

Bantu inversion: How “low” focus movement and smuggling circumvent Relative Minimality violations

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Relativized Minimality (RM) - Rizzi (1990), etc. - is challenged by grammatical configurations in which a non-subject appears to move over a c-commanding subject to a case/phi/EPP position. One example of such a configuration is inverted copular constructions (Moro 1997), studied in Shlonsky & Rizzi (2018). The present talk extends that analysis to Bantu inversion configurations.

The Kinyarwanda examples in (1) and (2) illustrate a pervasive pattern in Bantu. A logical subject can appear either preverbally, (1a), (2a) or postverbally, (1b), (2b). In the latter pattern, a non-subject comes to occupy the preverbal subject position - a goal DP in (1b), a direct object theme in (2b). The nonsubject then controls agreement (in noun class). See Marten & Van der Wal (2014) and Van der Wal (2022) for extensive arguments to the effect that the surface subject in is indeed in the subject/EPP position (and not, say, in a left-peripheral topic position).

- (1) a. Umúnyéeshuûri y-a-gii-ye kw' iishuûri. (Kimenyi 1980: 141, 142)
 1.student 1SM-PST-go-ASP to 5.school
 ‘The student went to school.’
 b. Iishuûri ry-a-gii-yé-ho umúnyéeshuûri.
 5.school 5SM-PST-go-ASP-LOC 1.student
 ‘It’s the student who went to school’
 lit. ‘The school went-to the student.’
- (2) a. Abáana nti-ba-nywá inzogá. (Ngoboka 2016: 356)
 2.children NEG-2SM-drink 10.alcohol
 ‘Children don’t drink alcohol.’
 b. Inzogá nti-zi-nywá abáana.
 10.alcohol NEG-10SM-drink 2.children
 ‘It’s the children who do not drink alcohol.’
 lit. ‘Alcohol does not drink children.’

The (b) examples appear to instantiate the schema in (3), in which IA moves over EA, in violation of RM:

- (3) IA_v [vP EA t_v t_E]

A similar problem arises in the derivation of inverted copular sentences. If the predicate nominal *my best friend* moved over the PredP subject *John* as in the derivation (4b), a RM violation would ensue.

- (4) a. Canonical copular sentence:
 John is my best friend John_i is [PredP t_i PRED [my best friend]]
 b. Inverted copular sentence:
 My best friend is John [My best friend]_i is [PredP John PRED t_i]

It is well-established that the postcopular nominal in the inverted construction is focused. Shlonsky & Rizzi (2018) argue that the derivation of (4b) crucially involves movement to a Focus phrase in the low left periphery of Belletti (2001):

- (5) **Step I: Focalization – Merge of Foc^o and movement of the subject of PredP to Spec/FocusP.**

- a. [PredP John PRED [my best friend]]
 b. FOC [PredP John PRED [my best friend]]
 c. John FOC [PredP t_{John} PRED [my best friend]]

Step II: Smuggling (Collins 2005; Belletti & Collins 2020) - **Movement of the (remnant) PredP to a position above FocusP.**

[PredP t_{John} PRED [my best friend]] ... [FocP John FOC t_{PredP}]

Step III: *be* → T and “EPP”.

[SubjP My best friend is [PredP t_{John} PRED t_{My best friend}] [FocP John FOC t_{PredP}]]

The combination of focus-fronting and remnant movement in (5) circumvents the RM problem. The copy of the subject internally to the smuggled PredP does not count as an intervenor under Krapova and Cinque’s (2008) proposal that only full chains, but not links of chains, are intervenors.

The Spec-head configuration established in FocusP after movement is a *criterial* configuration (Rizzi 2006). Criterial specifiers are frozen and cannot be further moved. The prediction is that the postcopular DP in the inverted construction is frozen (in Spec/FocP), while the postcopular one in the canonical order is not. This is true at least in Italian, Longobardi (1985), Moro (1997), Hebrew, Shlonsky & Rizzi (2018) and French Ruwet (1975), Roy and Shlonsky (2019).

Consider now Bantu inversion. As is evident in the translations, the postverbal subject in (1b) and (2b) is focused. I follow Ndayiragije (1999) and argue that it is moved to a vP-peripheral FocusP. The postverbal subject is, predictably, criterially frozen. (6a) illustrates relativization of a direct object promoted to subject position (and controlling agreement) in Kirundi inversion while (6b) shows that relativization of a postverbal subject in the same configuration is ungrammatical. Previous treatments of Bantu inversion are unable to explain this generalization.

- (6) a. Ibitabo_i bi- ti á-som-ye abana... (Henderson 2007: 180)
8books 8SM- PST-read-ASP 2children
‘the books that the children read...’
b. *Umuntu iyyo bitabo_i bi-á-som-ye ti ... (Ndayiragije 1999: 428)
person those 8books 8SM-PST-read-ASP
‘the person who read those books...’

As in the derivation of inverted copular sentences, the focalization step in Bantu inversion is followed by remnant vP movement above FocusP, smuggling the non-subject above the intervening subject so that it can access the canonical subject position and control agreement. In Kinyarwanda and Kirundi inversion, the postverbal subject is clause-final, a direct consequence of the smuggling of vP above it. In other Bantu (e.g., Xhosa, Zulu), the subject can be followed by other material. I show that this material exploits a TopicP below the low FocusP, thus providing a structural interpretation of the common observation that post-subject lexical material is right dislocated.

Two formal operations make for a unified treatment of inverted copular sentences and Bantu inversion, focus-fronting and remnant movement/smuggling. The presentation concludes with the suggestion that the two operations are connected via a functional head that selects FOC and attracts its complement, analogously to the derivation of (some) PPs in Kayne (2004). Other information-structural heads (e.g., TOP) are not selected, which is the reason why low topicalization, for example, cannot serve to circumvent RM violations.

Selected references:

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