Bantu languages are typically SVO and are known for their flexibility in word order (Demuth and Harford, 1999). According to Zerbian (2006) three different inversion structures can be found across Bantu languages: the impersonal construction (1-a), locative inversion (1-b) and subject-object reversal (1-c). These structures have in common that the constituent with the highest thematic role (the ‘logical subject’) is focused and follows the verb. In this configuration, the noun class features of the subject marker (SM) indicate that the logical subject is not the grammatical subject. Whereas languages like Kinyarwanda (Bantu D61) display the full range of inversion structures, others like Northern Sotho (Bantu S30), only show impersonal constructions (Zerbian, 2006).

(1) Kinyarwanda (adapted from Kimenyi (1980); Polinsky (1993))
   a. Ha-ra-som-a umukoõbwa.
      SM16-pres-read-ASP CL1.girl
      Lit: ‘There is reading a girl’ for ‘A girl is reading’
   b. mu gisagára ha-ra-riríimbir-a aba-shyitsi.
      in 7-village SM16-PRES-sing-ASP CL2.guest
      Lit: ‘In the village are singing guests’ for ‘Guests are singing in the village’
   c. Igitabo cyi-ra-som-a umuhuûgu.
      CL7.book SM7-PRES-read-ASP CL1.boy
      Lit: ‘The book is reading the boy’ for ‘The boy is reading the book’

In Bàsàa (Bantu A43), a Northwest Bantu language spoken in Central and Coastal Cameroon, none of these three inversion structures is attested. Whenever the logical subject is focused – i.e. alternatives are relevant for its interpretation (Krifka, 2007) – it either surfaces in situ (2) or in clause-initial position (3). Not unlike in many languages, ex-situ focus is associated with exhaustive identification (Szabolcsi, 1981; É. Kiss, 1998).

(2) A: ndef à ̀nníp ñóóllok likõndɔ?
      who SM1 P1-steal ripe CL5.plantain
      ‘Who stole the ripe plantain?’
   B: màŋŋe à ñníp ñóóllok likõndɔ.
      CL1.child SM1 P1-steal ripe CL5.plantain
      ‘The child is who stole the ripe plantain.’

(3) A: ndef à ñníp ñóóllok likõndɔ?
      who SM1 P1-steal ripe CL5.plantain
      ‘Who is it that stole the ripe plantain?’
In this talk, we discuss Bàsàa’s focusing strategies. Interestingly, Bàsàa is similar to languages like Egyptian Arabic (Eid, 1983) or Hebrew (Doron, 1983) in that it expresses identity through the use of a ‘copular pronoun’ (EXH in (3)B is morphologically a pronoun (Hyman, 2003)). We first offer a formal syntactic account of clause-initial focus along the following lines: drawing on evidence from islands sensitivity, connectivity effects and case, we propose that the structure underlying the question and answer in (3) is a cleft-sentence in which the focus is base-generated in its surface position and the complement of the head contributing exhaustivity (the copular pronoun, which is silent in the question (3)) is a null-headed CP. Bàsàa’s specificity in comparison to many Bantu and non-Bantu SVO languages is that the clefted focus is the grammatical subject of the copula instead of being its object.

Second, we propose an Optimality Theory (OT) approach (Prince and Smolensky, 2004) to the availability of focused subjects and the ungrammaticality of inversion structures in the grammar of Bàsàa. Building upon Morimoto (1999)’s OT account of argument reversal, we argue that a strong dispreference against non-subject proto-agents (*NSU/PA) is responsible. We propose that the outranking of the constraint mitigating against focused subjects (*F-MARKED/SUBJECT) by *NSU/PA captures the above-cited non-(Eastern/Southern)-Bantu-like properties of Bàsàa. In a nutshell: in Bàsàa argument linking takes priority over the expression of information structure, in contrast to what is seen e.g. in Kinyarwanda and Northern Sotho. Finally, the high ranking of *NSU/PA is shown to be consistent with other syntactic properties of Bàsàa, most notably related to diathesis.

References


