘The cloth is torn and will be mended today.’

**Plural:** *Nguo zīmeraruka na zītashonwa leo.*
‘The clothes are torn and will be mended today.’
And from this experience and the studies mentioned above, I hypothesized that primary school pupils, even those in late primary school, would make mistakes involving the lack of concord in the use of the specific five pairs of noun class markers in more than fifty percent of cases in their written Kiswahili.


The A-WA class markers

Mohammed (2001: 48) says that the A-WA classes take the concordial marker A- for all their nouns in the singular form and WA- for the plural, and that all living things are placed in these classes. Below are illustrative examples, which I invented.

It is standard practice to present them in pairs of singular vs. plural. Mohamed (2001: 40-51) observes that traditionally, nouns in Swahili have been classified according to their initial prefix. Thus, in the earliest descriptions of Kiswahili noun class markers (see e.g. Ashton 1947, pp. 10ff), there were eight classes of nouns, with each singular-plural pair being considered as just one class. The eight classes were: M-WA, M-MI, JI-MA, KI-VI, N-N, U-U, KU-, and PA-. It can be seen here that for the last two in the list, only the singular form was assumed. With regard to the specific case of the PA- class, Mohamed (2001) says that it inherently contains one noun only, namely mahali (place), signifying location. But, unlike in English, location in Kiswahili is traditionally described in three ways:

a) PA- (referring to a definite place of position)

b) KU- (referring to an indefinite place of direction)

c) MU- (referring to an area, with nuances of “alongness”, “withinness”)

Mohammed (p. 48) notes that more recent descriptions (such as Kapenga, 1983) came up with a new method of analyzing noun classes and their respective markers. The new method used subject prefixes, affixed e.g. to verbs, referring to the various types of nouns. Thus, instead of having eight classes of nouns, more recent accounts proposed eighteen, as a result of which the singular is considered as a class of its own, and the plural another one, although they are numbered successively, as follows: A-WA (1-2), U-I (3-4), LI-YA (5-6), KI-VI (7-8), I-ZI (9-10), U-ZI (11-14), U-YA (11-14), KU- (15), PA-KU-MU- (16-18). It can be noticed that classes 11 and 14 appear twice. This is because, according to Mohammed (2001), there is no such thing as classes 12 and 13 in Standard Swahili (Kiswahili Sanifu). For their part, Habwe and Karanja (2004: 90) point out that although nouns of classes 12 and 13 (represented by the prefixes KA- in the singular and TU- in the plural) are frequently used in informal conversation, they are not recognized in Standard Swahili, where their place is taken up by noun class markers KI- (in the singular) and VI- (in the plural).
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5. a. Singular: *Mhuni gliharibu nyaya tano za stima.*
   ‘The vagabond destroyed five electric cables.’

   b. Plural: *Wahuni waliharibu nyaya tano za stima.*
   ‘The vagabonds destroyed five electric cables.’

However, Habwe and Karanja (2004: 168-171) add that the A-WA noun classes take either the prefix A- or YU- in the singular form and WA- in the plural form as in the following examples:

   ‘That person is running.’

   (b) Plural: *Watu wale wanakimbia.*
   ‘Those people are running.’

The *LI-YA* class markers

Mohammed (2001:49) points out that the prefixes for nouns in the *LI-YA* classes are: *Ji-, J-,* or a zero morpheme for the singular, and *MA-* for the plural form, as shown below:

7. a. Singular: *Jembe hili ni la mama; alilinunua jana.*
   ‘This is my mother’s hoe; she bought it yesterday.’

   b. Plural: *Majembe haya ni ya mama, aliyanunua jana.*
   ‘These are my mother’s hoes, she bought them yesterday.’

On the other hand, Kapinga (1983: 44-46) points out that the *LI-YA* classes have nouns which have *U-* and zero-morpheme prefixes in the singular and *MA-* in the plural, as in the following examples: *umbo* (shape) vs. *maumbo* (shapes) and *bango* (placard) vs. *mabango* (placards). The word *bango* has a zero morpheme marker; it does not begin with the prefix *u-*.

The *KI-VI* class markers

Polome (1967: 100-1) and Mohammed (2001: 49) observe that the *KI-VI* noun classes are essentially the classes of inanimate objects. Polome adds that nominal stems denoting other concepts have found their way into these classes. These are concepts like diminutives, as in *kijikuku* (small hen), and nouns referring to people with physical disabilities, like *kiziwi* (a deaf person). On the other hand, Mohammed (ibid.) and Habwe and Karanja (2004: 169) note that although nouns like *kiziwi* (a deaf person), *kiongozi* (a leader) and *kilema* (a
lame person) morphologically belong to the $K_I^{-VI}$ classes, they get their concordial agreement in the $A$-$WA$ noun classes, as in the following examples, which I invented:

   ‘The disabled person was given one thousand shillings by the Minister of Health’

   b. Plural: Vilema walipewa shilingi elfu moja na Waziri wa Afya.
   ‘The disabled persons were given a thousand shillings by the Minister of Health’

The $I-ZI$ class markers

According to Polome (p. 96) and Habwe and Karanja (p. 170), while the nouns in these classes take the same form both in the singular and the plural, the class markers that refer to them occur in the form of the prefix $I$- in the singular and $ZI$- in the plural, and they appear in the pronominal and verbal concords.

   ‘That bucket is full of clean water.’

   ‘Those buckets are full of clean water.’

Mohammed (2001: 43-44) points out that many words borrowed from other languages like Arabic and English belong to this class. One example is sabuni (soap), a form which is the same both in the singular and in the plural, and which was borrowed from Arabic. He adds that some names of insects, birds and animals (including those of animates that begin with $n$- followed by $-d$- are placed in this class. Examples are: paka (cat, cats), panzi (grasshopper, grasshoppers), and ndugu (brother, brothers). Still according to Mohammed, also belonging to this class are words beginning with the consonant letter cluster $ny$- that precedes a vowel letter stem and whose singular and plural forms are the same, such as nyumba (house, houses) and nyundo (hammer, hammers).

The $U-ZI$ class markers

According to Kapinga (1983: 53-4), the $U-ZI$ class markers are typically used for nouns that begin with the letter $u$- in the singular and the letters $ny$- in the
plural, as is the case of *uzi* (thread) and *nyuzi* (threads) in the following examples:

   ‘Your thread is very nice.’

   b. Plural: *Nyuzi hizo zako zinapendeza sana.*
   ‘Your threads are very nice.’

However, he points out that other nouns having the prefix *U-* followed by a vowel take the prefix *W-* to make pronunciation easier, as is the case of *uaya*, which becomes *waya* (a wire) and *uembe*, which becomes *wembe* (razor). Their respective plurals are *nyaya* (wires) and *nyembe* (razors), as the examples in (11) show:

   ‘My wire has been lost.’

   b. Plural: *Nyaya zangu zimepotea.*
   ‘My wires have been lost.’

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. The respondents

I chose to test my research hypothesis on thirty Standard-Seven pupils of the Busibi Primary School in Samia District in western Kenya. Twenty of them were boys and ten girls. They were aged between 12 and 16 years. At the level of Standard Seven in the Kenyan educational system, learners will have completed six years of Kiswahili, since the language policy in Kenya provides that Kiswahili must be taught as an examinable subject from the first year of primary school, at the rate of five periods per week with each period being thirty-five minutes long. An interesting fact to note is that while these particular learners are required to use Kiswahili for communication outside the classroom, but still on the school premises, on Thursdays and Fridays while at school, they definitely do not use Kiswahili at home: the school is located in an area where Kisamia is the language used by the population. Taking this into account, I consider
Standard-Seven pupils to be at an intermediate level of learning Kiswahili. So, I designed my test with this in mind.

2.2. Materials

The respondents’ knowledge was tested with a questionnaire consisting of nineteen sentences containing a total of forty mistakes to be corrected by writing the correct sentences in the spaces provided. Eight sentences (ii, iii, v, vi, ix, xii, xiv and xviii) contained fourteen instances of misuse of the A-WA noun class markers, three sentences (viii, xiii and xvii) contained eight instances of the LI-YA noun class markers, four sentences (i, x, xv and xix) contained nine of the Ki-VI markers, two sentences (vii and xi) contained five of the I-ZI markers, while two sentences (iv and xvi) contained four of the U-ZI markers.

Below is the full questionnaire. The wrong class markers are highlighted in bold type, although they were not in the questionnaire given to the respondents. Their English translations have also been added in brackets; they were not in the original questionnaire either.

Soma sentensi zifuatazo kwa makini na usahihishe makosa. Kwa mfano:

3Here are the expected correct versions of the nineteen sentences:

ia. Choo kile ni kichaifu.
iiia. Dada zake wote wanafanya kazi.
iv. Kilema alipewa shilingi elfu moja na Waziri wa Afya.
ixa. Wahuni waliharibu nyanya tano za stima.
vi. Ng’ombe wale ni wa nani?
xi. Vifaranga wote wamenyakuliwa na mwewe.
viia. Ndoo ile imejaa maji safi.
xiia. Magari haya yote ni ya mtu mmoja.
ix. Kiroboto ameniuma.
ixa. Kijikuku kile changu kimetaga kijiyai.
xiia. Juma, nenda kwa mwalimu mkuu akupe karatasi za mtihani uniletee.
xiib. Vifaru wengi wanaishi katika misitu huu.
xviiia. Jembe hilii ni la mama, alilinunua jana.
viib. Mbwa wetu alikuwa jana.
xiv. Vitabu vyangu vyote vimepotea.
xviiia. Huo uzi wako unapendeza sana.
xiia. Kuna magunia tisa ya mahindi katika darasa la saba.
xiv. Samaki ambao baba alinunua jana walikuwa wameoza.
xiib. Kichwa kinaniuma.
Read the following sentences carefully and correct the mistakes. Here is an example:

a)  *Nendeni mbebe viti zote ambazo zimeharibika mlete hapa.*
    Go and bring here all those chairs that have been broken.

b)  *[Correct version:]  *Nendeni mbebe viti *vyote ambayo vimeharibika mlete hapa.*

i.  *Choo ile ni chafu sana.*
    ‘That toilet is very dirty.’

ii.  *Madada zake wote wanafanya kazi.*
    ‘All his/her sisters are employed.’

iii.  *Kilema kilipewa shilingi elfu moja na Waziri wa Afya.*
    ‘The disabled person was given one thousand shillings by the Minister for Health.’

iv.  *Wahuni waliharibu wa ya tano za stima.*
    ‘The vagabonds destroyed five electric cables.’

v.  *Ng’ombe zile ni za nani?*
    ‘Whose cows are those?’

vi.  *Vifaranga vyote vimenyakuliwa na mwewe.*
    ‘All the chicks have been snatched by the hawk.’

vii.  *Ndoo lile limejaa maji masafi.*
    ‘That bucket is full of clean water.’

viii.  *Gari hizi zote ni za mti moja.*
    ‘All these vehicles belong to one person.’

ix.  *Kiroboto kimeniuma.*
    ‘A flea has bitten me.’

x.  *Kijikuku yule wangu alitaga kijiyai.*
    ‘That small hen of mine laid a small egg.’

xi.  *Juma, nenda kwa mwali mu mkuu akupe makaratasi ya mthani uniletee.*
    ‘Juma, go and ask the head teacher to give you examination papers for me.’

xii.  *Vifarangi vingi vinaishi katika msitu huu.*
    ‘There are many rhinoceros living in this forest.’

xiii.  *Jembe hii ni ya mama, aliinunua jana.*
    ‘This is my mother’s hoe; she bought it yesterday.’
xiv. *Mbwa yetu ilikufa jana*
‘Our dog died yesterday.’

xv. *Vitabu zangu zote zimepotea.*
‘All my books have been lost.’

xvi. *Hiyo uzi yako inapendeza sana.*
‘Your thread is very nice.’

xvii. *Kuna magunia matisa ya mahindi katika darasa la saba.*
‘There are nine sacks of maize in the standard seven classroom.’

xviii. *Samaki ambazo baba alinunua jana zilikuwa zimeoza.*
‘The fish that my father bought yesterday were rotten.’

xix. *Kichwa inaniuma.*
‘My head is aching.’

3. **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

3.1. **Results**

The results are arranged in the table below, which shows the number of mistakes made by each one of the thirty respondents (referred to as R1 to R30 in the table) on each one of the five pairs of noun class markers. The percentages on the right hand side, in the rows, are those for the mistakes which each respondent made overall, that is for all the five singular-plural pairs of noun class markers. For their part, the percentages in the columns show which of the pairs of noun class markers the respondents made most, or least, mistakes on.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>A-WA (out of 14)</th>
<th>L1-YA (out of 8)</th>
<th>K1-VI (out of 9)</th>
<th>I-ZI (out of 5)</th>
<th>U-ZI (out of 4)</th>
<th>Total (out of 40)</th>
<th>%</th>
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3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Mistakes involving the A-WA noun class markers

The column percentages in the table show that overall this pair of noun classes scored the lowest number of non-corrected instances, namely 23%, of all the five pairs tested. Nevertheless, in terms of individual performance, the table above shows that three (i.e. 10%) respondents (R9, R15 and R21) out of the thirty did not make any mistake at all (hence the 0 in the relevant cell against their R serial number) with the A-WA noun class markers, while those who did poorly on these classes were R4, who made 12 out of 14 possible mistakes, and R18, R22 and R28, who made 9 mistakes each. These learners must have found it difficult to put animals like cows, (see ng’ombe in sentence (v)), rhinoceros (see vifaru in sentence (xii)), birds (see mwewe ‘hawk’ in sentence (vi)), insects (see kiroboto in sentence (ix)) and fish (see samaki in sentence (xviii)) in the same group as animate human beings.

3.2.2. Mistakes involving the LI-YA noun class markers

The column percentages in the table show that overall this pair of noun classes scored the second highest number of mistakes, 37%, of the five pairs tested. This relatively high number stems from the fact that twelve (i.e. 40%) of the respondents were not able to correct a single one of the four mistakes contained in sentence viii, Gari hizi zo ni za mtu mmoja (‘All these vehicles belong to one person’). All the twelve must have thought, wrongly, that the word garı (‘a car’) was already in the plural. But the table also shows that seven (i.e. 23%) of the respondents (R2, R8, R12, R13, R14, R21 and R25) did not make any mistake at all in the sentences testing the LI-YA classes. On the other hand, two respondents, R5 and R20, made the most mistakes, with each of them making seven mistakes out of the possible eight. They were followed by R20, R22 and R27, who made six mistakes each out of the possible eight. These five respondents who did quite poorly on the sentences testing the LI-YA noun class markers may not be aware
that it is the same class for even nouns with JI-, J-, U- prefixes, or zero morpheme in the singular, and the MA- prefix in the plural. These are words like *jembe* (as in item xiii), whose plural is *majembe*, and *magunia* (as in sentence xvii), that is, the plural of *gunia*, which has a zero morpheme marker.

### 3.2.3. Mistakes involving the Kl-Vi noun classes

First, it is worth reminding the reader that the *Kl-Vi* noun classes refer both to animate and inanimate beings. An interesting component of the latter is parts of the body, such as *kichwa* (a head) vs. *vichwa* (heads) and *kidole* (a finger) vs. *vidole* (fingers). Even though, overall, the 35% rate of non-corrected mistakes is relatively small, the respondents’ performance on the particular instances testing the use of *Kl-* as a diminutive was quite low. This concept of diminutive featured in sentence (x), **Kijikuku yule wangu alitaga kijiyai** (‘That small hen of mine laid a small egg’), whose correct version is **Kijikuku kile changu kilitaga kijiyai**. A whole twenty (that is, 66.7%, or two-thirds) of the thirty respondents could not correct a single one of the three mistakes in sentence (x). Only eight (i.e. 27%) were able to correct all the three. The remaining two respondents (i.e. 6.7%) were able to correct two of the three. The respondents who did badly on this sentence must have overgeneralized the rule that puts all the animates into the A-WA classes, but a rule which allows for one notable exception: the fact that animates in their diminutive form belong to the *Kl-Vi* classes, as is the case of *kijikuku*, which is a diminutive of *kuku* (hen).

Sentence (i), **Choo ile ni chafu sana** (‘That toilet is very dirty’), whose correct version is **Choo kile ni kichafu sana**, also presented much difficulty to the respondents: only three (i.e. 10%) of them gave this correct sentence.

As for the other sentences that tested the *Kl-Vi* noun classes, contrary to what one might have expected, they did not turn out to be difficult for most respondents. They were about a name of a person with physical disability (see *kilema* in sentence (iii)) and a name of an animal (see *vifaru* in sentence (xii)). Obviously, the difficulty with such nouns would be
expected to lie in the apparently paradoxical fact that morphologically they belong to the Kl-VI classes, and yet have to take concordial (noun class) markers that are usually reserved for the A-WA noun classes. Despite this, only five (i.e. 17%) of the respondents were not able to correct the mistakes in sentence (xii), and only three (i.e. 10%) were not able to correct those in sentence (iii).

3.2.4. Mistakes involving the I-ZI noun classes

Overall, this pair of noun classes scored the second lowest number of mistakes, 31%. In terms of individual performance, eight (i.e. 27%) of the respondents (namely R1, R2, R3, R6, R13, R14, R17 and R19) were able to correct all the five mistakes that were used to test the two noun class markers. On the other hand, four (i.e. 13%) of the respondents (namely R4, R21, R22 and R28) could not correct any one of them.

3.2.5. Mistakes involving the U-ZI noun classes

The column percentages show that, overall, it is this pair of noun class markers that scored the highest number of mistakes, 41%. Quite interestingly, though, the table also shows that it is the same pair that recorded the biggest number of respondents, thirteen (i.e. 43%) of the thirty, who were able to correct all the mistakes. The most plausible explanation for this apparently paradoxical observation is that it is the same pair which was tested by the smallest number of mistakes, only four, against, for instance, fourteen for the A-WA pair.

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to establish the extent to which five singular-plural pairs of noun class markers in Kiswahili would be misused by the Standard-seven pupils of the Busibi Primary School in Samia District in western Kenya. A questionnaire was used to this effect: it required of the respondents to correct mistakes in the nature of lack of agreement between the noun class markers and the noun they referred to. The results reported
in the table above are those of the number of mistakes which the respondents were not able to correct. The results show that fewer respondents than expected had problems in correcting those mistakes. If we look at these results from a language learning point of view and assume that the respondents’ ability to correct the mistakes represents their level of mastery of the rules governing the noun classes involved, we will conclude that the A-WA noun classes turned out to be the least difficult and the U-ZI classes the most difficult. But beyond this issue of which noun classes were less or more difficult, the results have disproved my research hypothesis, which suggested that the Standard-seven pupils of the Busibi Primary School would not be able to correct more than fifty percent of the mistakes targeted in the questionnaire: in the event, the highest rate of non-correction of those mistakes turned out to be only 41%; on average, this rate was only 31%. To many teachers and researchers on Kiswahili, these results are likely to look counterintuitive: we are used to thinking of noun classes as an area of Kiswahili grammar that is hard to master. So, it would be surprising how primary school learners of Kiswahili could demonstrate such a high mastery of this aspect of the grammar. The reasons for this may lie with the nature of the test used to test this mastery: it looks like asking respondents (albeit of an assumed non-advanced level of knowledge of the language) to correct mistakes while giving them an example of how to do it, may not be a sufficient way of testing their knowledge. So, tests of a different nature should be used as well. Further, my suggestion, at the beginning of this paper, that the five pairs of noun class markers are the most difficult to use in the Kiswahili of Kenya, may turn out to be based on shaky foundations. And indeed I am aware that another study, published in this volume, on the misuse of Kiswahili noun class markers, reports results that show that only the A-WA and LI-YA pairs of noun class markers appeared among the five top most misused of the thirteen studied. So, further research on the issue would be welcome.
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