

4.1 THE NOUN

4.1.1 Characteristics of the Noun

As has been noted in Section 2.2.2.3 on noun tone patterns the noun consists morphologically of a noun stem and a prefix.

One of the major typological features of Metta is the division of its inventory of nouns into a system of **morphological classes**. The noun class system is presented in Table 1 below. Another of the important typological features is the pairing of two noun classes, i.e. a singular class and a plural class, into one **gender**. The combination of noun classes into genders is shown in Table 2.

4.1.2 The noun Class and Gender System

Metta has 11 regular noun classes which are summarised in Table 1 below. The criteria used for establishing them are the **noun class prefix** (Npf) and the **concord element** (CE). The latter consists of a consonant (C_1) and a floating tone. Example (1a) illustrates this with a noun of Ncl 7; The concord element of this class consists of the consonant *z* and a floating |H| tone. The definite article *zé* is completed by adding the vowel *e*. In example (1b) the possessive pronoun ‘my’ is formed by adding the sequence *um* to the concord element. For certain noun classes the C_1 is preceded by a homorganic syllabic nasal (N). This is illustrated in examples (2a) and (2b) for Ncl 8.

- (1) (a) əbén zé ‘the farm’
 (b) əbén zúm ‘my farm’
- (2) (a) ɪbén mbé ‘the farms’
 (b) ɪbén mbúm ‘my farms’

Example (3a), however, shows that the article is subject to tone change, i.e. the H tone is realised as M after a preceding L tone, while the tone on the possessive pronoun in the same environment remains stable, i.e. H (example (3b)). The

possessive pronoun is therefore used to find the tone of the concord element which is used as one of the criteria to determine the class of a noun.

- (3) (a) ìbàm mbē ‘the bags’
(b) ìbàm mbúm ‘my bags’

Table 1
The Regular Noun Classes

Ncl	Npf	CE	Example
1	i-	w `	i-fôn ìwùm ‘my chief’
2	mi-	mb ´	mi-fôn mbúm ‘my chiefs’
3	i-	w ´	i-bâb ìwúm ‘my wing’
6	ə-	z ´	ə-bén èzúm ‘my breasts’
6a	mi-	mb `	mi-wúd mbùm ‘my oil’
7	ə-	z ´	ə-círí èzúm ‘my umbrella’
8	i-	mb ´	i-círí mbúm ‘my umbrellas’
9	N-	z `	n-dōŋ ì-zùm ‘my horn’
10	N-	t ´	n-dōŋ ìtúm ‘my horns’
13	tì-	t ´	tì-bâb tìwúm ‘my wings’
19	fì-	f ´	fì-nèn ìfúm ‘my bird’

In Table 1 no tones are shown on the prefixes, because the tone of the prefix is analyzed as being part of the noun stem.

Table 1 demonstrates, that neither the noun class prefix nor the consonant of the concord element alone can sufficiently distinguish these noun classes. But even these two features together do not suffice to distinguish between all the classes. It is only when the tone of the concord element is added that class 1 can be distinguished from class 3 and class 2 can be distinguished from class 6a.

But even on the basis of these three criteria the classes 6 and 7 cannot be distinguished from each other. It makes sense, however, to separate them, since class 6 is a plural class associated with the singular class 3, and class 7 is a singular class, which takes class 8 as its plural.

The singular noun classes are: 1, 3, 7, 9, 19. The plural classes are 2, 6, 8, 10, 13. The fact that all nouns of certain classes are singular while those of the remaining classes are plural gives rise to the notion of gender. A gender is a unit of two classes, containing the same set of nouns, the one having singular and the other having plural meaning.

According to the noun classes listed in Table 1 one would expect the existence of the singular/plural genders: 1/2, 3/6, 7/8, 9/10, plus the single class gender 6a. Gender 6a is neither singular nor plural, because all its nouns depict liquids, i.e. they are mass nouns. (But see the function of this class as a plural class for the singular class 3.)

There are, however, singular classes which associate with more than one plural class. Likewise there are two plural classes, the members of which are in several different singular classes. The gender pairing is summarised in Table 2. The lines in the “Pairing” column connect the singular and plural classes which have a gender relationship.

Table 2
The Singular / Plural Pairing of Metta Noun Classes

Singular Class	Pairing	Plural Class
1		2
3		6
		6a
7		8
9		10
19		13

As Table 2 indicates, the singular class 3 has plurals in the classes 6, 6a, and 13, the singular class 7 has plurals in class 2 and 8 and the singular class 9 has plurals in the classes 2 and 10. The plural class 2 has singulars in classes 1, 7 and 9, and the plural class 13 has singulars in the classes 3 and 19.

There are, of course, also a considerable number of nouns which occur only in one class, either in the singular or in the plural.

In the following subsection the class membership and gender pairing is further illustrated.

4.1.3 Illustrations of class Membership and Gender Pairing

In this subsection the contents of the different nouns classes are briefly illustrated and some irregularities are discussed.

Generally one can observe that there is no clear cut correspondence between semantic classes and noun classes, although some very broad generalisations are possible. In this way one can make the following observations:

Table 3
General observations about the Semantics of Noun Classes

1. nouns depicting persons occur generally in Gender 1/2
2. nominalisations referring to the agent mostly occur in Gender 1/2
3. many of the loan words occur in Gender 1/2
4. liquids generally occur in noun class 6a
5. small objects tend to occur in gender 19/13

Examples for persons in gender 1/2 are cited under (4b - c).

- (4) (a) ifôn wē / mifôn mbē *'the chief/the chiefs'*
(b) ηw à wē / mηw à mbē *'the god/the gods'*
(c) əyí wē / məyí mbé *'the woman/the women'*

Nominalisations depicting the semantic category ACTOR are illustrated under (5a – b).

- (5) (a) əmàènhì wē / màmàènhì mbē *'the learner/the learners'*
(b) àtɔ̀è wē / mətɔ̀è mbē *'the carver/the carvers'*
(c) əcwḕè wē / məcwḕè *'the teacher/the teachers'*

Loan words in gender 1/2 are illustrated under (6 a – c).

- (6) (a) mītùè wē / mbìmītùè mbē *'the motor
vehicle'* (English)
(b) ìηgwàbá? wē / mìηgwàbá? mbé *'lion'* (Hausa)
(c) kwínyàm wē / m̀kwínyàm *'pig'* (Mungaka)

Liquids in Ncl 6a are illustrated under (7 a – c).

- (7) (a) m̀nìb mbē *'water'*
(b) m̀wúd mbē *'oil'*
(c) m̀cêη mbē *'urine'*

Small objects in gender 19/13 are illustrated under (8 a – b), which shows ‘the knife’ which is the small counterpart of the ‘the cutlass’ in Ncl 19, while the latter occurs in Ncl 3. Further small objects under gender 19/13 are illustrated under (9 a – c).

- (8) (a) fíbí fē ‘the knife’ Ncl 19
 (b) íbí wē ‘the cutlass’ Ncl 3
 (9) (a) fìgw d fē ‘the fly maggot’
 (b) fìjì fē ‘the fly’
 (c) fìkwà’ì fé ‘the gravel’

4.1.3.1 The Gender 1/2

Besides the regular prefixes listed in Table 1, this gender contains nouns with a number of different prefixes which are considered irregular. This is because they do not occur in sufficient number to warrant setting them up as alternative regular prefixes for this gender.

Table 4
Irregular Prefixes in Gender 1/2

Ex. No.	Sg. Prefix	Pl. Prefix	Example	
(a)	0 ~ ì-	mì-	bá ~ ìbá / mìbá	‘old man’
(b)	ə-	mə-	əyí / məyí	‘woman’
(c)			ècà’è / məcà’è	‘searcher’
(d)	á-	mbì-	akyī / mbìakyī	‘live charcoal’
(e)			anjírè / mbìanjírè	‘angel’
(f)	mi-	mbì-	mìtùè / mbìmìtùè	‘motor vehicle’
(g)			mìwàrè / mbìmìwàrè	‘flowering of groundnuts’
(h)	mə-	mbì-	məfùmē / mbìməfùmē	‘wood beetle’
(i)	tì-	mbì-	tìkwìè / mbìrìkwìè	‘immortal[N]’
(j)	tə-	mbì-	təkwiè / mbìrəkwiè	‘deceased[N]’

Example (a) shows that the irregular prefix zero can alternate with \acute{z} . This phenomenon also occurs in the noun classes 9 and 10 which also have some nouns with a zero prefix.

Examples (b) and (c) belong to a number of instances where in both singular and plural prefixes the vowel has changed from \acute{i} to \emptyset . Example (b) is noteworthy for the fact that some tone rules do not apply to this noun.¹ This is the only noun we have found with the prefixes \emptyset -/ $m\emptyset$ - and the blocking of tone rules. Example (c), however, exemplifies the productive pattern of nominalisation of verbs, which forms nouns signifying the actor.

Examples (d) and (e) take the prefix \acute{a} - which seems to be derived from the word *wán* ‘child’. This is still visible in some proper names like the name *Amizàng* which means ‘child of the people of Zang’. A word which does not fit into this pattern is *aví* ‘mother, (old) lady’. The explanation is that the word was originally $\emptyset v\acute{i}$ (Ncl 7), and this is the pronunciation preferred by older people. It also must be noted that example (e) falls into this group by analogy, since it is a loan word from English and a transliteration of ‘angel’, which begins with the vowel \underline{a} . In this way example (f) is parallel to (e). It is also a loan word, adapted into the Metta phonological system from the English ‘motor’.

Examples (f) to (h) belong to a group of nouns the singular prefix of which has the form $m\acute{i}$ -, $m\emptyset$ -, which in other instances are plural prefixes. The plural of this group of nouns is then formed by adding a further prefix $mb\acute{i}$ -, notably always with a L tone. This morpheme is reminiscent of the 3rd person plural subject pronoun $mb\acute{i}$. The nouns concerned designate either loan words (example (f)), or specific animals, plants, etc., i.e. items with which many people may not be very familiar and therefore not sure of their proper class membership. One may therefore speculate that , by using a plural pronoun to indicate that the plurality of the noun a surrogate plural class was created, which in other respects has the characteristics of Ncl 2.²

¹ See example xxx for its behaviour as the N2 in an associative phrase.

² See also Section 4.1.3.3, gender 7/2

Examples (i) and (j) are similar to the examples (f) to (h), with the only difference that the singular prefix is *t̄-* or *t̄ə-*. Examples (i) and (j) are however clearly nominalizations of the verb *̄ kw̄* ‘to die’. Example (i) has a negative meaning.³ Example (j) represents a nominalisation depicting an ACTOR role, which is however different from the one represented by examples (5 a – c). Example (5b) is repeated as (10a). The form (10a) has the meaning ‘habitual carver’ while (10b) means ‘the actual carver (the one who carved the particular carving)’.

- (10) (a) *èt̄ə wē* ‘*carver*¹,
(b) *tèt̄ə wē* ‘*carver*²,

Gender 1/2 also contains the nouns in examples (11) and (12).

- (11) (a) *wán* ‘*child*’
(b) *bón* ‘*children*’
(12) (a) *wəd* ‘*person*’
(b) *bəd* ‘*people*’

The singular and plural forms of these two nouns are obviously contractions of historically older forms with their respective prefixes.

4.1.3.2 The Genders 3/6, 3/6a, and 3/13

Members of the singular class 3, which is formed with the prefix *̄-*, have their plurals in either class 6 with the prefix *ə-*, class 6a with the prefix *m̄-*, or class 13 with the prefix *t̄-*.

One needs to note that there is no singular class 5, and one can speculate that the former class 5 has fallen together with class 3.

It is not possible to make a general statement about the semantic content of class 3 or the genders it forms.

³ Negative nominalizations are not yet well understood, because they are very infrequent. It seems that only few verbs can form such nouns.

Examples

(13) to (15) illustrate the three different genders, i.e. example (13) illustrates gender 3/6, example (14) represents gender 3/6a, and example (15) exhibits gender 3/13.

- | | | |
|----------|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| (13) (a) | imíg wē / əmíg zē | <i>'moon'</i> |
| | (b) ìsà'ì wē / èsà'ì zē | <i>'net for unroped calabash'</i> |
| (14) (a) | icû wē / micû mbē | <i>'mouth'</i> |
| | (b) ìnèrì wē / mìnèrì mbē | <i>'boundary'</i> |
| (15) (a) | iswé wé / tìswé té | <i>'fibre'</i> |
| | (b) ìngǒm wé / tìngòm té | <i>'plantain'</i> |

The group of nouns occurring in the singular class 3 without a plural form is quite big. It consists largely of mass nouns (example (16)), abstracts (example (17)), and nominalisations (example (18)).

- | | | |
|------|-----------|--------------------|
| (16) | ìnàmì wē | <i>'glue, gum'</i> |
| (17) | ìngòmì wē | <i>'captivity'</i> |
| (18) | ipátí wé | <i>'warning'</i> |

4.1.3.2 The Single Class Gender 6a

When functioning as a singular class this gender contains only nouns denoting liquids (example (19)), its members are not numerous. Its prefix is *mí-*. As a plural class paired with the singular class 3 its members are semantically diverse (see example (20a – c)).

- | | | |
|----------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (19) | mitíg mbē | <i>'the venom'</i> |
| (20) (a) | icû wē / micû mbē | <i>'the mouth/the mouths'</i> |
| | (b) ìjò wē / mìjò mbē | <i>'the spear grass (sg./pl.)'</i> |
| | (c) inébí wé / minébí mbē | <i>'the family/the families'</i> |

4.1.3.3 The Genders 7/2 and 7/8

The gender 7/2 has been set up as a separate gender on account of the relatively large number of its members (approximately 40 instances) although it shares certain characteristics with the irregular portion of gender 1/2 (see Table 4, especially examples (d) to (h)). The singular has been set up tentatively as class 7 on the basis of its article being *zé*. According to its prefix *tí-* and its concord element *t'* it could also be considered to be class 13. The plural gender is formed as in gender 1/2. Examples of this group of nouns are given under (21 a – c).

- (21) (a) *tíkán zé / mb̀̀rikán mbé* *'bitterleaf'*
 (b) *t̀̀kw ñ̀̀ zē / mb̀̀rikw ñ̀̀ mbē* *'plantain stem'*
 (c) *t̀̀tàn zé / mb̀̀r̀̀tàn mbé* *'hooligan'*

The group of nouns constituting gender 7/8 is quite large and varied so that a generalisation about its semantic contents is not possible. One notices however, that a good number of animals (example (22)), body parts (example (23)), and a certain type of nominalisation (example (24)) are contained in this gender.

- (22) *əbí? zē / ̀̀bí? mbē* *'owl'*
 (23) *əbó zē / ̀̀bó mbē* *'hand'*
 (24) *əfáání / ̀̀fáání* *'forceps'*

The group of nouns in the singular class 7 which do not form a plural is also quite diverse in its semantic contents. It also contains mass nouns (see examples (25a + b) as well as nominalisations of the type of example (24), which are mostly abstract nouns (see (25 c + d)).

- (25) (a) *əbómí zé* *'clay'*
 (b) *əgwyí zé* *'dust'*
 (c) *əbōtì zē* *'meekness'*
 (d) *èghàmb̀̀* *'conversation'*

The verb roots of the nominalisations (25 a, b and d) are *f̄ bōm* ‘pasty’, *f̄ bɔti* ‘meek’, and *f̄ ghāmb̄* ‘converse[V]’.

4.1.3.4 The Gender 9/10 and 9/2

This gender also constitutes a large and semantically diverse group. Its prefix is a syllabic nasal at the same point of articulation as the first consonant of the stem. It is the same for both class 9 and class 10. The examples (26) illustrate the different points of articulation of the syllabic nasal. It is interesting to note that this is the only gender with all L tone prefixes.

- (26) (a) mbàn zē / mbàn tē ‘nail’
 (b) ndàn zē / ndàn tē ‘fight’
 (c) ngàn zē / ngàn tē ‘crocodile’

Just like gender 7/2 there is at least one instance of a gender 9/2. This gender is characterised by a singular prefix *N-* and a singular article *zē* thus forming a regular Ncl 9. The plural is formed by adding the Ncl 2 prefix *m̄-* to the singular nasal prefix. The plural article is *mbé*, just like the regular class 2 article.

- (27) ngàŋ zē / m̄ŋgàŋ mbē ‘expert’

The syllabic nasal alternates phonologically with zero. The phonological rule can be stated as

- (28) N- → 0 / ___ voiceless obstruents and nasals

which reads:

A syllabic nasal prefix becomes zero before voiceless obstruents and nasals.

Examples (29) illustrate the various phonological environments.

- (29) (a) c̄əb zē / c̄əb tē ‘protective magic’
 (b) f̄òŋ zē / f̄òŋ té ‘buffalo’

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------|-----------------|
| (c) | kà' zē / kà' tē | 'tin' |
| (d) | pà' zē / pà' tē | 'cloud' |
| (e) | sàmi zē / sàmi té | 'dancing field' |
| (f) | tàŋ zē / tàŋ tē | 'trumpet' |

Just like gender 1/2 so also gender 9/10 has a number of nouns with a zero prefix which do not conform to tone rules. This group is illustrated by examples (30 a – c).

- | | | |
|----------|-----------------|---------|
| (30) (a) | bú zē / bú tē | 'dog' |
| (b) | g b zē / g b tē | 'skin' |
| (c) | jó zē / jó tē | 'snake' |

There are also a number of nouns in class 9 without a plural (examples (30)) and also a number of nouns in class 10 without a singular (examples (32)).

- | | | |
|----------|---------|-----------------------|
| (31) (a) | sà zē | 'uproar' |
| (b) | ŋgā' zē | 'trouble' |
| (32) (a) | càd té | 'pulp' |
| (b) | fì tē | 'cover leaf on a pot' |

4.1.3.5 The Gender 19/13

This gender has a preponderance of nouns designating small objects (examples

(33)) but also nouns which do not have this semantic feature (examples (34)).

- | | | |
|----------|-----------------------|---------------|
| (33) (a) | fìjì fē / tìjì tē | 'fly' |
| (b) | fìbí fē / tìbí tē | 'small knife' |
| (34) (a) | fìkyīŋ fē / tìkyīŋ tē | 'pot' |
| (b) | fìpó' fē / tìpó' tē | 'tale' |

There are also a number of nouns, the prefixes of which are *fə-* / *tə-* instead of the regular *fɪ-* / *tɪ-* (example (35 a – b)). It must be noted that in these nouns the tone spreading rule is blocked so that the L prefix tone does not spread into the noun stem.

- (35) (a) fənón fé / tənón té *'k.o. small ant'*
(b) fəwóbé fé / təwóbé té *'small oilpalm nuts'*

4.1.4 Concluding remarks

Noun classes with their associated morphemes are an important device to disambiguate Metta utterances. There is, however, a tendency for certain nouns or groups of nouns to change their noun class, which seems to be the reason for multiple gender pairing and irregular members in certain classes. The fact that in spite of this there is little ambiguity of utterances is due to the fact that the disambiguating power of the gender system is reinforced by the cross classifying system of tone patterns both in nouns and verbs.