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Study of Information Structure An Essay in honor of Prof. Nobuko Yoneda

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Since (and several years prior to) her doctoral thesis on a descriptive study of Matengo (Yoneda 2000), Nobuko Yoneda's contribution as a field researcher, linguist, Bantuist and Africanist has ranged from detailed studies of various aspects of phonetics, phonology, and morphosyntax in individual Bantu languages including Herero (Yoneda 1997a, 2009c, 2010a, 2016a, 2018a, 2019a), Ganda (Yoneda & Nakayiza 2019), Swahili (Yoneda 2012a, 2015a,b, 2016b, 2018b,c), and Matengo (Yoneda 1999, 2004, 2005c, 2006, 2007b, 2008c, 2009a,b, 2010b, 2011, 2017, 2019b), cross-Bantu micro-variation of grammatical phenomena (e.g., Yoneda 2014), to macro-sociolinguistic issues such as multilingualism/language contact (Yoneda 1996, 2004, 2005a,b, 2010c, 2012b, 2016c), language situation (Yoneda 1995, 2007a, 2009c, 2019b) and policies (Yoneda 1997b, 2009d).

Study of information structure is another research area for which Yoneda's work has had a great impact on its advancement in the last few decades. Her work has surely shaped and refined my own work on information structure as well. Our common interest on this topic was shared in two publications (Morimoto 2006, Yoneda 2008), coincidentally around the time we first met at the 2nd international conference on Bantu languages in Gothenburg, Sweden in 2007. We kept in touch personally and professionally over the years; about a decade later, we finally have had the opportunities to collaborate on related topics (Yoneda and Morimoto 2018a,b, Morimoto and Yoneda 2018, 2024, Forthcoming). For me it has been such a valuable and fruitful learning and discovering process: in particular I have benefitted greatly from Nobuko's vast knowledge of Bantu languages as a Bantuist and Africanist and skills as a field-linguist. In this short essay, I highlight some pieces of her contribution in this area of Bantu research that has had particular influence on my own work.

Yoneda (2000): the first descriptive study of the Matengo language

As far as I am aware, Yoneda's (2000) doctoral thesis was the first comprehensive description of the Matengo language. It comprises of data analyzed at core linguistic levels (phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax) as well as the sociolinguistic situation in Tanzania like language contact and policies. All the relevant data were collected through fieldwork in Litembo, the Mbinga District on the southwest border of Tanzania, in a total of 12 months spanning over three years. A particular focus was on the verb structure, including the analysis

of verb tones, agreement and noun concord, the tense and aspect systems, and various derivational verb morphology. While doctoral theses in major U.S institutions were more focused on developing linguistic theories based primarily on published data in the 1990's and early 2000's, linguistic and sociolinguistic analysis of a language based on field data like in Yoneda's work has been a valuable contribution in the advancement of comparative Bantu study. Her doctoral thesis became the solid ground for her numerous subsequent publications on the language, some of which have influenced my own research on the role of information structure in Bantu languages.

Discourse Configurationality in Bantu: the case of Matengo

Yoneda's (2008) work on information structure and sentence formation in Mantengo was an important piece of work for the study of discourse configurationality in Bantu languages (cf. also Yoneda 2004, 2010b, 2011). Discourse configurationality is defined here that ordering of nominal elements in a tensed clause is determined primarily by constraints on the positioning of discourse-related elements rather than semantic roles or case (cf. Kiss 1995). Morimoto (2000) argues that Bantu languages are basically discourse configurational in that information status such as topicality and focality is often manifested in the syntactic positioning of nominal elements. Yoneda's (2008) work is a significant contribution in this line of research: new data are presented to show that Matengo, in fact, manifests the most prototypical case of discourse configurationality. In other Bantu languages treated in previous work, data seem to show that, despite the rather obvious role of information structure in the morphosyntax of these languages, there is still a strong syntactic preference that the grammatical subject is positioned preverbally (Yoneda 2008: 124):

- (1) Chewa (cited from Downing et al. 2004)

Mbúzi	iizi	mikango	i-ná-zí-saak-a
10.goat	10.these	4.lion	4SM-PST-10OM-hunt-FV

'These goats the lions hunted.'

- (2) Swahili (cited from Nakajima 2000)

Mchezea	zuri	baya	hu-m-fik-a
1.player	goodness	badness	SM/HAB-1OM-arrive-FV

'Badness arrives at one that laughs about the good.'

adverbial *lí:so* ‘yesterday’. At the same time in the (b) examples, the subject *Tómasí* is the given information in prior discourse, hence in preverbal position.

When the whole utterance is new information as in (6), the subject is placed postverbally (Yoneda 2008: 119 ex (30)):

- (6) [A friend looks sad and was asked ‘what happened?'] [Matengo]
 Ju-a-lí-hejwî mwâ:na.
 1SM-PST-REF-hurt/SF 1.child
 ‘A child got hurt.’

The utterance in (7) has then two interpretations (a) term focus *balúa* ‘letter’, and (b) athetic interpretation (Yoneda 2008: 120 ex(33a)):

- (7) N-a-hándika balúa lí:so
 1sgSM-PST-write/SF 9.letter yesterday
 a. ‘I wrote a LETTER yesterday.’ Term focus
 b. ‘I wrote a letter yesterday.’ Thetic (balúa = non-focal, non-topical)

Crucially, in all these Matengo examples above, the verb consistently agrees with the logical subject regardless of its syntactic position. This shows a different pattern from the well-known OVS sentences in other Bantu languages such as Rundi, Rwanda, in which the preverbal topic (object) agrees with the verb (cf. Kimenyi 1980, Ndayiragije 1999). In other words, Matengo is strictly discourse configurational. What word order indicates is not the grammatical relation, but the discourse prominence of the nominal elements: the preverbal position must be the highest element in terms of topicality; the focused element must be placed in IAV position. The grammatical relation is indicated solely by the agreement morphology. This complete division of labor that information structure is positionally encoded, while grammatical relation is morphologically signaled had not yet been observed in earlier work (cf. Morimoto 2000, 2006). Yoneda’s work on Matengo information structure and sentence formation has also become a crucial part of a subsequent comparative study of subject and topicality in Bantu languages.

Conjoint/disjoint alternation, verb focus, and light verb in Matengo

The conjoint/disjoint alternation in Bantu languages has received increasing attention in the last decades since the pioneering work of Creissels (1996), and has become a major topic of Bantu research (cf. van der Wal and Hyman 2017). Though the manifestations of the

conjoint/disjoint alternation vary across the Bantu languages that display this alternation, there are common characteristics. One of the robust syntactic generalizations is that the conjoint form cannot be sentence-final and must have a following element; information-structurally, the conjoint/disjoint alternation relates to focus of either the verbal element (truth-value, aspect, or the verb lexeme) of the disjoint verb form or the nominal complement of the conjoint verb (van der Wal & Hyman 2017: 15).

Within this context, Yoneda (2006) presents a light verb construction in Matengo, in which the conjoint verb form of the light verb ‘do’ is followed by an infinitival verb complement. Just as with a nominal complement of a conjoint verb, the verbal complement of the conjoint light verb also receives verb focus interpretation, as illustrated in 0 (Yoneda 2006: 201, ex (45), see also Yoneda 2017:436-7 for more examples and discussion of this construction).

(8) Matengo light verb construction and verb focus

Tómu	ju-tend-a	kú-soma	nga	kú-handika
1.Tom	1SM-do-BF	INF-read	NEG	INF-write

‘Tom READS not WRITES.’
 (lit) ‘Tom does READING not WRITING.’

Data like that in (8) from Matengo, in fact, later becomes a curious hint for a possible historical relation between the disjoint verb form and focus on the verbal element, as briefly discussed by Morimoto and Yoneda (Forthcoming). Consider the examples in (9) from a neighboring language Matuumbi:

(9) Matuumbi (Odden 1996: 60-61)

- a. ni-kat-a kaámba
 SM1SG-cut-FV rope
 ‘I am cutting ROPE (not something else).’
- b. e-endá-kaatá kaámba
 SM1-DJ.PRS-cut rope
 ‘He is CUTTING rope (not doing something else to it).’
- c. e-endá-kaatá
 SM1-DJ.PRS-cut
 ‘He is CUTTING.’

In Matuumbi, the complement of the unmarked conjoint verb form receives term focus interpretation, as illustrated in (9)a; when the verb form is the marked disjoint form regardless of the presence/absence of the following element, the focus interpretation is on the verb, as shown in (9)b,c. Note that the disjoint morphology in Matuumbi is *endá*, which is apparently formally related to the light verb *-tend(a)-* ‘do’ in Matengo. A potential historical relation between these two forms must be confirmed by more evidence; nonetheless the formal similarities remind us of the parallelism between a copular verb in a cleft construction in one context and a formally identical focus marker in another in a single language; for this as well, one might speculate that the focus marker has developed from a (reduced) cleft construction (e.g., Kikuyu: cf. Schwarz 2003, Morimoto 2017). While the potential historical connection must be further investigated, Yoneda’s work on Matengo is a crucial empirical contribution for this line of inquiry.

Subject and Topicality from a comparative Bantu perspective

Our earlier work on the role of information structure on core grammar such as syntactic position and agreement (e.g., Morimoto 2000, 2006, Yoneda 2006, 2008, 2010b, 2011) has focused on a few individual languages and variation within a small set of sample languages. In the last decade or so in particular, there is steady advancement in comparative research and micro-variation in various grammatical aspects of Bantu languages (e.g., Marten and Kula 2012, Marten and van der Wal 2014, van der Wal and Hyman 2017, Edelsten et al. 2022, Gibson et al. Forthcoming, Bloom-Strom et al. Forthcoming). Increasing availability of a wider range of relevant data and development of analytic tools such as morphosyntactic parameters for Bantu languages (Guérois et al. 2017, Shinagawa and Abe 2019) have enabled us to revisit the questions about Bantu subjects and grammatical encoding of topic both from a synchronic and diachronic perspective, with a larger set of cross-Bantu data: how grammaticized is topicality indeed in Bantu Grammar? Building on our earlier work, in particular, work from Morimoto (2006) and the refinement by Yoneda (2008) as the starting point of our perspective on the patterns of agreement and syntactic positioning of discourse elements, we examined 30 Bantu languages against 4 sets of morphosyntactic parameters (cf. Morimoto and Yoneda 2024 for the most recent results and analysis). Having data from a language like Matengo has enabled us to represent the micro-variation in the grammaticization of topic in Bantu languages within a typological space provided by two parametric axes: (i) whether the initial position has to be the subject or can be a non-subject topic and (ii) whether the agreeing target tends to be a topic or subject, as summarized in figure 1 (cf. Morimoto & Yoneda 2024). As shown, group A languages such as Rundi and Rwanda is most topic-

prominent in that both preverbal position and verb agreement picks out discourse topic. C2 languages such as Basaa and Rombo are most subject-prominent in that the grammatical subject is what occupies the initial position and agrees with the verb. Matengo belongs to C1, which shows a complete division of labor, as earlier described based on Yoneda’s earlier work: the initial position must be topic; the verb agreement is with the grammatical subject. Group B makes up 60% of our sample, showing the most variation.

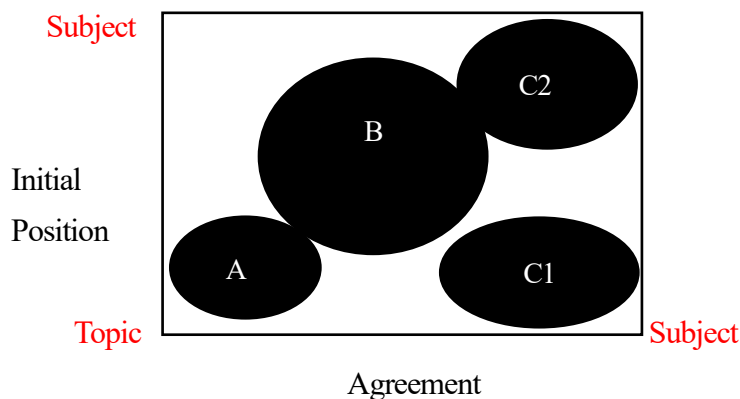


Figure 1: Positional and agreement marking of subject/topic

A (< 10%): Rundi, Ruwanda

B (60%): Herero, Sotho, Ganda, Uru, Chewa, Kikuyu ...

C1 (20%): Matengo, Makhuwa, Gogo-Tumba ...

C2: (10%): Basaa, Rombo ...

Obviously, coming originally from a purely theoretical background with no fieldwork experience in Africa, I could not have conducted a study of this scale alone. It was obviously due not only to Nobuko’s wealth of fieldwork experience in Tanzania and Namibia and fine analytic skills as a linguist, but also to her gift to connect with the societies and people (native speakers) through the years of her visit to Africa and to build such a warm, supportive ‘home’ community of Africanists/Bantuists who are always ready to provide us with data and their insights. Research is often seen as individual work, but surely, good research cannot be achieved alone. Good research is interesting because it relates to interests of other researchers in the community, and enables us see how a piece of science that is newly discovered fits into a bigger puzzle that we are all working on. Nobuko’s approach to research reminds us to continue working together as a community with support and respect for one another’s interest and expertise for further advancement in our subfield of linguistic science.

Abbreviations

BF ‘basic final’, DJ ‘disjoint’, FOC ‘focus’, FV ‘final vowel’, HAB ‘habitual’, INF ‘infinitive’, NEG ‘negation’, number 1/2/3... ‘noun class’, OM ‘object marker’, PRS ‘present’, PST ‘past’, REF ‘reflexive’, SF ‘simple final’, 1SG ‘1st singular’, SM ‘subject marker’

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