

Argument prominence and agreement: Explaining an unexpected object asymmetry in Zulu



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Abstract

In the “symmetrical” Bantu language Zulu, either the beneficiary/goal or the theme argument in double object constructions can agree with the verb. The agreeing object-DP is obligatorily dislocated to a VP-external position, while the non-agreeing DP remains inside the VP. However, Zulu also has a type of double object construction in which both internal arguments are right-dislocated. In this construction, agreement is always with the beneficiary/goal, and can no longer be with the theme. My paper offers a detailed description of these “double right dislocation” constructions and a Minimalist analysis of the observed agreement asymmetry. The analysis is based on the idea that dislocated arguments in Zulu are marked as “antifocus” and that only a DP with an antifocus feature can enter an Agree-relation with the functional head responsible for object agreement. Since Agree is constrained by Locality, a theme argument can only agree with the verb when it is the sole internal argument with an antifocus feature. When both internal arguments are dislocated and marked as antifocus, the theme competes with the beneficiary/goal for the available object agreement marker. In this case, Locality determines that agreement must be with the beneficiary/goal, since this argument is thematically (and hence syntactically) more prominent than the theme, and therefore closer to the functional object agreement head.

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1. Introduction

Bantu languages differ with respect to the number of internal arguments that can exhibit so-called “primary object properties” in multiple object constructions (Alsina, 1996; Bresnan and Moshi, 1990; Marten et al., 2007). In some languages, grammatical processes such as passivisation, object marking, or reciprocalisation may apply to both objects of a ditransitive verb, whereas these operations are restricted to one object in other languages. For example, in the “symmetrical” Bantu language Zulu (S 42), either object of a ditransitive verb can be realised as an object marker. In (1a), the object marker corresponds to the beneficiary argument of the applied verb *-thengela*, ‘buy for’, while the object marker in (1b) agrees with the theme:^{1,2}

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¹ All examples in this paper are from Zulu, unless otherwise indicated. Nouns in Bantu languages belong to noun classes that determine gender and number properties. Following standard practice, I mark Bantu noun class prefixes and corresponding agreement markers through numbers. Morphemes are glossed as follows: 1s/P, 2s/P = first, second person singular/plural; A = default vowel (Kilega); ADJ = adjective marker; APPL = applicative; AUG = augment; CA = complementiser agreement; CAUS = causative; DIS = disjoint verb form; EXPL = expletive; FV = final vowel; LOC = locative marker; NEG = negation; OM = object marker; PASS = passive; PAST = (recent) past tense; PERF = perfective aspect; POSS = possessive marker; SM = subject marker; SUBJ = subjunctive. I have occasionally adjusted the glosses of examples that I adopted from the literature to my system.

² In this paper, I treat Zulu object markers such as *m-* and *lu-* in (1) as agreement markers. When no overt DP co-occurs with the object marker, I assume that agreement is with a null pronominal. See Adams (2010) for the alternative view that object markers in Zulu are pronominal clitics; but see Buell (2005) and Zeller (2012) for arguments against a pronoun-analysis of object markers in Zulu.

- (1) a. Ngi-*m*-theng-el-a u-bisi (*u-Sipho*).
 1S-1.OM-buy-APPL-FV AUG-11.milk AUG-1a.Sipho
 ‘I’m buying him (Sipho) some milk.’
- b. Ngi-*lu*-theng-el-a u-Sipho (*u-bisi*).
 1S-11.OM-buy-APPL-FV AUG-1a.Sipho AUG-11.milk
 ‘I’m buying it (the milk) for Sipho.’

In contrast, constructions analogous to (1b) are ungrammatical in “asymmetrical” Bantu languages such as Chichewa (Alsina and Mchombo, 1993; Bresnan and Moshi, 1990) or Swahili (Marten et al., 2007; Riedel, 2009).

However, in another type of double object construction in Zulu, the symmetry illustrated by (1) breaks down. Although the sentences in (2) are based on the same verb and the same object-DPs as those in (1), object marking of the theme argument is not possible, (2b):

- (2) a. Ngi-*ya-m*-theng-el-a u-bisi *u-Sipho*.
 1S-DIS-1.OM-buy-APPL-FV AUG-11.milk AUG-1a.Sipho
 ‘I *am* buying milk for Sipho.’
- b. *Ngi-*ya-lu*-theng-el-a u-Sipho *u-bisi*.
 1S-DIS-11.OM-buy-APPL-FV AUG-1a.Sipho AUG-11.milk

The only obvious difference between the double object constructions in (1) and (2) is that the verb in the latter appears in the so-called disjoint (“long”) form, which in the present tense is marked by the prefix *ya-* in Zulu. This raises the question of how this morphological difference relates to the contrast between (1b) and (2b).

The goal of this paper is to offer an analysis of the construction in (2) which explains the difference between (1b) and (2b). The starting point of my proposal is the well-known correlation between object marking and *right dislocation*, which is observed in Zulu and other Bantu languages. In Section 2, I present data that show that object-marked object-DPs in Zulu are always in a VP-external position, which explains, amongst other things, why the beneficiary-DP follows the theme-DP in (1a), whereas the opposite order is observed in (1b).

I then demonstrate that in constructions such as (2), *both* object-DPs are dislocated and removed from their VP-internal base positions (see also Adams, 2010). This situation accounts for the choice of the disjoint verb form in (2), as well as a range of other properties of this construction, which are discussed in detail in Section 3. Since Zulu grammar only allows one object marker to attach to the verb stem, the “double dislocation”-analysis entails that the two dislocated DPs in constructions such as (2) compete for one available object agreement marker. As (2b) shows, this competition is always resolved in favour of the beneficiary argument, even though object marking of a theme argument is possible in simple dislocation constructions such as (1b).

In Section 4, I outline the key idea behind my analysis of this contrast. Based on a proposal by Alsina (1996), I suggest that the agreement properties of internal arguments in Zulu must reflect their thematic prominence relations, but importantly, I argue that thematic prominence is only relevant for the agreement properties of *dislocated* arguments. Because beneficiary arguments are ranked higher than themes, and because both the beneficiary and the theme are dislocated in (2), object agreement must be with the higher-ranked beneficiary. In contrast, thematic prominence is of no relevance in constructions such as those in (1), in which only one internal argument is dislocated. In either clause in (1), there is only one dislocated DP, and therefore only one candidate for object agreement (the beneficiary in (1a), and the theme in (1b)). Consequently, either the beneficiary or the theme can be object-marked.

In Section 5, I present the details of my analysis of right dislocation in Zulu within the theoretical framework of the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995, 2000, 2001). My objective is to show that important aspects of the idea outlined in Section 4 follow naturally in a theory in which syntactic operations are driven by grammatical features and thematic relations are represented through asymmetrical syntactic relations between arguments inside the VP. I propose that object marking in Zulu is a reflex of an Agree-relation between the uninterpretable feature of a VP-external functional head X which acts as a PROBE and the corresponding interpretable feature of a VP-internal argument which acts as a GOAL. I suggest that the relevant feature is an *antifocus* feature, which is associated with non-focused arguments in Zulu and which typically causes right dislocation of the respective constituent. Importantly, the antifocus Agree-relation is constrained by *Locality*: when more than one internal argument is marked as antifocus, only the one closest to the PROBE can Agree and trigger object marking. I suggest that this is what happens in constructions such as (2): both the theme and the beneficiary have antifocus features; therefore, both arguments will be right-dislocated, and both DPs compete for object agreement. Since the beneficiary argument is thematically more prominent than the theme, it is syntactically closer to the PROBE than the latter, and Locality determines that object agreement can only be with the beneficiary-DP. In contrast, I argue that in right dislocation constructions such as (1), only one of the two internal arguments has an antifocus feature.

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