

Issues in Phrasing in Northern Sotho (Bantu)

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Chichewa (spoken in Malawi) is one of the few Bantu languages for which a detailed description of its phrasal phonology exists. Kanerva (1990) has shown the phonetic cues to PP- and IP-boundaries and the influence of information structure on phrasing. Penultimate Lengthening, Tone Retraction, Nonfinal Doubling and Pre-High Doubling were established as processes that apply at PP-boundaries, whereas Intonational Boundary Tones, IP-final Lengthening and Tonal Catathesis were shown to apply at IP-boundaries. Focus has been shown to insert a boundary after the focused constituent (see also Downing et al. 2004). Truckenbrodt (1995, 1999) formalized the relationship between prosody and syntax in this language by means of the constraint WRAP-XP.

The phrasal phonology of most of the other Bantu languages is understudied, although interesting microvariation is to be expected. Work on the phrasal phonology of Northern Sotho, a Bantu language spoken in South Africa, shows that the findings for Chichewa cannot be reduplicated in this language. Instead, the relevant suprasegmental and tonal processes can be shown to apply at IP-boundaries only, and focus does not influence phrasing in this language.

The talk presents new data that show how in Northern Sotho the finality restriction that exempts the domain-final syllable from tonal processes, and lengthening of the penultimate syllable give evidence for IP-boundaries. Phrasal incorporation of the subject and separate phrasing of right-dislocated constituents support the view that the prosodic IP corresponds roughly to the root clause. However, the phrasal incorporation of left-dislocated constituents shows that the prosodic IP is not coextensive with the syntactic IP. The talk proposes to capture the phrasing in Northern Sotho by an alignment constraint that aligns the right edges of these phrases.

Furthermore, the talk presents results from a production and perception study which shows that no suprasegmental changes occur under focus.

The first finding raises issues concerning phonetic cues to prosodic constituents. It has been observed that the same phonetic cues might lend evidence for different prosodic layers across languages (e.g. reset at PP-boundaries in Japanese (Selkirk & Tateishi 1991), but at IP-boundaries in German (Truckenbrodt to appear)), though the issue seems understudied for closely related languages. At the same time, it is still an issue how in general phrases in Bantu languages fit into the Prosodic Hierarchy (Downing 2002). The talk lays out some problematic issues with respect to phrasal levels in the micro-variation found across Bantu languages. Reference is made to phrasing in Kinyambo (Bickmore 1990), Haya (Byarushengo et al. 1976), and Tsonga (Kisseberth 1994) among others.

The second finding suggests that prosodic expression of focus (either by prominence or by phrasing) is not a language universal. In Northern Sotho, the absence of syntactic focus marking as well poses a challenge to focus theories in more general, in that focus need not be marked (see also Hartmann & Zimmermann, to appear, on Hausa).

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