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Noun classes, variation, and creativity in youth language practices in Zimbabwe and Tanzania

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Abstract: While classical accounts of Bantu linguistics often depict noun classes as an inherent feature of nouns, more recent studies show there is greater variation in the use of noun classes, especially in terms of their discursive and pragmatic context. Youth language practices, often characterized by creativity and conscious changes, are of particular interest in this regard. This paper explores whether Bantu youth language practices exhibit conscious variation in their noun class systems and agreement. I discuss data from Bantu-based youth language practices in Southern and Eastern Africa, especially Lugha ya mtaani (Tanzania) and S'ncamtho (Zimbabwe), looking at noun classes and agreement. The paper features a short discussion of variation in noun class usage in Bantu languages in general, including insights into relevant aspects such as information structure, the use of loan words, noun classes in multilingual or translanguaging situations, and semantics. The latter is particularly important, as speakers can make conscious use of noun classes as part of contextualized meaning making processes that reflect semantic nuances and stylistic choices. The objective of this contribution is to highlight the role of semantics and conscious meaning making in the choice of grammatical devices and the manifestations of microvariation in youth language practices.

Keywords: noun classes; semantics; morphosyntactic variation; meaning making; Bantu languages

1 Introduction: microvariation, meaning making, and youth language practices

Despite the fact that microvariation is quite a new research perspective, there are different conceptions of this notion, featuring different input from a range of subdisciplines of linguistics, including generative grammar, dialectology, classical variationist sociolinguistics, and typology. For example, scholars have investigated syntactic microvariation, or "microcomparative syntax", by combining generative theory with dialectology and by looking at variational linguistic data (Brandner 2012: 113). Generally, microvariation deals with the study of morphosyntactic variation between closely related languages or varieties. Hereby,

- the close relation between the varieties under study could be geographical or genetic
- the varieties under study are usually nonstandardized, lacking a normative grammar with formally codified grammatical rules
- the varieties under study often do not have an established and/or uniform writing tradition (see Brandner 2012: 117)

It should be stressed that the aim of this approach, at least in the way it is employed here, is not to draw clear boundaries between variations or varieties but rather to analyze the microvariational phenomena observed and to investigate their variational behavior in their respective contexts (Brandner 2012: 118). In this regard, it is important to note that while the study of (micro)variation often shows differences, it can also reflect

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commonalities and patterns that connect linguistic practices in larger areas. In my own research, as well as in the larger project it is embedded in (see the other contributions in this special issue), which looks at microvariation and youth language practices in Bantu-speaking areas, we can observe that connections are established through microvariation. For example, the creative patterns of usage of diminutives and augmentatives show similarities across the larger areas under study. In order to express semantic nuances, noun class prefixes and in some cases so-called secondary noun prefixes are employed by speakers of various languages, including for instance isiNdebele (Dube et al. 2014) and Kiswahili (of Lubumbashi; see Mulumbwa Mutambwa 2009), in similar manners, as we shall see below.

Moreover, an approach which focuses on the creative potential of microvariation can also help to overcome prejudices about the morphosyntax of nonstandard varieties. For example, in fields such as dialectology or creole studies, contributions on attitudes towards nonstandard varieties often reveal that those varieties are sometimes regarded as being less sophisticated or complex than the standard varieties (see Beckford Wassink 1999; Brandner 2012). Therefore, the deconstruction of prejudices about linguistic variation is another benefit of the synergies between microvariation and youth language research.

Despite the fact that microvariation is quite a new research approach, there is a range of works on Bantu languages that provide a focus on microvariation and that study specific morphosyntactic features in a micro-comparative perspective (e.g. Gibson et al. 2020a, 2020b; Lee et al. 2021; Shinagawa and Abe 2019). With regard to African youth language practices, a study of morphosyntactic variation is a new undertaking that has not yet received much attention, especially in a comparative perspective (but see Nassenstein and Bose 2020).

While the focus of many microvariational studies has been on syntax and morphosyntax in their grammatical context, it is my aim in this contribution to add a semantic perspective to this approach in order to discuss the role of conscious meaning making in the use of morphosyntactic variation in youth language practices. My objective is to take a step towards developing an approach to morphosyntactic variation that includes the role of conscious meaning making and stylistic choices in the use of noun classes in order to express stylistic and semantic nuances.[1] When reading through some of the literature on microvariation I realized that studies on morphosyntactic variation often do not include a discussion of the speakers' agency or consciousness in the development of morphosyntactic variation or in the use of variants. Such approaches are also reflected in the wider field of linguistic change. For example, theories of language change, such as the "invisible hand" theory of Rudi Keller (1994), hold that language change is usually "unintentional". In general, it can be observed that, in studies of the emergence of variation and change, factors such as contact phenomena or linguistic areas in which shared features develop and spread are more likely to be discussed than the intentions of speakers in their choices of resources from the linguistic and morphosyntactic repertoires available to them.[2]

On the other hand, research on youth language practices, including African youth languages, has been concerned with conscious language manipulation and intentional linguistic change. In many studies, conscious linguistic – including morphosyntactic – choices are regarded as being at the heart of young*[3] speakers' creative expressions. Therefore, bringing youth language research and microvariation together needs to involve more than the application of a microvariational approach to the language practices of young* speakers: it is crucial to

1 Of course, a perspective that includes the conscious choices of speakers considers not merely semantic motivations but also pragmatic aspects and choices. It is a general observation that pragmatic choices result in semantic modifications and it is often not easy to draw a clear line between these two subfields of linguistics. In this particular context, the picture is even more complex, as the microvariational phenomena under discussion here connect the fields of morphosyntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

2 In sociolinguistic theories of linguistic change, William Labov (e.g. 1994) has argued for a distinction between "changes from below" and "changes from above", where the latter refers to linguistic changes of which the speakers are aware and which they employ on purpose. However, in Labov's findings and definitions, (conscious) changes from above are always initiated by the dominant social class. This is not the case in the youth language practices discussed in this contribution. It would probably be interesting to evaluate and compare the role of awareness in processes of linguistic change in different contexts, and in youth language in particular.

3 The term "young" is marked with an asterisk in this contribution to highlight the fact that "young", especially in the context of (African) youth languages, is a problematic category. Since youth, and hence being young, is seemingly a given characteristic of the speakers of so-called youth languages, it seems contradictory but necessary to look critically at this term: looking at the actual speakers of (African) youth language practices, youth seems to be hard to define as a category, particularly (but not only) in light of the aspect of aging (e.g. Nassenstein et al. 2018).

develop new perspectives for this joint approach which reconcile the two positions associated with these research strands. I want to argue that taking conscious stylistic choices and meaning making into account can build a bridge that will help us to gain a better understanding of processes of linguistic change and variation in youth language practices and beyond. This paper will therefore explore the question of whether we can account for some phenomena of morphosyntactic variation in youth language practices, namely the use of noun classes and agreement, in terms of style and semantics as conscious linguistic acts. The data on Tanzanian and Zimbabwean youth language practices presented in this paper have been collected and analyzed through qualitative and collaborative research methods in cooperation with the local language experts Keith Moyo (Zimbabwe) and Faris Ramadhani Kirama (Tanzania). In particular, participant observation in relevant locations, including youth culture hotspots such as chill spots, bars, concerts, and so on, and recording of group conversations have been crucial in gaining insights into the youth language practices under study.

1.1 Areas and linguistic practices under study

In this study, I will compare and discuss language data and the microvariational practices of young* speakers of Bantu languages of Eastern and Southern Africa. While some examples will be drawn from various practices across the larger areas, there are two particular youth language practices that I focus on, created and spoken in Tanzania (Lugha ya mtaani) and in Zimbabwe (S'ncamtho/slang).

Lugha ya mtaani (also Lugha ya mitaani) is a language practice of young* speakers of Kiswahili in Tanzania, especially in urban areas such as Dar es Salaam and Arusha, among other urban centers. Reuster-Jahn and Kießling (2022: 167) state that Lugha ya mitaani "is a cover term for a spectrum of informal urban speaking practices based on Swahili" and that "it has no discrete boundaries but must be seen as being on a continuum between style and sociolect". The fluidity of Lugha ya mtaani described here is also evident in speakers' morphosyntactic choices with regard to noun classes and agreement, as will be analyzed and discussed in this paper. In the greater East African context, Lugha ya mtaani is also embedded in larger language ecologies which also include other youth language practices, most prominently the Kenyan variety Sheng (see e.g. Githiora 2018).

In Zimbabwe, there is also diversity with regard to youth language practices: in the capital Harare (among other urban and rural areas), we find dynamic and creative language practices of young* speakers based on the main lingua franca chiShona (see Hollington and Makwabarara 2015). In Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city and the capital of Matabeleland, youth language practices draw mostly on isiNdebele, with significant connections to and influences from isiZulu and South African youth and popular culture in general. While the majority of young* speakers in Zimbabwe (Mashonaland and Matabeleland) refer to their creative language practices as "slang", isiNdebele-based youth language is sometimes also referred to as S'ncamtho (Ndlovu 2017). As we shall see in the following, youth language practices in Zimbabwe, as well as in Tanzania, exhibit interesting and creative usage of noun class prefixes and agreement patterns, which will be discussed in relation to their semantic and pragmatic context.

2 Some remarks on variation in noun class use and agreement in Bantu (youth) languages

Noun classes are one of the major shared features of Bantu languages with regard to morphosyntax. They are marked with a prefix on the noun itself, as well as on other elements in the noun phrase and the clause; hence they constitute an important morphosyntactic category which impacts agreement (Katamba 2003; van der Wal 2015). While many nouns are typically assigned to a specific noun class, which makes noun class assignment seem an inherent feature of the noun (see the critical discussion in Morrison 2018), there is also variation with regard to the choice of noun class for semantic purposes (derivation), such as in the expression of diminutive or augmentative, as seen in (1) (see also Guérois and Mtenje-Mkochi 2022). Beyond the mere "derivational" process

depicted in (1), variation in noun class usage can be more complex, depending not only on semantic and pragmatic aspects but also on the communicative and situational context involved.[4]

Kiswahili

(1)	*n-dege*	9-bird	'bird'	*ki-dege*	7-bird	'small bird, birdie'
	ny-umba	9-house	'house'	*j-umba*	5-house	'big house, large building'

Moreover, there are cases where the noun class prefix on the noun is different from the noun class used in the agreement pattern, as exemplified in the proverb in (2), which shows a well-known case of semantic agreement. Here, the noun *vifaru* 'rhinoceroses' takes a class 8 prefix but the agreement markers are from class 2, which is the class for human beings and animals (semantic agreement).

Kiswahili

(2)	***Vi**-faru*	***wa**-wili*	***wa**-ki-pig-an-a*	*nyasi*	*hu-um-i-a*
	8-rhino	2-two	2-COND-beat-RECP-FV	9.grass	HAB-hurt-APPL-FV

'When two rhinos fight, it is the grass that suffers'

Other strategies that involve the use of noun classes can be observed in multilingual contexts and in translanguaging practices. Here, youth languages prominently feature creative means of combining grammatical and lexical resources from large multilingual repertoires. One very common strategy in this respect is the use of noun class prefixes with "borrowed" lexemes,[5] in particular with nouns from colonial European languages. This has been extensively described in African youth language research for the use of English nouns (see Kießling and Mous 2004, who refer to this practice as "morphological hybridization").

chiShona

(3)	*Ndi-ri*	*ku-check-a*	***ma**-level-**s***
	1SG-be.PRES	INF-check-FV	6-level-PL

'I'm checking what's going on'
(Hollington and Makwabarara 2015: 265)

Moreover, in example (3), we can observe double plural marking on the English noun 'level', where the plural noun class prefix *ma-* is used together with the English plural suffix *-s*. In Bantu (youth) language practices, the class prefix *ma-* (class 6) is generally very productive, as can also be seen in example (4) from Sheng.

Sheng

(4)	*Pungu-z-a*	***ma**-hewa*	***ma**-karau*	*wa-ko*	*kwa*	*horizon*
	reduce-CAUS-FV	6-air	6-cops	2-LOC	at	horizon

'Reduce your speed, the cops are near'[6]

In example (4) the plural noun class prefix *ma-* (class 6) is used with the nouns *hewa* (which is an Arabic loanword and as such usually used without a noun class prefix) and *karau* (which is a typical and common Sheng word for 'cops').

4 Examples follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Abbreviations used: 1/2/3/4/5/6/7/8/9/17 number of noun class; 1SG/2SG/3SG 1st person singular, 2nd person singular, 3rd person singular; APPL applicative; AUX auxiliary; CAUS causative; COND conditional; CONJ conjunction; CONN connective; CONT continuous; COP copula; DEM demonstrative; DIM diminutive; DIST distal; EXCL exclusive; FUT future; FV final vowel; HAB habitual; IMMEDIATE PAST immediate past; INF infinitive; LOC locative; NEG negative; OM object marker; PASS passive; PAST past; PERF perfect; PL plural; POSS possessive; PRES present; PROX proximate; RECP reciprocal; REF reference; REL relative; SG singular; SM subject marker; SUBJ subjunctive.

5 "Borrowing" is a contested term in the context of translanguaging and multilingual practices, as one could argue that the diverse linguistic resources employed by speakers all belong to the person's personal linguistic repertoire and are therefore not "borrowed".

6 This example is taken from the lyrics of Necessary Noise's song "Kenyan girl Kenyan boy".

With regard to Tanzanian youth language practices it can be observed that there is variation in terms of noun class usage in the very name of the linguistic variety: in linguistic publications, it is often referred to as *Lugha ya mitaani* ('language of the hoods/neighborhoods/town quarters'; see Reuster-Jahn and Kießling 2006, 2022). Here, *mitaani* is the plural form 'town quarters', with the plural noun class prefix *mi-* (class 4).[7] However, many speakers also frequently use the singular form *Lugha ya mtaani* ('language of the neighborhood'), where the stem *-taa* is combined with the noun class prefix *m-* (class 3) and the locative suffix *-ni*. Apart from the expression *Lugha ya m(i)taani*, there is also the form *kitaa*, in which the stem *-taa* is combined with the noun class prefix *ki-* (class 7). This noun class is usually used for deriving language names such as *Kiswahili, Kiingereza* ('English'), and *Kifaranza* ('French'). Here, the youth language practice becomes a language (in terms of its linguistic naming) on a par with other recognized and labeled languages, with the naming strategy of using the class 7 prefix *ki-* following the conventions of Kiswahili.[8] The noun class prefix *ki-* (class 7) also derives diminutives, which sometimes, and maybe even more in youth language practices, express an affectionate relation or closeness (e.g. *kipenzi* 'darling, favorite'). Since the prefixes of classes 7 and 8 can also derive adverbs, this noun class features prominently in morphosyntactic variation, that is, it is used for various semantic and pragmatic purposes.

Generally, in Bantu languages, there is also variety with regard to the morphosyntactic marking of noun class agreement; for example, while subject marking is obligatory, object marking may be optional (van der Wal 2015: 2), and there are different other forms of variation in agreement patterns. In Kiswahili, the choice of whether or not to use the object marker can be a conscious meaning making practice. Compare examples (5) and (6):

	Kiswahili			
(5)	*M-toto*	*a-na-**vi**-som-a*	*vi-tabu*	*vi-tatu*
	1-child	SM1-PRES-OM8-read-FV	8-book	8-three
	'The child is reading three books'			

	Kiswahili			
(6)	*M-toto*	*a-na-som-a*	*vi-tabu*	*vi-tatu*
	1-child	SM1-PRES-read-FV	8-book	8-three
	'The child is reading three books'			

The use of the object marker *vi-* in (5) can indicate that the books are emphasized for their significance or already known to the participants of the communicative situation (the particular nuance of meaning will be determined by the actual linguistic context of the utterance). Furthermore, in this regard, van der Wal (2015) discusses the importance of information structure for morphosyntactic analyses in Bantu languages and names subject and object marking as being among the morphosyntactic domains that are affected and influenced by information structure.

3 Noun class usage as conscious semantic-stylistic choice in youth language practices

As Morrison (2018) argues, more attention needs to be paid to functions and variations of the noun class system and its usage in discourse contexts. This is also based on the widely accepted observation that the noun classes of Bantu languages are (at least partially) semantically motivated (Morrison 2018; see also Katamba 2003). Morrison (2018: 54) states that the "choice of noun class is a complex combination of factors, including (but likely not limited to) denotative and connotative semantics, discourse factors such as reference tracking and participant

7 It is true that several previous publications on Tanzanian youth language tend to use the plural form *mitaani*, which also highlights the diversity and multiplicity of the youth language practices. However, most of the speakers I interviewed have used the singular form.
8 It would be interesting to look at this variation in more detail and to get more information on usage and shades of meaning in various contexts.

disambiguation, and potentially other issues such as foregrounding and backgrounding of participants". The author bases her analysis on Contini-Morava's (1997, 2002) cognitive semantic approach to noun classes, according to which the "assignment of nouns to a particular class involves processes of semantic extension such as metaphor and metonymy". Morrison shows that in Bena, a Bantu language spoken in southern Tanzania, the choice of noun class is a complex matter and can be informed by reference tracking and stance taking by analyzing narratives. This also challenges the common notion that nouns have an inherent class (Morrison 2018: 54). Morrison uses the Frog Story, famous among linguists, to take a closer look at how narrators make use of noun class prefixes and agreement. She shows that one and the same noun stem can be used in different classes within a narrative, even when referring to the same referent, for example when highlighting or foregrounding specific semantic aspects of the noun itself or of the context. Discourse context, stance taking, and connotative semantics influence the shifting use of noun class prefixes and their agreement.[9]

Against the background of this perspective, youth language practices in Bantu-speaking areas also exhibit variation in noun class usage, which we shall analyze with respect to semantic and stylistic aspects. Example (7) provides an excerpt from a conversation between two young* men in Bulawayo, in which speaker A tells speaker B a story that had happened to person C, who was also present in the communicative situation. In this story, person C gets conned (*kurayitshwa* in isiNdebele slang) when buying a SIM card from a street vendor in the streets of Harare and registering the card to open an Ecocash account.

isiNdebele (slang)

(7)

I-ecocash	*u-memba*	*w-a-hle*	*w-a-thi*	*aaah*	**ecocash**
9-Ecocash	1-member	1-PAST-quickly	1-PAST-say	aaah	Ecocash

what	*ku-ya-be*	*ku-le-mali*	*e-zwakala-yo,*	*ngi-nika*
what	17-FUT-be.SUBJ	17-DEM-money	9.REL-be.heard-9REF	OM.1SG-give

ama-phepha	*wa-ya*	*what?*	*Ngi-za-ku-soth-el-a*	*what*
6-paper	1-go.PST	what?	1SG-FUT-OM.2SG-sort-APPL-FV	what

ukuthi	***i-ecocash***	*i-ngen-e*	*what*	*e-foni-ni*	*yakho*
that	9-Ecocash	9-enter-SUBJ	what	LOC-phone-LOC	9.POSS.2SG

'When he heard Ecocash the guy quickly thought Ecocash, there is a lot of money coming in, give me your papers. He went, I will sort it, so that the Ecocash money comes into your account.'

In example (7), the choice of the noun class prefix *i-* with the (phonologically) English noun and company name *Ecocash* reflects variation which may be a result of translanguaging practices, as the excerpt also shows the frequent use of English words.[10] The question is whether the absence or presence of the noun class prefix *i-* in these instances can indicate whether the speaker frames the name Ecocash as isiNdebele or English in the context of this narrative excerpt. What variation also illustrates in this context is the messiness of spoken dialogue and natural linguistic practices: the narrator uses different forms, linguistic resources, and also narrative perspective as he switches between third person and first person while enacting the characters of the story he recounts. Another common discursive practice is the frequent insertion of *what*, which invites the conversation partner(s) to actively take part in the conversation by completing the phrase (by replacing *what*) or by expressing affirmation. While the frequent *what* is often not replied to, it is a means to engage the listeners in the conversation and trigger their attention. In this complex utterance we can observe the use of many and diverse communicative resources that constitute meaning through translanguaging, provide context, express voices and perspectives,

9 Morrison (2018) presents extensive discursively analyzed examples of the noun class usage in a narrative. The interested reader is referred to the data in her article.

10 It may be worth mentioning that, especially in fast speech, the noun class prefix *i-* cannot easily be distinguished from the very similar sounding first vowel of the noun (*ecocash*). However, the two sounds constitute two phonemes and are (on the phonetic level) separated by a glottal stop.

engage the listeners, mark style and identity, and so on. The use of noun classes here can be interpreted as being at the intersection of morphosyntax and sociopragmatics.[11]

In example (8), we can see that the speaker assigns the noun *piano* to two different noun classes. The term *piano* derives from an English word which has been semantically manipulated to denote a very popular music genre that originates from South Africa but is now very popular in Zimbabwe and many other countries around the world.

isiNdebele (slang)
(8) *Izolo* ***i-piano*** *be-li-gqul-a* *e-bhawa*
Yesterday 5-piano PAST-5-smash-FV LOC-bar
Se-si-hlany-is-w-a *yi-ku-lalel-a* ***ama-piano***
EXCL-1PL-go.crazy-CAUS-PASS-FV COP-15-listen-FV 6-piano
'Yesterday Amapiano music was playing in the bar. We are going crazy due to listening to Amapiano.'

The music genre is usually called *Amapiano*, which is a plural noun denoting the current genre of Afro house music. In this example the noun is also used in the singular form with the class 5 noun class prefix. This is a common variation in isiNdebele and isiZulu, despite the fact that, globally, the music genre has been referred to with the class 6 prefix ever since Amapiano became an internationally popular music genre several years ago.

Apart from this basic variation, there are noun classes that feature prominently as markers of connotative meaning. IsiNdebele has a set of secondary noun prefixes which, according to Dube et al. (2014), "are known as commentary prefixes mainly because they carry overtones of sarcasm, criticism and caricature among other elements, through loading an implied meaning onto a noun construction". These so-called secondary noun classes, or commentary noun classes, are not uncommon in Bantu languages, and usually draw on diminutive and augmentative morphology, as well as appreciative, depreciative, and abstractive (for examples from DR Congo, see Mulumbwa Mutambwa 2009). Examples (9) and (10) illustrate how secondary/commentary noun classes, in particular the diminutive, are used in the speech of young* speakers in Bulawayo.

isiNdebele (slang)
(9) *olu-topi* *loluyana* *olu-de*
11.DIM-old.man 11.DEM.DIST 11.REL-tall
'that (insignificant) tall old man'

The semantic nuances are of particular interest in example (9), as they are different from more common semantic overtones expressed by diminutives. As I have mentioned above for the case of class 7/8 in Kiswahili, it is used as a diminutive, but it also has some connotations of closeness and affection (but see Mulumbwa Mutambwa 2009). This is a semantic overtone that is usually associated with the diminutive in Bantu, as pointed out by Guérois and Mtenje-Mkochi (2022), who show that the appreciative is commonly expressed with diminutive noun classes in several Bantu languages. In isiNdebele, as shown in (9), we can observe the opposite with the diminutive secondary/commentary Ndebele noun class prefix of class 11. Here, the diminutive noun class prefix expresses negative connotations, where "smallness" is associated with "insignificance". In this regard, diminutive (and augmentative) morphological devices seem to be among the grammatical features that show significant micro-variation not only in terms of their morphological variation (e.g. which noun class prefixes are employed to express diminutive/augmentative) but also with respect to the semantic nuances they encode. The secondary/commentary noun classes with derogative semantic nuances are also used in isiNdebele. However, they are very frequent in youth language practices and in example (9) they are particularly "disrespectful"; in Zimbabwean culture, elders are usually treated with respect, which is also evident in language use (respectful terms of address, honorific plural forms, etc.).

11 This complex interplay of morphosyntax and pragmatic and semantic factors as such is, of course, not specific to youth language. However, this paper focuses on discussing such phenomena in youth language practices and thus contributes to our general understanding of these kinds of variation in dynamic language practices.

In example (10) we can observe another semantic context for the use of a diminutive noun class, this time employing the secondary noun class prefix of class 15 in (10b).

(10) IsiNdebele (slang)

a.

Aaah	*ku-dak-iwe*	*khiwa*	*s-enz-a*	*njani?*
aaah	17-get.drunk-PASS	White person	3PL-do-FV	what

'Ah, it's boring, boss, what can we do?'

b.

Aaah	*no*	*be-ngi-gay-a*	*ukuthi*	*si-fik-e*	*laphana*
aaah	no	PAST.CONT-1SG-grind-FV	that	1PL-arrive-SUBJ	there

si-bamb-e	*oku-y-im-bodlela*	*si-thi*	*1–2*
1PL-grab-SUBJ	DIM.15-COP-9-bottle	1PL-say	1–2

'Aaah no, I've been thinking that we go there and grab a small bottle (beer), let's say 1–2'

In this excerpt from a phone conversation between two young* speakers of isiNdebele, the two conversation partners discuss their plans for the evening. Their utterances are full of metaphors and other semantic manipulations such as the word *kudakiwe* 'it is boring', which literally means 'it is drunk'. As one speaker explained, this metaphor builds on the characteristics of a drunk person, who is believed to be slow, with low energy, and hence boring. Moreover, the word *khiwa* 'White person' is used here, and generally among youths, as a term of address for friends, showing respect. In the context of isiNdebele slang, it is usually translated as 'boss'. Here, we can observe underlying racialized semantics which display the ongoing legacy of colonialism: a White person is synonymous with a boss. The term *khiwa* comes from the word *inkiwane* 'fig', the metaphorical association being that a ripe fig is pinkish inside and hence resembles the skin color of White people. It would be interesting to explore whether the appropriation of this racialized term and its underlying semantic extension is a strategy for dealing with the colonial social and linguistic heritage.

As can be seen in (10b), the diminutive (commentary noun class 15) in *okuyimbodlela*, especially in combination with the following construction *sithi 1–2*, is used semantically to make the undertaking of drinking sound "small", to downplay the act of drinking alcohol. In this example, the contextual meaning given by the other components of the sentence and the communicative context in which this reply is embedded all play together with the diminutive noun class to form the complex meaning. Here, the denotative meaning of the diminutive morphology extends into the connotative level to play down and minimize the drinking of beer (in the sense of making it seem "small").

There are also cases in which the diminutive and the augmentative are used within their common semantic frame, but where young* speakers or linguistic trendsetters such as musical artists employ these noun classes in new or uncommon contexts. In Lugha ya mtaani in Tanzania, diminutive and augmentative noun classes also feature prominently in youth language practices and song lyrics. Example (11) illustrates the use of the augmentative in the song "Unachezaje" by Diamond Platnumz.

(11) Lugha ya mtaani

∅-Simba	*la*	*baba*	*ka-let-e-wa*
5-lion	5.CONN	father	PAST-bring-APPL-PASS

'The big lion of the father was brought'

Here, the noun 'lion' is used with the connective in class 5 (augmentative), which is different from the expected class 1, used for humans and animals. In both cases (class 1 or class 5) the noun itself is unmarked and does not carry a prefix. It is the agreement pattern (here the connective) that shows the noun class allocation and the use of the augmentative. It might be interesting to look at artistic language practices such as music and poetry to explore the noun class and agreement practices in these domains.

However, we can also observe the frequent use of the augmentative in the common speech of young* people, as in example (12).

Lugha ya mtaani

(12) a.

A-na	*m-zigo*	*si*	*m-dogo,*	*mw-ana-ngu*	*m-zigo*	*u-me-shiba*
3SG-have	3-load	NEG.COP	3-small	1-child-1SG.POSS	3-load	3-PERF-to.be.full

'She has a butt (lit., "load") that is not small my friend (lit. "my child"), her butt is big (lit., "the load is full")'

b.

∅-Zigo	*remix*	*li-le*
5-load	remix	5-DEM.DIST

'A big butt that!'

Example (12) constitutes an excerpt from a conversation between two male speakers who are discussing a female friend and her physical shape using the word *mzigo* 'load, luggage', which in this context metaphorically refers to a (big) butt. In (12b), speaker B's reply to the comment made by speaker A in (12a), the noun *mzigo*, which is commonly used in class 3/4, is used with class 5 morphology (zero marking on the noun and class 5 demonstrative). Here, the augmentative emphasizes the size of the *mzigo* and also alludes to a song that refers to 'big butts', namely "Zigo remix" (with the augmentative rendering of the noun again) by Ay, featuring Diamond Platnumz.

A very common practice among speakers of Lugha ya mtaani, especially in Dar es Salaam, is the use of class 1 noun prefixes with nouns that are semantically allocated to this class but which usually do not take a prefix, as can be seen in (13) and (14).[12]

Lugha ya mtaani

(13)

Makeda	*ni*	***m-dada***	*m-kubwa*	*a-ki-we-po*	*a-na-wez-a*
Makeda	COP	1-sister	1-big	3SG-COND-be-LOC	3SG-PRES-can-FV

ku-wa-angali-a	*wa-dogo*	*za-ke*	*kama*	*ku-ki-wa*
INF-3PL-look-FV	2-small	10-POSS	if	15-COND-be

na	*u-angalizi*	*wa*	*m-tu*	*m-zima*
CONJ	14-watch	14.CONN	1-person	1-whole

'Makeda is a big girl; when she is there she can look after her younger siblings under the watch of a grown-up person'

Lugha ya mtaani

(14)

wewe	*tu*	*mi*	*ni-me-ku-let-e-a*	*pasi*	*hii*	*hapa*
you	just	I	1SG-PERF-2SG-bring-APPL-FV	9.pass	9.DEM.PROX	here

alafu	***m-jamaa***	*a-na-mbwinya*	*huyu*	*hapa*
then	1-guy	3SG-PRES-not.be.capable	1.DEM.PROX	here'

'It's just you; me I brought you this pass here now the guy is not capable, this one here'

In example (13), the class 1 prefix *m-* is combined with the noun *dada* 'sister', which, like most kinship terms in Kiswahili, does not commonly take a prefix. Similarly, example (14) shows the use of the same prefix with the noun *jamaa* 'guy', which is also mostly used without a prefix. In these cases there does not seem to be much of a semantic change involved and the employment of the prefixes seems to be a stylistic choice.[13]

Moreover, there are other new forms of morphosyntactic variation through the combining of noun classes. In isiNdebele slang, morphological creativity involving noun classes and their (general and contextual) semantic nuances can derive new words and metaphors, as in (15).

12 Many thanks to Julius Taji for pointing this out to me in the first place.

13 More research will be needed to find out about the motivation behind this process. This could be a stylistic choice of wanting to deviate from the standard usage, or it could be influenced by hypercorrection.

IsiNdebele slang

(15) *A-si-vaya-nga, hanti isi-khathi. Be-se-si-phuz-ile ngale.*
NEG-1PL-go-PAST isn't 7-time PERF-EXCL-1PL- be.late-PERF that.side
U-Mickey laye w-a-fika w-a-thela in-hlabathi w-a-thela
1-Mickey also 1-PAST-arrive 1-PAST-pour 9-soil 1-PAST-pour
i-gazi w-a-be-tshaya phansi.
5-blood 1-PAST-?-hit down
'We didn't go because of time. We were late (to reach) that side. Mickey also arrived, he ruined it, he negated it (lit., "he poured soil, he poured blood").'
So vele eye, ***u-ma-simi-ni*** *laye kade e-se-tshay-is-ile*
so AUX.simply yes 1-6-field-LOC also IMMEDIATE.PAST 3SG-EXCL-hit-CAUS-PAST
'So yes, the girl/woman had also knocked off'

In example (15), the word *umasimini* underwent a complex morphological process of meaning making, as the term was lexicalized to mean 'woman'. At the core of this metaphor is the noun *insimu* (class 9) 'field', which becomes *amasimu* in the plural, meaning 'fields, cultivated lands' (class 6 augmentative). Adding locative morphology, the construction becomes *emasimini* 'in the fields'. Finally, the replacement of the locative prefix *e-* with the noun class prefix *u-* (class 1) marks the personification of the field in its locative construction (also marked by the suffix *-ni*). In this usage, the term 'woman' often implies a relationship such as 'girlfriend' or 'wife', as explained by one speaker. As another speaker explained, this metaphor is also informed by the phonological resemblance between the word *umasimini* and the expression *my sis* /maisis/, which is used as a term for 'girl, woman (of the same age group)' as well. In terms of morphological variation, it is interesting to note that the noun here is marked with two noun classes, namely *(a)ma-* (class 6, adding the plural/augmentative semantic component to the construction) and *u-* (class 1, here marking the personification of the otherwise inanimate noun). This rather atypical construction, using two noun class prefixes, underlines the conscious creativity of the speakers at the intersection of semantics and morphology, as noun classes and locative morphology are combined on the noun to create a complex metaphor.[14]

4 Conclusions

Several scholars have noted variation and flexibility in noun class usage for grammatical, semantic, and stylistic purposes. As this paper has illustrated, looking at youth language practices adds to our understanding of creative and fluid ways of using noun classes. This is not to suggest that youth language practices are exotic or different per se, as we find "messy" language practices and both ad hoc and consciously constructed creativity in spoken and real linguistic conversations and discourse everywhere. However, data from youth language practices shed more light on these phenomena, as we can find dynamic, multilingual, and artistic language practices and different semantic domains and conversational topics. As we have seen, in isiNdebele youth language practices, the use of secondary noun classes with evaluative nominal morphology features prominently in several semantic domains and is informed by conscious meaning making (for example to express sarcastic overtones). Other examples from Lugha ya mtaani show that stylistic choices also play a role in the morphosyntactic variation that can be observed in the use of noun class prefixes among young* speakers. Here, it seems that the semantic domain of people and their social relations (e.g. kinship terms, terms for friends, etc.) is particularly affected by this practice.

In a comparative perspective, it is evident that the diminutive and the augmentative (expressed by particular noun classes) are especially prominently employed in youth language practices (although such usage is also

14 While the use of noun class stacking is not generally uncommon in Bantu languages, the specific process described in (15) illustrates the creative construction of a semantically and morphologically manipulated word using stacked prefixes from a youth language perspective.

common in Bantu languages in general). Interestingly, the semantic nuances which can be expressed through the usage of diminutive and augmentative prefixes exhibit a broad variety, including contrary meanings: while, for example, in many Bantu languages the diminutive (e.g. class 7 or class 12) is associated with positive connotations and social closeness, the opposite is true for isiNdebele diminutive secondary noun classes, which instead express depreciative evaluations. Given this variation and the underlying meaning-making practices, this paper has argued that the study of microvariation (in the context of youth language and beyond) will greatly benefit from a focus on semantic aspects of morphosyntactic variation. Complex nominal constructions like *umasimini* in example (15) underline the significance of considering the intersection between semantic and morphosyntax in this regard. Noun classes constitute but one of the grammatical domains in which conscious meaning making leads to microvariation. Other domains that are of particular interest in the study of microvariation in youth languages in Eastern and Southern Africa include, for instance, verbal extensions (such as the so-called prefinal; see Gibson et al. 2022).

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