The impact of Bantu languages on generative syntactic theory

Elisabeth J. Kerr (Ghent University)

The Bantu languages form a group of approximately 500 Niger-Congo languages spoken across sub-Saharan Africa, many of which are endangered and poorly described. Because of the large number of closely-related languages, the subfamily provides valuable insights into linguistic variation. As such, they have had a particularly large impact on generative syntactic theory (Henderson 2011). In this talk I highlight three areas where Bantu languages are currently influencing the field.

The first area is constituent order variation in the noun phrase, namely investigation into Greenberg's Universal 20 regarding the relative order of noun, demonstrative, adjective, and numeral. Which orders are possible, and which are impossible? And how can we model this formally? I discuss how some orders were only attested in Bantu languages in early typological samples, e.g. N-Dem-Num-Adj in Gikuyu (Bantu, Kenya; Van de Velde 2019:260). Recent work testing this experimentally has important implications for hypotheses of universal hierarchical structure (Martin et al. 2024).

The second area is nominal licensing. Does abstract Case exist as a crosslinguistic requirement on nominals' form/position, is it parametrised (e.g. by direction of licensing), or do we only have morphological case? I discuss how Bantu languages have been implicated in this debate due to their lack of visible case morphology, as has influenced many important works (Perez 1985; Diercks 2012; Halpert 2015; Sheehan & Van der Wal 2018, i.a.).

The final area is the place of information structure (IS) in the grammar – is IS part of Narrow Syntax, e.g. via FocP/TopPs or IS-features? While well-studied languages like English primarily use phonological means to highlight or background information (*Sarah ate BEANs / SARAH ate beans*), many aspects of IS manifest themselves syntactically in Bantu languages (Van der Wal et al. 2025), challenging IS-free syntactic models. Bantu languages therefore raise important questions about the architecture of the grammar.

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