

THE EVOLUTION OF *NA* IN BANTU LANGUAGES

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Abstract

The link word *na* in Bantu languages has been identified as one of the forms inherited from the ancestral language, commonly known as Proto-Bantu (Guthrie, 1971; Greenberg, 1948; Meeussen, 1969). This form has been reconstructed in Proto-Bantu with the meaning of “and” and “with”. Its main role has been recognized as to link together two syntactic units in a coordinative or associative manner.

This paper examines the two original functions of *na* as a marker of coordination or association of syntactic units in Bantu languages. It shows how some languages have extended its use through the process of grammaticalization to assume other functions. Thus, the paper concludes by observing that the evolution of the *na* form is one of the cases in which words in Bantu languages have evolved to acquire other functions (Polomé, 1977; Guthrie, 1971). However, there are also cases in which units belonging to one grammatical category change to other categories.

Key words: Proto-Bantu, form evolution, coordinative, associative, grammaticalization.

Résumé

Le mot lien «*na*» dans les langues Bantu a été identifié comme un des formes hérités de la langue ancestrale, communément appelé Proto-Bantu (Guthrie, 1971; Greenberg, 1948; Meeussen, 1969). Ce forme a été reconstruite en Proto-Bantu avec le sens de «et» et «avec». Son rôle essentiel a été reconnu comme ce de lier ensemble deux unités syntactiques dans une manière coordinatrice et associative.

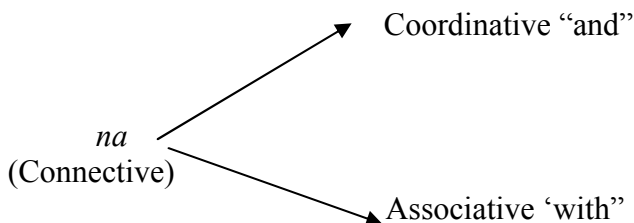
Ce document examine les deux fonctions originelles de *na* comme marqueur de coordination ou association des unités syntactiques dans les langues Bantu. Il montre comment quelques langues ont prolongé son utilisation par le processus de grammaticalisation pour assumer d'autres fonctions. Par conséquent, ce document s'achève avec l'observation que l'évolution de la forme « *na* » est l'un parmi les cas où les mots appartiennent aux langues Bantu ont évolués pour acquérir d'autres fonctions (Polomé, 1977; Guthrie, 1971). Cependant, il y a aussi des cas quand les unités qui appartiennent à une catégorie grammaticale change à d'autres catégories.

Mots-clés: Proto-Bantu, évolution de la forme, coordinatrice, associative, grammaticalisation.

1. Introduction

Several scholars have identified the link word *na* in Bantu languages as being one of the forms inherited from the ancestral language, commonly known as Proto-Bantu (Guthrie, 1971; Greenberg, 1948; Meeussen, 1969). This form has been reconstructed in Proto-Bantu with the meaning of “and” and “with”. Its main role has been recognized as to link together two syntactic units in a coordinative or associative manner. The two functions are shown in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1: The two functions of *na* in Proto-Bantu



Many of the contemporary Bantu languages have retained these functions, often with varying roles or semantic attributes. Some examples are given below:

Example 1: The linking role of *na* in Bantu languages

- (i) Juma na Hamisi wa - me - fika (Kiswahili)
Juma and Hamisi 3rd pers.pl.- Perf.- arrive
“Juma and Hamisi have arrived.”
- (ii) a - mu - 2 - ono baba - ake na mama-ake (Comorian)
SM- OM - Pres. - see father-poss. and mother-poss.
“He sees his father with his mother” (Comorian)

- (iii) Juma a - me- kata 2 - embe na ki - su
(Kiswahili)
Juma SM – Perf.-cut Cl.5-mango with Cl.7 - knife”
(Kiswahili)
- (iv) u¹ - Pita na u - Meri ba -a - hamba (IsiZulu)
Iv - Peter and Iv - Mary SM Past - arrive
“Peter and Mary have arrived”
- (v) u-Pita u - 2 - hlala na u – Meri (Ciluba)
Cl.1a-Peter SM Pres. – stay with Cl.1a-Mary
“Peter stays with Mary (?)
- (vi) Pita na Meri ba - a - hamba (Chishona)
Peter and Mary SM - Past - arrive
“Peter and Mary have arrived”
- (vii) Pita u - 2 - hara pu na Meri (Otjiherero)
Peter SM – Pres.- stay together with Mary
“Peter stays together with Mary”
- (viii) Pierre u - di u - somba ne² Marie (Ciluba)
Peter SM - AUX SM - stay with Mary
“Peter is staying with Mar”
- (ix) Pita ni³ Meri ba - 2 - na ni ma - ndu (Silozi)
Peter and Mary SM Pres. – be with Cl.6 - house
“Peter and mary have houses”

2.The evolution of na in Bantu

The two original functions of *na*, as a marker of coordination or association of syntactic units, has been maintained in most Bantu languages. However, some languages have extended its use through the process of grammaticalization to assume other functions. The most common ones are:

2.1.From a coordinative to a copula

In some languages the form *na* was extended in function from a coordinative to a copula (translated as “be”), expressing existential meaning, as shown in Example 2:

Example 2: The use of *na* as copula, “to be”

- (i) ku - 2 - na ma - thata ((Ikalanga)
SM -Pres. -be Cl.6 - problem
“There are problems”
- (ii) ke - 2 - na le ba - ana (Setswana)
SM - Pres.-be with Cl.2-child
“I have children”

In fact, in Setswana, the copula *na* has become so much grammaticalized that it has assumed other verbal forms, such as the perfective form (*na + ile > ne*), as in Example 6 below.

Example 6: The perfective form of *na* as conjunctive in Setswana

ke - na - ile ke - lima > ke ne ke lema (Setswana)
SM - copula - perf. SM - cultivate
“I was cultivating”

2.2.From copula to temporal-aspectual marker (TAM)

The process of grammaticalization of the *na* did not end by extending it from coordinative to copula only, but also by changing it from a copula to temporal-aspectual marker (TAM). As observed by Heine and Reh (1982), Nurse (1988) and Batibo (1999), when a copulative form becomes a temporal-aspectual markers (TAM), it assumes the role of either present or future tense marker. Thus, in those Bantu languages where it has become a temporal-aspectual marker (TAM), it functions as a marker of present or future tense. This new role is shown in the examples below.

Example 3: The role of na as a temporal-aspectual marker

- (i) m - toto a - na - cheza (Kiswahili)
Cl.1 - child SM - pres - play
“The child is playing”
- (ii) si - anana si - na - emba (Gitonga)
Cl.8 - child SM - fut - sing
“The children will sing”

2.3.From Associative to possessive verb

In some languages, the form *na* was extended in function from an associative to a possessive verb “have”, expressing a sense of something possessed. This is exemplified in Example 4.

Example 5: The role of na as a possessive verb

- (i) ni - 2 - na ny - umba (Kiswahili)
SM - Pres. - have cl.9 - house
“I have a house”
- (ii) Pita ni Meri ba - 2 - na ma - ndu (Ciluba)
Peter and Mary SM - TAM - have cl.6-house
“Peter and Mary have houses”

2.4.From Possessive verb to Genitive form

The process of grammaticalization of the *na* did not end by extending it from an associative to a possessive verb only, but also from possessive verb to a genitive form, that is a form indicating that a given noun is part or belongs to another noun. This is usually expressed by the preposition “of”. This case is demonstrated in Example 5 below.

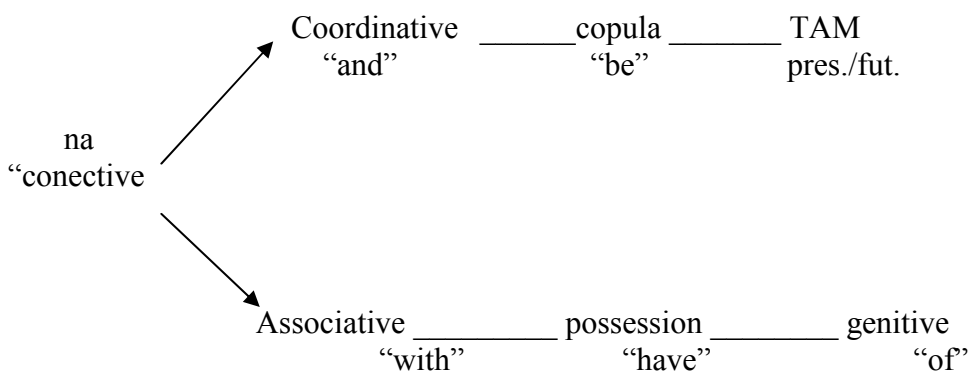
Example 5: The role of *na* as a genitive form

- (i) 2 - mama na ba - ana (Lingala)
Cl.1a-mother of cl.2 - child
“The mother of children, i.e. wife, madam”

3. Discussion

Thus, the evolution of *na* in the contemporary Bantu languages has extended in role and usage so as to include other functions. This has taken place following the processes of grammaticalization as shown in Diagram 2 below:

Diagram 2. The evolutionary path of *na* in contemporary Bantu languages



Thus, in both cases, the trend was towards grammaticalization and the use of the *na* as a grammatical morpheme, which shifted or extended its functions from an independent syntactic unit, functioning as a connective, to a dependent or bound morpheme. However, the new roles of *na* in some languages have triggered the use of other words to replace the earlier functions of this form. This is the case of Setswana, in which *na* assumed the function of copula, apart from its earlier role of an associative marker, “with”. The language had to distinguish the two roles by adopting another word, namely *le* for the function of “with”. The form *le* was earlier used as a copula and is widely used, in that role, in other Bantu languages (Greenberg, 1948; Guthrie, 1971; Meeussen 1969). Hence, the two forms exchanged their functions. This far-reaching evolution is shown in Example 7:

Example 7: Evolution of *na* and *le* from Proto-Bantu to Setswana

Proto-Bantu:	ba	-	2	-	1 ^{hand}	na	ba	-	ana
	SM	-			copula	with	cl.2	-	child
Setswana:	ba	-	2	-	na	le	ba	-	ana
	SM	-	pres.	-	copula	with	cl.2	-	child
	"They have children"								

In this case, Setswana, and the other Sotho languages, have not only given opposite semantic values to the two forms *na* and *le*, but also exchanged their positions in a metathetical process. But one may assume that two processes took place, namely the formal disappearance of the copula *le* (as it has done in many languages and therefore its formal replacement) but *na* which remained in that position. Then the *na* which had assumed a new function was replaced by *le*, which re-surfaced with the function of associative "with".

4. Conclusion

Bantu languages are usually characterized by lexical items, which often change their semantic attributes due to environmental, usage or functional roles (Polomé, 1977; Guthrie, 1971). However, there are also cases in which units belonging to one grammatical category change to other categories. This happens, especially in the process of grammaticalization (Traugott, 1980; Lehmann, 1986; Kurylowicz, 1975).

The link word or connective *na*, in Bantu languages, belongs to the grammatical category of words, given that it can function as both preposition and conjunction. However, it has gone through many fundamental charges to acquire inflectional attributes, in several Bantu languages, through the process of grammaticalization (Heine and Reh (1982). As a result, new functions emerged, replacing some of its earlier roles. Also, new forms have appeared to take over some of the functions which were once assumed by this word.

Notes

1. The initial vowel (Iv) has lost its original function of definitive marker in many Bantu languages. This is true also in Nguni languages, like Isizulu and IsiXhosa. It has become part of each noun form, including proper nouns.
2. The form *ne* is presumably a phonetically evolved variety of *na*.
3. The form *ni* could also be a morpho-phonologically evolved variety of *na*. However, it is difficult to explain the motivation of this change.

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