

Resetting object marking parameters in Bantu

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The majority of the Bantu languages, spoken in sub-Saharan Africa, feature both subject and object indexing in their agglutinative verb morphology:

- (1) Watoto wa-li-**mw**-ona Juma. Swahili
2.children 2SM-PAST-1OM-see 1.Juma
'The children saw Juma.'

Within the Bantu languages that show object marking in a verbal prefix, there is much variation, which has been described along a number of parameters, two of which will be examined in this presentation:

1. behaviour in ditransitives: only the highest object can be marked (asymmetric) or either object can be marked (symmetric);
2. nature of the object marker: syntactic agreement (doubling) or pronominal clitic (non-doubling).

For each of these we may ask what the earlier (possibly Proto-Bantu) setting was, and how the parameter has been reset in the innovating languages. In order to answer these questions, I have collected data on object marking from 50+ Bantu languages.

Based on the geographical distribution of the settings for these parameters, I conclude that non-doubling symmetric object marking must be the older pattern, and doubling asymmetric object marking is the innovation (cf. Givón 1976).

Furthermore, the combinations of parameter settings give an unmistakable clue for the path of development. There is a striking three-quarter pattern captured as the RANDOM: the Relation between Asymmetry and Non-Doubling Object Marking (indicated in the table below, giving numbers of languages with the given parameter setting; leaving out languages with incomplete data). This strongly suggests that languages can only change from the initial state in the bottom left cell (non-doubling symmetric) to the innovated state in the top right cell (doubling asymmetric) via the bottom left (doubling symmetric), that is, of the two changes that occur, the change to doubling must precede the change to asymmetry.

	non-doubling	doubling
asymmetric		15
symmetric	21	7

In this talk I will illustrate the object marking parameter settings in Bantu, explain my featural account of the parameters in terms of a [Person] feature on the DP or a low functional clausal head such as Appl, and discuss the diachronic pathway of resetting these object marking parameters.