

## Bantu flexible argument licensing

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*Two typical Bantu syntactic characteristics are subject inversion and symmetrical double objects, which are both problematic for current theories of Case and agreement. I propose that both can be captured using a new concept of flexible licensing by low functional heads (Appl and v), connected to topicality. This leads to a crosslinguistic implicational relation, whose empirical and theoretical consequences I explore.*

In subject inversion the logical subject appears postverbally and a preverbal locative/patient/instrument agrees with the verb (-zi- in 1):

- (1) Inzogá nti-**zi**-nywá abáana.  
 9.alcohol NEG-9SM-drink 2.children  
 ‘It’s the children who do not drink alcohol.’ Kinyarwanda (Ngoboka 2016: 356)

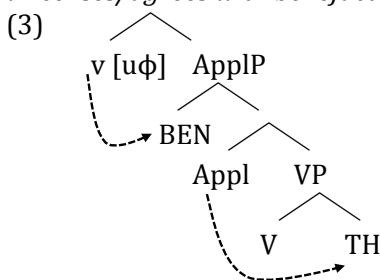
In double object symmetry, either object of a ditransitive can be passivised and either can be object-marked (OM) on the verb (2):

- (2) a. U-mama u-**ba**-nik-e in-cwadi (aba-ntwana).  
 1a-mama 1SM-2OM-give-PFV 9-book 2-children  
 ‘Mama gave them a book (the children).’  
 b. U-mama u-**yi**-nik-e aba-ntwana (in-cwadi).  
 1a-mama 1SM-9OM-give-PFV 2-children 9-book  
 ‘Mama gave the children it (a book).’ Zulu (Adams 2010: 11)

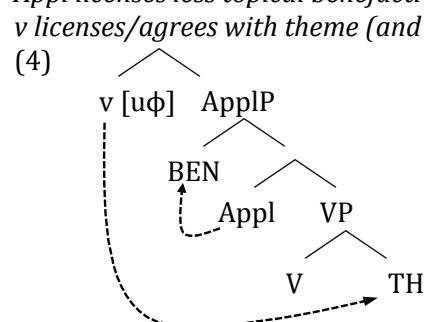
The challenge is how T (for inversion and passive) or v (for object marking) can agree with a lower Goal across a higher one, given standard non-intervention locality restrictions on Agree. In (1), T agrees with the theme despite the external argument being closer, and in (2b), v skips the closer recipient to agree with the theme (assuming a defective goal approach to OM; Roberts 2010, Iorio 2014, Van der Wal 2015). Previous approaches to the symmetry challenge include equidistance of the two Goals (Ura 1996, Anagnostopoulou 2003), movement of the lower argument over the higher (McGinnis 2001), or selective probing under featural Relativised Minimality so that an intervener does not count as a Goal (Anagnostopoulou 2005, Rizzi 2013, a.o.). A fourth and better fitting approach for Bantu involves flexible licensing of an intervening argument, rendering it invisible for probing (assuming no defective intervention).

Following Haddican & Holmberg (2012, 2015), Van der Wal (2017) proposes that, in symmetrical languages, low functional heads like Appl and Caus can license downward or upward, depending on the relative animacy and topicality of the two arguments (3&4). While these are ‘symmetrical’ languages as described above (2), there is always an asymmetry in topicality of the objects. A **flexible head will license the least topical object**, leaving the more topical object for licensing by and agreement with little v (active) or T (passive), thus deriving symmetry. The parameter distinguishing asymmetry from symmetry is that the former only allows downward licensing (3) while the latter allows both up and down (4&3).

v licenses/agrees with benefactive (and can OM)

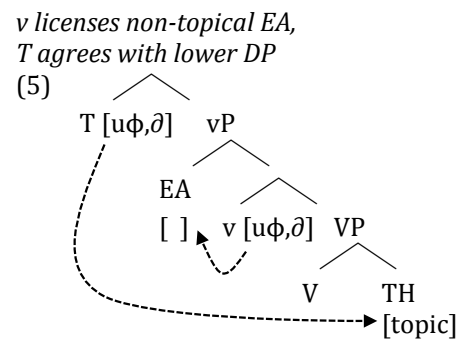


Appl licenses less topical benefactive, v licenses/agrees with theme (and can OM)



This approach requires, first, a separation of (abstract Case) licensing and  $\phi$  agreement (as convincingly argued by Keine 2010, Bárány 2015; contra Chomsky 2000, 2001), even if the two tend to go together (Baker 2015); and second, a revision of nominal licensing. The notion of abstract Case fits awkwardly with current Minimalist thinking (Pesetsky & Torrego 2011), leading Diercks (2012) to propose a parameter determining whether a language has abstract Case or not. However, as nouns do not appear randomly in the clause, even in Bantu languages that show no clear evidence for abstract Case, there must be some system of nominal licensing (Sheehan & Van der Wal to appear). It is known that Bantu morphosyntax is highly influenced by information structure. The hypothesis here is therefore that **languages vary in whether [Case] or [ $\partial$ ] licenses DPs**, where [ $\partial$ ] is a grammaticalised discourse feature (cf. Miyagawa 2010). Many Bantu languages appear to employ [ $\partial$ ] and not [Case] (cf. Carstens&Mletshe 2015 on Case related to Focus), as shown for topical objects.

I propose that this analysis can be extended: If argument-introducing functional heads like Appl can be flexible in licensing, can *v* license flexibly too? Yes: **Little *v* licenses the EA upwards iff EA is non-topical**, rendering it invisible for T, which then finds a lower DP Goal – the theme as in (1) and (5), or a locative or instrument. This analysis of subject inversion **1.** solves the Locality problem (assuming PIC2, Chomsky 2011); **2.** accounts for the licensing of the postverbal subject (cf. Belletti 1988, Carstens 2005, Diercks 2012); **3.** correctly predicts a non-topical interpretation, VS being used for thetics and narrow subject focus; **4.** explains why OM is never allowed in Bantu subject inversion, as *v* does not agree with a lower DP and upward agreement cannot spell out under a defective goal approach.



Furthermore, an **implicational relation** appears whereby higher heads can only be flexible if lower heads are (Van der Wal to appear): Caus > HAppl > LAppl. If true, then *v* is predicted to license flexibly iff lower functional heads do so too. More concretely: inversion by upward licensing is predicted to only be attested in combination with symmetrical double objects. The available data support this generalisation: although subject inversion in asymmetrical languages is possible, it does not involve upward licensing by *v*. Either T licenses the postverbal subject (Matengo, Makhwa), or locative inversion is restricted to unaccusatives and passives, i.e. only when a locative (specAppl) is closer to T than S (Chichewa, Bukusu):

- (6) M-chi-tsîme mw-a-gw-er-a                    /\*mw-a-kodz-a                    mbûzi.  
 LOC-7-well LOC.SM-PERF-fall-APPL-FV /LOC.SM-PERF-urinate-FV 9.goat  
 ‘Into the well has fallen/\*urinated a goat.’ (Chichewa, Bresnan&Mchombo 1989:16)

In the talk I provide details on the [ $\partial$ /TOP] features involved in flexible licensing and illustrate for a number of Bantu languages how the analysis captures crosslinguistic variation in object- and subject marking. This approach thus provides a formalisation of aspects of discourse configurability in terms of formal features, extending beyond word order and agreement (É.Kiss 1995, Morimoto 2002,2006, Miyagawa 2010), and revising nominal licensing theory.

Selected references: Anagnostopoulou, E. 2003. *The syntax of ditransitives: Evidence from clitics*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. ♦ Anagnostopoulou, E. 2005. Strong and weak person restrictions. A feature checking analysis. In L. Heggie & F. Ordoñez (eds.) *Clitic and Affix Combinations* 199- 235. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. ♦ Carstens, V. 2005. Agree and EPP in Bantu. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 23 (2), 219-279. ♦ Diercks, M. 2012. Parameterizing Case: Evidence from Bantu. *Syntax* 15:3, 253-286. ♦ Haddican, W. & A. Holmberg. 2015. Four kinds of object asymmetry. In L. Veselovská & M. Janebová (eds.), *Complex visibles out there*, 145-162. Olomouc: Palacky University. ♦ Keine, S. 2010. *Case and agreement from fringe to core: a minimalist approach*. Berlin: De Gruyter. ♦ Miyagawa, S. 2010. *Why Agree? Why Move? Unifying agreement-based and discourse-configurational languages*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press. ♦ Van der Wal, Jenneke. 2017. Flexibility in symmetry: An implicational relation in Bantu double object constructions. In Sheehan, M. & L. R. Bailey (eds.), *Order and structure in syntax II*, 115–152. Berlin: Language Science Press. ♦ Sheehan, M. & J. van der Wal. To appear. Evidence for nominal licensing in caseless languages. *Journal of Linguistics*.