

Three paths of diffusion of diminutive marking in Southern Bantu

Bantu languages are among the best described African language group, and many examples of morphosyntactic microvariation have been discussed in the literature (Van de Velde et al. 2019, Bloom Ström et al. to appear). The present paper focusses on one aspect of this microvariation, namely diminutive marking. The paper shows that variation in diminutive marking in Southern Bantu languages can best be explained by developing sociolinguistic hypotheses about specific possible roles innovation and retention of diminutive marking could have played in the history of the relevant languages. The examples show how the combination of structural and sociolinguistic ‘reconstruction’ can lead to better insights about language change.

Many Southern Bantu languages have developed a new nominal diminutive suffix *-ana*, replacing the earlier diminutive morphology which was based on noun class prefixes (e.g. class prefix 12 **ka-* for singular diminutives, and class 13 **tu-* for plurals) (Doke 1954, Gibson et al. 2017). The innovative suffix *-ana* is based on a lexical root **mu-ana* ‘child’, reflecting a common grammaticalization path, and may also have been further influenced by language contact with Khoisan languages (Engelbrecht 1925, Poulos 1986, Güldemann 1999). However, the innovative process has proceeded in different ways and stages across different Southern Bantu languages.

Based on comparative evidence from three Southern Bantu languages, the present paper proposes that the diffusion of the innovative suffix may have been motivated by specific sociolinguistic functions associated with the suffix, and the wider context in which the innovation took place.

In particular, we will propose the following ‘sociolinguistic reconstructions’ to explain the diffusion of the suffix in three Southern Bantu languages: 1) in Zulu (1) the innovative suffix fully replaced older forms of diminutive marking due to it becoming associated with a prestige variety of the language and strong conforming pressures in the language at the time the suffix spread, notably the formation of the Zulu nation in the 19th century; 2) in languages like Venda (2), without these pressures, both new and old forms remain in variation today (with possible associated differences in specific meaning); and 3) in Herero (3), the innovative suffix failed to diffuse and the older noun-class based prefix forms have (again) become the prevalent diminutive strategy – we propose that this is due to a wider process of reconstructing of older forms of the language as part of a social and cultural reconstruction process taking place following the traumatic experience of the community under colonial rule and the defeat of the German colonisers in 1915.

The proposed analysis assumes that morphosyntactic features can adopt socio-pragmatic functions and that these functions can play a role in the diffusion of the features in languages change – leading to acceleration of diffusion in the case of Zulu, and suppression of diffusion in the case of Herero, reflecting the very different sociolinguistic circumstances in which the innovation was introduced. This in turn shows the close interaction of morphosyntactic variation, sociolinguistic dynamics, and language change.

Examples

- (1) Zulu (Doke 1930: 75)
imbuzi 'goat' > imbuz-ana 'small goat'
- (2) Venda (Poulos 1986: 289)
thava 'mountain' > thav-ana 'small mountain' '
> ku-thava 'small mountain'
> ku-thav-ana 'very small mountain'
- (3) a. Herero (Kavari and Marten 2009: 169-171)
Oru-vyo 'knife' > oka-ru-vyo 'small knife'
> ou-tu-vyo 'small knives'
- b. earlier Herero (Brincker 1886: 161)
ombua 'dog' > omb-ona 'small dog'
ondera 'bird' > oka-zer-ona 'small bird'

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