Prosodic effects of DP-internal word order variation in Xitsonga

Seunghun J. Lee[1,2] & Kristina Riedel[3]

[1]*International Christian University (Japan), *[2]*University of Venda (South Africa), *[3]*University of Free State (South Africa)*
seunghun@icu.ac.jp, RiedelK@ufs.ac.za

Many Bantu languages have penultimate lengthening where the penultimate syllable of a sentence is lengthened. The domain of penultimate lengthening is described to be an intonational phrase. Qualitative penultimate lengthening can be observed even at the phonological word level. There is an extensive literature on penultimate lengthening in Bantu languages [8], but none of this addresses DP-internal patterns. This paper seeks to address this gap by introducing and analysing syntactic and phonological patterns, including new data from Xitsonga, a southern Bantu language.

Bantu languages generally have a noun-initial DP word order. However, all (or nearly all) Bantu languages also allow for demonstratives (1) and sometimes a quantifier meaning 'each, every' to precede the noun. Beyond this, Bantu languages generally allow changing the relative order of the post-nominal modifiers which leads to subtle (focus-related) changes in meaning but generally Bantu languages do not allow for adjectives, numerals and possessives to appear before the noun. However, Tsonga (S53), Tswana (S31), Haya (JE22) and Basaá (A43a) allow these kinds of nominal modifiers to appear in the pre-nominal position. While the general properties of Bantu noun phrases are well documented, there are few studies about the specific ordering constraints in the various Bantu languages [9], nor any larger cross-linguistic comparisons. Discussions of Bantu language noun phrases generally focus on nominal morphology or the augment [4, 5, 6, 7].

Xitsonga allows numerals and adjectives to appear prenominally (1-3). This word order is associated with focus and the focused element is marked with a longer duration of penultimate lengthening compared to unfocussed elements in non-sentence final position.

(1a) va-nhu lá-va
      2-people this-2
      'these people'

(1b) lá-vá vá:-nhu
      this-2 2-people
      'THESE people'

(2a) va-nhu   va-mbi:rhí
      2-people   2-two
      'two people'

(2b) va-mbirhí   vá:-nhu
      2-two   2-people
      'TWO people'

(3a) va-nhu   va-nkú:lú
      2-people   2-big
      'big people'

(3b) va-nkúlú   vá:-nhu
      2-big   2-people
      'BIG people'

Xitsonga also allows for multiple modifiers to appear pre-nominally with N Adj Num being able to appear in any of the logically possible orders. This pattern has not been reported for other Bantu languages, except for Basaá and violates Greenberg's Universal and Cinque's predictions on possible and impossible ordering [1, 2, 3].

In this paper, we offer an overview of noun phrase word order patterns in Xitsonga and analyse these patterns in terms of the effects on penultimate lengthening. The focused element in (1b, 2b, 3b) show longer penultimate vowel than the unfocussed head noun in (1a, 2a, 3a).

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