

Obligatory and optional left-dislocation of topics in eastern Bantu languages and the impossibility of VSO

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The Bantu languages of eastern and southern Africa are typologically very similar and have similar information structural properties, characterised by left-dislocation of topics and very frequent use of topic-comment sentence articulation. There are, however, differences between these languages regarding the behaviour of topic and focus expressions. This paper will demonstrate that these information structural differences are grammatically significant.

In some eastern and southern Bantu languages, the preverbal domain is restricted to topics; that is, focused referents may not occur preverbally (Zerbian 2006; Van der Wal 2009; Van der Wal, in preparation; Yoneda 2011). Additionally, in certain languages topics must be expressed in preverbal position, and a topic occurring in any other position is considered not just pragmatically infelicitous but ungrammatical. This is the case in Fuliiru [DJ63] (Van Otterloo 2011) and Jita [EJ25] (Pyle & Robinson, in press). In these languages, topics are left-dislocated; this is illustrated in (1) by the insertion of *bhuri rusiku* ‘every day’ between the topic *wamembe* ‘hyena’ and the verb, and in (2) by the insertion of the clause *ikyanya ali mubalamuka* ‘the time he is returning from a trip’ between the topic *yiba* ‘her husband’ and the verb:

1) Eyo mw=ibhara wamembe bhuri rusiku :aa-jaga mu=mugunda gwaye
DEM LOC=forest hyena every day 3SG.IPFV-go LOC=field his
‘There in the forest, Hyena, every day he went to his field.’ (Jita)

2) Yiba ikyanya a-li mu=balamuka a-li mu=yija
her.husband time 3SG-be PROG=travel 3SG-be PROG=come

a-ba-gul-ira amakanju bombi.
3SG-3PL-buy-APPL dresses both

‘Her husband, the time he is returning from a trip, he is coming having bought dresses for both of them.’ (Fuliiru)

In other eastern Bantu languages, topics in certain discourse contexts may occur in postverbal position. In Digo [E73] (Nicolle 2013) the position of topics is sensitive to the distinction between switch topics and continued topics in specific discourse contexts. When the topic changes between one clause and the next, the new topic is a switch topic; when there is no change of topic from the previous clause, this is a continued topic. All switch topics, as well as continued topics occurring at places of discontinuity in a text (such as at the start of a new thematic unit), must be preverbal. However, continued topics in Digo are right-dislocated when there is no discourse discontinuity. In the following example, there is no change of topic and no discontinuity (note the use of the consecutive tense indicating a sequential action within a single thematic unit), and so the continued topic *mutu yuyu* ‘this person’ is right-dislocated:

3) Lakini a-chi-nyamala mutu yuyu wala ka-ya-gomba na mutu.
but 3SG-CONS-be.silent person DEM nor 3SG.NEG-PST-speak with person
‘But he stayed silent this person, neither did he speak with anyone.’

In Jita and Fuliiru, in contrast, even when the topic has not changed and there is no discourse-level discontinuity, topics must be left-dislocated. In the following Jita example, a left-dislocated continued topic occurs mid-way through a paragraph at a place with no apparent discontinuity:

- 4) Woori omumura oyo a-ta-chandaga na ku-fwima
now man DEM 3SG-NEG-like with INF-hunt
'Now this man did not like to hunt.'

In all of these languages, "the preverbal position *indicates* the topical status of the referents occurring there" (Van der Wal, in preparation; original emphasis); that is, any preverbal NP will be interpreted as a topic. Only in Jita and Fuliiru, however, is the preverbal position the obligatory location of topics, such that a NP in any other position cannot be a topic; in Digo, although preverbal NPs are topics, not all topics are preverbal.

I will demonstrate that despite these differences, information structure makes VSO constituent order impossible in these languages. If S is a topic, it is left-dislocated obligatorily in Jita and Fuliiru and optionally in Digo. In Digo, if S is a right-dislocated topic, then it must be outside of the clause nucleus. If the object is part of the focus it will occur after V in the clause nucleus, and so S will occur to the right of VO, giving the order VOS. On the other hand, if the object is also a topic it will be left-dislocated, giving the order OVS. Therefore VSO is impossible if S is a topic. If, on the other hand, S is not a topic, the only time it occurs after V in these languages is in a presentational sentence, since focusing of S in sentences with identificational articulation occurs in cleft constructions in Digo and Jita (Nicolle 2013: 241-242; Pyle & Robinson in press) and preverbally with a focus copula in Fuliiru (Van Otterloo 2011: 344-346). Presentational sentences require intransitive verbs such as *appear*, *come*, *emerge* and so VSO is impossible if S is not a topic. Since S must either be a topic or not be a topic, and the order VSO cannot occur in either case, the order VSO is ruled out because of information structural reasons.

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