

The Importance of “Weak” vs. “Strong Nouns” in Learning and Teaching Bantu Languages

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1. Introduction.

Several years ago when I was first introduced to a Bantu language, Sotho (Sesotho), I came across a description of weak and strong nouns. At the time, I assumed it was some relic of mid-19th century grammatical description, and probably had little relevance to a “modern”¹ description of the language. As a consequence my Sotho grammar (Zorc & Mokabe 1998) did not give the phenomenon any attention.² However, as my studies progressed into Xhosa, I began to see how important this distinction was for variations in nominal and pronominal inflection. We will take a brief look at Xhosa in §2.

Noun classes can, of course, be distinguished by many criteria, one of which is the phonological makeup of their prefixes. Some with vowels (**i-**, **u-**, **a-**), some with nasals (**m-**, **n-**), and others with stop or sibilant consonants (**b**, **k**, **r**, **s**, **z**, etc.). What is important is that there are SYSTEMATIC DIFFERENCES, i.e., that literally apply across the entire system of inflection. Forms that agree with classes having vowel or nasal prefixes (or a combination, such as **umu-**, **ama-**) behave quite differently from those which have a thematic consonant (e.g., **aba-**, **iki-** / **isi-**, **izi-**, **ubu-**, **uku-**, etc.). In descriptions, both recent and archaic, of Sotho, Xhosa, and Zulu (Southern Bantu languages), the former have been called “weak,” while the latter “strong.”

More recently, I have been working on Rwanda (Kinyarwanda) and Rundi (Kirundi) and note that textbooks and grammars resort to some rather tortuous explanations of why certain classes of nouns get various tone patterns or inflectional changes. What is going on in these cases is absolutely parallel with the Southern Bantu system, and it should benefit both students and teachers of these and other Bantu languages to be aware of it. I have not seen any published treatment using this descriptive mnemonic for either Rwanda or Rundi. Nevertheless, subject agreement forms, possessive markers, number affixes, and the entire demonstrative (deictic) system differ along these lines. This will be discussed in §3.

What is even more fascinating and relevant for the Rwandi-Rundi system is that pronouns also carry this distinction, so that there are varying subject and object agreement

¹ Read: useful or student-friendly. The rejection was justified for Sotho (where the phenomenon occurs, but has only minor pedagogical impact). On the other hand it is extremely helpful in coming to grips with complex Xhosa, Zulu, and Rwanda-Rundi grammatical phenomena.

² In the case of Sotho this was no significant loss and I was in good company; none of the major authors employed this contrast in either their grammars or textbooks, e.g., DeMuth & Sekhesa (1978), Doke & Mofokeng (1967), Emslie (1983), Guma (1971), Paroz (1946), Sharpe (1980). I regret that I do not have the citation for the Sotho distinction; it was in a turn-of-the-century grammar (c.1892-1912) through which I was browsing at the Library of Congress.

forms, dependent vs. independent past forms, and preterit (perfect) forms which behave like corresponding strong or weak nouns.

Finally, there are two homographic classes marked with the prefix **umu-** (class 1 or group 1 singular as opposed to class 18 / group 12 locative). The former has a weak **-m-**, which is lost in subject agreement forms, demonstratives, etc., while the latter has a strong **-m-**, which is kept as a cluster (**mw-**) in demonstratives.

2. Strong vs. Weak Noun Classes in Xhosa.

If a Xhosa noun prefix consists of a single vowel or if it has a nasal, then it is called a weak noun, and follows different rules from the strong class nouns.³ These result in shorter prefixes or agreement forms, a factor which applies across the entire Xhosa grammatical system. This affects subject agreement in that only the vowel (or article) survives – the nasal is lost. In possessive forms agreeing with nouns of class 1a, everything is lost, leaving only the marker **ka** with zero agreement. The relative agreement forms are the result of fusion with the relative marker **a-** (so that **a + u > o**, **a + i > e**, **a + a > a**). The first position demonstrative pronouns involve a unique or fossilized **l-** prefix plus the relative form. Meanwhile, the formation of predicative locatives consists of a **nan-** prefix and final class-related thematic vowel in common, with a complex series of intervening consonants (i.e., they irregularly become strong). Thus:

Table 1. Weak Nouns in Xhosa

WEAK	PREFIX	SUBJ	N1A-SG- POSS	REL/ATR	DEIC-1	PRED LOC	COP
n1-sg	um-	u-	Øka-	o-	lo	nanku	ngum-
n1a-sg	u-	u-	Øka-	o-	lo	nanku	ngu-
n2-sg	um-	u-	Øka-	o-	lo	nangu	ngum-
n2-pl	imi-	i-	Øka-	e-	le	nantsi	yimi-
n3-pl	ama-	a-	Øka-	a-	la	nanga	ngama-
n5-sg	iN-	i-	Øka-	e-	le	nanzi	yin-

In contrast, a strong noun has a consonant within its prefix (n1a-pl, **oo-**, was originally or historically ***aboo-**). Note how each tends to keep its shape (i.e., its characteristic class marker) intact throughout the system. The only exceptions are the copulative forms of n1-pl and n1a-pl, which start with **ng-** (**ngaba-**, **ngoo-**); the other copulatives simply reduplicate or echo the class marker (**bubu-**, **kuku-**, **sisi-**, **zizi-**).

³ Found in virtually all Xhosa textbooks and grammars, past and present, e.g.: McLaren-Welsh 1939:26, Jordan 1966:56, Einhorn & Siyengo 1990:17, Pinnock 1994:101, Dowling 1998:36f.

Table 2. Strong Nouns in Xhosa

STRONG	PREFIX	SUBJ	N1A-SG- POSS	REL/ATR	DEIC-1	PRED LOC	COP
n1-pl	aba-	ba-	baka-	aba-	aba	naba	ngaba-
n1a-pl	oo-	ba-	baka-	aba-	aba	naba	ngoo-
n3-sg	ili-	li-	lika-	eli-	eli	nali	lili-
n4-sg	isi-	si-	sika-	esi-	esi	nasi	sis-
n4-pl	izi-	zi-	zika-	ezi-	ezi	nazi	zizi-
n5-pl	iziN-	zi-	zika-	ezi-	ezi	nazi	zizi-
n6-sg	ulu-	lu-	luka-	olu-	olu	nalulu	lulu-
n6-pl	izi-	zi-	zika-	ezi-	ezi	nazi	zizi-
n7-sg	ubu-	bu-	buka-	obu-	obu	nabu	bubu-
n8-vn	uku-	ku-	kuka-	oku-	oku	naku	kuku-
n9-loc	pha-	ku-	kuka-	oku-	oku	naku	kupha-
n10-loc	uku-	ku-	kuka-	oku-	oku	naku	kuku-

3. Strong vs. Weak Noun Classes in Rwanda.

If a noun prefix consists of a single vowel or if it has a weak nasal, then it is called a WEAK NOUN, and follows different rules from strong nouns. One must draw a distinction between a WEAK **m** vs. a STRONG **m**. The former (in n1-sg, n2-sg, n3-pl, n8-pl, and n9-pl) will be lost; the latter (in n12-loc and pro-2pl) will be retained, or strengthened further with the cluster **mw**. Weak forms result in shorter prefixes or agreement forms, and sometimes in a different tone pattern, a factor which applies across the entire Rwanda-Rundi grammatical system. This affects subject agreement in that only the class vowel (article or augment) survives – any nasal is lost). In the possessive, one of two semivowels appear, forms with **u** become **w**, forms with **i** or **a** become **y**. The first position demonstrative pronouns involve an echo vowel and a semivowel. Meanwhile, the second position demonstratives are formed from the class vowel, a semivowel, and the vowel root **-o**. The first position affective or emphatic demonstrative has high tone on the final syllable (whereas in the strong classes it is on the penult). The third position demonstrative has a high tone on the first of the long vowels. See Table 3.

Table 3. Weak Nouns in Rwanda

GROUP	prefix	subj	poss	num	deic -1	deic1- emph +2	deic1 +2	deic-2	deic-3
n1-sg	umu-	a-	wa waa	u-	uyu	unó	urya	uwo	uríiya
n1a-sg	Ø-	a-	wa waa	u-	uyu	unó	urya	uwo	uríiya
n2-sg	umu-	u-	wa waa	u-	uyu	unó	urya	uwo	uríiya
n2-pl	imi-	i-	ya yaa	i-	iyi	inó	iryá	iyo	iríiya
n3-pl	ama-	a-	ya yaa	a-	aya	anó	arya	ayo	aríiya
n5-sg	iN-	i-	ya yaa	i-	iyi	inó	iryá	iyo	iríiya
n8-pl	ama-	a-	ya yaa	a-	aya	anó	arya	ayo	aríiya
n9-pl	ama-	a-	ya yaa	a-	aya	anó	arya	ayo	aríiya

In contrast, a STRONG NOUN has a consonant (stop or strong nasal) within its prefix. Note how each tends to keep its shape (i.e., its characteristic class marker) intact throughout the system. There are only two exceptions: the n3-sg has a thematic consonant **r-** which does not appear in the prefix (**i-**) and n5-pl/n6-pl has a thematic consonant **z-** which also does not appear in the prefix (**iN-**). Note that the irregularity is actually in the class prefix (where the consonant is lost), not in the various derivations, which retain the consonant. The first position affective or emphatic demonstrative has high tone on the penultimate syllable (whereas in the weak classes it is on the final syllable). Note also that the third position demonstrative has a high tone on the second of the long vowels, as well as on its first (thematic) syllable. See Table 4.

Table 4. Strong Nouns in Rwanda

GROUP	prefix	subj	poss	num	deic-1	deic1-emph	deic1+2	deic-2	deic-3
n1-pl	aba-	ba-	báa	ba-	aba	báno	barya	abo	báriíya
n1a-pl	ba-	ba-	báa	ba-	aba	báno	barya	abo	báriíya
n3-sg	i-	ri-	ryáa	ri-	iri	ríno	riryá	iryó	ríriíya
n4-sg	iki-	ki-	cyáa	ki-	iki	kíno	kiryá	icyó	kíriíya
n4-pl	ibi-	bi-	byáa	bi-	ibi	bíno	birya	ibyó	bíriíya
n5-pl	iN-	zi-	záa	eCC-	izi	zíno	zirya	izo	zíriíya
n6-sg	uru-	ru-	rwáa	ru-	uru	rúno	rurya	urwo	rúriíya
n6-pl	iN-	zi-	záa	eCC-	izi	zíno	zirya	izo	zíriíya
n7-sg	aka-	ka-	káa	ka-	aka	káno	karya	ako	káriíya
n7-pl	utu-	tu-	twáa	tu-	utu	túno	turya	utwo	túriíya
n8-sg	ubu-	bu-	bwáa	bu-	ubu	búno	burya	ubwo	búriíya
n9-sg	uku-	ku-	kwáa	ku-	uku	kúno	kurya	ukwo	kúriíya
n10-loc	aha-	ha-	háa	ha-	aha	háno	harya	aho	háriíya
n11-loc	ku-		kwáa		uku	kúno	kúrya	uko	kúriíya
n12-loc	mu-		mwáa		umu	múno	múrya	umwo	múriíya
n13-loc	i-		##		##	##	##	##	##

Sources: Overdulse 1975:303

This distinction also applies to the PRONOUNS in that factors of vowel length or tone differ in various inflections between the singular (weak) forms and the plural (strong) forms. See Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5. Weak Pronouns in Rwanda

FORM	SUBJECT (S1)	DEP. PAST	IND.PAST	PRETERIT	OBJECT
pro-1sg <i>I</i>	N-, m-, ny-	na-	naa-	na-	-n-, -m-, -ny-
pro-2sg <i>you</i>	u-, w-	wa-	waa-	wa-	-ku-, -gu-, -kw-
pro-3sg (<i>she</i>)	a-	ya-	yaa-	ya-	-mu-, -mw-

Table 6. Strong Pronouns in Rwanda

FORM	SUBJECT (S1)	DEP. PAST	IND.PAST	PRETERIT	OBJECT
pro-1pl <i>we</i>	tu-, tw-, du-	twaa-		twaá-	-tu-, -du-, -tw-
pro-2pl <i>you</i>	mu-, mw-	mwaa-		mwaá-	-ba-, -b-
pro-3pl <i>they</i>	ba-	baa-		baá-	-ba-, -b-

While such distinctions may appear to be GRAMMATICAL (i.e., between the singular and the plural), they are actually based upon their PHONOLOGICAL makeup: the weak pronouns, consisting of vowels (**a-**, **u-**) or a weak nasal (**n-**) vs. the strong forms, consisting of stop consonants (**b-**, **t-**), a strong nasal (**m-**), or consonant clusters (**mw-**, **tw-**). Note that the second person singular pronoun irregularly becomes strong in its object forms (it acquires a **k-**, or **g-**).

The following discussion relates to some other areas of Rwanda grammar where this distinction also applies.

In the analysis of type 3 demonstratives (**unó-kíno**), Overdulve [1975:174] states that they are “formed from the thematic cluster *-no* preceded by the pronominal prefix; the prefix carries a morphotoneme which is placed on *-no* when the prefix is monophonic.”⁴ Comparison with the DEIC1-EMPH columns in Tables 3 and 4 illustrates their WEAK vs. STRONG nature.

Possessives are based upon three connectives, **-a**, **-aa**, and **-ó**, depending on the type of word that follows. [Overdulve 1975:47f] If a pronoun follows, the vowel will always be long. If a noun follows, the weak vs. strong noun distinction applies. Note that only weak nouns have two possessive forms (short vs. long vowel in Table 3); strong nouns have a single form (with long vowel, high tone on the first in Table 4).

Among many other parts of the verb system, the inflection of the preterit perfect (Tables 7-8) makes more sense if looked at from the weak-strong framework, as demonstrated by the treatment of the negative participial (in Table 9).

Table 7. Indicative Preterit Perfect Independent Positive

AGREEMENT	FORMATION	REALIZATION	TYPE
pro-1sg	n-á-ra-Δ-ye	narákoze	weak
pro-1pl	tu-á-ra-Δ-ye	twaarakóze	strong
pro-2sg	u-á-ra-Δ-ye	warákoze	weak
pro-2pl	mu-á-ra-Δ-ye	mwaarakóze	strong
n1-sg	a-á-ra-Δ-ye	yarákoze	weak
n1-pl	ba-á-ra-Δ-ye	baarakóze	strong

Source: Overdulve 1975:135ff

Table 8. Indicative Preterit Perfect Negative

AGREEMENT	FORMATION	REALIZATION	TYPE
pro-1sg	si-n-á-Δ-ye	sinakóze	weak
pro-1pl	nti-twa-á-Δ-ye	ntitwaákoze	strong
pro-2sg	nti-u-á-Δ-ye	ntiwakóze	weak
pro-2pl	nti-mu-á-Δ-ye	ntimwaákoze	strong
n1-sg	nti-a-á-Δ-ye	ntiyakóze	weak
n1-pl	nti-ba-á-Δ-ye	ntibaákoze	strong

Source: Overdulve 1975:137

⁴ Translation of the French by Steven Harrell of MRM/McNeil.

Table 9. Formation of the Negative Participial

AGREEMENT	-geenda ‘go’	-kora ‘work’	TYPE
pro-1sg	ntágeendá	ndákorá	weak
pro-2sg	utágeendá	udákorá	weak
n1-sg	atágeendá	adákorá	weak
pro-1pl	tútageendá	túdakorá	strong
pro-2pl	mútageendá	múdakorá	strong
n1-pl	bátageendá	bádakorá	strong

Sources: Overdulse 1975:156

There is an interrogative co-verb **-te** ‘how?’ which agrees with the head verb. If the prefix is WEAK, the tone falls on the stem **-té**; if the prefix is STRONG, the tone falls on the prefix, as in Table 10.

Table 10. Interrogative co-verb -te

AGREEMENT	FORMATION	ENGLISH	TYPE
pro-1sg	nté	how ... I?	weak
pro-1pl	dúte	how ... we?	strong
pro-2sg	uté	how ... you?	weak
pro-2pl	múte	how ... you (all)?	strong
n1-sg	até	how ... he / she?	weak
n1-pl	báte	how ... they?	strong
n2-sg	uté	how ... it?	weak
n2-pl	ité	how ... they?	weak
n3-sg	ríte	how ... it?	strong
n3-pl	até	how ... they?	weak
n4-sg	gíte	how ... he / she / it?	strong
n4-pl	bíte	how are things? [com- [mon / generic neuter]	strong
n5-sg	ité	how ... he / she / it?	weak
n5-pl	zíte	how ... they?	strong
n6-sg	rúte	how ... it?	strong
n6-pl	zíte	how ... they?	strong
n7-sg	gúte	how ... he / she / it?	strong
n7-pl	dúte	how ... they?	strong
n8-sg	búte	how ... it?	strong
n8-pl	até	how ... they?	weak
n9-sg	gúte	how ... it?	strong
n9-pl	até	how ... they?	weak
n10-loc	háte	how ... it (there)?	strong

Sources: Overdulse 1975:140-141,228, Hands 1952:159-160, Dubnova 1984:50

As with many languages, there are two ways of expressing ‘another,’ depending on whether one is talking about ‘another (of the same kind)’ as opposed to ‘another (of a

different kind).⁵ Although the root (**-ndi**) is homophonous, there is a difference in both word order and in inflection to express these subtle differences:

- **-ndi** ‘another (of the same kind), the other’ – precedes the noun it qualifies and takes strong vs. weak prefixes; the noun loses its initial vowel [Cf: Hands 1952:198f,263]
- **-ndi** ‘another (of a different kind)’ – follows the noun it qualifies and loses its initial vowel [Cf: Hands 1952:307]

It is only Hands (op.cit.) who draws attention to the semantic differences of this form. Other authors treat them as if they were simply positional variants. [Cf: Hurel 1959:43f, Overdulve 1975:202-203 (§69), 305 (Table II).]

Most significantly, it is only the weak forms that have an alternate short form (see forms marked with † in Table 11).

Table 11. Enumerative Pronoun ‘Another’

AGREEMENT	-ndi [same kind] preposed	-ndi [different] postposed
n1-sg	uwuúndi , † undí	wúundi
n1-pl	abaándi	báandi
n2-sg	uwuúndi , † undí	wúundi
n2-pl	iyiíndi , † indí	yíundi
n3-sg	iriíndi	ríundi
n3-pl	ayaándi , † andí	yáandi
n4-sg	ikiíndi	kíundi
n4-pl	ibiíndi	bíundi
n5-sg	iyiíndi , † indí	yíundi
n5-pl	iziíndi	zíundi
n6-sg	uruúndi	rúundi
n6-pl	iziíndi	zíundi
n7-sg	akaándi	káandi
n7-pl	utuúndi	túundi
n8-sg	ubuúndi	búundi
n8-pl	ayaándi , † andí	yáandi
n9-sg	ukuúndi	kúundi
n9-pl	ayaándi , † andí	yáandi
n10-loc	ahaándi	háandi
n11-loc	ukuúndi	kúundi

Sources: ALO:305, ERH:198f,307; GKH:43-44

⁵ As an illustration, if I offer someone a menthol cigarette, he may take it, smoke it, and ask for ‘another’ (i.e., another menthol cigarette). On the other hand, he might ask for ‘another,’ i.e., a non-menthol one. In Aklanon (Bisayan, Central Philippines) the differences are **Ea’ín** (different) vs. **ibáh** (same); in Yolngu-Matha (Aboriginal, Northeast Arnhemland, Australia) they are **wiripu** (different) vs. **bulu** (same); in Xhosa (Southern Bantu) they are **-mbi** (different) vs. **-nye** (same).

I hope that from this brief discussion and overview, teachers and students can draw their own mnemonic devices for learning or teaching a Bantu language more effectively and rationally.

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