

Topic and focus in Bantu comparative syntax

An central question in generative approaches to information structure is **whether features like [focus] and/or [topic] are present in the derivation**. In a Minimalist spirit, we should minimise the syntactic features we postulate. In particular, we need to have evidence that

1. the superficially similar phenomena we examine are structurally the same;
2. there is no alternative that makes use of fewer features;
3. if there is a feature, this is not just a semantic or phonological but a syntactically active feature.

In this talk, I show the relevance of these three issues in **two comparative case studies** on Bantu languages. The first is the conjoint-disjoint alternation (a morphological distinction on the verb associated with post-verbal focus), and the second is subject inversion, illustrated below.

1. Underlying differences. Matengo (1) and Makhuwa (2) display highly similar Agreeing Inversion, with a postverbal subject that agrees with the verb. However, their underlying structures are different: in Matengo the postverbal subject is vP-internal, resulting in VS(O) word order, a conjoint verb form and either athetic or a subject-focus interpretation; in Makhuwa the subject is raised followed by remnant movement, resulting in V(O)S word order, a disjoint verb form and only athetic interpretation (Van der Wal 2012).

- (1) CJ Ju-a-lwal-aje mwaná gwa. [Matengo]
1SUBJ-PAST-suffer-CJ 1.child 1.my
'My child was sick.' (Yoneda 2011:759)
- (2) DJ Ni-hoó-wá n-láikha. [Makhuwa]
5SUBJ-PERF.DJ-COME 5-angel
'There came an angel.' (Van der Wal 2009)

2. Fewer features. In Matengo, the subject is topical in SV order and focal orthetic in VS order. SV/VS could be accounted for by a [focus] feature on the postverbal subject or a [topic] feature on the preverbal subject. An alternative is to assume an optional movement trigger that is *not* associated with any information-structural feature, but that must –by Interface Economy (Reinhart 2006)– influence the interpretation: only if it is present is the subject moved, receiving a topical interpretation.

3. Formal features. For inversion constructions in Zulu, the postverbal logical subject is claimed to be focussed, and a possible preverbal element is topical (3). However, only [topic] needs to be posited as a syntactic feature. In inflectionally rich languages, a *syntactically active* formal feature is expected to influence operations like agreement. In (3), the topical preverbal instrument determines agreement on the verb –an indication that the syntax is sensitive to [topic]. T's sensitivity just to [topic] suffices to explain the VS interpretation: if the subject is topical, it agrees and raises (SVO sentence); otherwise it does not agree and stays in situ, where its interpretation is "non-topical" but otherwise underspecified, as in the expletive inversion in (4). Although a [focus] feature may be present here, there is no evidence that it is active in the syntax.

- (3) Isipunu si-dla uJohn. [Zulu]
7.spoon 7SUBJ-eat 1a.John
'John is using the spoon to eat.' (Lit. 'The spoon is eating John.') (Zeller 2012)
- (4) Ku-cula abafana.
17SM-sing DET.2.boys
a. 'The BOYS are singing.'
b. 'There are boys singing.' (Buell 2006:13)

References

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