HOMONYMY VERSUS UNITY OF FORM:
THE PARTICLE -A IN SWAHILI*

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In this paper, the particle -A in Swahili will be examined
in detail. This particle is often described as a "possessive"
morpheme although it is used to convey a wide variety of
messages, of which "possession" is but one type. Past anal-
yses account for the variety of messages by proposing that -A
has two distinct functions, one which is adjectival and one
which is possessive. The concern of this paper is to deter-
mine whether such an analysis is justified. That is, can the
variety of messages expressed by -A be accounted for without
appealing to differences in -A, i.e. adjectival versus pos-
sessive homonyms? Differences in the message will be shown to
be directly related to differences in the context in which -A
is used. Therefore, by extracting differences which are
determined by context, it becomes possible to see that -A is
in fact a unitary form. Additional evidence that -A is best
characterized as a single semantic unity, found by comparing
-A with other elements in the language which appear to express
similar messages, will also be discussed.

1. Introduction

    In this paper we will examine the particle -A in Swahili, often re-
ferred to as the "nominal possessive", which is used to connect two
nouns. Concern will center on the question of homonymy in grammar;
that is, does the range of "uses" observed for -A reflect a number of
different meanings, which are superficially realized by homonymous

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forms, or is the variety due to something else? We are especially concerned with whether the different "uses" of -A might not be accounted for *without* appealing to a number of grammatically distinct and homonymous -A's. We will begin by discussing past analyses of -A in sections 2 and 3. These are based on the assumption that there is more than one -A, but they disagree as to the actual meanings proposed for the homonyms. The fact alone suggests that there may be problems with a "homomymous" analysis. We will show then in section 4 how the different environments in which -A occurs influence what -A "means", thus raising further doubt as to the necessity of positing homonymous forms to account for -A.

In sections 5 and 6 we will consider the semantics of -A and compare -A constructions with paraphrastic equivalents. These also suggest that there may be only one -A since -A and paraphrases of it formed with the prepositional suffix -i- differ consistently in the same way, regardless of the acceptability of the resulting constructions. If -A were really more than one, i.e. if it reflected homonymous forms, such a consistency would not be obtained. The data in this section also reveals additional facts about the semantic nature of -A. In section 7, a further line of research will be discussed.

2. Previous Analyses

The construction in which we are interested is:

$$\text{NOUN}_1 \quad --- \quad \begin{array}{c}\text{Pronominal Concord}\\ \text{Agreeing with the}\\ \text{Gender Class of NOUN}_1 \text{ (PC)}\end{array} \quad + \quad A \quad --- \quad \text{NOUN}_2$$

Examples are:

(1) m-   toto   w- a mw- alimu
     class-child PC_1-A CP_2-teacher   'teacher's book'
     Prefix
     (CP_1) N_1 N_2

(2) ki- tabu ch- a mw- alimu
     CP_1-book PC_1-A CP_2-teacher   'teacher's book'

This construction has been analyzed in past works as conveying a range of meanings, of which "possession" and "modification" are considered to be the more basic. Three analyses of -A will be discussed: Ashton [1944], Polomé [1967] and Gregersen [1967].

In Ashton's pedogogical grammar [1944:55, 145], a basic distinction is drawn between -A in possessive constructions and all other uses of the particle; these are treated as adjectival, although Ashton recognizes that the same -A occurs in both construction types. As a possessive, -A is considered to be equivalent to the English preposition 'of':

(3)　m- toto　w- a　mw- anamke　　　'child of woman/woman's child'
　　　CP_1-child　PC_1-A　CP_2-woman

As an adjectival particle, -A expresses a variety of relationships be-
tween the two nouns which it links; several are exemplified below:

(4)　m- toto　w- a　furaha　　　　'happy child' [Modification]
　　　CP_1-child　PC_1-A　happiness

(5)　ki- kombe　ch- a　kahawa　　　'coffee cup' [Modification]
　　　CP_1-cup　PC_1-A　coffee　　OR　'cup containing coffee'
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　[Container/Contents]
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　OR　'cuplike container to be used
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　for coffee' [Purpose]

(6)　ki- ti　ch- a　m- ti　　　'wooden chair' [Modification]
　　　CP_1-tree　PC_1-A　CP_2-tree　OR　'chair (made from) tree'
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　[Constituency]
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　OR　'chair by tree' [Location]

(7)　habari　z- a　serikali　　　'news about government'
　　　news　PC_1-A　government　　　　　　[Modification]
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　OR　'news from government' [Source]
　　　　　　　　　　　　　　OR　'news for government' [Goal]

　　　In Polomé's structural account [1967:133], a unity of form is again
recognized, with a duality of function implied. Two basic construction
types are described: (i) PC + A + POSSESSOR and (ii) PC + A + COMPLE-
MENT. Although Ashton and Polomé agree in demarcating possession and
modification as distinct functions of -A, they differ in how they classi-
fy particular constructions as possessive or adjectival. So for example
while Ashton would treat the following example as adjectival, Polomé
has categorized it as possessive (p. 132):

(8)　ki- kapu　ch- a　ma- tunda　　　'basket of fruit'[1]
　　　CP_1-basket　PC_1-A　CP_2-fruit

　　　It is important to note that the possessive relationship conveyed
in (8) is intrinsically different from that expressed in other posses-
sive constructions: in (1) and (3) ['child of teacher' and 'child of
woman'], N_2 in the -A construction is the possessor while in (8), N_1
is the possessor. Ashton clearly regards only those constructions
where N_2 is the possessor as truly "possessive"; Polomé does not draw
such a distinction. This reveals then that although they both

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[1]One should note that Polomé does not seem to regard the fact that
this example could also be adjectival, i.e. 'fruit basket' as problematic
for its classification as a possessive.

postulate a boundary between one kind of -A and another, they do not agree on where that boundary is.

In Gregersen's [1967] transformational account, a deep structure analysis for Ashton's and Polomé's possessive use of -A is provided: the construction is derived transformationally from a sentence where possession is expressed by the preposition na 'with'. So from a sentence of the form 'X is with Y' Gregersen derives 'Y -A X':

(9)   mw- alimu   a- na   m- toto
       CP_2-teacher PC_2-with CP_1-child -->

       m- toto   w- a mw- alimu
       CP_1-child PC_1-A CP_2-teacher

       X   with   Y   -->   Y -A   X

       'teacher has child'   'teacher's child'

Although Gregersen is not explicit about other uses of -A, it appears that -A is generated as part of the base in such instances, e.g. a base-generated -A triggers pronoun pleonasm (p.55). However, by testing the applicability of his transformation for various -A constructions three distinct types emerge: (i) a "na" equivalent is possible and the transformation operates as stated, e.g. (9). This appears to coincide with Ashton's possessive construction type; (ii) there is no "na" equivalent:

(10)   *tano i- na   ny-umba   --> ny- umba   y- a tano
       five PC-with CP-house CP_1-house PC_1-A five

       *'five has house'   'fifth house'

And (iii) a "na" equivalent is possible, but the transformation deriving -A must apply without noun re-ordering because such would result in a change in meaning. So while 'Y -A X' may be derived from 'Y is with X', it may not be derived from 'X is with Y' (cf. above):

(11)   ki- kapu   ki- na   ma- tunda --> ki- kapu   ch- a ma- tunda
       CP_1-basket PC_1-with CP_2-fruit CP_1-basket PC_1-A CP_2-fruit

       Y   with   X   --> Y   -A   X

       'basket has fruit', i.e.   'basket of fruit', i.e.
       'basket contains fruit'   'basket containing fruit'

A "with" construction parallel to that in (9) would be inadequate for the derivation of the -A construction in (11) because it would not reflect the appropriate semantic relationship between the nouns:

(12)   ma- tunda ya- na ki- kapu   'fruit has basket', e.g.
         fruit   basket   which you can put it in
                                if you like....
         X   with   Y

This structure could be used, however, to derive another semantically parallel (though not quite synonymous) -A phrase:

(13) ma- tunda y- a ki- kapu   'fruit from/for/in basket'
         fruit   basket

It is interesting to observe that Gregersen does not analyze -A as a meaning-bearing entity in the language; rather he describes it as a "carrier" for the pronominal concords. This contrasts certainly with Ashton who regards it as a particle expressing "relationship". Polomé, on the other hand, is not explicit about -A's status as a meaningful element in the language.

3. The Problem

Previous analyses of -A are problematic for several reasons. First of all, the indeterminacy of the boundaries between different -A construction types is problematic for any analysis of the particle in terms of homonymous forms where each conveys a different meaning. If Ashton and Polomé do not agree on how to differentiate "possessive" uses of -A from non-possessive ones, then perhaps "possession" is inappropriate as a distinguishing criterion. Therefore, one question to pose concerns whether a separation is necessary at all.

Related to the problem of category indeterminacy is the fact that none of the analyses proposed provides a definitive criterion for classifying -A constructions. In fact, the categories proposed are described according to different parameters: both Polomé and Ashton distinguish, on the basis of a semantic notion of possession, adjectival and possessive uses of -A. They further differentiate adjectival constructions according to part-of-speech categories. So for example both distinguish -A phrases where N_2 is a verb infinitive from those where it is not:

(14) ch- akula ch- a ny- umba   -A + NOUN
         food   house

      'food from/for/in house'

(15) ch- akula ch- a ku- tosha   -A + VERB INFINITIVE
         food   to- suffice

      'sufficient food'

The two-fold criterion is necessary presumably because part-of-speech categories are inadequate for distinguishing the two uses which they regard as basic to -A. That is, nouns (as opposed to verb infinitives for example) follow -A in "possessive" as well as "adjectival" phrases.

Another problem is that Gregersen's analysis allows us to derive two types of -A constructions from sentences formed with a particle reflecting possession even more clearly than -A, i.e. na 'with'. This suggests that the boundary between possession and modification may really be where Polomé suggests and that the category of possession

must further be subdivided, one subsection coinciding with Ashton's possessive type. That is, there are two kinds of "possession", that which exists between a container and its contents, e.g. 'basket of fruit', as opposed to that which exists between an owner and an ownee, e.g. 'book of teacher'.

The fact that absolute categories cannot be identified in past analyses of -A constructions means that it is impossible to classify constructions which are not explicitly discussed in those works. So for example it is not clear what Ashton or Polomé or even Gregersen would do with the -A phrase in (16) below, where N_2 may refer to someone who receives N_1 [Recipient], or who benefits from action upon N_1 [Benefit], or who own N_1 [Ownership, i.e. "possess" in the more narrow sense]:

(16)   ni- li- tafuta zawadi   y- a m- toto
       I-   past-seek   present   child

       'I sought present to give to child'
    OR 'I sought present on behalf of child'
    OR 'I sought child's present', i.e. that he misplaced

None of the analyses thus far proposed for -A tell us how to treat it in this example.

We propose that the inability of analysts in the past to consistently (and categorically) delimit different functions of -A is due to the fact that the separation between possession and modification is artificial, that in fact there is only one -A with only one meaning. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to investigating the possibility that -A is semantically unitary. We will begin by showing how different "uses" of -A depend upon variables independent of -A itself.

4. Environmental Contrast

The one thing which is consistently and patently true of -A in any and all instances where it occurs is that it expresses some kind of relation or association between two things. So although Ashton recognized the relational nature of -A, she did not pay sufficient attention to the fact that its "possessive" use is also relational. She thus made a misleading distinction between -A as a possessive and all other uses of it. However, if we begin only with the assumption that -A expresses some sort of relationship between two things, it is possible to see that the context in which -A is used determines the relationships it conveys. Three types of context will be considered:

(i)   the nouns themselves which -A "relates" (4.1);

(ii) the verb co-occurring with an -A phrase in a sentence (4.2);

(iii) the discourse in which the sentence is used (4.3).

4.1. <u>The nouns which -A relates</u>.

4.1.1. <u>N₁ and N₂ differ in animacy</u>. The nature of the entities re-
ferred to by -A linked nouns determine to a large extent the kinds
of relationships which -A may convey. On a gross level, animacy
differences are crucial. For example, we find that the relation-
ships conveyed when -A links two inanimate objects are just those
which are impossible when only the noun preceding -A (N_1) is in-
animate and the noun following it (N_2) is animate.

When N_1 is inanimate and N_2 is animate several different relation-
ships may be expressed by -A:

(17) ni- li- tafuta zawadi   y- a m- toto
      I-   past- seek   present   child

    i.   'I looked for the child's present' [Ownership]

   ii.   'I looked for the present from the child' [Source]

  iii.   'I looked for the present instead of the child doing it'
                                                               [Lieutenancy]

   iv.   'I looked for the present for the child's sake'   [Benefit]

    v.   'I looked for the present to give to the child', e.g. so he
       could take it to someone else [Receipt]

   vi.   'I looked for a child's present', e.g. as opposed to the kind
       of present one would give an adult [Modification]

Only different discourse contexts will determine which message speci-
fically is being conveyed by -A constructions in sentences such as (17).
However, it is interesting to observe that the relationships which are
possible reflect various ways in which animate beings are typically
associated with inanimate objects: animate beings usually control in-
animate objects, owning them and dictating where they are located, to
whom they will be sent, and for whose benefit. Such relationships
are not usually found between inanimate objects and, therefore, -A
does not express most of the relationships possible above when both
nouns in the -A phrase are inanimate:

(18) ni- li-   tafuta ki- kombe ch- a kahawa
      I-: past- seek   cup   coffee

    i.   'I looked for a cuplike container for the coffee' [Purpose]

   ii.   'I looked for a cup containing coffee' [Container/Contents]

  iii.   'I looked for a coffee cup' [Modification]

   iv.   'I looked for the cup that had been somehow previously
       associated with the coffee', e.g. was intended to be used
       to hold it, or had held it before the coffee spilled, etc.
                                       [Previous Association]

Here then we see that the messages possible in (18) differ considerably
from those given for (17). But the differences are not due to -A,

rather they reflect to a large extent expectations about the kinds
of relations which are more likely to exist between certain kinds
of entities in the world. So relations of benefit and receipt for
example are impossible when N_2 in an -A phrase is not an entity
which can plausibly be viewed as a beneficiary or recipient in the
real world, i.e. when it is not animate.

4.1.2. N_1 and N_2 are inanimate.   When both nouns in an -A phrase are
inanimate a wide range of messages is possible. In addition to
those noted in (18), we also find -A expressing direction and/or
location, the material an item is made of [constituency], and
part/whole relations. However, they are not all possible for every
-A construction; possible messages are severely limited by the
nature of the entities which the -A linked nouns designate in the
world. So for example, direction and/or location can only be ex-
pressed when N_2 can plausibly be viewed as the location and/or
destination of N_1:

(19)   safari   y- a Afrika   'journey to/in/from Africa'
        journey   OR 'African journey' [Modification]

If N_2 refers to something which cannot be a location, direction
and/or location are unlikely messages:

(20)   safari   y- a m- vua   'rain journey' [Modification]
        journey   rain   ??'journey to rain'

Similarly, if N_1 refers to something which cannot be located in what
N_2 designates, -A cannot convey direction or location:

(21)   umbo   l- a Afrika   'shape of Africa', i.e. of the
        shape   African continent' [Modification]
                                    *'shape to/in/from Africa'

    Container and contents may be related by -A but only when N_1 can
plausibly be viewed as a container for N_2. Hence such a relationship
is only expressed in (22) and not (23):

(22)   ki- kombe ch- a kahawa   'cup containing coffee'
             cup   OR 'coffee cup'
                                 OR 'cuplike container for coffee'

(23)   ?m- lango   w- a kahawa ?'door to (the place where) the
             door   coffee (is kept)'
                                  *'door containing coffee'

Similarly, such a relation cannot be conveyed if N is not something
which can be contained:

(24)   ki- kombe   ch- a ny- umba 'cup in/from/for house'
                                    *'cup containing house'

Obviously if we were talking about a miniature toy house, the second reading of (24) would also be possible.

Parallel examples can be found for part-whole relations. These can be conveyed by -A only when N_1 can be realistically viewed as part of N_2:

(25)   m- kono w- a koti   'coat-sleeve'
           arm   coat

(26)   m- kono w- a Ali   'Ali's arm'[2]

But part-whole relations are impossible when N_1 cannot be considered part of N_2:

(27)   ?m- kono w- a dirisha   *'window's arm/sleeve'

N_2 may also be interpreted to provide information about the purpose of N_1. But this only occurs when N_1 can reasonably be seen to be an instrument in an activity involving N_2 or specified by N_2 (as in those instances where N_2 is a verb infinitive). Thus since knives are used to cut bread, -A may convey a purposeful relation in (28):

(28)   ki- su ch- a m- kate   'knife to cut bread', but not
                                      necessarily one regularly associated
                                      with this activity
              OR 'bread-knife', i.e. a knife which
                                      is regularly associated with the
                                      activity of cutting bread
                                              [Modification]

The two messages possible above differ in that the latter implies that bread is somehow a defining characteristic of knife while the former suggests only that some knife, e.g. a fish-knife perhaps, is being used for cutting bread. We will see in Section 4 how discourse context may distinguish one of these messages from the other.

A relationship between some thing and the material out of which it is made may also be conveyed by -A. Again it depends upon the nature of the nouns themselves: this relationship is only conveyed when N_2 can be plausibly viewed as something out of which N_1 is made, hence the differing messages in (29) and (30) below:

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[2]The relationship between 'arm' and 'Ali' may also be viewed as one of possession, i.e. "inalienable" possession cf. Hyman et al. [1970]. Here then we see that the "part-whole" message fades into a possessive one; hence there can be no absolute boundary between the two.

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(29)  ki- su    ch- a  dhahabu        'gold knife'
         knife          gold        ?'knife for cutting gold' [Purpose]
(30)  ki- su  ch- a  wali           *'knife made of rice'
                     rice           ?'knife for rice'   [Purpose]
                                     'knife in rice'    [Location]
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4.1.3. <u>N₁ and N₂ are animate</u>. The fact that animacy differences in-
itially narrow down the rubmer of relations possible with -A can also
be seen when we consider situations where both nouns are animate as
opposed to those where both are inanimate (4.1.2) or there is one of
each (4.1.1). Again we find that (a) there are a number of messages
possible which are not possible elsewhere and (b) the specific iden-
tity of the entities linked by -A further delimits this set of possible
messages in any situation where -A is used.

When both of the nouns linked by -A are human we find a variety
of messages possible: kinship ties, employer-employee associations,
marital ties, supervisor-supervisee associations, etc. One message
never found is that of modification. It is clear then already that
the relations which are possible reflect those usually found between
humans in the real world: humans may be married or related to one
another, but never is one regarded as a characteristic feature of
another.

It is possible to see again that the specific identity of the
nouns linked by -A determines which relationship is conveyed by any
particular -A phrase when we compare constructions where only one noun
is varied:

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(31)  m- kubwa  w- a  m- toto       'child's older sibling'
         big           child
(32)  mw- ongozi  w- a  m- toto     'child's governess/guide'
          guide
(33)  m- bwa  w- a  m- toto         'child's dog'
         dog
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It is interesting to observe that the relationship between the two
nouns changes drastically when N₁ is an animal instead of a human,
e.g. (33). So while in (31) and (32) child appears to be somehow
dominated by N₁, the reverse is certainly true in (33), i.e. the
child owns the dog. This is clearly due to the fact that adults
usually dominate children in the real world but dogs do not, hence,
the difference in the relationship conveyed by -A. This is of course
not unique to -A; we get the same feeling from the English so-called
"possessive" constructions given as glosses.

By comparing examples where N₁ rather than N₂ above is varied, it
is possible to see that neither noun independently dictates which

relationship will be expressed:

(34)   m- kubwa w- a m- toto   'child's older sibling'

(35)   m- kubwa w- a m- tumishi   'servant's supervisor/
                                         employer'

(36)   m- kubwa w- a w- enyeji   'leader of the villagers'
                         inhabitants

In these examples both nouns contribute something in establishing
the nature of the relationship being conveyed, e.g. big person +
child → older sibling. In some cases, however, the meaning of only
one noun may be determinative. When this occurs there is no
adequate label for describing what -A conveys, other than that it
establishes a relationship between two nouns:

(37)   rafiki y- a m- toto   'child's friend'
       friend

    It is clear that the reason -A expresses relations when both
nouns are animate which it cannot convey when both are inanimate is
because of the way different entities are usually associated with
one another in the real world. So because inanimate objects are
never related by marriage, or blood, or as employer-employees, etc.
these relations are not possible when -A links such entities.
Similarly, because animate beings are never parts of one another,
or containers for one another, or characteristic features of one
another, these relations cannot be expressed when -A connects them.
It is important to recognize then that various relationships are not
restricted because of anything in the meaning of -A, i.e. whether it
is functioning "possessively" or not. Rather, they are limited in
certain particular circumstances because of the nature of the enti-
ties involved.

4.2 The verb co-occurring with the -A phrase. Although the nature
of the nouns linked by -A usually delimits the number of messages
possible, it often does not narrow the possibilities down to a single
one. Information outside the -A phrase itself is often needed to
disambiguate. That information may be in the sentence in which the
-A construction is used or in the wider discourse context. We will
consider the former.

    Usually in a sentence where -A occurs, information in the verb
is important for determining what -A expresses. Two types of verbal
information may be distinguished: lexical and grammatical. Lexically,
the meaning of a verb stem may delimit the messages conveyed by -A.
So, for someone on behalf of someone else eliminates the possibility
that -A conveys relations of lieutenancy, benefit, or receipt in (38):

(38)   ni- li- penda kanzu y- a mw- anamume
       I- past-like   robe   man

       'I liked the/a man's robe'   NOT
     *'I liked the robe for the man'

In fact, the wider range of messages noted in 4.1.1 is only possible when the verb refers to an activity where someone is acting upon something else:

(39)   n- li- shona   kanzu y- a   mw- anamume
                sew

   i.   'I sewed man's robe'   [Ownership]
  ii.   'I sewed robe instead of man'   [Lieutenancy]
 iii.   'I sewed robe from man'   [Source]
  iv.   'I sewed robe for man's sake'   [Benefit]
   v.   'I sewed robe to give man' (to take   [Receipt]
              somewhere)
  vi.   'I sewed male- robe'   [Modification]

Grammatically, two aspects of the verb appear to be significant: agreement markers and derivational suffixes. We will consider each in turn.

In Swahili the verb agrees with the subject of a sentence by carrying concords agreeing with the noun class to which the subject noun belongs. This marker, often called the "subject marker" (SM), is indicated below:

(40)   mw- anamume   a- li- kuja   'the/a man came'
              man   SM-past-come

Agreement with an object is also possible, but it does not occur as regularly as subject agreement which is obligatory in most tenses. When it occurs, definite reference is implied if the object noun is inanimate. The object agreement marker (OM) is attached directly before the verb stem:

(41)   mw- anamume a- li- ki-ona   ki- ti
              man   SM-past-OM-see   chair

     'the/a man saw <u>the</u> chair'

In this situation, object agreement focusses attention upon an object noun, bringing it into prominence as something which is recognizable ("known", cf. Chafe [1976]) and important to the speaker (which is presumably why he is talking about it in the first place, cf. Port [1972]). That this is the case can be seen by examining a sentence where there is no OM; in this case the object noun may still be definite, i.e. "known", or it may be indefinite:

(42)   mw- anamume a- li- ona ki- ti

     'the/a man saw the/a chair'

It appears then from this example that although "knownness" is characteristic of situations where object agreement occurs, it is not the reason for its occurrence; some kind of "foregrounding" seems to be more responsible.

The contrast between sentences where object agreement occurs and those where it is absent is obtained only when the object is inanimate. This is because the verb in Swahili almost always agrees with the objects which are animate, regardless of their "knownness". This again suggests that the presence of object markers on the verb is not determined by this feature:

(43)   mw- anamume   a- li- mw- ona   m- toto
          man   SM   OM   child

      'the/a man saw the/a child'

Now it is interesting to observe that, in those situations where contrast is possible, i.e. when the object is inanimate, that the messages conveyable by an -A construction are restricted when there is an OM on the verb in a sentence which refers to N_1 in an -A phrase. That is, the presence of an agreeing OM appears to imply that certain relationships between N_1 and N_2 are *not* being expressed. Specifically, relations of "benefit", "receipt", and "lieutenancy" are impossible. So for example only a "possessive" message is possible in (44) where the verb agrees with the noun 'robe':

(44)   ni- li- i- shona kanzu y- a mw- anamume
       I- past-OM-sew   robe   man

      'I sewed robe belonging to man', i.e. 'I sewed man's robe'
   NOT *'I sewed robe for sake of/to give to man' cf. (39)

Another situation where the messages conveyable by -A are limited by information in the verb is found when the verb carries the prepositional suffix -i-/-e- . This suffix is usually found on the verb when a beneficiary, recipient or lieutenant is involved in the activity described

(45)   ni- li- m- shon- e- a   mw- anamume kanzu
       I- past-OM-sew- to/for   man   robe

      'I sewed rob for man', i.e. to give to him, on his behalf, or
      instead of him

Presumably because this verbal suffix is more regularly associated with messages of benefit, receipt and lieutenancy than -A we find that it is impossible to convey such messages for N_2 in an -A phrase when the verb in the sentence carries the prepositional suffix and agrees with some noun outside of it:

(46)   ni- li- m- shon- e- a   Ali kanzu z- a w- anaume
       I- past-OM-sew- to/for   robe   men

      'I sewed men's robes for the sake of/to give to Ali'
   NOT *'I sewed robes for Ali to give to men

4.3.   The discourse context. In addition to the nature of the nouns in an -A phrase, and information in the verb co-occurring in the

sentence with it, the wider discourse context will often influence
the nature of the message conveyed by -A. To illustrate how this may
occur, the following -A construction is contextualized in different
discourse contexts:

(47)   sanduku l- a kuni   i. 'box containing firewood'
       box   firewood   ii. 'box to be used for carrying/
                                        holding firewood'
                                  iii. 'firewood-box', i.e. box
                                        designed for holding firewood
                                        and nothing else

The following discourses are designed to show how different contexts
will make one interpretation of the message conveyed by -A more likely
than others:

i. Jana nilikuwa ninapika na   Yesterday I was cooking and I

    sikuweza kumaliza kwa sababu   couldn't finish because I

    nilikuwa sina kuni. Ndugu   didn't have firewood. My

    yangu aliniletea sanduku la   brother brought me a *box of*

    kuni nikamaliza kupika mara   *firewood* and I finished cook-

    moja.   ing right away.

     In this example the most likely inference is that the box has
firewood in it since the speaker needs firewood before he or she can
finish cooking. The box may also be a "firewood-box", or just an
ordinary box. It is important to recognize that sometimes it is
not crucial for an appropriate understanding of a described event to
isolate a *single* message, i.e. what is important is that the box con-
tained wood, not what kind of box it was. In the next example, the
nature of the box is made clear.

ii. Jana mimi na ndugu yangu   Yesterday I and my brother went

    tulikwenda kutafuta kuni na   to look for firewood and when we

    tulipofika msituni,   arrived in the woods we realized

    tulitambua kwamba tulisahau   that we had forgotten to bring

    kuleta kitu cha kuleta kuni.   *something to carry the firewood.*

    Basi ndugu yangu alitoa   So my brother took out my books

    vitabu vyangu vilivyokuwemo   which were *inside my school-box*

    ndani ya sanduku langu la   and used it as a *box for the*

    shule na alilitumia kama   *firewood.*

    sanduku la kuni.

     In this example there are several -A phrases (underlined); the
last is that in (47). In this context it is clear that the box is

not a "firewood-box" but rather, it is some other kind of box
("school-box") being used for firewood. In the last example, how-
ever, the box is a "firewood-box", not just any kind of box.

iii. Jana baba yangu alinunu   Yesterday my father bought

     sanduku la kuni. Ni zuri   a firewood-box. It's very

     sana, lilitengenezwa   nice, it was made especially

     maksudi kwa kuni na baba   for firewood and father

     anasema hatuwezi kulitumia   says that we mustn't use

     kwa kitu chengine.   it for anything else.

5. <u>The Semantic Significance of -A</u>

     Since differences in context *do* correlate with differences in the
message conveyed by -A in a regular and consistent manner, it is not
necessary to impute the differences in the message to -A itself, i.e.
to postulate homonymous forms. For this reason we propose that -A
is in fact a unitary sign, formally and semantically. In light of
this hypothesis we will now consider the nature of -A's semantic con-
tribution in utterances where it occurs.

     It is important to observe initially that if -A specifically desig-
nated "possession" or "modification" or "benefit" (etc.) we would not
expect contextual differences to affect the message conveyed by -A.
Further, if -A did denote any one of these meanings, it would be im-
possible for it to convey the others. It appears then that speakers
are able to express a variety of different messages with -A just *because*
it does not specify any particular relationship. Here it becomes evi-
dent that we need to distinguish the *meaning* of -A from the *messages*
which it is used to convey in speech.[3]

5.1. "Meaning" vs. "message". The "meaning" of a linguistic sign,
e.g. -A, is its consistent and invariable contribution to the messages
conveyed in any utterance in which it is used.[4] The "message" is what
is conveyed by the use of the sign, and its associated meaning, in a
particular context, i.e. on any given occasion when it is used. The
meaning of a linguistic element differs from the messages it conveys
in that the latter is relatively more precise than the former. This

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[3]Such a distinction has been drawn more or less explicitly in
many linguistic studies, e.g. Bolinger [1965], Bull [1964], Uhlenbeck
[1965], Jakobson [1936], Garcia [1975], Morava [1976], Kirsner [1975].

[4]I am indebted to R.L. Otheguy for this formulation of the notion
of "meaning".

difference is aptly illustrated by Kirsner [1975] with the following examples:

> My wife brought me my slippers. Message: 'brought in her hands'
>
> My dog brought me my slippers. Message: 'brought in its mouth'

These examples show how important context may be for interpreting the message conveyed by a particular linguistic form. That is, the way in which something is "brought" is not specified by the verb "bring" itself; it is something implied by the context in which "bring" is used. Here, the nature of the entities doing the "bringing", i.e. in the real world, dictates how the hearer will view the act of "bringing" described in each instance. Therefore, it is possible to see that the different messages conveyed by one linguistic form, e.g. "bring", are not necessarily proof that the form has different meanings, i.e. that it should be analyzed as a pair of homonyms, one meaning "bring in the "hand" and the other meaning "bring in the mouth". The different messages certainly provide clues as to what the meaning of "bring" may be, but they are not necessarily identical with its meaning.

5.2. *-A as a meaningful unit*. The data provided in section 4 shows that the context in which -A is used largely determines which message it conveys. This *could* be taken to imply that -A has no meaning, that the relationship between any two nouns linked by -A derives from their identity alone. This would mean that -A is simply a formal, i.e. meaningless, element in the language [Gregersen 1967:29] used to link nouns. However, there is evidence which suggests that such an analysis would be inadequate.

First of all, there are other particles used to link nouns in Swahili; these contrast with one another and with -A. If -A were to be analyzed as meaningless we would not be able to account for meaningful differences between noun phrases with -A and those formed with other particles, e.g. na 'with' and -enye 'having':

(48)   -A: m- toto   w- a̱ m- zee   'old person's child'
             child   old person

(49)   -enye: m- toto w- enye m- zee   'child having old person',
                                               e.g. grandmother/grandfather

(50)   na: m- toto na̱ m- zee   'child and old person'

It is also possible to link nouns without any particle at all. Comparing such constructions with those using -A, differences in the message conveyed are obtained:

(51) a. -A: ni- li- m- tafuta ki- jana w- a̱ mw- anamke
              I- past-him-seek   teenager   woman

         'I looked for *woman's teenage child*.'

b. ∅: ni- li- m- tafuta ki- jana mw- anamke.

    'I looked for *teenage woman*'

It is clear here that -A is not merely a formal element used to
relate nouns since (51b) has two nouns related in relationship of
modification (and recall that this is given as one of -A's basic
functions in past analyses) and yet there is no particle -A. Further-
more, the message conveyed in (51a) where -A occurs is different
from that conveyed by the parallel construction without -A (51b).
The difference can only be accounted for with reference to a meaning-
ful difference between -A as a linker and nothing, i.e. noun-noun
apposition without a linking particle. The contrast in messages
suggests that -A does have semantic significance when used to link
two nouns. It is therefore important to consider the nature of its
semantic contribution.

5.3. -A as a "backgrounding" entity. We should observe first that
the relationship established by -A is not a symmetrical one. That is,
N_2 in an -A phrase is not related to N_1 in the same way that N_1 is
related to N_2. This can be illustrated in two ways:

    i. The reversal of N_1 and N_2 in an acceptable -A construction
may render the construction less acceptable:

(52) a. ki- su   ch- a m- kate   'bread knife'
          knife   bread

    b. ?m- kate w- a ki- su   ?'knife's bread'

If the relationship between N_1 and N_2 were symmetrical, the relative
ordering of the nouns would not affect the acceptability of the con-
struction. Although (52b) might be acceptable in particular circum-
stances, e.g. if the speaker wanted to explain that the knife he was
talking about had been that which he had used earlier for the bread,
it certainly is less likely to be used than (52a). Presumably, this
is because the relationship which -A sets up between two nouns is one
which is more readily seen when the nouns in (52) are related in the
order given in (a).

    ii. When reversal does not result in a less acceptable construc-
tion, the asymmetricality of -A is apparent in the change in message
which results from reversing the nouns:

(53) a. m- toto w- a furaha   'happy child'
         child   happiness

    b. furaha y- a m- toto   'child's happiness'

This is the strongest evidence that -A conveys an asymmetrical rela-
tionship: if -A did not relate nouns asymmetrically, noun re-
ordering would not change the nature of the relationship conveyed.

In order to understand how -A "relates" two entities it is important
now to characterize the nature of its asymmetry more narrowly.

It appears from the examples in (53) that N_2 is related to N_1 in
such a way that the latter (N_1) is somehow the reason why the former
(N_2) is mentioned at all. So in (53a) it is possible to observe that
"happiness" wouldn't have been mentioned at all but for the fact that
it tells the hearer something about the child; the reverse is true in
(53b): "child" tells the near something about the happiness, i.e.
whose it is. In syntactic terms, we might say that N_2 is dependent
or subordinate to N_1. Semantically, we can say that N_2 provides some
sort of "background" information about N_1, i.e. information which pro-
vides a more detailed description of N_1 but which is not necessary for
an accurate account of the events being described. This means that if
we placed (53a) for example in a sentence,   the event described
would not change if N_2 in the -A phrase were omitted:

(54) a. ni- li- mw- ona m- toto w- a furaha
        I- past-him-see   child   happiness
                         N_1 N_2

      'I saw the/a happy child', i.e. I saw the/a child who was happy

  b. ni- li- mw- ona m- toto
                    N_1

      'I saw the/a child'

In (54) both sentences describe the same event; the only difference
is that more is known about N_1 in the example where an -A phrase links
it to another noun (54a) than is known in the one where it occurs
alone (54b). This is however not the case if N_1 is omitted; the two
events described are distinct from one another:

(55) a. ni- li- mw- ona m- toto   w- a furaha
                      child   happiness
                      N_1 N_2

      'I saw the/a happy child'

  b. ni- li- ona furaha
               N_2

      'I saw happiness'

In (54) the speaker is seeing a child in both examples; in (55), how-
ever, this is not the case: in (55a) the speaker sees a child while
in (55b) he sees happiness. Thus we can see that N_1 is essential for
adequate description of a particular event while N_2 is not. We can
therefore conclude the following about -A: it establishes a relation-
ship between two things in the world, as named by the two nouns which
it links, in such a way that one (N_2) is interpreted to provide "back-
ground" information about the other (N_1). -A might then be characterized

as a device for "backgrounding" an entity in terms of its relation
to another entity.

5.4. "Directionality" of relationship. While past analyses of -A
recognize (although sometimes only implicitly) the essentially rela-
tional nature of -A, they have not been able to provide any systematic
account of the variety of messages which -A conveys. Particularly,
they have not dealt with the fact that the direction of the relation-
ships conveyed by -A appears to "change", as well as their specific
character. That is, in many instances N_2 appears to be related to
N_1 in the same way, even though the specific relationship conveyed is
not the same. So in (56) and (57) N_1 is seen to somehow "dominate"
or "control" N_2 cf. 4.1.3:

(56) m- kubwa w- a m- toto   'child's older sibling'
      big person   child
      N_1 N_2

(57) mw- ongozi w- a m- toto   'child's governess'
       guide   child
       N_1 N_2

Whild in (58) N_2 "dominates" N_1:

(58) m- bwa w- a m- toto   'child's dog'
       dog   child
       N_1 N_2

     By distinguishing the meaning of a sign from the message which
it conveys on a particular occasion of its use, it is possible to
characterize different messages without imputing the differences
to the sign itself, i.e. without postulating homonymous forms or a
polysemous sign. We have shown that different messages correlate
consistently with different contexts; therefore we conclude that the
context is responsible for those differences, not -A itself. And
more importantly perhaps, it is also now possible to see that the
apparent variation in -A's directionality is also due to contextual
differences. In order to do this, however, it is necessary to recog-
nize the significance of speaker/hearer presuppositions about the
kinds of relationships which are likely to exist between certain
kinds of entities in the world. So for example in cases such as
(56) and (57) N_1 appears to "dominate" N_2, while it does not in
examples such as (58). The difference is not because of any differ-
ence in -A; rather it is because adults control children in the real
world (56-57), while people, regardless of whether they are children
or adults, control animals (58). In light of this observation, it
is possible to see why N_1 dominates N_2 when it refers to an adult
and N_2 does not, while the reverse is true when it refers to an
animal (and N_2 refers to a human being).

     Differences in the nature of the entities linked by -A can also
be shown to account for why N_1 may appear to somehow "possess" N_2 in

one situation, while N_2 "possesses" N_1 in another;[5]

(59) a. ki- kombe ch- a kahawa   'cup containing coffee'
          cup   coffee   ?'cup belonging to coffee'

     b. ki- kombe ch- a Juma   'cup belonging to Juma'
                                ?'cup containing Juma'

To the extent that a container can be said to "possess" its contents [Polomé 1967:132], N_1 (cup) "possesses" N_2 (coffee) in (59a). But in (59b) N_2 (Juma) "possesses" N_1 (cup); and here we can see that it is possession in the more traditional sense [Ashton 1949:55]. Here again, the variation in the direction of "control" between N_1 and N_2 depends upon the nature of the entities linked by -A and speaker/hearer presuppositions about how such entities may be related to one another: containers control their contents, i.e. contain them, while people control things, i.e. own them. The reverse relationship for either pair of entities seems odd.

It is important to recognize that it is the directionality of the *message* conveyed by -A in the preceding examples which varies, not the *meaning* of -A itself: in all examples N_2 is backgrounded; that is, its omission would not result in reference to an entity entirely different from that specified by the original -A phrase, e.g. "coffee" or "Juma" instead of "cup". Omission of N_1 would however cause such a change in reference. The non-centrality of N_2 as opposed to N_1 is *always* expressed by -A.

6. Paraphrase Relations

While we have been able to identify -A's constant and invariable semantic contribution and show how differences in the context are responsible for the variety of messages which it can convey, we are confronted by another problem: to show that context influences the message conveyed by a particular form is not to define it. That is, since the meaning of -A is so vague, i.e. backgrounding one entity by setting up a relationship between it and some other entity, identifying it does not tell us what governs its occurrence, i.e. as opposed to other forms in the language. Recall that we have seen other forms in Swahili which may be used to express some of the relations also expressed by -A, e.g. -i- conveys relations of benefit, receipt and lieutenancy. Only if we can describe -A in terms of how it differs from other forms in the language will it become possible to *define* it in such a way that we can distinguish it from all other forms in the language. That is, "dans la langue, il n'y que des differences..." [de Saussure 1922:166].

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[5]I am indebted to T. Hinnebusch for pointing this out to me.

6.1. __Paraphrases with -i-__ . One way in which we may be able to
get closer to an adequate definition of -A is to compare it with
forms which appear to coincide semantically. While paraphrases do
not constitute definitions, they may help us to describe -A's
semantic contribution more narrowly. An obvious candidate for such
a comparison is the prepositional suffix (-i-) because it para-
phrases -A in expressing relations of benefit, receipt and
lieutenancy. So for example the pairs of sentences in (60) and
(61) below are usually given by native speakers as paraphrases of
one another:

(60) a.   ni- li- andika barua   y- a Hasan
          I- past-write   letter

     b.   ni- li- mu- andik- i- a   Hasan barua
          I- past-him-write- to/for

          'I wrote Hasan a letter', i.e. for his sake (benefit), to
          give him (receipt), instead of him (lieutenancy)

(61) a.   ni- li- pika ch- akula ch- a Hasan
          I- past-cook   food

     b.   ni- li- pik- i- a   Hasan ch- akula
          I- past-cook-to/for   food

          'I cooked Hasan food', i.e. for his sake, to give him, instead
          of him

     Neither -i- nor -A specify whether a beneficiary, recipient,
or lieutenancy relationship is being expressed; this must be inferred
from the wider context. Both are, therefore, equally imprecise in
their indication of these relations. However, many uses of -A cannot
be paraphrased with -i- . These are of two types:

     i. Situations where a mechanical paraphrase is possible, but
the message conveyed by one is unlike that conveyed by the other:

(62)   a- li- poteza pesa   z- a- ngu
         he-past-lose   money

         'he lost my money', i.e. money which was mine or was to be mine
         [Detriment]

While -A in (62) can only convey a message which relates "me" to
"money", -i- can convey a message where someone else is related to
"money", as well as the message where "I" am so associated:

(63)   a- li- ni-potez-e- a   mimi pesa
         he-past-me-lose- to/for me   money

         'he lost _his money_ and losing it had an effect on me', i.e. he
         lost me his money [Ethical Dative]
     OR 'he lost money which was for me' [=(62)]

ii. Situations where even a mechanical paraphrase is impossible:

(64) ni- li- leta ki- kombe ch- a kahawa
      I- past-bring   cup   coffee

      'I brought cup containing coffee'
  OR 'I brought coffee cup'
  OR 'I brought cup-like container for the coffee'

While several relationships between "cup" and "coffee" are possible when they are linked by -A, none are possible if (64) is paraphrased with an -i- construction:

(65) *ni- li- let- e- a   kahawa ki- kombe
       I- past-bring-to/for coffee   cup

   If we were to use message categories such as "benefit", "receipt", "detriment", "ethical dative", "container/contents", etc. to distinguish different meanings for -A we would have to do the same thing for each element with which it paraphrases only in certain circumstances. That is, we would have to propose that $-A_1$ meaning "benefit", "receipt", and "lieutenancy" paraphrases with $-i_{-1}$ having the same meaning, but that it does not paraphrase with $-i_{-2}$ meaning "ethical dative". In this approach $-A_2$ would be the form which expresses "container/contents", "ownership", "location", etc.

6.2. <u>The problem of limiting the number of paraphrases</u>. One problem with paraphrastic comparison is that there is no limit to the number of paraphrastic equivalents existing in a language. So for instance, while -A (i.e. $-A_1$) paraphrases with -i- (i.e. $-i_{-2}$), one might also say that it paraphrases with a zero morpheme and/or a change in noun ordering after the verb:

(66) a. [-A] ni- li- ki- kata ki- dole ch- a mw- anamume
             I- past-it- cut   finger   man
                                   N_1 N_2

     b. [∅]   ni- li- m- kata mw- anamume ki- dole
              I- past-him-cut N_2 N_1

             'I cut the/a man's finger' [Body part]

These sentences differ formally in that -A is used to link "finger" and "man" in (66a) while it is not so used in (66b). Still the inference is made in (66b) that the finger belongs to the man. In fact, it must be attached to him in (66b) while it need not be so attached in (66a).[6]

Although -A and ∅ paraphrase in (66), they do not always do so. Hence (67b) below in impossible:

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[6]This distinction is often characterized as "alienable" versus "inalienable" possession.

(67) a. ni- li- ki- leta ki- kombe ch- a kahawa
         I- past-it- bring   cup   coffee

     b. *ni- li- i- leta kahawa ki- kombe
         I- past-it-bring coffee   cup

        'I brought cup containing coffee/coffee cup/container for
        coffee'

     Given these examples, an analytical procedure based upon para-
phrastic equivalents would now recognize three -A's:

A_1: "the -A of benefit/receipt/lieutenancy", paraphrasing -i- ;

A_2: "the -A of body parts", paraphrasing ϕ ;

A_3: "the -A of container/contents, direction, etc.", paraphrasing
        neither -i- nor ϕ .

The problem here is that if we were to use paraphrase as the criterion
for defining meaning we could continue subdividing indefinitely since
some paraphrase is always possible for any message expressed in a
language. So in addition to the "-A of benefit/receipt/lieutenancy"
and the "-A of body parts" there would be the "-A of container/contents",
the "-A of direction", the "-A of modification", etc. All could un-
doubtedly be given formal status on the basis of paraphrase.

6.3. <u>Situations where -A and -i- are not paraphrases</u>. The failure
of paraphrastic comparisons to work definitively and non-arbitrarily
suggests that we look more carefully at those situations where para-
phrase is possible. We already noted that the sentences where -A
paraphrases ϕ are not exactly equivalent, i.e. that one implies some-
thing the other does not. We find that the same is also true of situ-
ations where -A paraphrases -i-. While -A may convey messages of
benefit, receipt and lieutenancy, it may also convey one of ownership;
that is N_2 in the -A construction may be associated with N_1 without
any implication that it benefit from the activity expressed by the
verb:

(68)   ni- li- andika barua y- a Hasan
        I- past-write   letter

        'I wrote Hasan's letter, not someone else's'

     The same cannot be said for -i- . When it occurs on a verb there
is *always* a link between some entity and the activity described. In
fact, if a speaker wishes to unambiguously convey a relationship of
ownership between two nouns following a verb carrying -i- , he or
she must use additional linguistic elements, e.g. -A, because -i-
alone does not necessarily imply a relationship between the nouns.
This can be seen by comparing the examples in (69): in (69a) the first
noun following the verb is linked to the second one by -A while in (69b)

it is linked to another noun by -A. If -i- necessarily implied a relationship between the two nouns, sentences such as (69b) would be impossible:

(69) a. ni- li- mu- andik- i- a   Hasan barua y- a- ke
         I- past- him- write- to/for N_1 N_2 PC_2- A- his_1

     'I wrote Hasan's letter for him' [Lieutenancy]
          N_1 N_2 N_1

    b. ni- li- mu- andik- i- a Hasan barua y- a Ali
                                 N_1 N_2 N_3

     'I wrote Ali's letter to/for Hasan' [Benefit/Receipt]
          N_e N_2 N_1

  NOT *'I wrote Hasan's letter to/for Ali'
          N_1 N_2 N_3

   It is now possible to identify how -i- and -A differ, even though they paraphrase in certain circumstances. First of all, -A is less precise than -i- , although they both are somewhat imprecise (cf. 6.1). Secondly, -i- specifically implies that some entity (named by one of the nouns following the verb) is involved in the activity described by the verb while -A does not. -A is neutral regarding any involvement of N_2 in the activity expressed by the verb. "Involvement" here is defined in terms of an entity's relative importance (as opposed to other entities) in the bringing about of an event [Port 1972]. This means that an agent, for example, is more involved in (the bringing about of) an event than a beneficiary or recipient. But they are still involved, although secondarily, since the event took place *because of* them, i.e. presumably it would not have occurred at all had it not been because such a participant needed the agent to bring about the event. In this framewrok, an uninvolved participant is one which is not responsible for the bringing about of an event; an inanimate "patient" object is a paradigmatic example.

   If the difference between -A and -i- is that the latter specifies some entity's involvement in an activity while the other does not, we can expect that the two will paraphrase in just those situations where N_2 in the -A construction *cannot* be viewed as an entity which is somehow responsible for an event's occurrence. And this is indeed what we find. So (70) below is unacceptable because the only message possible is one where "coffee" receives "cup" and "coffee" doesn't usually play such a role in real world events, i.e. recipients are usually human, rarely (if ever) are they inanimate objects:

(70) *ni- li- i- let- e- a kahawa ki- kombe   (cf. (65))
      I- past-it- bring- to/for coffee   cup

    'I brought cup to/for coffee'

Presumably if "coffee" were anthropomorphized in a story, (70) would be acceptable.

Similarly, we find that a "part/whole" relationship cannot be paraphrased by -i- because the "whole" cannot "benefit" from an action upon a "part" of it, e.g. (71b):

(71) a. ni- li- shona m- kono w- a koti
       I- past-sew   sleeve   coat

     'I sewed sleeve of/to put on coat'

   b. *ni- li- i- shon- e- a koti m- kono
       I- past-it-sew- to/for coat   sleeve

And how often is a "cheek" responsible for the event of "hitting" as would be implied if (72b) were acceptable:

(72) a. a- li- ni- piga kofi l- a shavu
       he-past-me- hit   blow   cheek

     'he hit me on the cheek'

   b. *a- li- li- pig- i- a shavu l- a- ngu kofi
       he-past-it- hit- to/for   cheek$_1$ PC$_1$-A- my blow

     'he hit blow to my cheek'

The fact that -A and -i- *do* paraphrase in certain situations may be similarly understood. Although the noun linked by -A, i.e. N_2, is not necessarily involved in the activity described by the verb with which it occurs in a sentence, it may be so involved unless some other entity is already involved, i.e. as indicated by the presence of -i- . Hence involvement of N_2 in an -A phrase can only be inferred when there is no -i- on the verb specifying that relationship for some *other* noun. (The identity of the noun to which -i- refers is usually apparent from the object concord marker which the verb carries.) It is important to recognize however that this is an inference made under these circumstances; it is not something specified by -A itself.

It is now possible to see that -i- and -A always contrast in the same say, regardless of whether or not paraphrase is possible. That is, the reason why -i- *can* paraphrase -A in one situation is the same as the reason why it cannot in another. That is, they paraphrase when N_2 in the -A phrase can be viewed as a participant involved in the bringing about of the activity described by the verb; and they cannot paraphrase when it cannot be so viewed. Furthermore, this constant difference between -i- and -A enables us to explain why one construction doesn't paraphrase all the messages possible with the other when they do paraphrase: the reason why -A cannot be used to paraphrase the "ethical dative" message possible with -i- , e.g. (63), is that first person singular

refers to an entity in the world which is too important (in the world "I" live in) *not* to be mentioned in the verb (with -i-) if "I" am at all responsible for bringing about the activity described therein. So if "I" am not mentioned in the verb, i.e. if "I" follow a particle used to "background" one entity in terms of another, my non-involvement will be assumed (by speaker and hearer alike).

It is important to recognize here that if -A were not a semantic unity, the observed consistency in paraphrasability would not be obtained. That is, we would not expect to find that the reason why -A could paraphrase in one situation was the same as the reason why it could not in another instance. But we do find such a regularity and the consistent difference enables us to predict when paraphrase is possible, i.e. when N_2 in the -A phrase can be viewed as an entity involved in bringing about the activity described in the verb co-occurring with it in a sentence, -i- may be used to paraphrase, and vice versa. The paraphrastic evidence then also suggests that -A is a single form with a single semantic value.

7. Conclusions

In this paper we have suggested that past analyses of the particle -A are misleading because they imply that the different messages which it conveys are due to variation in -A itself, i.e. its meaning. We have demonstrated that such an assumption is not supported by the data in two ways:

i. by illustrating how different messages correlate in a non-arbitrary fashion with differences in the context in which -A occurs; and

ii. by showing that the difference between -A and another form the language (-i-) remains constant, regardless of whether or not they paraphrase in a particular situation.

The observed consistency in the difference between the two forms plus the non-arbitrary relationship between the message and the context in which -A occurs suggests that -A is in fact a single form with a single meaning, i.e. it is a single *sign* in the Saussurean sense [de Saussure 1922].

Even though we have been able to show that differences in the messages conveyed by a particular form (-A) are not necessarily *proof* that it has more than one meaning, we have also found that the form itself is semantically very imprecise. Thus far we know only that -A is used to background an entity (or activity) named by a noun (N_2) by setting up a relationship between it and some other entity, also named by a noun (N_1). We have also learned that -A does not specify participant involvement in events, that

involvement for an entity may only be inferred in certain circum-
stances, viz. when N_2 is an entity which can plausibly be seen to
be somehow involved in an event's occurrence and there is no -i-
suffix on the verb specifying such involvement for some other
entity. The fact that we can describe precisely the circumstances
in which particular messages are possible supports the claim that
it is not variations in the meaning of -A which are responsible
for different messages but rather, differences in the context in
which it is used are determinative.

   While comparing -A with paraphrasing forms in Swahili enables
us to describe it in terms of (negative) differences, this des-
cription in itself does not constitute a *definition*. That is,
knowing what -A does *not* express is not the same as knowing what it
does signify. We can only begin to fully understand how -A
functions in the grammar, i.e. what governs speaker choice of this
particular linguistic form on any given occasion of its use, when
we identify what it grammatically opposes: "dés que l'on compare
entre eux lex signes--termes positifs--...on ne peut plus parler
des differences... Entre eux il n'y a qu'opposition" [de Saussure:
1922:167]. A definitive characterization of -A must therefore re-
flect its oppositional nature.

   We have seen in this paper that -A and -i- express different
kinds of semantic information: -i- specifies something about parti-
cipant involvement in an activity while -A does not. It merely
relates entities to one another. Since -A and -i- deal with
different types of semantic substance, they cannot be in semantic
opposition in the grammar. An adequate definition of -i- would
therefore be one which characterizes it in terms of forms in the
language into which it enters into opposition, i.e. other forms
concerned with participant involvement in events.[7] Similarly, in
order to define -A we must describe it in terms of its relation to
other forms in the language which are concerned with the same
semantic substance, i.e. relationships between things. In this way
it will be possible to formulate an oppositional characterization
of -A.

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   [7]In Port [1972:161-62], a characterization of -i- is provided
which defines it in terms of its relationship to other verbal suf-
fixes, also concerned with participant. Specifically, an opposition
is provided between the prepositional suffix -i- and the causative
suffix -ish-/-iz-. They are opposed to each other in that the
prepositional designates a new participant role whose contribution to
the event's occurrence is less than that of the agent himself while
the causative indicates the presence of a participant who is more
responsible for the event than the agent.

Although we cannot ascertain prior to analysis whether or not a given linguistic form is semantically opposed to another, it is possible to suggest one candidate for such analysis. This is the particle NA, defined as a conjunction by Swahilists. Like -A, it is used to link events as well as concrete objects to one another. The difference between -A and NA appears to lie in the nature of the relationship which they (respectively) convey. While -A sets up a relationship which is asymmetrical, NA appears to establish one which is symmetrical. So while -A links two nouns in such a way that one (N_2) is "backgrounded" with respect to the other (N_1), NA relates two nouns in such a way that neither is less relevant than the other for the scene being described. (Recall that N_2 in an -A construction was somehow less prominent in the scene being described by the speaker than N_1, cf. 5.3.) The fact that -A and NA differ in terms of symmetricality can easily be seen by placing both in the same environment, as below:

(73)   ni- li- leta   ki- kombe   ch- a   kahawa
       I- past-bring   cup   coffee
                       N_1 -A N_2

   'I brought cup containing coffee'
   'I brought coffee cup'
   'I brought cuplike container for coffee'

(74)   ni- li- leta   ki- kombe   na   kahawa
                       N_1 NA N_2

   'I brought the/a cup and the/some coffee'
   'I brought the/a cup with the/some coffee

In (73) we know that N_2 is backgrounded with respect to N_1 because the event described remains the same regardless of whether or not N_2 is mentioned; the event involves the bringing of one entity (cup) but not necessarily the bringing of the other (unless of course it is in the cup). This is not the case however in (74); the event described involves necessarily the bringing of *two* entities rather than one. If one is omitted, the activity described is no longer the same, i.e. one entity (not two) is brought. Thus it appears that -A and NA oppose one another in terms of the nature of the relationship which they express; NA establishes a relationship in which the two linked items are equally prominent in the event or situation being described, i.e. no one is more important for an adequate description than the other. -A on the other hand sets up a relationship which is not equal; one entity is more important than the other for an accurate account of the event being described.

Although this brief comparison of -A and NA suggests that they do oppose each other in the Swahili grammatical system, the nature of their opposition cannot be precisely formulated without a more complete understanding of NA, i.e. how it is used to convey

(different) messages, e.g. "with" versus "and" (see (74)). Thus, while we can conclude that -A is semantically unitary, manipulated by speakers to convey a variety of messages according to differences in the context in which it is used, any conclusions about its oppositional nature must be regarded as necessarily preliminary and therefore candidates for further analysis.

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