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Kay Williamson**

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Kay R.M. Williamson in 1969



Professor Kay R.M. Williamson in 1994

Object Diagnostics in Bantu

Thilo C. Schadeberg

The harder I try the more difficult I find it to say which nominal phrases are syntactic objects in Bantu. The common tests of objecthood are not quite satisfactory. In this paper I list some alternative diagnostic tests. The results are not easy to interpret; the old problems remain and new ones are added.

Objects have to be distinguished from non-objects. Non-objects come in two different kinds: subjects and adjuncts. Furthermore, several kinds of objects may have to be distinguished from each other, especially if we concede that a sentence may contain more than one object.

Since finite verb forms include a subject concord (SCd) regardless of the presence or absence of a lexical subject in the sentence, it is easy to establish which noun phrase is the subject of a given sentence: It is the one that agrees with the person or class of the SCd. I accept this as a diagnostic feature for subjects, at least for the purposes of this paper, even though there may be problems with this definition. Some linguists may claim that locative subjects are not quite what they seem to be, and there are languages where, in certain relative verb forms, the apparent SCd agrees not with the subject but with the antecedent of the relative clause.

Having dealt with subjects, I now turn to properties which distinguish objects from adjuncts. Three tests are widely used to determine the objecthood of a noun phrase (cf. Hyman and Duranti 1982):

- word order (access to the position immediately after the verb)
- cliticization (as object prefix)
- subjectivization (through passivization)

In (1), the word *kamba* 'rope' shows all three properties relative to the verb *-kata* 'cut'. However, if we replace *kamba* in the first sentence by, say, *kimya* 'silence', it would then be quite impossible to apply the same transformations.

(1) Swahili G42d

a-me-kata kamba	she has cut a rope
a-me-i-kata	he has cut it
kamba i-me-katwa	the rope has been cut

These tests sometimes help to distinguish objects from adjuncts, but they do not always answer all questions. Different tests may produce conflicting clues, and thus lead to degrees or types of objecthood, a topic that has recently inspired a flood of papers on "object asymmetries".

There is another problem concerning the interpretation of such tests. How can we be certain that the acceptability of any of these transformations (through changing the word order, pronominalization and passivization) tells us anything about the syntax of the original sentence? Consider the following case of "symmetric objects".

(2) Haya E.22 (Hyman and Duranti 1982)

akah' ómwáán' ébitooke.	She gave the child bananas.
akah' ébitook' ómwána.	She gave bananas to the child.
akamúh' ébitooke.	She gave him bananas.
akabih' ómwána.	She gave them to the child.
omwáán' akaháábw' ébitooke.	The child was given bananas.
ébitooke bíkaháábw' ómwána.	The bananas were given to the child.

In such a case, where both complements have access to the post-verbal position, to object cliticisation and to subjectivization, I maintain that it is still possible that the two complements in the first pair of sentences may have different syntactic status. As we shall see, such differences are overtly marked in some Bantu languages — just as they are marked in English by the use of a preposition.

There is a kind of markers that may tell us something about objecthood, and most of them can even be observed without recourse to transformations. The problem is that these markers identify a class of complements that is wider than what we are used to regard as objects and for which we seem to have no use in our syntactic descriptions. There are at least four such properties:

- object case marking by tone
- metatony of verb forms
- shortened verb forms
- transitive agent nouns

The first of these markers is a particularly powerful diagnostic device because it involves a marking of the noun itself. The other three markers appear on the verb. The first three are directly observable in the appropriate sentences; the fourth one involves a derivational process of nominalization. None of them provides a test that could be applied to just any Bantu language, but all of them have at least a regional spread within Bantu.

OBJECT CASE MARKING BY TONE occurs in an area along the Atlantic Ocean from Gabon (Zone B) in the north to Namibia (Zone R) in the south; it is not clear how far inland this region extends. The syntactic and semantic details differ from language to language. For UMBundu (R.11), I have described the situation approximately as follows (1986):

Each noun appears in two tonally distinct forms, one starting with a high tone (form A) and one starting with a low tone (form B). Form A is used for all nouns as the citation form and with a predicative function. Form A is also used for nouns with an augment (which are most nouns except proper names, certain kinship terms and some borrowed words) when they are used as the first nominal object of an affirmative verb in a main clause. Form B is used in all other environments. More precisely we can list the following environments:

(3) UMBundu R.11

OC (Object Case, form A with nouns having an augment) is used for:

- the first complement of an affirmative verb in a non-subordinated clause
- this includes locative complements
- it also includes the locative noun (class 17) referring to the agent of a passive verb
- it also includes basic and locative complements of various verbs 'to be'
- it also includes infinitives used as complements of auxiliary verbs
- it also applies to the first nominal complement of a verb having an OCd referring to another complement

CC (Common Case, always form B) is used for:

- all subjects
- the second (and any following) complement of any verb form
- this includes a nominal complement after a verb with a post-clitic pronominal complement
- the complement of a negative verb form
- the complement of a verb in a subordinated clause (mostly relative verb forms)
- subordinated infinitives
- complements of infinitives (the infinitive itself being in the OC form when it is the complement of an affirmative auxiliary verb in a main clause)
- the complement of a progressive verb form (such forms are probably derived from an auxiliary followed by an infinitive)
- complements placed into pre-verbal position and (rarely) subjects placed into post-verbal position
- adjuncts (nouns outside the predication frame)

All these cases have been documented in the article mentioned above; in (4) I repeat just a few examples for further illustration:

(4) UMBundu R.11 (Schadeberg 1986)

onjali y-á-!há ó!má!á epako
 9.parent.OC SCd9-PST-give 2.children.OC 5.fruit.OC
 The parent gave the children a fruit.

onjali i-!vá-!há épáko
 9.parent.OC SCd9-OCd2-give 5.fruit.OC
 The parent gives them a fruit.

á-tánde-mó v-uliví
 SCd1-leave.OPT-PRO18 18-3.trap.OC
 May he get out of the trap!

nda w-á-!ile ombisi' ...
 if SCd1-PST-eat.PF 9.fish.OC
 If s/he had eaten the fish ...

Note that Umbundu admits more than one object concord before the verb stem, but it never admits two nominal complements both marked for object case (OC).

METATONY is the term used for those cases where the tone of the final (inflectional) suffix of certain verb forms is (underlyingly) high before an object and low otherwise. This is how Meeussen reconstructs the tone of the final suffix -a of the infinitive (1967:111). The geographical spread of metatony has not been described in the literature, but the fact that Meeussen reconstructs it for Protobantu indicates that it has some significant distribution. I have found metatony described for the infinitive (and some other verb forms) in grammars for languages of zones D and L. I shall use Stappers' (1964) grammar of Songye (L. 23) for exemplification. From the description it is clear that the high tone final °-a appears before an object and the low tone final °-a before pause. Note that it is quite clear that this is not a phonological conditioning since numerous other words, including verb forms, are consistently ending in either high or low tones irrespective of their being in the middle or at the end of a phrase. Stappers is not explicit about cases where the infinitive is followed by something which is not an object. Fortunately, there are some examples where an infinitive is followed by a connexive (a nominal possessive), and here it appears that the verb has a final low tone °-a.

(5) Songye L.23 (Stappers 1964)

kudimununa	to work again (on the land)
kudimundá mádimi	to work the fields again
kusepá mfumu	to laugh at the chief
kusepa kwá-mbwá n-kubú!úka	the laughter of the dog is barking

Even if the syntactic details are not known, it is clear that metatony is a syntactic marking of a certain relationship between a verb and a class of complements which includes what we call the object.

SHORTENED VERB FORMS are a typical feature of southern Bantu languages (Ngumi S.40, Sotho S.30, Venda S.20), but something similar has also been described for Interlacustrine languages (e.g. Rundi JD.62). Again, I am not aware of the exact spread of this phenomenon. In these languages, one or more tenses appear in two forms, a long one and a short one. The general but oversimplified statement about their distribution is that the short form is used before a complement and the long form elsewhere. I shall illustrate this with some examples from Xhosa (S.41), taken from the pedagogical grammar by Louw and Jubase (1978; tone not marked) and from the study of Xhosa syntax by Du Plessis and Visser (1992; tone marked).

There are two tenses in Xhosa which exhibit a long and a short form: the Present and the Perfective. The respective forms are shown in (6a). It is obvious that the difference between the two forms is not conditioned phonologically. This is particularly clear in the Present tense where the "shortening" does not affect the end of the word but determines the deletion of the word-internal tense marker *-ya-*. The general distribution of the two forms given above has to be further qualified. It appears to be true that the short form can never appear in sentence final position but only when there is some kind of complement, though this complement may well be a noun phrase which by the common transformational tests is an adjunct rather than an object. The long form, however, can appear in several types of non-final position. I would like to suggest that complements following the long form are not objects but are placed outside the predication frame of the verb.

(6) Xhosa S.41 (Louw & Jubase 1978; Du Plessis & Visser 1992)

(6a) PRES: ndiyabona I see adibona abantu I see some people
 PERF: ndibonile I have seen ndibone abantu I have seen some people

(6b) lé ntómbi i-báya édlóphiini the girl is returning from town [short form]
 ábantu bá-ya-lla écwéni the people are crying in church [long form]
 ábantu bá-lléla écwéni the people are crying in church only [short form]

(6c) amádodá á-xhéla igusha the men are slaughtering a sheep
 amádodá á-ya-yi-xhéla igusha the men do occasionally slaughter a sheep
 lí-máwí á-in-vuyisa kakhálu uthémba these words make Themba very glad

The first two sentences in (6b) show that locative complements can follow both the short and the long form; the example suggests that this is a marker of a different syntactic status; i.e. the locative is an object with the verb of movement 'to return (from)' but not with 'to cry'. The third sentence of (6b) indicates that the applicative extension turns an adjunct into an object — which would be another kind of transformational test of objecthood that has not yet been fully exploited. The first two sentences in (6c) suggest that the use of an object concord removes the corresponding lexical object from the predication frame and turns it into an adjunct. In the third sentence of (6c), the OCd and the corresponding lexical object do cooccur with the short form, but here the verb is followed by *kakhálu*, and this so-called adverb meaning 'very' can apparently fill the complement position.

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Xhosa is a language with rather free word order, but changing the place of the noun phrases has repercussions on the choice between the long and the short verb forms. Both grammars which I consulted ascribe these differences to discourse functions and/or emphasis; I won't argue with this but I still suspect that different syntactic structures are involved, too.

TRANSITIVE AGENT NOUNS occur in many East African Bantu languages. The situation is very clear in Nyamwezi (F.22) which I shall use for exemplification (cf. Maganga and Schadeberg 1992:173-175).

The stem of the normal, independent agent noun is formed from the verbal base by the addition of either one of two allomorphs: *-i* in general, but *-á* after the causative extension *-i-* and the passive extension *-u-*. (The high tone of the second allomorph is probably a trace of the original high tone of the two extensions.) However, when the agent noun has a complement, another final morpheme is suffixed: *-a*. This suffix has an underlying low tone but may be realized as high by the regular operation of High Tone Shift.

(7) Nyamwezi F.22 (Maganga and Schadeberg 1992)

(7a)	<i>m̄tumámi</i>	worker	< <i>-tumáma</i> 'to work'
	<i>m̄βuóǰá</i>	someone who asks	< <i>-βuóǰa</i> 'ask', CAUS < <i>-βuóla</i> 'reveal'
	<i>m̄toólwá</i>	bride	< <i>-toólwa</i> PASS < <i>-toóla</i> 'to marry (of man)'

(7b)	<i>m̄kamila βushishi</i>	slave; lit. squeezer tamarind
	<i>isela magazi</i>	a place name; lit. shedding blood
	<i>m̄koŋwáá nzoká</i>	rascal; lit. bitten [by-] snake
	<i>ku taángwá βázugi</i>	evening star; lit. preceded [-by] cooks (i.e., the star arrives before the cooks)

The last two examples show that the complement of such a "transitive agent noun" does not have to be an object in the traditional sense; it corresponds to the agent of a passive construction in the word for 'rascal' which, in a clause, would be preceded by the preclitic index *na-*, and the complement in the word for 'evening star', even more surprisingly, corresponds to what would be the syntactic subject of the corresponding passive clause.

Such transitive agent nouns are also common in Swahili (G.42d). Here, too, the complements are not restricted to objects in the traditional sense but also include nouns whose function is rather one of adjunct. A well-known example occurs in the following proverb:

(8) Swahili G.42d

<i>simba</i>	<i>mwenda</i>	<i>kimya</i>	<i>ndiye</i>	<i>m̄la</i>	<i>nyama</i>
lion	walker	silence	it is he	eater	meat

In this paper, I have certainly not solved the problem of how to recognize objects in Bantu. What I have shown is that certain languages have certain ways of marking some kind of

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syntactic relationship between the verb and (some of) its complement(s). No real analysis of any one language has been presented, much less a comparative overview of the typological variation. If any conclusion is indicated at all, it would be that Bantu languages recognize a type of syntactic relationship which is wider than our traditional category of object, including some but not all of our category of adjunct. I think we should take serious account of such concrete morphological markers in syntactic description (and theory).

Finally, I would like to add a comparative historical hypothesis. It occurs to me that the first two of the four complement marking strategies presented in this article may well be related. I have said before that the tonal marking of the noun, as described here for UMBundu and attested in all language groups along the Atlantic Ocean (except the northernmost ones belonging to Zone A), has its origin in the augment (also called "pre-prefix" or "initial vowel"). In the northern part of this area, the segmental, vocalic body of the augment has disappeared, leaving behind its high tone which became incorporated into the noun. Metatony, then, could very well be the incorporation of the same floating high tone into the preceding verb form. Much will depend on the geographical spread of metatony, which, ideally, should be adjacent to but not overlapping with the area where complement nouns are marked tonally.

Shortened verb forms, at first sight, appear to have nothing in common with the augment, object case marking by tone and metatony of verb forms. Recently, however, Creissels (in press) has shown that in Tswana (S.31), the dichotomy between long and short verb forms has a tonal parallel in other tenses. He also notes the similarity with the facts from Rundi and adopts the syntactically oriented terms "conjoint" and "disjoint" forms (cf. Meeussen 1959). We therefore cannot rule out that further comparative research will establish a link between conjoint verb forms and metatony, too.

No reconstruction exists for the final suffix ^o-a of the transitive agent noun. If it had a high tone it would be tempting to think that it, too, could be a remnant of the augment, being identical with the final suffix of the infinitive when followed by a complement. But this is not what the data from Nyamwezi suggest.

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