Suppletive kinship terms in the Bantu language family: A typological and historical analysis

Jens Fleischhauer

Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, Germany

Comparative Niger-Congo Workshop

Topic

Investigation of suppletive kinship terms in the Bantu languages from a comparative and historical perspective.

Research questions

1. What patterns of suppletion do we find in the Bantu languages?
2. What conclusions can we draw about the development of kinship terms and possessor marking?

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Essentially, I confirm Van de Velde's (to appear) synchronic and diachronic statements on the suppletion of kinship terms in Bantu based on a larger data sample.

Brief outline

Part 1: Typology of suppletion patterns of kinship terms (synchronic study)
Part 2: Speculations on the etymology of kinship terms ('father')

Kinship terms

Kinship terms: relational nouns expressing a 'family' relationship between two individuals ('referent' and 'anchor' in the terminology of Östen Dahl & Koptevskaja-Tamm 2001, 201).

(1) $[\![\text{mother}]\!]$: $\lambda y.\lambda x.[\text{mother-of}(x,y)]$
$\rightarrow$ 'x is mother of y'

---

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Although such nouns occur in absolute uses (2a) [= implicit anchor], they usually take an argument which is realized like an ordinary possessor (cf. (2b) with (2c)).

(2) a. *The mother left the room.*
b. *The mother of the boy left the room/ The boy's mother left the room.*
c. *The cover of the book is red/ The photograph on the book's cover was shot in June 1949* [...][a].

[a] https://academic.oup.com/book/35018/chapter-abstract/298798750?redirectedFrom=fulltext

Pronominal possession: irregular morphology

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I. With kinship terms, unlike with other nouns, the possessor suffix is affixed directly to the possessum, e.g., Swahili:

(3) a. *ki-tabu ch-angu*
7-book 7-1SG.POSS
'my book'

b. *baba-ngu*
father-1SG.POSS
'my father'

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II. Pronominal possessor affixes exclusively restricted to kinship terms, e.g., Gĩkũyũ:

(3) a. *i-buku ri-a-ku*
5-book 5-ASSOC-2SG.POSS
'your book'

b. *maitu-gwo*
mother-2SG.POSS
'your mother'

Pronominal possession: irregular morphology

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III. Possessor marking through **suppletive kinship terms**, e.g., Gĩkũyũ:

(3) a. *baba*
'my father'
b. *thoguo*
'your father'
c. *ithe*
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> *[S]uppletion is a relation between signs X and Y such that the semantic difference 'd' between X and Y is maximally regular [...], while the formal (i.e. phonological) difference d between them is maximally irregular.*
>
> *(Mel'čuk, 2000, 510)*

Suppletion is a gradual phenomenon; its clearest instance is the use of etymologically unrelated word forms.

Question & Data

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Restrictions regarding data selection
In languages that have suppletive kinship terms, not all kinship terms are suppletive.
It seems that when there is suppletion, the nouns for 'mother' and/or 'father' are always affected.

Restriction of the study to nouns with the meaning **'mother'** and **'father'**,

i. for better comparability of the languages,
ii. because a complete paradigm is more likely to be documented in grammars for these forms than for other kinship terms.

Restriction to **singular possessors**,

iii. because forms like 'my father' occur more frequently in grammars that forms like 'our father'.

Language sample: 35 languages

Guthrie classes	Languages
A	Eton (A.71), Ewondo (A.72)
D	Mituku (D.13), Zimba (D.26)
E	Gĩkũyũ (E.51), Kimeru (E.53), Digo (E.73)
G	Chasu/Pare (G.22), Sambaa (G.23), Swahili (G.42), Makwe (G.402)
JD	Kinyarwanda (JD.61), igiHa (JD.66)
JE	Runyoro-Rutooto (JE.12), Luganda (JE.15), Lubukusu (JE.31) Gusii (JE.42)
K	Luvale (K. 14), Simbunda (K.15), Silozi (K.21), SiLuyana (K.31)
N	Chimpoto (N.14), Chitumbuka (N.21), Chichewa (N.31)
P	Makinde (P.23), Ekoti (P.311), Chuwabo (P.34)
R	Oshivambo (R.21), Herero (R.31), Yeyi (R.41)
S	Shona (S.10), Northern Sotho (S.32), Xhosa (S.41), Zulu (S.42), Northern Ndebele (S.44)

Sources: Various sources, including grammars and informant interviews.
Note of caution: The data sample only contains orthographic data; unfortunately, it is not possible to make statements about the actual phonology of the forms. Information on tone is also missing in most cases.

Suppletion [23 (65.7%)] vs no suppletion [12 (34.3%)]

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[1] Only the form for 'mother' in the sample.

Suppletion patterns

	Type 1	**Type 2**	**Type 3**	**Type 4**
1SG.POSS	A	A	A	A
2SG.POSS	A	B	B	B
3SG.POSS	B	A	B	C

Type 1: Speech act participants vs non-speech act participants ($1 = 2 \neq 3$)

Type 2: addressee vs others ($2 \neq 1 = 3$)

Type 3: speaker vs others ($1 \neq 2 = 3$)

Type 4: each person distinct ($1 \neq 2 \neq 3$)

Split patterns: Different suppletion patterns for 'mother' and 'father', or only of the two nouns exhibits suppletion.

Suppletion patterns in the Bantu family

Type 1 ($1 = 2 \neq 3$)	—
Type 2 ($2 \neq 1 = 3$)	—
Type 3 ($1 \neq 2 = 3$)	—
Type 4 ($1 \neq 2 \neq 3$)	Kinyarwanda, Eton, Zulu, Mituku, Gusii, Xhosa, Ewondo, Runyoro-Rutooto, Yeyi, Sambaa, Northern Ndebele, Luvale, Herero, Chitumbuku, igiHa, Oshivambo (n = 16)
Split type	Digo, Gĩkũyũ, Kimeru, Simbunda, Chimpoto, SiLuyana, Luganda (n = 7)

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'mother'	**'father'**	**Language**
Type 1	Type 4	Digo, Gĩkũyũ, Kimeru, Simbunda
no suppletion	Type 2	Chimpoto
Type 4	no suppletion	SiLuyana, Luganda

Example split type 1/4: Gĩkũyũ (E.51)

	'mother'	**'father'**
1SG.POSS	*maitu*	*baba*
2SG.POSS	*maitu-gwo*	*thoguo*
3SG.POSS	*nyina wao*	*ithe*
	mother 3SG.POSS	

Thoguo 'your father' is a lexicalized form, the stem *tho-* does not exist in the present language.

Africa vs New Guinea

Baerman (2014) presents an analysis of suppletive kinship terms in languages from Papua-New Guinea (42 languages from different families).

Caution: Comparison with results from my study is only partially possible as Baerman's analysis is not restricted to kinship terms meaning 'mother' and 'father'.

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Patterns in their order of frequency (in Baerman's sample)

(4) $1 \neq 2 = 3$ (Type 3) >
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Hypothesis: The difference between Baerman's Papua sample and the Bantu languages with regard to the preferences of the suppletion patterns can be explained diachronically.

Diachronic hypotheses 1: Suppletion is not an innovation

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Evidence: We find remnants of suppletion in languages that no longer show suppletion in current language use:

(5) a. *mama-ngu* [Swahili]
mother-1SG.POSS
'my mother'

b. *mama-ko*
mother-2SG.POSS
'your mother'

c. *mama-ke*
mother-3SG.POSS
'his/her mother'

Johnson's (1939, 339, 347) lists *nyoko* 'your mother' and *nina* 'mother' as additional forms beside *mama* 'mother'. The forms are called 'old', which are used either only in poetry or abusive.

Diachronic hypotheses 2: '1 ≠ 2 ≠ 3' goes back to '1 ≠ 2 = 3'

2. The synchronic most frequent suppletion pattern in the sample (1 ≠ 2 ≠ 3) goes back historically to a pattern in which the noun for 'father' – maybe also 'mother' – had the same stem in the context of POSS.2SG and POSS.3SG (1 ≠ 2 = 3).

→ The same claim is essentially made by Van de Velde (to appear, 20–21).

Reconstructions in 'Bantu Lexical Reconstructions 3' (BLR3; Bastin et al., 2002

Four reconstructed basic etymons meaning '(my/his/her) father'. The etymon for 'your father' is considered to be derived from the one for 'his/her father'.

(6) **Reconstructed basic etymons**

a. **bààbá* 'father'
b. **tààtá* 'father, my father'
c. **pàpá* 'father'
d. **cé* 'his father'

(7) **Reconstructed derived etymon**

**có* 'your father'

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I will argue below both forms share the same stem and the vowels – *-ó* and *-é* – represent possessor affixes.

‘my father’

Distributional differences (BLR3)

(8)
a. **bààbá* Guthrie zones: C, E, F, G, J, N, P, S
b. **tààtá* Guthrie zones: A, B, C, E, H, J, K, L, M, P, S
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My sample

Reflexes of **bààbá* are basically restricted to languages of Zone E and Zone S (two exceptions: Swahili (G.42) and Chuwabo (P.34)). Reflexes of **tààtá* show the widest distribution. **Pàpá* is attested in only one language from Zone S (Northern Sotho).

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Hypothesis

The three forms go back to a common form. Perhaps **tààtá*, as this has the widest distribution in my sample. Final evidence for a reconstructed form must be attested sound changes (independent of this particular form).

Meeussen (1967) also gives the form **taatá* as the reconstruction for ‘my father’. De Wolf (1971, 53) reconstructs a form **tata* for Proto-Benue-Congo.

‘your father’

Form	Languages
so	Mituku, Digo, Kinyarwanda, igiHa, Runyoro-Rutooto
iso/ uso	Eton, Ewondo, Gusii, Luvale, Chitumbaka
tho	Gĩkũyũ
xo	Oshivambo
sho	Yeyi
isho	Sambaa
iho	Herero
ihlo	Zulu, Xhosa, Northern Ndebele

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The forms appear more uniform if we ignore – for the moment – the initial vowel. I argue later that the *i-* is part of the stem.

The initial vowel cannot be analyzed synchronously as an augment, which is realized as additional *u-* in, for instance, Zulu:

(9) a. ***u****-baba*
AUG-father.1SG.POSS
‘my father’

b. ***u****y-ihlo*
AUG-father.2SG.POSS
‘your father’

c. ***u****y-ise*
AUG-father.3SG.POSS
‘his/her father’

(Doke, 1927 citet after Güldemann, 1999, 159)

‘your father’

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so	Mituku, Digo, Kinyarwanda, igiHa, Runyoro-Rutooto, Eton, Ewondo, Gusii, Luvale, Chitumbaka
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BLR3 gives **có* as the Proto-Bantu derived etymon for ‘your father’.

The palatal plosive *c* could as well be reconstructed as [*s*] or [*z*] (Schadeberg, 2003, 147; also Nurse, 1987, 102). Thus, the reconstruction can be basically supported by the data from my sample.

‘his/her father’

Form	Languages
se	Kinyarwanda, igiHa
ise	Mituku, Digo, Runyoro-Rutooto, Gusii, Luvale, Zulu, Xhosa, Northern Ndebele
ithe	Gĩkũyũ, Kimeru
isa	Eton
isia	Ewondo
she	Yeyi
ihe	Herero
ishe	Sambaa, Simbunda
iske	Chitumbaka
xe	Oshivambo

The languages with an initial *i-* outnumber those without an initial vowel (16:4).

BLR3 gives **cé* as the Proto-Bantu etymon for ‘his/her father’.

Hypothesis
The initial vowel *i* is part of the stem: **icé*.

One stem **ic* instead of two stems **cé* and **có*

Hypotheses

1. There was a common stem for the forms ‘your father’ and ‘his/her father’: **ic* instead of two stems **có* and **cé*; although it has an unusual vowel-initial shape.

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Meeussen (1967) also reconstructs the stems with an initial vowel: **icó* 'your father', **icé* 'his/her father'.

De Wolf (1971, 53) reconstructs a stem **itu* for Proto-Benue-Congo.

Reflexes of a stem **ic* still exists in the two non-suppletive languages Zimba (*ìs*; D.26) and SiLuyana (*it*; K.31).

(9)
a. *ìs-ánɛ́*
father-1SG.POSS
'my father'

b. *ìs-áò*
father-2SG.POSS
'your father'

c. *ìs-ákɛ́*
father-3SG.POSS
'his/her father'

(Lojenga, 2019, 486)

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2. **-ó* and **-é* are possessor affixes. Probably reduced forms of (free) possessive pronouns.

Cammenge (2002, 217) argues for a synchronic segmentation of the nouns *isɔ* ‘your father’ and *isɛ* ‘his/her father’ in Gusii into *is-ɔ* and *is-ɛ* but without further evidence.

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Older Swahili (Miehe, 1979, 161, 162) – 18. century – provides evidence for hypothesis 2:

(9) a. *babi-o*
father-2SG.POSS
'your father'

b. *babi-ye*
father-3SG.POSS
'his/her father'

We still find it in contemporary Swahili (Mpriranya, 2015, 188):

(10) a. *mke-o*
wife-2SG.POSS
'your wife'

b. *mke-we*
wife-3SG.POSS
'his wife'

→ Reduced forms of the (free) possessive pronouns *-ako* '2SG.POSS' and *-ake* '3SG.POSS'.

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3. In the course of language development, the possessor affixes have been reanalyzed as part of the stem.

Evidence is provided by Gĩkũyũ: the stem *thoguo* 'your father' is a lexicalization of *tho* 'father.2SG.POSS' + *-guo* '2SG.POSS'. *tho* is the Gĩkũyũ reflex of PB **ic-o* 'your father'.

Conclusion

Suppletive kinship terms meaning ‘father’ (probably also ‘mother’) can be reconstructed for Proto-Bantu (in line with Bastin et al., 2002; Van de Velde, to appear) and Proto-Benue-Congo. (De Wolf, 1971).

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During language evolution, possessor markers were reanalyzed as part of the stem. For 'father', an ego-based suppletion pattern ($1 \neq 2 = 3$) in PB became a 'each person distinct' pattern ($1 \neq 2 \neq 3$) in the majority of the contemporary languages that show suppletion.

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The data for 'mother' are less clear:

> *"If the forms for 'your (SG) mother' and 'his/her mother' are cognate, this isn't reflected in any segmental resemblance in the contemporary language [i.e., Mituku]."*
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> *(Van de Velde, to appear, 20)*

This statement can be generalized to the languages in my sample.

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Compared to Baerman's (2014) Papuan sample, the Bantu languages do not prove to be typologically unusual: PB showed the most frequent pattern in Baerman's sample. Whether this can be confirmed for 'mother' remains to be seen.

Future issues

Regularization: What are the preferences regarding the form used to replace the suppletive stems?

Sound changes: Is there sufficient evidence for the sound changes that would have to be assumed for the reconstructed forms to be plausible?

More languages: Increasing the sample of Bantu languages

More forms: Which other kinship terms show suppletion? Do these forms behave consistently with 'mother' and 'father'?

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Thank you very much for your attention!

References I

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Language	**father.1SG.POSS**	**father.2SG.POSS**	**father.3SG.POSS**
Eton	*tàdá*	*í↓sɔ́*	*í↓sá*
Ewondo	*tata*	*isoa*	*isia*
Mituku	*tata*	*sɔ̂*	*isɛ̂*
Gĩkũyũ	*baba*	*tho*(*guo*)	*ithe*
Kimeru	*baba*	*aba*(*gu*)	*ithe*
Digo	*baba*	*sowe*	*ise*
Sambaa	*tate*	*isho*	*ishe*
Kinyarwanda	*dada*	*so*	*se*
igiHa	*daayi*	*so*	*se*
Runyoro-Rutooto	*tata*	*so*	*ise*
Gusii	*taata*	*iso*	*ise*
Luvale	*tate*	*iso*	*ise*
Simbunda	*tate*	*tate*	*ishe*
Chitumbaka	*dada*	*uso*	*iske*
Oshivambo	*tate*	*xo*	*xe*
Herero	*tate*	*iho*	*ihe*
Yeyi	*tate*	*sho*	*she*
Zulu	*baba*	*ihlo*	*ise*
Xhosa	*tata*	*ikho*/*ihlo*	*ise*
Northern Ndebele	*bhabha*	*ihlo*	*ise*

Language	**father.1SG.POSS**	**father.2SG.POSS**	**father.3SG.POSS**
Zimba	*ìs*	*ìs*	*ìs*
Chasu	*vav-*	*vav-*	*vav-*
Swahili	*baba*	*baba*	*baba*
Makwe	*wáaw*	*wáaw*	*wáaw*
Luganda	*kita*	*kita*	*kita*
Silozi	*ndate*	*ndate*	*ndate*
SiLuyana	*it*	*it*	*it*
Chichewa	*bambo*	*bambo*	*bambo*
Makonde	*atátaá*	*atátaá*	*atátaá*
Chuwabo	*báâb-*	*báâb-*	*báâb-*
Shona	*baba*	*baba*	*baba*
Northern Sotho	*papa*	*papa*	*papa*

Regularization

Which form is the starting point for the regularization of kinship terms, i.e. the reduction of suppletive forms?

The stem, which is independent of the person of the possessor, is a reflex of :

- PB **tààtá* 'father.1SG.POSS': Swahili (*baba*), Shona (*baba*), Northern Sotho (*papa*), Makonde (*atátaá*), Chasu (*vav*), Makwe (*wáaw*), Chuwabo (*báâb*), ?Silozi (*ndate*)
- PB **ic* 'father.2/3SG.POSS': Zimba (*ìs*), SiLuyana (*it*)
- unclear: Luganda (*kita*), Chichewa (*bambo*)

Forms for ‘mother’: suppletive languages

Language	**mother.1SG**	**mother.2SG**	**mother.3SG**
Eton	*na*	*gno*	*gna*
Ewondo	*nana*	*noa*	*ngngaa*
Mituku	*ima*	*ngoko*	*nina*
Gĩkũyũ	*maitu*	*maitu*	*nyina*
Kimeru	*maitu*	*maitu*	*gina*
Sambaa	*mame*	*nyokwe*	*nine*
Kinyarwanda	*mama*	*nyoko*	*nyina*
igiHa	*kooyo*	*nyoko*	*nyina*
Runyoro-Rutooto	*maau*	*nyoko*	*nyina*
Luganda	*mmange*	*mama*	*nnyima*
Gusii	*baaba*	*nyoko*	*ngina*
Luvale	*mama*	*noko*	*naye*
SiLuyana	*mawe*	*inyoko*	*nyina*
Simbunda	*banana*	*banyoko*	*baina*
Chitumbuka	*mame*	*nyoko*	*nyina*
Oshivambo	*meme*	*nyoko*	*yina*
Herero	*mama*	*nyoko*	*ina*
Yeyi	*ma*	*nyoko*	*nyina*
Zulu	*mame*	*nyoko*	*nina*
Xhosa	*mama*	*nyoko*	*nina*
Northern Ndebele	*mma*	*nnyoko*	*nnina*

Forms for ‘mother’: non-suppletive languages

Language	**mother.1SG**	**mother.2SG**	**mother.3SG**
Zimba	*ìn*	*ìn*	*ìn*
Digo	*mayo*	*mayo*	*mayo*
Chasu	*mlala*	*mlala*	*mlala*
Swahili	*mama*	*mama*	*mama*
Makwe	*maama*	*maama*	*maama*
Lubukusu	*maayi*	*maayi*	*maayi*
Silozi	*mma*	*mma*	*mma*
Chichewa	*mayi*	*mayi*	*mayi*
Makonde	*ámaáma*	*ámaáma*	*ámaáma*
Chuwabo	*ḿmáá*	*ḿmáá*	*ḿmáá*
Shona	*mai*	*mai*	*mai*

Reconstruction in 'Bantu Lexical Reconstructions 3'

Three reconstructed basic etymons meaning '(my) mother'.

(9) a. **máá* 'my mother, mother'
b. **jìnà* 'mother'
c. **jíjà* 'mother'

Meeussen (1967, 45) gives the forms:

(10) a. *ni/ nina* 'mother'
b. *noko* 'your mother'
c. *nina* 'his/her mother'

> *"If the forms for 'your (SG) mother' and 'his/her mother' are cognate, this isn't reflected in any segmental resemblance in the contemporary language [i.e., Mituku]."*
>
> *(Van de Velde, to appear, 20)*

This statement can be generalized to the languages in my sample. De Wolf (1971, 53) reconstructs three stem already for Proto-Benue-Congo: **nina*, **noko* (probably meaning 'your mother'), **mama*.

The majority of suppletive stems for 'mother.2SG.POSS have a final *o*, but it is unclear whether this can serve as evidence for lexicalized possessive marking (as assumed for 'father.2SG.POSS').

Example: Chimpoto (N.14)

(11) a. *tati waka*
father 1SG.POSS
'my father'

b. *tateu/ tati waku*
father.2SG.POSS father 2SG.POSS
'your father'

c. *tati waki*
father 3SG.POSS
'his/her father'

(12) a. *nyongoo waka*
mother 1SG.POSS
'my mother'

b. *nyongoo waku*
mother 2SG.POSS
'your mother'

c. *nyongoo waki*
mother 3SG.POSS
'his/her mother'

It is unclear whether the suppletive form *tateu* is frequent or not.
Possibly the language looses the suppletive forms and develops in the direction