

## The distribution and function of “noun class” morphology in Shupamem

**Background:** Shupamem is a Grassfields language of Cameroon. Shupamem nouns surface with morphology cognate to noun class prefixes reconstructed to Proto-Benue-Congo (de Wolf 1971). However, the distribution, function, and semantics of these morphemes differs from the ‘traditional’ account of noun class systems in Niger-Congo. Most notably, lexical items in Shupamem cannot be sorted discretely into noun classes due to an abundance of nouns surfacing with multiple pieces of noun class morphology simultaneously. This paper provides a synchronic account of the distribution and function of nominal morphology in Shupamem, as well as a proposed diachronic pathway that led to its current state.

**Noun class morphology in Shupamem:** Nchare (2012) describes Shupamem as having a traditional noun class system with sixteen noun class markers (eight singular, and eight plural). A number of these are null morphemes, and some are not contrastive but can be predicted based on the phonological structure of the stem. Based on fieldwork with the same speaker, we find the following morphology sensitive to noun class:

Morpheme	Attaches to	Associated Semantics	Examples
/m(ə)-/	nouns	singular, human	<i>m-in</i> ‘person’, <i>mə-<sup>m</sup>bà</i> ‘man’
/p(ə)-/	nouns	plural, human	<i>p-in</i> ‘people’, <i>pə-<sup>m</sup>bà</i> ‘men’
/N <sub>sg</sub> -/	nouns	singular, social roles	<i>“sún</i> ‘friend’ (cf. <i>sún</i> ‘friends’)
/N <sub>pl</sub> -/	nouns	plural, body parts, weapons/tools	<i>“bè</i> ‘thighs’ (cf. <i>pè</i> ‘thigh’)
/pà-/	nouns	plural, default (incl. loanwords)	<i>pà-kám</i> ‘crabs’
/HL/(+RED)	nouns	plural, ???	<i>lérwà</i> ‘books’ (cf. <i>lèrwà</i> ‘book’) <i>“dáp-<sup>n</sup>dàp</i> ‘houses’ (cf. <i>“dàp</i> ‘house’)
/LHL/(+RED)	nouns	plural, ???	<i>kǎfǎkǎ</i> ‘curses’ (cf. <i>kàfǎkǎ</i> ‘curse’) <i>sě:t-sě:t</i> ‘magic.pl’ (cf. <i>sě:t</i> ‘magic’)
/-p-/	poss. suffix	plural, human	<i>sún-p-á</i> ‘my friends’

**Agreement:** One feature of many Niger-Congo noun class systems, especially in Bantu, is that noun class prefixes surface on verbs and adjectives that agree with the noun class of a head noun. In Shupamem, neither adjectives nor verbs agree with noun class. The last remaining trace of noun class agreement is on complementizers marking a relative clause: plural nouns that combine with /-p-/ take the complementizer *puə* while other plural nouns take *fuə*. All other cases of number marking (i.e. on verbs/adjectives) are not sensitive to what morphology is selected by the head noun.

**Multiply-marked nouns:** In many Niger-Congo languages, the noun class prefix a lexical item takes in the plural is not entirely predictable from its singular prefix or vice versa. For example, Anaguta (Kainji, Nigeria) has 7 singular prefixes and 7 plural prefixes, but 12 combinations of sg./pl. prefixes selected by lexical items (de Wolf 1971:69). Shupamem, however, is unique in that many nouns surface with multiple ‘noun class’ markings simultaneously. For example, /rì:m/ ‘witch’ surfaces as *“zì:m* in the singular with the /N<sub>sg</sub>-/ denoting a social role, but *pá-rì:m* in the plural, with both /pà-/ and /HL/ marking plurality. /kpè:n/ ‘slave’ surfaces as *“kpè:n* in the singular with /N<sub>sg</sub>-/, *pà-“kpè:n* in the plural with both /N<sub>pl</sub>-/ and /p(ə)-/, and takes the possessive /-p-/ (cf. *kpè:n-p-á* ‘my slaves’). Which pieces of the above nominal morphology co-occur on lexical items is not predictable, and the distribution of tonal morphemes /HL/ and /LHL/ is not predictable from the root’s lexical tone. Of the eight morphemes listed above, our study finds up to **twenty-five distinct combinations** of morphemes combining with single lexical items (Table 1).

**Redundant or cumulative?:** One case in which multiply-marked nouns have been attested in noun class languages is when they contribute cumulatively to the semantics of the noun, for example by combining multiple plural noun class markers to convey “groups of X’s” (Langa & Taraldsen 2013 and references

therein). There is one case in Shupamem where multiple “noun class” markers contribute identifiable meaning to a root: /kpɛ:n/ ‘slave’ combines with both /N<sub>sg</sub>-/, the marker for social roles, and /N<sub>pl</sub>-/, which marks a class of nouns containing many tools/instruments. (As this root appears without prenasalization in some contexts, we do not analyze the nasal as part of the root.) However, an abundance of Shupamem nouns surface with multiple plural markers without the aforementioned “groups of X’s” reading.

**Noun class vs. grammatical gender:** In Niger-Congo languages, the prefix a root takes in the plural is not always predictable based on which prefix it takes in the singular and vice versa (e.g. Anaguta, above). However, in most existing descriptions of Niger-Congo noun class systems, each singular and plural form surfaces with one noun class prefix at a time, and thus each form can be described as the member of a discrete noun class (for example, some body parts in Italian like *braccio/braccia* ‘arm/s’ have different genders in the sg./pl., but each form can be described as part of a discrete gender category). Shupamem’s noun class membership, however, is not discrete, as single forms may be marked by multiple ‘noun class’ markers. This occurs in languages with grammatical gender systems that do not convey as much semantic information as noun class markers: for example, Swedish *tänder* ‘teeth’ (cf. *tand* ‘tooth’) surfaces with two pluralization strategies that are used independently of each other on other roots (cf. *man/män* ‘man/men’ for umlaut and *minut/minuter* ‘minute/s’ for *-er*). Since both umlaut and the *-er* suffix contribute only plurality (as opposed to plural noun class markers, which also contain information on animacy, shape etc.), they can be used simultaneously without any conflict in the information they convey. We argue that the availability of multiply-marked nouns in Shupamem stems from the loss of semantic information on many of the plural morphemes: while plurals with /p(ə)-/ and /N<sub>pl</sub>-/ denote nouns that share identifiable traits, /pà-/ , /HL/ , and /LHL/ do not. Thus, like the umlaut/*-er* in Swedish, multiple ‘noun class’ markers are redundant and do not contribute conflicting information to Shupamem nouns. Other factors that may have facilitated the shift to Shupamem’s current non-discrete noun class system include the loss of noun class agreement on adjectives/verbs and the development of tonal noun class markers that can be produced simultaneously with the phonological content of other affixes and the stem.

**Selected references:** Langa, D. and T. Taraldsen. (2013). “Secondary nominal prefixes in Bantu”. *Afranaph Workshop II.*; Nchare, A.L. (2012). *The grammar of Shupamem*. Diss. Ph.D., NYU.; de Wolf, P. (1971). *The Noun Class System of Proto-Benue-Congo*. Mouton.

m(ə)-	p(ə)-	N <sub>sg</sub> -	N <sub>pl</sub> -	pà-	HL	LHL	-RED	P <sub>poss</sub>	Example
+	+	?	?	-	+	-	0	-	<sup>(gm)</sup> gbíá ‘woman’
?	?	?	?	-	+	-	0	0	<sup>(u)</sup> góp ‘chicken’
+	+	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	ón ‘child’
?	?	-	-	-	+	-	0	0	sì ‘bird’
-	+	+	+	-	-	-	0	+	kpɛ:n ‘slave’
-	-	+	-	+	+	-	0	-	rám ‘witch’
-	-	+	-	+	-	-	0	+	yà:n ‘guest’
-	-	+	-	-	-	-	-	+	sún ‘friend’
-	-	+	-	-	+	-	0	+	tèsí ‘chief’
-	-	+	-	-	-	+	-	?	yà: ‘someone’
-	-	?	?	+	-	-	0	0	<sup>(n)</sup> dú: ‘horn’
-	-	?	?	-	+	-	+	0	<sup>(n)</sup> tám ‘message’
-	-	?	?	-	+	-	0	0	<sup>(u)</sup> gì <sup>u</sup> gà ‘grass’
-	-	?	?	-	-	+	+	0	<sup>(u)</sup> fyt ‘feather’
-	-	?	?	-	-	+	0	0	<sup>(u)</sup> fù <sup>u</sup> fù ‘lung’
-	-	?	?	-	-	-	-	0	<sup>(gm)</sup> gbɛ:n ‘stick’
-	-	-	+	-	+	-	0	0	pàpɔ ‘wing’
-	-	-	+	-	-	-	-	0	pè ‘thigh’
-	-	-	-	+	+	-	0	0	tà: ‘insect’
-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	0	kám ‘crab’

Table 1: Attested combinations of nominal morphology in Shupamem. ‘?’ marks values in question or which cannot be evaluated; ‘0’ marks morphology unavailable due to the phonological structure of the stem.