Historical Cycles of Reciprocal Marking in Bantu and the Polysemy of Proto-Bantu *-an

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The widespread Bantu verbal derivation suffix -an has been reconstructed in Proto-Bantu as a marker of reciprocity and associativity (Schadeberg 2003: 72; Schadeberg & Bostoen 2019: 182), a semantic category also known as “sociative-reciprocal” (Nedjalkov 2007). Across Bantu languages, the suffix is notoriously polysemous (Dammann 1954; Mugane 1999; Maslova 2007). It conveys meanings as diverse as sociative/collective, reciprocal, natural collective, natural reciprocal, chaining, antipassive, intensive/extensive, iterative, comitative/instrumental, body action middle, cognition middle, spontaneous event middle, mediopassive, potential, etc. (Bostoen et al. 2015). We have argued that the notion of ‘plurality of relations’, as developed by Lichtenberk (2000: 34), allows to account for the semantic extension or shift from prototypically associative meanings involving both plurality of participants and events to meanings rather uniquely pertaining to plurality of events (Bostoen et al. 2015).

The diachronic semantic evolution of the Proto-Bantu reciprocal marker *-an is at the origin of several cycles of innovation in reciprocal marking. A first common innovation consists of the emergence of morphologically complex but semantically non-compositional reciprocal suffixes incorporating Proto-Bantu *-an (cf. Dom et al. forthcoming). A second recurrent renewal is the development of reflexive/reciprocal polysemy out of the reflexive prefix (cf. Polak-Bynon 1983: 297-298; Marlo 2015: 9). In certain Bantu subgroups, these two cycles occurred successively (cf. Bostoen forthcoming).

References