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Chapter 5

Number and animacy in the Teke noun class system

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In this paper, we trace the development of Proto-Bantu noun classes into Teke (Bantu B71, Ewo dialect), showing that formal reflexes of classes 1, 2, 5–9, and 14 are detectable. We further show that animacy, abstractness, and number allow us to determine the fate of classes 3, 4, 10, 11 and identify the following singular/plural genders: 1/2 (animate <PB 1/2, some 9/10), 1/8 (inanimate, <PB 3/4), 14/8 (abstract, <PB 14/8), 5/6 (<PB 5/6), 5/9 (<PB 11/10, with 10>9 merger), 7/8 (<PB 7/8), and 9/6 (<PB 9/6). Such reassignments provide a window into probing parallel noun class changes in other Northwest Bantu and Niger-Congo in general.

1 Introduction

In this paper we have two goals. First, we trace the development of the Proto-Bantu (PB) noun classes into a variety of Teke, a group of closely related, understudied B70 languages spoken in Gabon, the Republic of the Congo, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Second, we discuss how the Teke facts provide a window into probing parallel noun class changes in other Northwest Bantu, Bantu, and Niger-Congo (NC) in general. In this sense we provide an additional contribution and comparison with past work on the restructuring and loss



of NC noun classes. This includes, among others, the considerable work on mergers and loss in Bantoid (cf. the papers in Hyman 1980 and Hyman & Voorhoeve 1980) and Cross-River (Williamson 1985; Faraclas 1986; Connell 1987; Hyman & Udoh 2006). Of particular interest will be the restructuring which takes place on the basis of animacy, something discussed at great length in Northeastern Bantu (Wald 1975; Contini-Morava 2008) and elsewhere in Bantu (Maho 1999: 122–126). We will show that both phonetic and semantic factors have played a role in the changes which have taken place between PB and Teke. All of the above – and more – is covered in very careful detail in Good (2012).

Crucial to the approach taken here is that synchronic noun classes and genders (singular/plural pairings) are established by concord (agreement markers), not by affixal marking on the noun itself. On the other hand, as pointed out by several of the above studies, attention must be paid to both marking on the noun as well as on agreeing elements. Our attention is on the Ewo dialect of Teke B71 (Republic of the Congo), as spoken by the third author, reporting on a several month study together in Berkeley in Spring 2016. We begin by considering the situation in PB in §2, then turn to Teke in §3. The changes which have taken place between the two are enumerated in §4, followed by a presentation of our conclusions in §5.

2 Proto-Bantu noun classes

The natural starting point for this kind of study is the Proto-Bantu noun class system, both noun prefixes and (pronominal) concordial elements, which Meeussen (1967: 97) identifies as shown in Table 1.¹

On the basis of the reconstructions, we can make the following observations: (i) Noun prefixes all have L(ow) tone. (ii) Pronominal concord is H(igh) except for (shaded) classes 1 and 9 which are L. (iii) As indicated, some class pairings show some semantic consistency, e.g. 12, 13 and 19 are diminutive classes. In addition, class 6 *mà-* is also used for mass/liquids, and 16, 17, and 18 are locative classes. In short, at least 19 distinct noun classes can be reconstructed in PB.

¹Abbreviations used in the tables are listed at the end of this paper. Vowels are transcribed using IPA symbols, rather than Meeussen's (1967) symbols: /i, ɪ, u, ʊ/ rather than /j, i, ɥ, u/. Note that we choose to reconstruct the concordial prefix of class 1 as **ʊ-* rather than to adopt Meeussen's (1967)'s **jʊ-*, in which the *j-* might be a confusion with class 9.

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Table 1: Proto-Bantu noun classes and genders

Class	NPfx	Co	Class	NPfx	Co	Sg./Pl. genders	
1	*mò-	*ò-	11	*lò-	*l'ò-	1/2	(humans)
2	*bà-	*bá-	12	*kà-	*ká-	3/4	
3	*mò-	*g'ò-	13	*tò-	*t'ò-	5/6	
4	*mì-	*g'ì-	14	*b'ò-	*b'ò-	7/8	
5	*ì-	*l'ì-	15	*k'ò-	*k'ò-	9/10	(incl. animals)
6	*mà-	*g'á-	16	*pà-	*p'á-	11/10	
7	*k'ì-	*g'ì-	17	*k'ò-	*k'ò-	12/13	(diminutives)
8	*b'ì-	*b'ì-	18	*m'ò-	*m'ò-	14/6	(abstract)
9	*N-	*j'ì-	19	*p'ì-	*p'ì-	15/6	
10	*N-	*j'ì-				19/13?	(diminutives)

Table 2: Noun class reflexes in Teke (Ewo dialect)

PB	NPfx	As	Prox	Dist	'two'	SPr	SAgr/_C	SAgr/_V
1	ò-, Ñ-, Ø-	wà	wù	wâ	—	ndé	∅	∅
2	à-	bá	bà	bâ	bvwóólè	bó	á	bá
5	lè-, ∅	lé	lì	lyâ	—	ló	lé	lé
6	à-	má	mà	mâ	mbvwóólè	mó	á	má
7	kè-	ké	ki	kyâ	—	kó	ké	ké
8	è-	bé	bì	byâ	dziéélè	jó	é	bé
9	N(-), ∅	yè	yì	yâ	yíéélè	yó	é	yé
14	ò-	bó	bà	bâ	—	ndé	∅	∅

Table 3: Teke genders (sg./pl. pairings)

Gender	PB cl.	Sg. pfx	Pl. pfx	Prox (sg./pl.)	#	Semantics
wà/bá	1/2	ò-, Ñ-, Ø-	à-	wù/bà	79	animate, human
wà/bé	(1/8)	ò-	è-	wù/bì	52	inanimate
bó/bé	(14/8)	ò-	è-	bà/bì	18	abstract
lé/má	5/6	lè-	à-	lì/mà	92	
lé/bá	(5/2)	lè-	à-	lì/bà	1	'bird'
lé/yè	(5/9)	lè-	N-	lì/yì	12	
ké/bé	7/8	kè-	è-	kì/bì	54	
yè/má	(9/6)	N(-), Ø-	à-	yì/mà	45	

3 Teke (Ewo dialect)

The situation is quite different in Teke.² The forms found in the Ewo dialect are presented in Table 2. The PB class numbers in the first column are given for reference. Note that it is not clear whether the initial nasal consonant of class 9 nouns should still be analyzed as a prefix in Teke, or whether it has fused with the root (i.e., class 9 nouns do not have a prefix anymore). This will accordingly be shown in all transcriptions of class 9 nouns with a hyphen in parentheses between the potential nasal prefix and the root.

From these tables the following observations and additional facts can be noted:³

- (i) Class 3 merged with class 1. We know that the form is historical class 1 because of the L tone associative (only classes 1 and 9 had L tone concord in PB).
- (ii) Class 4 merged with class 8, thus producing a 1/8 gender (corresponding to PB 3/4).
- (iii) The Teke reflexes of PB class 9 is used both as a singular (with a class 6 plural), but also as the plural of class 5 (from class Proto-Bantu class 11, see below), thus producing the two genders 9/6 and 5/9. Again, we know that the plural form is a reflex of class 9 because of its L tone associative (a reflex of Proto-Bantu class 10 would have a H tone).
- (iv) Class 11 merged with class 5. Its plural is now in class 9, hence a 5/9 gender (see above).
- (v) PB diminutive classes 12, 13 and 19 and locative classes 16, 17 and 18 are not present in Teke.
- (vi) Of the eight singular/plural genders in Teke, those not occurring in PB are in parentheses (Maho 1999: 255–261). As seen, most genders are innovations (five out of eight), as schematized in Figure 1 (the numerals refer to

²Although Teke languages often have seven (or more) phonetic vowels, e.g. Kukuya (Paulian 1975), we did not find a phonemic contrast in the mid vowels, which we transcribe with *e* and *o*, pronounced as such in noun class markers and other grammatical morphemes, otherwise as [ɛ] and [ɔ].

³Note, additionally, that the plural of class 14 nouns is now in class 8 instead of the original class 6 of proto-Bantu, despite the fact that class 6 still exists in Teke. We do not have an explanation for this change. One may surmise that the similarity of the singular *ò-* of 1/8 (from Proto-Bantu 3/4), inanimate, may have caused an analogy.

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the PB noun classes that the modern Teke classes correspond to historically; the numerals in parentheses refer to the PB classes that merged with other classes). Examples of each gender follow in Table 4.

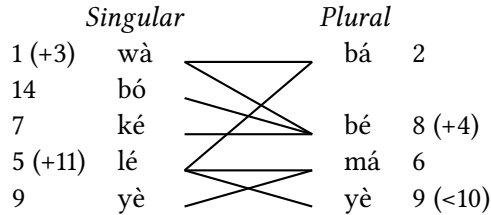


Figure 1: Teke genders

As can be seen in the shaded column of Table 2, at most eight distinct classes are recognizable, which we identify by their associative marker. The singular/plural pairings (“genders”) are presented in Table 3, where the number (#) indicated for each gender is based on a lexicon of 356 singular/plural nouns.

With this established, we now turn to consider how Teke derived from PB.

Table 4: Examples of each Teke gender

Teke	PB	Singular	Plural	
wà/bá	1/2	mwàánà ò-kúúlù n-dziá n-dzòò	à-bàánà à-kúúlù à-ndziá à-ndzòò	‘child’ ‘uncle’ ‘stranger’ ‘elephant’
wà/bé	(1/8)	ò-bá ò-mbónó ò-nywà ò-kilà	è-bá è-mbónó è-nywà è-kilà	‘palm tree’ ‘leg’ ‘mouth’ ‘tail’
bó/bé	(14/8)	ò-yúú ò-dzá ò-bvwòó ò-nsámbá	è-yúú è-dzá è-bvòó è-nsámbá	‘poverty’ ‘food’ ‘fear’ ‘judgment’
lé/má ⁴	5/6	lè-lémì kélé dziíni dziírì	à-lémì à-kélé míini mbíirì	‘tongue’ ‘stone’ ‘tooth’ ‘eye’
lé/bá	(5/2)	lè-nyòní	à-nyòní	‘bird’

Teke	PB	Singular	Plural	
lé/yè	(5/9)	lè-nkíí	n(-)kíí	'neck'
		lè-sálá	n(-)tsálá	'feather'
		lè-ntsèrè	n(-)tsèrè	'straw'
		lè-ndèli	n(-)dèli	'beard'
ké/bé	7/8	kè-kàì	è-kàì	'hand'
		kè-kàlá	è-kàlá	'mat'
		kè-bàá	è-bàá	'wall'
		kè-yirí	è-yirí	'bone'
yè/má	(9/6)	n(-)dzó	à-ndzó	'house'
		bí	à-bí	'egg'
		n(-)dzálí	à-ndzálí	'river'
		m(-)bàà	à-mbàà	'fire'

4 From Proto-Bantu to Teke

As summarized in §2, the noun classes inherited from PB have undergone a number of mergers. PB classes 3, 4 and 11 all merged their noun and agreements with classes 1, 8 and 5, respectively. Class 14, on the other hand has merged its **bù-* prefix with class 1 (and 3) *ò-*, but maintains a separate agreement. Similarly, PB class 2 **bà-* and class 6 **mà-* have merged their noun prefix as *a-*, but maintain distinct agreements. It is likely therefore that the noun prefixes merged first, and later their agreements. We survey these changes in this section. However, we first begin by considering the three genders that were inherited directly from PB. Table 5 presents examples of PB and later regional reconstructions, as well as their current reflexes in Teke.⁵

As seen in Table 5, the major change has been the loss of the initial consonant of PB class 2 **ba-*, class 6 **ma-* and class 8 **br-*. The Teke 5/6 examples show that class 5 nouns can be marked by *lè-* or \emptyset . Nouns in 5/6 are roughly equally divided; those in 5/9 always take *lè-*, since they all derive from PB class 11 **lù-*.

⁴Gender *lé/má* (5/6) contains a few nouns whose class can be identified through initial consonant alternation rather than the regular Teke prefixes *lè-* and *à-*, e.g. *dziini/miini* 'tooth', *dziiri/mbiiri* 'eye'. Such words are rare, and constitute exceptional forms in the language (we have not been able to identify any phonological conditioning). Note that the plural of 'tooth' *mbiiri* starts with a (historically unexpected) [mb] cluster rather than the expected [m].

⁵Proto-Bantu reconstructions are taken from Bastin et al. (2002) (noun roots), and Meeussen (1967) (noun class prefixes, cf. Table 1).

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Table 5: Genders inherited from Proto-Bantu (Pfx-Noun + Assoc.)

PB (sg./pl.)		Teke (sg./pl.)		
*1/2		1/2 wà/bá		
*mò-kádí ò-	*bà-kádí bá-	ò-kálí wà	à-kálí bá	‘woman’
*mò-già ò-	*bà-già bá-	ò-yià wà	à-yià bá	‘slave’
*5/6		5/6 lé/má		
*ì-jìcò lí-	*mà-jìcò gá-	dziíri lé	mbíiri má	‘eye’
*ì-jói lí-	*mà-jói gá-	dzúì lé	à-dzúì-má	‘voice’
*ì-kájá lí-	*mà-kájá gá-	lè-káyà lé	à-káyà má	‘tobacco’
*7/8		7/8 ké/bé		
*kì-dìbà gí-	*bì-dìbà bí-	kè-dià ké	è-dià bé	‘pool’
*kì-gàdá gí-	*bì-gàdá bí-	kè-kàlá ké	è-kàlá bé	‘mat’

While the above genders have been stable, four class mergers directly explain two of the new genders: The first, gender 1/8 *wà/bé*, is the formal merger of *3 > 1 and *4 > 8. Thus, as seen in Table 6, PB 3/4 now corresponds to Teke 1/8 *wà/bé*:

Table 6: Gender *wà/bé* (*3/4 > 1/8)

PB (sg./pl.)		Teke (sg./pl.)		
*3/4		1/8 wà/bé		
*mò-nòà gò-	*mì-nòà gí-	ò-nywà wà	è-nywà bé	‘mouth’
*mò-gòndà gò-	*mì-gòndà gí-	ò-kùunà wà	è-kùunà bé	‘field’
*mò-kídà gò-	*mì-kídà gí-	ò-kílà wà	è-kílà bé	‘tail’
*mò-tímà gò-	*mì-tímà gí-	ò-tímà wà	è-tímà bé	‘heart’

Similarly, gender 5/9 *lé/yè* derives from the merger of *11 > 5 and *10 > 9 (Table 7).⁶

⁶The same *10 > 9 merger seems to have occurred in Latege, another B71 dialect (Ruth Raharimanantsoa and Pauline Linton, p.c.), but not in Kukuya (Paulian 1975), Ngungwel, or Eboo (Ruth Raharimanantsoa p.c.). This merger thus seems to be a characteristic of B71 dialects only.

Table 7: Gender *lé/yè* (*11/10 > 5/9)

PB (sg./pl.)		Teke (sg./pl.)			
*11/10		5/9 <i>lé/yè</i>			
*lò-dèdù ló-	*Ñ-dèdù yí	lè-ndèlì lé	n(-)dèlì yè (*yé)		‘beard’ ^a
*lò-cáadá ló-	*Ñ-cáadá yí	lè-sálá lé	n(-)tsálá yè (*yé)		‘feather’

^aNote that the initial [n] in the singular form *lè-ndèlì* might be an indication that the singular was also initially in class 9, and then reassigned to class 5.

As discussed above, these mergers appear to be the result of regular sound changes affecting noun prefixes, e.g. the systematic loss of prefix-initial [b] or [m] (prefix-initial [l] and [k] are not affected), followed by the realignment of agreement patterns, as illustrated in Table 8 for the *4 > 8 merger.⁷

Table 8: Hypothesized steps of *4 > 8 merger

4 *mì-kídà gí-	>	4 ì-kídà gí-	>	(...)	>	8 è-kídà bé
8 *bi-dibà bí-	>	8 ì-dibà bí-	>	(...)	>	8 è-dià bé

The origin of 5/9, and 9/6 can be traced back to class/gender reassignment following the consequences of the *10 > 9 merger, i.e. the loss of a number distinction for N- initial nouns. This again shows the importance of a prior prefix merger in motivating changes in noun class assignments. Former *9/10 nouns could have become a number-insensitive 9/9 gender, but did not. Instead, the *10 > 9 merger led to a class/gender reassignment based on the semantic property of animacy. Animate *9/10 nouns were reassigned to 1/2 *wà/bá*, merging with the human nouns in that class, as shown in Table 9.⁸

As also seen in Table 9, one noun, *lè-nyòní* ‘bird’, shifted into gender 5/2 *lé/bá*. Note that this is the only noun illustrating both this shift, and the inquarete

⁷The fact that only prefix-initial labial consonants are targeted does not necessarily contradict the Neogrammarian principle of sound change regularity: stem-initial prominence, which plays an important role in Teke and more generally Northwestern Bantu languages (cf. Paulian (1975), Hyman (1987), Idiatov & Van de Velde (2016), a.o.) is not unlikely to have protected stem-initial consonants (and possibly other non-prefix consonants?) from this change. A detailed account of such sound changes in Teke is, however, outside the scope of this paper.

⁸Most of the former class 9 nouns that were reassigned to class 1 or class 5 start with a nasal consonant, which is a trace of the former nasal prefix of class 9, now part of the root. We have indicated the historical origin of this nasal consonant as a prefix with a hyphen in parentheses.

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gender 5/2 *lé/bá*. On the other hand, inanimate *9/10 nouns either became 9/6 *yè/má* (plural reassignment only) or 5/6 *lè/má* (complete gender reassignment), as shown in Table 10.

Table 9: Animate *9/10 > 1/2 *wà/bá* (+ 1 case of 5/2 *lé/bá*)

PB (sg./pl.)		Teke (sg./pl.)		
*9/10		1/2 <i>wà/bá</i>		
*N- <i>nàmà yì-</i>	*N- <i>nàmà yí-</i>	<i>nyàmà wà</i>	<i>à-nyàmà bá</i>	'animal'
*N- <i>jògù yì-</i>	*N- <i>jògù yí-</i>	<i>n(-)dzòò wà</i>	<i>à-ndzòò bá</i>	'elephant'
*N- <i>bùà yì-</i>	*N- <i>bùà yí-</i>	<i>m(-)bvà wà</i>	<i>à-mbvà bá</i>	'dog'
*N- <i>gòmbè yì-</i>	*N- <i>gòmbè yí-</i>	<i>n(-)gòmbè wà</i>	<i>à-ngòmbè bá</i>	'cow'
*N- <i>gàndù yì-</i>	*N- <i>gàndù yí-</i>	<i>n(-)gàndí wà</i>	<i>à-ngàndí bá</i>	'crocodile'
*N- <i>gòì yì-</i>	*N- <i>gòì yí-</i>	<i>n(-)gò wà</i>	<i>à-ngò bá</i>	'leopard'
*N- <i>gòmbá yì-</i>	*N- <i>gòmbá yí-</i>	<i>n(-)gùùmà wà</i>	<i>à-ngùùmà bá</i>	'porcupine'
*N- <i>kímà yì-</i>	*N- <i>kímà yí-</i>	<i>n(-)kímà wà</i>	<i>à-nkímà bá</i>	'monkey'
*N- <i>gùbù yì-</i>	*N- <i>gùbù yí-</i>	<i>n(-)gùbù</i>	<i>à-ngùbù bá</i>	'hippo'
*N- <i>pókù yì-</i>	*N- <i>pókù yí-</i>	<i>m(-)pùù wà</i>	<i>à-mpùù bá</i>	'rat'
*N- <i>pídì yì-</i>	*N- <i>pídì yí-</i>	<i>m(-)pìlì wà</i>	<i>à-mpìlì bá</i>	'snake sp.'
*N- <i>cùí yì-</i>	*N- <i>cùí yí-</i>	<i>n(-)tsù wà</i>	<i>à-ntsù bá</i>	'fish'
		5/2 <i>lé/bá</i>		
*N- <i>jònì yì-</i>	*N- <i>jònì yí-</i>	<i>lè-nyònì lé</i>	<i>à-nyònì bá</i>	'bird'

Table 10: Inanimate *9/10 > 9/6 *yè/má* or 5/6 *lè/má*

PB (sg./pl.)		Teke (sg./pl.)		
*9/10		9/6 <i>yè/má</i>		
*N- <i>jàdà yì-</i>	*N- <i>jàdà yí-</i>	<i>n(-)dzàlà yè</i>	<i>à-ndzàlà má</i>	'hunger'
*N- <i>jòngù yì-</i>	*N- <i>jòngù yí-</i>	<i>n(-)dzùngù yè</i>	<i>à-ndzùngù má</i>	'pot'
*N- <i>jìdà yì-</i>	*N- <i>jìdà yí-</i>	<i>n(-)dzilà yè</i>	<i>à-ndzilà má</i>	'path'
		5/6 <i>lé/má</i>		
*N- <i>gì yì-</i>	*N- <i>gì yí-</i>	<i>lè-ngìngì lé</i>	<i>à-ngìngì má</i>	'fly'
*N- <i>dòngù yì-</i>	*N- <i>dòngù yí-</i>	<i>lè-ndúú lé</i>	<i>à-ndúú má</i>	'pepper'
*N- <i>tódù yì-</i>	*N- <i>tódù yí-</i>	<i>lè-ntúlù lé</i>	<i>à-ntúlù má</i>	'chest'

In addition, a few *9/10 inanimate nouns became either 1/8 *wà/bé* or 5/9 *lé/yè*, as can be seen in Table 11.

Table 11: Inanimate *9/10 > 1/8 wà/bé or 5/9 lé/yè

PB (sg./pl.)		Teke (sg./pl.)		
*9/10		wà/bé		
*Ñ-gòdí yì-	Ñ-gòdí yí-	ò-ngòrí wà	è-ngòrí bé	'liana'
		lé/yè		
*Ñ-jùgù yì-	Ñ-jùgù yí-	lè-ndzú lé	n(-)dzú yè	'groundnut'
*Ñ-kíngó yì-	Ñ-kíngó yí-	lè-nkíí lé	ŋ(-)kíí yè	'neck'

Finally, a few former *9/10 nouns alternate between 5/6 *lé/má* and 5/9 (< *10) *lé/yè*, e.g. *lè-mpàmbù lé / à-mpàmbù má ~ m(-)pàmbù yè* 'worm'. Note that all former *9/10 nouns reassigned to 1/2 *wà/bá*, 5/6 *lè/má*, 9/6 *yè/má*, 1/8 *wà/bé*, or 5/9 *lè/yè* have kept the historical N- prefix. The cause of all of the above *9/10 class/gender reassignments is presumably the need to maintain a singular/plural distinction, with animacy exploited as the guiding criterion for reassignment.

Animacy plays a potential role in other places in the Teke noun class system. Recall that singular nouns marked by the prefix *ò-* today may represent the merger of PB *1 and *3 (with the same agreements) or class *14 (with its distinct agreements). From the semantics one can almost perfectly predict whether an *ò-*-prefixed noun will be in gender 1/2, 1/8 or 14/8. As before, animate nouns will all be in 1/2. Inanimates will either be in 14/8 *bó/bé* if they represent an abstract quality (as in PB *14), otherwise in 1/8 *wà/bé*. Representative examples are provided in Table 12.

Table 12: Animacy-based gender assignment of *ò-* nouns

Animate → 1/2 <i>wà/bá</i>				
ò-lúmi	'husband'	→	ò-lúmi wá	/ à-lúmi bá
ò-téé	'Teke person'	→	ò-téé wá	/ à-téé bá
Abstract → 14/8 <i>bó/bé</i>				
ò-bvwòó	'fear'	→	ò-bvwòó bó	/ è-mbvwòó bé
ò-yúú	'poverty'	→	ò-yúú bó	/ è-yúú bé
Concrete inanimate → 1/8 <i>wà/bé</i>				
ò-bá	'palm tree'	→	ò-bá wà	/ è-bá bé
ò-sià	'rope'	→	ò-sià wà	/ è-sià bé

5 Number and animacy in the Teke noun class system

Table 13 shows the number of animate nouns that occur in each gender.

Table 13: Genders and animacy [bracketed number = nouns with human referent]

		Animate [incl. human]	Inanimate	Total
1/2	wà/bá	73 [34]	6	79
5/2	lé/bá	1	0	1
1/8	wà/bé	5 [1]	47	52
14/8	bó/bé	0	18 (abstract)	18
5/6	lé/má	9 (insects, 'frog', 'tortoise')	83	92
5/9	lé/yè	2	10	12
7/8	ké/bé	11 [5, kin]	43	54
9/6	yè/má	0	45	45
Total: 353				

As seen in Table 13, the total number of animates is 101 out of 353 total nouns. Of these 101, 73 occur in 1/2 *wà/bá*. In fact, virtually all humans are in 1/2. Of the rest only 28 animate nouns occur outside 1/2. Interestingly, no animate noun has a class 9 *yè* singular (gender 9/6 *yè/má*). All PB *9/10 animate nouns were reassigned, mostly to 1/2 *wà/bá*.

To conclude this section, we note with considerable interest the variation in former *11 (and some *9) nouns that have been reassigned to class 5 *lé*. These have kept the former class 10 plural N- form, even though it has the L tone agreement *yè* of *9. However, as we have noted, an N- noun is ambiguous in terms of number, and may be interpreted either as singular or as plural. It can be the plural class 9 of a class 5 *lé* singular (from *11) or the singular of 9/6 *yè/má* and 1/2 *wà/bá*. In addition, nearly half of class 5/6 nouns alternate between a prefixed *lè-* and a \emptyset or N- singular form, approximately half in our lexicon occur without *lè-*. (Recall that all 5/9 nouns require *lè-* on their singular.) This is illustrated in Table 14.

Table 14: *lè-* vs. \emptyset sg. prefix in 5/6 *lé/má* nouns

Optional \emptyset			
(<i>lè-</i>)mpèi lé	/	à-mpèi má	'chin'
(<i>lè-</i>)sàáni lé	/	à-sàáni má	'plate'
Obligatory \emptyset			
(* <i>lè-</i>)kfúru lé	/	à-kfúru má	'hole'
(* <i>lè-</i>)bilà lé	/	à-bilà má	'leprosy'

As a result this has produced several cases where the same N- noun can be interpreted as either singular or plural, paired with an appropriate noun class of opposite number, as shown in Table 15.

Table 15: N- nouns as singular or plural

Plural class 9 <i>yè</i> (singular = class 5 <i>lé</i>)			
<i>lè-mbàlà lé</i>	/	<i>m(-)bàlà yè</i>	'civet cat'
<i>lè-ŋkíí lé</i>	/	<i>ŋ(-)kíí yè</i>	'neck'
Singular class 5 <i>lé</i> (plural = class 2 <i>bá</i> if animate)			
<i>m(-)bàlà lé</i>	/	<i>à-mbàlà bá</i>	'civet cat'
Singular class 5 <i>lé</i> (plural = class 2 <i>má</i> if inanimate)			
<i>ŋ(-)kíí lé</i>	/	<i>à-ŋkíí má</i>	'leprosy'

5 Conclusion

As seen above, an identical prefix shape can not only lead to merger of noun classes (e.g. class *1 and *3, *4 and *8, *5 and *11), but can cause a noun to function in two different genders, one as a singular, the other as a plural. This too can be expected to lead to further realignments as the noun classes prepare for their next move.

In the preceding sections, we have seen that the Teke noun class system has undergone important restructuring with loss of eleven of the nineteen PB classes, four class mergers, and many gender reassignments. As we have shown, only three out of eight genders are inherited from PB. Three variables have played an important role in this evolution: (i) prefix shapes; (ii) animacy; (iii) number. Number and animacy have played a major role in this restructuring, in particular in the class and gender reassignment of PB *9/10 nouns. These become 1/2 *wà/bá* if animate, 5/6 *lé/má* or 9/6 *yè/má* if inanimate (occasionally also 1/8 *wà/bé* and 5/9 *lé/yè*). Animacy also plays an important role in synchrony. As we have shown, singular *ò-* is interpreted as 1/2 *wà/bá* if animate, 14/8 *bó/bé* if abstract, and 1/8 *wà/bé* if concrete inanimate. In addition, a noun with the prefix sequence *à-N-* is unambiguously class 2 *bá* if animate, class 6 *má* if inanimate. The relevance (and potential conflict) of animacy in the synchronic and diachronic marking of noun classes is attested elsewhere in Bantu (Wald 1975; Maho 1999; Contini-Morava 2008; among others), even to the extent of entirely replacing the inherited noun class system, as in Nzadi (Crane et al. 2011). What is particularly interesting in

the Teke case is the conspiracy between prefix shape and animacy. Noun classes are reassigned on the basis of animacy. As prefixes merge, noun class agreements merge, even those accompanying singular and plural 9/10. This shows that Teke speakers are paying attention not only to the semantics, but are impressively influenced by the forms. Such interplay in the reassignments which we have enumerated should be considered in probing parallel noun class changes in other Northwest Bantu and Niger-Congo in general.

Abbreviations

As	Associative	Prox	proximal demonstrative
Co	concord		'this/these'
Dist	distal demonstrative 'that/those'	SA	Subject agreement
NPfx	noun prefix	SPr	Subject pronoun

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