An information structure template in Bantoid

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1   Introduction

[1] Not infrequently one encounters word-order alternations along the lines of the following in Bantoid languages (data from Aghem (Grassfields Bantu))

[a] ***énáʔ*** *mɔ̀   ñɨ́ŋ nô*
Inah DPST run FOC
"Inah ran."

[b] *á   mɔ̀   ñɨ́ŋ **ndúghɔ̀***
DS DPST run who
"Who ran?"

[c] *á   mɔ̀   ñɨ́ŋ **énáʔ***
DS DPST run Inah
"*Inah* ran."   (Watters 1979:144)

[2] Descriptions of these languages (see, e.g., Watters (1979)) often describe data like that above in terms linearly-defined positions in the clause.

[3] For example, one might propose a schema like the following (see Good (forthcoming))

[[   ]Topic   [   ]Predicate   [   ]Focus]

[4] An alternative approach is to assume that there is one basic canonical word order in languages like Aghem (typically SVO) and to derive other word orders via "displacements" of varying kinds.

[5] The so-called cartographic approach to information structure (see, e.g., Rizzi (1997)) is probably the most well-known contemporary displacement approach.

[6] "Field" based analyses of syntactic structure—i.e., syntactic templates—have not been as popular as displacement approaches, but they can be found.

[7] Kathol (2000) is a recent example of a long line of scholarship treating the German sentence as consisting of templatic topological fields.

[8] Similarly, Dahlstrom (1995) proposes a syntactic template in analyzing Algonquian.

[9] The primary goal of this presentation is to defend a templatic approach to Bantoid syntax.

[10] Some key ideas:

[a] An information structure template approach allows us to treat a wider range of word orders as canonical than would otherwise be possible.

[b] Apparent position class effects are positive evidence for the template.

[c] Evidence for grammatical subjects is not as clear as often portrayed—some "subject" properties can be reduced to topicality.

[d] It is difficult, if not impossible, to avoid reference to linear position at some point in any analysis.

2   Criteria for template-hood

2.1   Fluence and word order

[11] **Fluence:** The relationship between information bearing entities of a clause and their grammatical expression.

[12] **Confluentive:** An alignment between information structure relations and semantic macroroles (in the RRG sense, see Van Valin and LaPolla (1997:139–147)) wherein an actor is coded as topical and an undergoer as focal (perhaps as part of a larger focal predicate).

[13] **Disfluentive:** An alignment between information structure relations and grammatical relations wherein the normal information flow of the confluentive alignment is not found.

[14] Confluentive alignment construction in Naki (Beboid)

[a] *Kúm ákpɔ̄lɔ̄ fyɛ̀p yɔ̀.*
Kum kill.PST 9.rat 9.the
"Kum killed the rat."

[b] *Mū   wɔ̄   āmé   yē?*
1.man 1.the see.PST who
"Who did the man see?"

[c] *L' āmé   mùkpàng wɔ̀.*
3s see.PST 1.woman 1.the
"He saw the woman."

[15] Disfluentive alignment in Naki (actor focus)

[a] *Fyɛ̀p yɔ̀ ākpɔ́lɔ̄ yē?*
9.rat 9.the kill.PST.DIS who
"Who killed the rat?"

[b] *Fyɛ̀p yɔ̀ ākpɔ́lɔ̄ Kúm.*
9.rat 9.the kill.PST.DIS Kum
"*Kum* killed the rat."

[16] Disfluentive alignment in Naki has a similar function to passivization in other languages.

[a] *Nyɛ̀ŋkɔ̀ wɜ̄ ákpɜ̄lɔ̄ mù wɜ̄ bwɛ̀ wɜ̄.*
1.lion 1.the kill.PST 1.man 1.the hunt 1.the
"The lion killed the hunter."

[b] *Nyɨ́ŋkɔ̀ wɜ̄ ākpɔ́lɔ̄ mù wɜ̄ bwɛ̀ wɜ̄.*
1.lion 1.the kill.PST.DIS 1.man 1.the hunt 1.the
"*The hunter* killed the lion."

[17] This construction can also be used to focalize elements other than subjects that would not normally appear immediately postverbally (adjunct focus).

@*Bùflɑ̄ bùnɔ́ngbɛ́, kì bú sí tsád ɔ́nɛ̄ là?*
1.flower 1.good 1p 3p will meet where PART
"Nice flowers, where can we find them?"

[18] The basic construction can be found in other Bantoid languages, though only Naki, so far, is reported as showing a special tone pattern when it is employed.

[19] Locative inversion in Chichewa (N.30; Bantu) (Bresnan 1994:77)—disfluentivity triggered by "presentational focus" (Bresnan 1994:85)

[a] *Chitsîme chi-li ku mudzi.*
7.well 7-be 17 3.village
"The well is in the village."

[b] *Ku mudzi ku-li chitsîme.*
17 3.village 17-be 7.well
"In the village is a well."

[20] Conceptualizing the sentential structure of these languages as Topic-Predicate-Focus rather than Subject-Verb-Object allows us to treat non-SVO sentences as showing canonical word order without resorting to a displacement analysis.

2.2 Position-class effects

[21] Expletive elements in Topic Field and Focus Field

[a] Dummy "subject" in Aghem
á mɔ̀ ñɨ́ŋ énáʔ
DS DPST run Inah
"*Inah* ran."   (Watters 1979:144)

[b] Dummy "object" in Aghem
énáʔ mɔ̀ ñɨ́ŋ nô
Inah DPST run FOC
"*Inah* ran."   (Watters 1979:144)

[22] Non-expletive use of the focus marker (Watters 1979:167)

fú kɨ́ mɔ̂ ñɨ̀ŋ á kɨ́-bé nò
7.rat.B 7 DPST run in 7.compound.A FOC
"The rat ran inside the *compound* [not inside the house]"

[23] Some of the relevant languages, then, apparently show "active" slots which must be filled—a hallmark of templatic constructions.

[24] "Objects" and "adjuncts" conflated: Short and long verb forms in Zulu (S.40; Bantu) (data from Güldemann (2003), originally from Doke (1927[1992]))

[a] *ba-ya-fika*
2-LONG-come.PRS.FV
"They are coming."

[b] *u-hlakaza u:-thango*
1-shake.PRS.FV 11-fence
"He shakes a fence."

[c] *ngi-hamba kakhulu*
1s-walk.PRS.FV much
"I walk hard."   (Güldemann 2003:326)

[25] Arguments and adjuncts behaving the same grammatically gives us another typical templatic effect: non-natural classes of elements grouped in the same slot.

[26] Such data also suggests the postverbal position is not a dedicated argument position.

2.3 Scope insensitivity

[27] Initial data from Naki suggests that scope relations reflect actor/undergoer relations as opposed to surface linear relations.

[28] Confluentive/disfluentive sentence pair from Naki

[a] **Bùnkɔ̄ng   bɔ̀   búnsāt**   ámē   m̱būt   m̱ùbù   m̱ɔ̄.
2.chief   2.the   2.each   see.PERF   6.cat   6.their   6.the
"**Each chief**[i] saw <u>his</u>[i] <u>cat</u>."

[b] <u>Mbūt</u>   <u>mùbù</u>   <u>mɔ̄</u>   àmē   **bùnkɔ̄ng**   **bɔ̀**   **búnsāt**.
6.cat   6.their   6.the   see.PERF.DIS   2.chief   2.the   2.each
"*Each chief*[i] saw <u>his</u>[i] <u>cat</u>."

[29] While a pattern like the above does not argue specifically for a templatic approach to surface syntactic structure, it is consistent with it.

[30] Displacement approaches—at least those employing common transformational assumptions—must propose analyses for sentences like these where the actor is structurally higher than the undergoer in both cases.

[31] Kirundi (J.60; Bantu) shows comparable word order in disfluentive sentences but, unlike Naki, does not show constant scope readings (Ndayiragije 1999:421).

2.4 Agreement/"case" reversal

[32] "Subject" coding not found when "subject" is not preverbal: "A" and "B" nominal forms in Aghem

[a] **m̀**   mɔ̂   bvʉ̀   nò
1s.B   DPST   fall   FOC
"I fell."   (Hyman 1979:47)

[b] ò   mɔ̂   kɔ̀ʔ   **mùɔ**
3s.B   DPST   see   1s.A
"He saw me."   (Hyman 1979:49)

[c] à   zɨ́á   **mùɔ**   bɛ́'kɔ́
DS   eat.INC   1s.A   fufu.B
"*I* am eating fufu."   (Hyman 1979:49)

[33] Moreover, different morphological forms exist for subject and non-subject pronouns, suggesting case-like differentiation. (Bresnan and Mchombo 1987:767)

[34] "Subject-object reversal" (see Morimoto (2000)) (data from Dzamba (C.40; Bantu) (Bokamba 1985:21–22))

[a] *óPetélo*   *a-kpét-el-eki*   *bâzi*   *nzeté*   *wáàbo*.
AUG.Peter   3s-cut-APPL-PST   2.woman   10.tree   here
"Peter chopped down (some) trees here for the women."

[b] *bábazi*   *ba-kpét-el-eki*   *óPetélo*   *nzeté*   *wáàbo*.
AUG.2.woman   3p-cut-APPL-PST   AUG.Peter   10.tree   here
"For the women, Peter chopped down some trees here."

[c] *ínzeté*   *í-kpét-el-eki*   *óPetélo*   *bâzi*   *wáàbo*.
AUG.10.tree   10-cut-APPL-PST   AUG.Peter   2.woman   here
"The trees, Peter cut for some women here."

[35] In Narrow Bantu, the general assumption in the literature has been that the "object" becomes the "subject" (along the lines of a passive) in these constructions.

[36] But, in fact, evidence for this other than the shift in word order and verbal agreement is hard to come by (see Morimoto (2000:154–162) for relevant discussion).

[37] Similarly, there does not seem to be any evidence that the postverbal "subject" is treated grammatically as an object (see Morimoto (2000:162–165)).

2.5 Summary

[38] Data from disfluentive constructions shows that apparent SVO word order may actually be better characterized as Topic-Predicate-Focus.

[39] Two phenomena encountered straightforwardly analyzable under the rubric of position class effects: (i) expletive topic and focus markers and (ii) argument/adjunct constructional conflation.

[40] Agreement and "case" phenomena are more readily characterized in terms of information structure configurations than grammatical relations.

3 Non-displacement alternatives?

[41] The idea that languages like Naki and Aghem are problematic for displacement approaches to information structure is not new here (see, e.g., Horvath (1995) and Hyman and Polinsky (2007)).

[42] However, most formal work has still assumed that focus assignment is mediated via a more or less canonical kind of constituency structure.

[43] The structure we propose is as follows: an interrogative or focus operator is in the specifier of the highest functional projection... and unselectively binds the lowest XP in the clause... If our proposal is on the right track, the association between the [postverbal position] and focus is an artifact of a general focus-assignment rule. Focus is read off constituent structure, but is not directly projected. (Hyman and Polinsky 2007)

CP
Op$_i$ C′
TP   C°
VP   [+interr]
XP$_i$ [+focus]
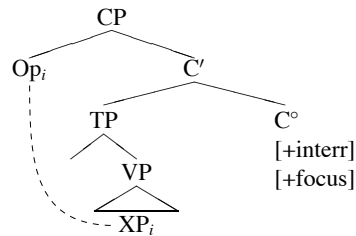
[44] We hypothesize that *nò* marks off the *right* edge of the verb phrase. If non-verbal constituents on the right edge are present, it is optional; when the verb appears "bare", *nò* is required. We are not sure what accounts for this optionality. (Hyman and Polinsky 2007) (Emphasis added.)

[45] So, even in this analysis, linear relations must be referred to at some point.

4   Conclusion

[46] At least some Bantoid languages have surface syntax characterizable in terms of a templatic structure like the following:

[[   ]$_{Topic}$ [   ]$_{Predicate}$ [   ]$_{Focus}$]

[47] While alternative analyses are possible, it is not obvious that they can completely avoid referring to linear relations entirely.

[48] This analysis leads to a potentially interesting typological classification of the surface syntax of these languages

[a] Fixed word order (in information structure terms)

[b] Non-configurational (in the sense that surface syntax is not determined by more general aspects of syntactic configuration)

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Glossing abbreviations

1...19	noun class
1,2,3(s/p)	person
s,p	singular, plural
A	"in focus" noun form
APPL	applicative
AUG	augment
B	"out of focus" noun form
DIS	disfluentive verb
DPST	distant past
DS	"dummy" subject
FOC	focus particle
FV	final vowel
INC	incompletive
LONG	long verb form
PART	particle
PERF	perfect
PRS	present
PST	past

Approximate locations of languages discussed
Map adapted Guillaume Segerer's African Pronouns project
<http://sumale.vjf.cnrs.fr/pronoms/>