

What's with the associative marker *-a* in Bantu?

1. Introduction. A widely held view in Bantu linguistics is that the associative marker *-a* (AM) is a genitive Case assigner. As seen in (1a) from KiLega, the head noun precedes and triggers agreement on AM; the possessor DP follows. In no instance can *-a* show agreement with the possessor (1b). Carstens's (2001) account of similar facts in Swahili has the following properties: (i) *-a* is analogous to *v*, viz., *n*; (ii) in merging with the head NP, *n* is in a position to probe for matching features, assuming valued features of the head NP; (iii) the possessor, agent or theme argument of N is generated in Spec*n*P; (iv) an optional EPP-feature of *n* causes the head NP to raise to outer Spec*n*P; (v) *n*P is the complement of a null functional head F; *n* adjoins to F. The latter has abstract uninterpretable ϕ -features, but assigns no Case; its EPP-feature drives the head NP to raise to SpecFP. For Carstens, the presence of the head NP in Spec*n*P has the consequence that the possessor DP is not in an *Agree* relation with the ϕ -features of F. Therefore, it cannot value them, thereafter deriving the fact that the features of the possessor DP cannot show up on *-a*, either instead of or in addition to those valued by the head noun. As for the Case of the possessor DP, Carstens assumes that it is valued by Num. On this analysis, the derivation for (1a) would be as in (1c).

2. Further data. However, there are contexts where it is inconceivable to correlate the presence of *-a* with genitive Case, as traditionally assumed. One problem with Carstens's proposal has to do with the nature of *-a* together with the treatment of its agreement properties in such contexts. In (2a), a relative clause, *-a* is a non-finite C whose Spec is filled with a null *wh*-operator, which triggers agreement in class and gender features on *-a* (Kinyalolo 1991). There being no constraint on what constituent may relativize, *-a* must be in a position to "long-distance probe" for matching features from the *wh*-operator, unlike the case in Carstens (2001). Likewise for the EPP-feature that drives the dislocation of the constituent that triggers agreement. Other constituents that occur in the position immediately to the left of *-a* include modifiers like a *numeral* (3b), suggesting that in (3a), the *numeral* is in apposition on a par with the name *Binzali* (3c). The fronting of the latter entails recursion of *-a* (3d). As seen from (4a) vs (4b), the nominal *kikóngóló* 'a stupid person' cannot modify a DP attributively, suggesting that (4b) involves secondary predication. The occurrence of *kikóngóló* to the left of *-a* then provides a structure consistent with the attributive interpretation (4c). The sequence *noun adjective* with *adjective* modifying *noun* attributively (5a) has a corresponding [*adjective -a noun*] order (5b). It is clear that *adjective* behaves like a constituent in that it moves by itself leaving *noun* behind. It also triggers agreement on *-a*, raising the questions of how to treat the agreement facts and sequence *noun adjective* (cf. 3a). In (5c-d), the post-AM nominal qualifies the constituent that precedes. (6a-b) involve quantification, or evaluation, of the noun following *-a* by the speaker. This time, the constituent triggering agreement on AM must be covert. (6c) is a case of modification of *brave man* by *old person* (cf. 4c). Etc. The issues therefore are (i) whether a unified account of these constructions is desirable, and if so, how assignment of genitive Case is to be dealt with; (ii) how one would derive the differences between them.

3. Proposal. Because only the constituent preceding it can trigger agreement in class/gender on *-a*, the optimal hypothesis is for these cases to all share the same superordinate structure. I therefore propose that, besides heading a non-finite CP in a relative clause, *-a* heads a CP in the extended projection of NP; that *-a* is not a genitive Case assigner, and that it has a strong N-feature. If agreement is parasitic on the Spec-head configuration, nothing needs to be said about *Agree*. The differences between the constructions in which *-a* occurs follow from (at least) a three-way distinction of the complement of C: (i) in a relative clause, C merges with IP; (ii) in possessive constructions, it merges with a functional category (FP) in whose Spec the possessor DP is checked for genitive Case (unlike in Carstens where it is deleted by Num), while the head noun raises into SpecCP; (iii) in instances of modification by a nominal: it merges with a small clause which contains a subject DP and a predicate (cf. Kayne 1994, den Dikken 1998, Hulk & Tellier 2000). In one instance, the predicate obligatorily raises into SpecCP, leaving the subject DP behind; in another, the subject DP does. What raises depends on the need to avoid the interpretation of the noun following AM as a possessor. I claim that *a*-recursion is an instance of merge (or movement) of modifiers into SpecCP. This claim makes a clear prediction about multiple arguments of a head noun in possessive constructions: they are not possible.

- (1) a. mpéné z - á Musémé
10goat 10agr-a Museme
'Museme's goats'
- b. * mpéné w - á Musémé
10goat 1agr-a Museme
'Museme's goats'
- c. [FP [DP mpéné]_k [F' [z_á-F] [n_P t_k [n' Musémé [n' t_j t_k]]]]]
- (2) a. magomá m-á ku-bík-a *(mu luzi)
6plantain 6agr-a 15-put-fv 18 11basket
'(the) plantains to put in the basket...'
- b. [CP Op_j [C' agr_j-á [TP PRO ku-V DP t_j mu luzi]]]
- (3) a. mpéné makúmbá má-sátu
10goat 6ten 6agr-three
'thirty goats'
- b. makúmbá má-sátu m-á mpéné
6ten 6agr-three 6agr-a 10goat
'thirty goats'
- c. mubítu w-a Musémé Binzali
1sibling of op. sex 1agr-a M B
'Museme's sister Binzali'
- d. Binzali by-á mubítu w-a M
B agr-a 1sibling of op. sex 1agr-a M
'Museme's sister Binzali'
- (4) bá-ku-m-mán-in-a mw_{na} kikóngóló
2agr-prog-ISG-call-appl-fv 1child 7stupid person
- a. * 'They are calling a stupid child on my behalf / for me'
- b. 'They are calling my child stupid'
- c. bá-ku-m-mán-in-a kikóngóló ky-á mw_{na}
2agr-prog-ISG-call-appl-fv 7stupid person 7agr-a 1child
'They are calling a stupid child on my behalf / for me'
- (5) a. mw_{na} mu-sosú
1child 1agr-lazy
'(a) lazy child'
- b. mu-sosú w-á mw_{na}
1agr-lazy 1agr-a 1child
'(a) lazy child'
- c. mw_{na} w-a mulúme
1child 1agr-a 1male
'boy' / 'young man'
- d. m_{zi} m-á mpégo
6water 6agr-a 9cold
'cold water'
- (6) a. nne Museme ni (-li) w-a mulúme
ISG M 1sg(-be) 1agr-a 1male
'I Museme am a brave man'
- b. tw-á maku
13agr-a 6beer
'some small amount of beer'
- c. mukúngú w-á w-a mulúme
1old person 1agr-a 1agr-a 1male
'an old brave man'

Selected references

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