1 Introduction

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

[a] énà mò nị́γ nò
  Inah DPST run FOC
  “Inah ran.”
[b] á mò nị́γ ndúghò
  DS DPST run who
  “Who ran?”
[c] á mò nị́γ énà?
  DS DPST run Inah
  “Inah ran.”

(Watters 1979:144)

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

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

\[\begin{array}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
\text{Topic} & \text{Predicate} & \text{Focus} \\
\hline
\end{array}\]

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.

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

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

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

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

2 Criteria for template-hood

2.1 Fluence and word order

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

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).

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

Confluentive alignment construction in Naki (Beboid)

Kùm k̀lpì fyìp yà.
Kùm killed.PST 9.rat 9.the
“Kum killed the rat.”

Mà wà àmé ye?
1.man 1.the see.PST who
“Who did the man see?”

L’àmé mà kpàng wà.
3s see.PST 1.woman 1.the
“He saw the woman.”
Disfluentive alignment in Naki (actor focus)

(a) *Fyep yɔ əkpɔkɔ  yet?*  
9.rat 9.the kill.PST.DIS who  
“Who killed the rat?”

(b) *Fyep yɔ əkpɔkɔ Kúm.*  
9.rat 9.the kill.PST.DIS Kum  
“Kum killed the rat.”

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

(a) *Nyɛkɔ wɔ əkpɔkɔ mu wɔ bware wɔ.*  
1.lion 1.the kill.PST 1.man 1.the hunt 1.the  
“The lion killed the hunter.”

(b) *Nyɛkɔ wɔ əkpɔkɔ mu wɔ bware wɔ.*  
1.lion 1.the kill.PST 1.man 1.the hunt 1.the  
“The hunter killed the lion.”

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

(a) *Bufa bufangi, ki businga tsad ənə lə?*  
1.flower 1.good 1p 3p will meet where PART  
“Nice flowers, where can we find them?”

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.

Locative inversion in Chichewa (N.30; Bantu) (Bresnan 1994:77)—disfluentivity triggered by “presentational focus” (Bresnan 1994:85)

(a) *Chitsɪme chi-li ku mudzi.*  
7.well 7-be 17 3.village  
“The well is in the village.”

(b) *Ku mudzi ku-li chitsɪme.*  
17 3.village 17-be 7.well  
“In the village is a well.”

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

Expletive elements in Topic Field and Focus Field

(a) Dummy “subject” in Aghem  
á mo ńiy éná?  
DS DPST run Inah  
“Inah ran.”  
(Watters 1979:144)

(b) Dummy “object” in Aghem  
ěná mo ńiy nó  
Inah DPST run FOC  
“Inah ran.”  
(Watters 1979:144)

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

(fu kí mo ńiy á kí-bé nó  
7.rat.B 7 DPST run in 7.compound.A FOC  
“The rat ran inside the compound [not inside the house]”

Some of the relevant languages, then, apparently show “active” slots which must be filled—a hallmark of templatic constructions.

“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)

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

Such data also suggests the postverbal position is not a dedicated argument position.
2.3 Scope insensitivity

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

Confluentive/disfluentive sentence pair from Naki

\[ \text{bunkng b bunsat ame mbut mbut m.} \]

2.chief 2.the 2.each see.PERF 6.cat 6.their 6.the

"Each chief, saw his cat."

\[ \text{mbut mbut m. ame bunkng b b bunsat.} \]

6.cat 6.their 6.the see.PERF.DIS 2.chief 2.the 2.each

"Each chief, saw his cat."

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

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.

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

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

\[ \text{m m. bvu n} \]

1s.B DPST fall FOC

"I fell." (Hyman 1979:47)

\[ \text{d m. k} \text{? m} \text{uc} \]

3s.B DPST see 1s.A

"He saw me." (Hyman 1979:49)

\[ \text{zd m. b} \text{f} \text{k} \]

DS eat.INC 1s.A fufu.B

"I am eating fufu." (Hyman 1979:49)

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

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

\[ \text{otpetelo a-kpet-el-eki bazi nzete wabo.} \]

AUG.Peter 3s-cut-APPL-PST 2.woman 10.tree here

"Peter chopped down (some) trees here for the women." (Hyman 1979:49)

\[ \text{ba-bazi ba-kpet-el-eki opetelo nzete wabo.} \]

AUG.2.woman 3p-cut-APPL-PST AUG.Peter 10.tree here

"For the women, Peter chopped down some trees here."

\[ \text{nzete t-kpet-el-eki o-petelo bazi wabo.} \]

AUG.10.tree 10-cut-APPL-PST AUG.Peter 2.woman here

"The trees, Peter cut for some women here."

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.

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).

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

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

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

Agreement and “case” phenomena are more readily characterized in terms of information structure configurations than grammatical relations.

3 Non-displacement alternatives?

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

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)

We hypothesize that nö 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", nö is required. We are not sure what accounts for this optionality. (Hyman and Polinsky 2007) (Emphasis added.)

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

4 Conclusion

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

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 |

5 References


Map adapted Guillaume Segerer’s African Pronouns project <http://sumale.vjf.cnrs.fr/pronoms/>