# WHAT IS A SYMMETRICAL LANGUAGE? MULTIPLE OBJECT CONSTRUCTIONS IN BANTU

Josephat M Rugemalira
University of Dar es Salaam and UC Berkeley

## Introduction

There exist in Bantu languages constructions with usually two and possibly three postverbal noun phrase arguments. Such constructions are usually called 'double object' constructions. Example 1 from Runyambo is typical.

1 omukázi akasiigá abáánáamajúta
woman smear children oil
'the woman smeared the children with oil'

The number of ditransitive verbs that behave like 'siiga' is fairly small. They include:

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| -ha | *give* | -ima | *deny* | -aka | *deprive* |
| -iba | *steal* | -oreka | *show* | -teera | *hit* |
| -juura | *undress* | -jweeka | *dress* | -nyaga | *cheat* |

Most double object constructions are obtained by 'extending' the verb with the applicative or causative extensions, or occasionally, by a combination of the two. The Runyambo data in 2-4 illustrate each of the three possibilities.

2 omukázi a - ka - hemb - er - á abáánáomuriro
woman she -PAST- light-APP -FV children fire
'the woman lit a fire for the children'

3 omukázi a - ka - hemb - es - á abáánáomuriro
woman she-PAST- light-CAUS-FV children fire
'the woman had the children light a fire'

4 omukázi a - ka - son - es - ez - á abáánáemyéenda
woman she -PAST- sew -CAUS-APP -FV children dresses
'the woman had someone sew dresses for the children'

The applicative construction is represented in 2 and the causative in 3; in 4 the causative and applicative co-occur. Note that in 4 an extra noun phrase to represent the tailor cannot be accommodated in this construction -- though a locative expression would be acceptable. Incidentally this verb, *-sona* 'sew',

is one of a small group of Runyambo verbs whose causatives allow the deletion of the causee.

The major issue about Bantu object constructions revolves around the relative status of the two post verbal noun phrases in 1-4: are they objects with equal status or is one of them more object-like than the other? Bresnan and Moshi (1990) seek to show that some of the languages treat the objects as equal (hence symmetrical languages) while other languages treat the objects as unequal (hence asymmetrical languages). This decision crucially depends on the application of three traditional tests of objecthood:

a) Word order - which of the two noun phrases is closer (adjacent) to the verb;
b) Agreement - which of the noun phrases is marked on the verb by an affix;
c) Subjectivization - which of the noun phrases can become subject of the passive construction.

In this paper I show, first, that these formal tests of objecthood cannot be relied upon because not every test may be applicable in every language and because the tests may give contradictory results. Second, I show that there exists a larger set of formal and semantic strategies in these languages for keeping the objects separate, and that from this perspective there is no symmetrical language.

The data are drawn from two Eastern Bantu languages, Runyambo and Kiswahili, E21 and G42 respectively in Guthrie's classification. First the problems related to the use of the test are presented. Then follows a discussion of the various strategies and their mutual interaction. The final section gives a summary of the strategies and draws implications for linguistic theory.

**Problems with the tests**

a) Word order: In Runyambo the word order test applies and consistently places one of the postverbal noun phrases immediately after the verb. As a general rule the human object precedes the non-human one, and the animate object precedes the inanimate one. This is illustrated in 5.

5 a a - ka - teec - er - a kató ebitooce
she -PAST - cook -APP -FV Kato bananas
'she cooked bananas for Kato'

b *a - ka - teec - er - á ebitooce káto

Only one ordering of the postverbal noun phrases is acceptable, i.e. 5a which puts the human participant, *Kato*, before the non-human, *bananas*. The reverse order in 5b is not acceptable.

This test, however, cannot be applied in Kiswahili where order is irrelevant. This is shown in 6.

6 a * a - li - pik - i - a kato ndizi
she -PAST-cook -APP-FV Kato bananas
'she cooked bananas for Kato'

b * a - li - pik - i - a ndizi kato

c a - li - m - pik - i - a kato ndizi
she -PAST-him-cook -APP-FV Kato bananas
'she cooked bananas for Kato'

d a - li - m - pik - i - a ndizi kato

Neither order of the object noun phrases is acceptable without object agreement (6a,b). But with this agreement either order is acceptable (6c,d).

b) Contradictory results: The passive and agreement tests in Runyambo give conflicting results. This is shown in 7.

7 a omuseija a - ka - reet - er - á omwááná ebiráatwa
man she-PAST-bring -APP -FV child shoes
'a man brought shoes for a child'

b omwááná (ebiráátwa) a - ka - bi - reet -er - w - á omuséija
child (shoes) she-PAST-them-bring -APP-PASS-FV man
'the child was brought them (the shoes) by a man'

c *ebiráátwá (omwáána) bi - ka - mu-reet -er - w - á omuséija
shoes (child) they-PAST-her-bring-APP-PASS-FV man
'shoes were brought for her (child) by a man'

d omuséíjá a - ka - bi - mu - réét - er - a
man he-PAST-them-her -bring -APP -FV
'the man brought them for her'

While only one of the noun phrases can become subject of the passive construction (7b,c), both of them can be marked on the verb (7d). Note that

in 7b even the non-subjectivizable noun phrase has to undergo left-dislocation and, therefore, obligatory object agreement as well. And as 8 shows, up to three objects may be marked on the Runyambo verb.

8 a - ka - ga - mu - m - pé - er - a
she-PAST- it - him- me-give-APP -FV
'she gave it to him for me'

In a framework where the formal tests are supposed to be necessary and sufficient criteria, as is the case in Lexical Mapping Theory (cf. Bresnan & Moshi 1990, Alsina & Mchombo 1990), these results are clearly contradictory. However it might be argued that a prototype framework could handle these results by appealing to a notion of degrees of objecthood. In such a framework, a noun phrase is more of an object the more object properties it has. Thus a noun phrase that was closer to the verb, could become subject of the passive construction, and could trigger agreement would be a 'primary object', while a noun phrase that displayed only object agreement would be a 'secondary object'. The problem with such an approach, however, is that given the fact that some tests may be inapplicable in certain languages, there is no basis for deciding on the 'canonical' set of criteria for objecthood. Even the three tests under discussion are no more than an arbitrary collection of unrelated linguistic features with which a person may decide to define the category 'object' (cf Baker 1988:431). An open list of such features with equal weight does not help us identify any 'objects' objectively.

In this discussion the term 'object' is retained as a useful descriptive label applied to postverbal noun phrases and to agreement prefixes other than that for the 'subject'. The focus of attention will be on the means by which the participants in an event are kept distinct, i.e the means of differentiation among the object arguments of the verb.

**Strategies for argument differentiation**

The strategies discussed here include animacy, word order, agreement, definiteness, person and number, and their mutual interaction. Two points need to be kept in mind. First, with respect to Runyambo, word order applies to both the postverbal noun phrases and to the object markers. Second, a mix of object markers and noun phrases is the norm. In particular, three postverbal noun phrases are not allowed.

The chief strategy combines animacy with word order. This is shown in 9.

9 a a - ka - ga - mú - ha
she-PAST- it - him-give 'she gave it to him'

b *a - ka - mu - gá - ha
she-PAST-him - it - give 'she gave it to him'

c a - ka - ga - zí - ha
she-PAST- it -them-give 'she gave it to them'
them=cattle, it=water

d *a - ka - zi - gá - ha
she-PAST-them- it -give 'she gave it to them'

Each of the constructions in 9 has two object markers. Those constructions that place inanimate object markers closer to the verb (9b,c) are not acceptable.

There is potential ambiguity if both arguments are human, as 10 shows.

10 a - ka - mu - reet - er - á abakázi
she-PAST-him - bring-APP -FV women
'she brought him to women' / 'she brought women to him'

Indeed if the language were symmetrical this is what would always happen: every construction with double objects would be ambiguous.

By the logic of the foregoing argument, a construction with two inanimate objects should be ambiguous too. But the interaction of animacy, word order, and semantic roles disposes of the potential ambiguity. The basic idea is that a participant in an event is conceived as assuming either a human or a non-human role; and more generally, an animate or an inanimate role. Animate roles include what are often called beneficiary, maleficiary, recipient, causee, affected, etc. Inanimate roles include instrument, locative, reason, theme, manner, etc. Note that the list is open-ended and the labels merely suggestive of the binary contrast between animate and inanimate roles. Now when two inanimate noun phrases co-occur in a construction, their order is based on this binary contrast between possible roles: by analogy one of the noun phrases takes the position of the typically animate role for that particular verb, and the other noun phrase follows. This is illustrated in 11.

11 a a - ka - haat - is - á omusyó ebitooce
she-PAST- peel -CAUS-FV knife bananas
'she peeled bananas with a knife'

b *a - ka - haat - is - á ebitoocé omúsyo

c a - ka - teec - er - á obujenyí ebitooce
she-PAST- cook -APP -FV feast bananas
'she cooked bananas for the feast'

d *a - ka - teec - er - á ebitoocé obujenyi

Both 'peel' and 'cook' have typically inanimate objects. Any second object introduced by the causative or the applicative is thus typically animate and closer to the verb. So both 'knife' and 'feast' have, in this sense, acquired a semblance of animacy.

Earlier it was shown that a construction with two human objects is potentially ambiguous (10). There is another combination of strategies which is designed to reduce such ambiguous constructions and produce one interpretation in a construction like (8). This combines person and number distinctions, agreement, and word order. In general the first person object marker is closer to the verb than second and third person object markers, as in 12.

12 a a - ka - kú - m - pa
she-PAST-you - me-give 'she gave you to me'

b *a - ka - n - kú - ha *'she gave you to me'
she-PAST- me -you -give *'she gave me to you'

Particularly worth noting about 12b is the fact that there is no combination of the items that can give the interpretation 'she gave me to you'. In general, if a construction already has a first person object marker (*me, us*), no other animate role can be introduced without changing the original role of the first person. Consider 13.

13 a a - ka - ci - tú - ha
she-PAST- it - us -give 'she gave it to us'
it=theme, us=recipient

b a - ka - ci - tu - he - er - á omu- nju
she-PAST- it - us -give-APP -FV in- house
'she gave it to us in the house'

c a - ka - ci - tu - he - er - á abáana
she-PAST- it - us -give-APP -FV children
'she gave it to the children for us'
it=theme, us=beneficiary, children=recipient

In 13b the inanimate role, locative, does not affect the existing roles when it is added to the construction by the applicative extension. But in 13c the new animate participant requires a reassignment of roles: the first person must be the beneficiary (more on this below).

The acceptable combinations of person, number and order in object marker positions are shown in 14 where position X is closer to the verb root than position Y.

| 14 | Y | X | VERB |
|---|---|---|---|
| a | 3rd Plural | 1st,2nd,3rd:Plural & Singular | V |
| b | 3rd Singular | 1st Singular & Plural<br>2nd & 3rd Singular<br>*2nd & 3rd Plural | V |
| c | 2nd Plural & Singular | 1st Singular<br>*1st Plural; 2nd & 3rd | V |
| d | *1st | *1st, 2nd, 3rd | V |

Anything is possible in position X as long as position Y has a 3rd person plural object marker (14a). If position Y has a 3rd person plural, then position X cannot have 2nd and 3rd person plural forms (14b). Only 1st person singular in position X allows a 2nd person in position Y (14c). The first person can never occupy position Y (14d).

A summary of these combinations is presented in 15.

15 a 1st person > 2nd person > 3rd person
b singular > plural

In filling position X the first person has priority over the rest, and the second person has priority over the third person (15a). Similarly, singular person object markers have priority over plural markers.

Given the foregoing data, it is not surprising that if a Runyambo construction has three objects, one is likely to be a first person object marker. Givon (1976:151) has rightly argued that 15a reflects the fact that speech is self-centered. Note the self-centeredness of the 'beneficiary' role assigned to the first person in 13c. But besides this ego-centrism, the interaction of person and number points to a significant distinction between definite and indefinite

participants (or between specific and non-specific participants). What can be more definite (given, identifiable) than the speaker? In this context 16 is not acceptable because the first person plural is less specific than the second person singular.

16 *a - ka - ku - tú - ha
she-PAST- you- us -give
'she gave you to us' / 'she gave us to you'

The rule is that the specific has priority over the non-specific for occupying position X.

The definiteness strategy is more clearly demonstrated in Kiswahili where it is signalled by agreement, as illustrated in 17.

17 a a - li - meny - e - a kisu
she-PAST- peel -APP-FV knife
'she peeled with a knife'

b (kile kisu) a - li - ki - meny - e - a ndizi
that knife she-PAST- it - peel -APP-FV bananas
'that knife, she peeled bananas with it'

'Knife' is indefinite in 17a, but definite in 17b. The Runyambo parallel to 17 was noted earlier and referred to as left-dislocation (7b). In both Runyambo and Kiswahili the constructions encode a definiteness distinction.

Finally, in Kiswahili, as already noted, animacy interacts with object marking. In a double object construction, object marking is required of the animate object.

**Summary and conclusion**

In this paper I have identified a number of strategies that serve as means of differentiation among the arguments of the verb. These strategies are listed in 18.

18 a Formal strategies:
- 'word order' (noun phrases, object markers)
- object agreement

b Semantic strategies:
- animacy (human vs non-human; animate vs inanimate)
- person (1st vs 2nd & 3rd; 2nd vs 3rd)
- number (singular vs plural)
- definiteness (definite vs indefinite; specific vs non-specific)
- semantic roles

I have shown that there is a high degree of interaction among these strategies.

From the foregoing discussion it would appear that languages cannot be neatly classified as either symmetrical or asymmetrical. More generally, languages have a vested interest in keeping a degree of inequality among the arguments of predicates so as to facilitate interpretation. Languages differ in the types of strategies they use to maintain this inequality, and in the ways these strategies are combined. Within Bantu languages it seems safe to say that animacy, word order, and agreement are shared by all.

In the course of the discussion I have touched, only in passing, on two issues of crucial importance in current work in linguistic theory. I have indirectly suggested that, contrary to the assumptions of Lexical Functional Grammar, there does not exist a universal hierarchy of semantic roles which plays a crucial role in assigning the arguments of the verb to grammatical functions. I have further cast doubt on the relevance of the category 'object' in a formal linguistic theory. On a separate occasion I will be investigating the full implications of this line of argument.

**References**


Alsina A. 1990 Where is the mirror principle? Stanford University. ms.

Alsina A. & Mchombo S. 1990 Object asymmetries and the Chichewa applicative construction. Stanford University & UC Berkeley. ms.

Alsina A. & Mchombo S. 1990 Object asymmetries in Chichewa. Stanford University & UC Berkeley. ms.

Bresnan J. & Moshi L. 1990 Object asymmetries in comparative Bantu syntax. **Linguistic Inquiry** 21.

Byarushengo E., Duranti A., & Hyman L. 1977 **Haya grammatical structure.** Scopil 6. University of Southern California, Los Angeles.

Comrie B. 1981 **Language universals and linguistic typology.** University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Cruse D.A. 1973 Some thoughts on agentivity. **Journal of Linguistics** 9:1, pp 11-23.

Fillmore C.J. 1976 Frame semantics and the nature of language. In S. Harnad et. al. **Origins and evolution of language and speech.** New York Academy of Sciences, New York.

Fillmore C.J. 1977 The case for case reopened. In P.Cole & J. Sadock, **Syntax and semantics 8: grammatical relations,** Academic Press, New York.

Firmino G. 1990 Applicatives and objects in Gitonga. UC Berkeley. ms.

Givon T. 1976 Topic, pronoun and grammatical agreement. In C. Li (ed.) **Subject and topic.** Academic Press, New York.

Hawkinson A. & Hyman L. 1974 Hierarchies of natural topic in Shona. **Studies in African Linguistics** 5:2 pp 147-170.

Morolong M. & Hyman L. 1977 Animacy, objects and clitics in Sesotho. **Studies in African Linguistics** 8:3 pp 199-218.

Russell J. 1985 Swahili quasi-passives: the question of context. In Goyvaerts D. (ed.) **African Linguistics.** John Benjamins, Amsterdam/Philadelphia.