

Abstract: Scenario based explanations for the structure of nominal expressions

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The aim of this presentation is to show the power of diachronic scenarios for the discovery and explanation of morphosyntactic patterns in complex nominal expressions. This will be illustrated by means of two recently discovered scenarios of change that are active in the Bantu languages, viz. the AMAR mechanism and the BRA cycle.

I proposed the AMAR mechanism (short for Adnominal Modifier Apposition and Reintegration) to try and make sense of a series of logically unrelated typological peculiarities of Bantu nominal expressions, including the extreme variation in word order patterns, some of which are attested nowhere else in the languages of the world, and the presence of strong prosodic boundaries within otherwise integral noun phrases. The BRA (Bantu Relative Agreement) cycle makes sense of different types of agreement patterns found in Bantu relative verb forms. Although it touches on much fewer aspects of the structure of nominal expressions than the AMAR mechanism, this presentation will concentrate on the BRA cycle, because it is more firmly established and because it allows to contrast the scenario-based approach with a number of purely synchronic explanatory models that have been proposed in the literature on the same subject.

It has been received knowledge for many decades that the morphological slot that is normally occupied by a subject index in Bantu verbs can contain either a subject prefix (SBJ-), or a prefix indexing the relativised NP (NPREL-), or both (NPREL-SBJ-) in the verb form of object relative clauses. Furthermore, the type of agreement on the verb correlates with the pre- or postverbal position of lexical subjects in the relative clause, such that postverbal subjects tend to co-occur with NPREL- or NPREL-SBJ-agreement and preverbal subjects with SBJ-agreement. This can be easily accounted for once we become aware that there is a tendency in the Bantu languages for relativizers to emerge from elements that agree with the relativised NP, such as demonstratives or genitive linkers, and that these relativisers tend to bond with the following relative verb, where they are best analysed as agreement markers and where they often merge with the pre-existing agreement prefix. This cycle of emerging agreement markers (the BRA cycle) can apply repeatedly in the history of a construction. Its explanatory strength derives from the fact that it consists of a series of small uncontroversial steps, all of which can be observed in at least some Bantu languages. Moreover, logically following the path of the BRA cycle has led to the discovery of a far greater range of typological variation in Bantu relative constructions than what was previously recognised, such as NPREL-NPREL-agreement, dedicated prefix paradigms, or the fact that subject relatives are as prone to variation in agreement types as object relatives.