

Agreement, word order and information structure: Some Bantu examples

The availability of different word-order possibilities in Bantu has frequently been observed, but has only recently been addressed more systematically. In this paper, I focus on verb-subject (VS) word-order, and show how in particular a systematic study of prosody and information structure is necessary to come to an understanding of different VS structures in Bantu.

In addition to canonical SV(O) surface word-order in Bantu, VS word-order, with ‘subject inversion’, is frequently found. There are four broad contexts in which VS order is found: in ‘after-thought’ constructions (1), in presentational constructions (2), in locative inversion (3) and in object relative clauses (4):

- (1) v-á-hìt-í, òv-à-ndù [Herero]
 SC2-PAST-enter-FV 2DC-people
 ‘They entered, the people’
- (2) Baada ya siku mbili wa-li-fik-a vi-jana wawili [Swahili]
 After GEN days two SC2-PAST-arrive-FV 8-youths2-two
 ‘After two days, two youths arrived’
- (3) mò-ngàndà mw-á-hìt-í òv-á-ndù [Herero]
 18.9DC-house SC18-PAST-enter-FV 2CC-people
 ‘Into the house entered people’
- (4) ùmù-ánàkàshì ùó á-mwèènè Mùt-àlè [Bemba]
 1-girl REL1 SC1-see.PERF Mutale
 ‘The girl who Mutale saw ...’

The difference between these structures is characterised by prosodic marking as well as by the pragmatic context. For example, prosodic marking distinguishes post-verbal topics (1) from foci (3) in Herero. Pragmatically, after-thought constructions presuppose the referent of the post-verbal subject (1), while presentational constructions introduce a new discourse referent (2). Different Bantu languages show different coding of these constructions, e.g. Swahili and Nsenga allow the use full person agreement for both after-thought and presentational constructions while in Tswana, Herero or Zulu full person agreement is used for after-thought constructions (5), but presentational constructions require the use of locative agreement (6):

- (5) ó tsámà-ìlè Mphó [Tswana]
 SC1 go-PERF.DISJ Mpho
 ‘He has gone, Mpho that is’ (Creissels 1996: 113)
- (6) Gó tsámá-ílé Mphó
 SC17 go-PERF.CONJ Mpho
 ‘There has gone Mpho’ (Creissels 1996: 113)

Taken together, these comparatively local sources of variation in syntactic complementation, prosodic marking and agreement systems lead to a complex pattern of cross-linguistic micro-variation. I will argue that an understanding of this pattern requires detailed description of individual languages as well as comparative considerations, taking into account of syntactic, prosodic and pragmatic aspects of language structure.