

Object agreement in Swahili is topic agreement

Summary: In this talk, I argue that object markers on the verb in Swahili should be analysed as agreement markers which agree with a topic object in an in-situ or ex-situ position. The optionality of this agreement is explained by assuming that v carries a feature bundle composed of ϕ -features and a topic feature, so that if the object does not act as a topic, the whole feature bundle is absent. Based on this analysis, the apparent optionality of the agreement marker can be explained.

Background: There has been a long lasting discussion concerning the status of the object marker in Bantu languages. Bresnan & Mchombo (1987) argue that the object marker in Chichewa is best analysed as an incorporated pronoun referring to the topic of the clause. If the topic DP is present as well, the DP needs to be merged in a VP-external position, either as an adjunct or in the left periphery, as to avoid a condition C effect.

- (1) a. *Ndi-kufuna kuti [mu-wa-patsé t_i mphatso] alenje.*
1SG.S-want COMP 2SG.S-2.O-give 3.gift 2.hunters
'I want you to give the hunters a gift.'

b. ??*Ndi-kufuna kuti [mu-wa-patsé alenje mphatso].* (Henderson 2006:171)

This, however, cannot be the correct analysis for the object marker in Swahili. Even though it shares the neutral S-V-IO-DO word order with Chichewa, the object marker can co-occur with the IO in its in-situ position (2).

- (2) *Yohane a-li-wa-ambia watu habari zake.*
John 3SG.S-PST-2.O-tell 2.people 10.news POSS
'John told the people his news.'

(Joswig 1996:27)

Under a pronoun incorporation analysis, (2) would constitute a condition C violation. Consequently, I argue in this talk that object marking in Swahili needs to be treated as object agreement. The optional distribution of the agreement marker, however, seems to be puzzling at first glance, but will follow naturally from the analysis presented below, supporting the assumption of it being an agreement marker. Thus, while animacy (3-a) and definiteness (3-b) of the object strongly favour object agreement, none of them requires it.

- (3) a. *Mbwa a-li-ona mbuzi.*
1.dog 3SG.S-PST-see 1.goat

'The dog saw a goat.'

(Seidl & Dimitriadis 1997:379)

- b. *Tu-li-po-kwenda Dar tu-li-tembela chuo-kikuu.*

1PL.S-PST-REL-go Dar 1PL.S-PST-visit university

'When we were in Dar we visited the/*a (only) university.'

(Nicolle 2000:684)

On the other hand, object agreement becomes obligatory if the object is pre-posed or *pro* dropped.

- (4) a. *Hao a-li-*(wa)-pa uwezo.*
3PL.DEM 3SG.S-PST-3PL.O-give ability
'He gave them an ability.'

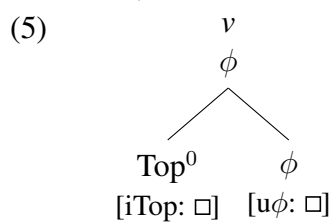
(Joswig 1996:26)

- b. *Maneo haya a-li-ya-sema kwa sauti kubwa. Rosa a-li-*(ya)-sikia.*
6.words these 3SG.S-PST-6.O-say with 9.voice 9.big Rosa 3SG.S-PST-6.O-hear
'He said the words loudly. Rosa heard them.'

(Seidl & Dimitriadis 1997:376)

Analysis: Based on Belletti (2004) and subsequent work, I assume that vP , similar to CP hosts a left periphery containing discourse related projections/features, probably due to its status as a phase. Extending this analysis and following Miyagawa (2010,2017) and Jiménez-Fernández (2010), it is possible for discourse related δ - and agreement related ϕ -features to be present on the same head. This has been argued for C in long distance agreement (Bjorkman & Zeijlstra *subm.*) and I claim that this also holds for v in Swahili. Thus, I assume that v in Swahili hosts

unvalued ϕ -features that are bundled together with an adjoined unvalued topic feature (5).



Due to being unvalued, the ϕ -features probe in their c-command domain and agree with the highest suitable goal, deriving the impossibility of object agreement with low DOs over higher IOs in ditransitives (Bresnan & Moshi 1990). If the agreement goal also carries a valued topic feature, ie. counts as topic of the clause, the topic feature in v also receives a value. If the goal for

ϕ -feature agreement does not act as a topic, the topic feature on v cannot receive a value and the derivation crashes. Consequently, the whole probe is absent when the object does not carry a topic feature.

This analysis of object agreement as topic-object (T-O) agreement derives the Swahili data mentioned above and is comparable to the analysis based on an anti-focus feature proposed for Zulu by Zeller (2014). In contrast to Chichewa, T-O agreement in Swahili can take place in-situ, leading to its optional appearance. If, however, the topic status is marked additionally by dislocation, T-O agreement becomes obligatory. On the other hand, if dislocation is not due to topicality but for example due to focus, the agreement is absent.

- (6) *Hata risasi ni-me-(*zi)-nunua.*
 even 10.bullet 1SG.S-PRF-**10.O**-buy
 ‘I have bought even bullets.’

(Allan 1983:326)

The same holds for T-O agreement of *pro* dropped objects. These kinds of objects are typically very salient and discourse old, thus share important characteristics with topics. Consequently, as expected, agreement on the verb is obligatory in most cases. The strong correlation between definiteness, animacy, and T-O agreement can be explained in a similar way. Since topics are usually definite and frequently also animate, they are expected to often co-occur with this kind of agreement but not to obligatorily require it.

Under the assumption that T-O agreement in Swahili is due to v carrying a combined ϕ -topic probe, it is expected that in sentences without or with defective v , T-O agreement should be absent. This prediction is borne out as the agreement is impossible in passives in Swahili.

- (7) *Rosa a-li-(*ki)-p-ewa kitabu*
 Rosa 3SG.S-PST-**7.O**-give-PASS 7.book
 ‘Rosa was given the book.’

(Seidl & Dimitriadis 1997:376)

The interaction between wh-elements and object marking appears to be problematic for the present analysis at a first glance. Generally, wh-elements are taken to be focal and should thus not cause object marking. However, this is only true for a subset of wh-elements, namely the wh-words for inanimates, while d-linked wh-elements (8) and the question word for animates (9) cause object agreement (Riedel 2009:69-70).

- (8) *U-li-ki-pata kitabu kipi?*
 2SG.S-PST-**7.O**-get 7.book 7.which?
 ‘Which book did you get?’

- (9) *U-li-mw-ona nani?*
 2SG.S-PST-**1.O**-see 1.who
 ‘Who (of them) did you see?’

To explain (8), I assume that in addition to carrying a focus feature, a d-linked wh-phrase becomes d-linked due to a topic feature that it carries. This also explains (9), since, following Baker (Ms.:20), *who* in certain languages can be seen as comparable to *which person* and thus on a way to a d-linked reading, therefore also providing a topic feature for v to agree with.

Selected references: Allan (1983). Anaphora, Cataphora, and Topic Focussing. | Baker (Ms.). On the Status of Object Markers in Bantu languages. | Joswig (1996) Die grammatischen Rollen des Objekts im Swahili. | Nicolle (2000). The Swahili Object Marker. | Riedel (2009). Object Marking in wh-questions in Bantu. | Seidel & Dimitriadis (1997). The discourse function of Object Marking in Swahili. | Zeller (2014). Three types of object marking in Bantu.