

## Africanistics, at the ZAS, in Berlin

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When I first moved to Berlin, I was surprised that the first question many people – both friends and colleagues – asked me was why anyone would decide to come here to work on African linguistics. The implied questions were: How could one work on African linguistics in Berlin? And what could an Africanist offer to a centre for research into theoretical linguistics? In this essay, I will take the opportunity to respond to these two questions, especially the second question. At the end of the essay, it is hoped the reader will share my surprise, given the long history of research into African languages in Berlin, the international base of African linguistics and the importance of research on non-European languages for the development of modern linguistic theories.

The modern Seminar für Afrikawissenschaft at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin, which includes a languages and linguistics program, is the successor of the Seminar für Orientalische Sprachen, which was founded at the Friedrich-Wilhelm University (now Humboldt) in 1887. This makes it one of the oldest faculties for African studies, and it was an academic home for two important and influential early figures in African Linguistics, Carl Meinhof (Meinhof 1906) and Diedrich Westermann (Westermann 1927). Meinhof's recordings of spoken language and music made in East Africa in the early 1900's were among the first contributions to the Berliner-Phonogramm-Archiv, housed at the Ethnologisches Museum. This archive was designated part of UNESCO's Memory of the World Register in 1999. Berlin has a long history, then, of being a center for academic research on African languages and linguistics.

Humboldt's African Studies faculty is currently, though, only one center in what has become an international field, with two major conferences (ACAL, in the United States, and CALL, at the University of Leiden), each held annually for nearly 40 years, and several journals providing forums for research by Africanists from all over Europe, the United States and Japan, as well as Africa. Africanists, like other linguists – indeed, most academics these days – are no respecters of borders. Berlin is a good place to be an Africanist

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because one finds here in abundance the main things one needs to carry out good research: good libraries and internet access, resources for data collection, and good colleagues working in related areas.

But what can Africanists offer a center for theoretical linguistics? An explicit goal of the generative linguistics research paradigm is to develop a theory of linguistic universals. These are defined in Chomsky & Halle's (1968: 4) seminal work as, "a system of hypotheses concerning the essential properties of any human language. These properties determine the class of possible natural languages and the class of potential grammars for some human language." It is clear that a theoretical framework with such an ambitious typological aim necessarily bases hypotheses on data taken from as broad a sample of human languages as possible. Over a third of the world's languages (roughly 2,000) are spoken in Africa, so no linguistic theory can afford to ignore them. Indeed, work in generative linguistics since Chomsky & Halle (1968) includes data from African languages. Clements (1989) provides a somewhat dated but still useful overview of the importance of African linguistics to the development of several core areas of generative linguistic theory.

At the ZAS in the past several years, research on African languages has been important in developing or testing hypotheses in several areas of linguistic theory, especially the expression of focus, but also phonetics, prosodic morphology, syntax and Creole linguistics. Some of these results are briefly sketched here.

A five-year project on the expression of focus in Southern African languages (Bantu and Khoisan), carried out partly in collaboration with phoneticians at the ZAS and Africanist colleagues at the SFB 632 on Information Structure, set out to test the common claim (see, for example, Frota 2000, Samek-Lodovici 2005, Truckenbrodt 2007) that focus – i. e. the implied presence of alternatives relevant for interpretation (cf. Krifka 2006) – has some effect on the grammar of all languages. In situ focus – i. e. focus that preserves the basic word order of a sentence – correlates with prosodic prominence or accent, as schematized in (1a). Indeed, much work on focus makes the very strong claim that there is a necessary cross-linguistic correlation between main sentence accent and focus. Ex situ focus – i. e. focus that alters the basic word order of a sentence – correlates with a particular prosodic position (and, in languages like English, is also accented), as schematized in (1b). In both cases, focus is claimed to only indirectly correlate with prosodic phrasing, though focus is expected to have some prosodic correlate, either accent or phrasing:

- (1) Focus-grammar interactions (Frota 2000: 375)
- (a) In situ: Focus → Prominence (Accent) → Prosodic Phrasing  
 For example, accent in English: I like *bananas* for breakfast, not just toast.
- (b) Ex situ: Focus → Syntax → Prosodic Phrasing (→ Accent)  
 For example, fronting in English: BANANAS, I like, but not LYCHEES.  
 clefting in English: It's KIWI FRUIT that he's allergic to.

Our research shows that focus does not, in fact, have an obligatory effect on the prosody or syntax of all languages, contrary to the typological proposals summarized above.

Within the so-called Khoisan languages investigated, only Richtersveld Nama uses prosodic phenomena such as pitch, intensity and duration to mark contrastively focused constituents (Voll 2006). Most Khoe and Tuu (so-called Khoisan) languages do not appear to have any prosodic equivalent of sentence stress or focus-conditioned prosodic phrasing. Colleagues in the ZAS and SFB 632 found similar results in Ewe, a Kwa language spoken in Ghana (Jannedy & Fielder 2006). While their work shows there are some durational edge effects of focus on prosody, they observe that these prosodic reflexes never occur as the sole indicators for the focused element.

All of the Bantu languages investigated at the ZAS have the equivalent of sentential stress on an (Intonation) phrase penult vowel. This is realized as vowel lengthening in Chichewa, Chitumbuka, Northern Sotho and Zulu, and as an intensity peak in Shingazidja. However, in none of the languages does the position of sentential stress necessarily correlate with the position of focus. Instead, it remains fixed in phrase-final position. This is illustrated very strikingly in the Northern Sotho example below, which shows that, although the context of elicitation clearly indicates that a difference in focus is intended, both realizations of the sentence have the same phrasing and other prosodic properties. Note in the following data sets that prosodic phrasing is indicated with parentheses, and that focused material is enclosed in brackets subscripted with F. Lengthening of the phrase penult vowel is the most consistent and easily observed correlate of the prosodic phrasing:

(2) *Northern Sotho* (Zerbian 2006: 144)

(a) [Q: When do you help the brother?]

A: (ke thúsá mogóló [moségaaré]<sub>F</sub>)

I help brother midday

‘I help brother DURING THE DAY.’

(b) Q: Who do you help during the day?]

A: (ke thúsá [mogóló]<sub>F</sub> moségaaré)

‘I help BROTHER during the day.’

Indeed, Zerbian (2006) shows that there is no prosodic correlate of focus in Northern Sotho. Downing (2008) reaches a similar conclusion for Chitumbuka.

In other Bantu languages, like Chichewa (Kanerva 1990, Downing et al. 2004), in situ focus can be expressed by a phonological phrase boundary (indicated with parentheses, motivated by long vowels) after constituents in focus. Downing et al. (2004) also find that the pitch of the entire phrase containing the focused word is raised (indicated with an upward arrow following the phrase) in some varieties of Chichewa compared to the neutral pronunciation:

(3) *Chichewa* (Downing et al. 2004)

S/he hit the house with a rock.

(a) /A-ná-mény-a nyumbá ndí mwalá

s/he-SIMPLE PAST-hit-FV house with rock

(b) broad V(erb)P(hrase) focus

(A-ná-mény-a nyumbá ndí mwáálá).

(c) [Q: Did s/he hit the house with a rock or with a stick?]

A: (A-ná-mény-a nyuúmbá) [(ndí mwáálá)]<sub>F</sub> ↑.

(d) [Q: What did s/he hit with the rock?]

A: (A-ná-mény-a [nyuúmbá]<sub>F</sub>) ↑ || (ndí mwáálá).

(e) [Q: What happened to the house?]

A: [(A-ná-mény-a)]<sub>F</sub> ↑ (nyuúmbá) (ndí mwáálá).

As this focus-conditioned pitch raising affects the entire focused phrase, not just the word in focus, prosody only indirectly highlights the word in focus.

The Bantu languages we investigated not only do not express focus through accent or other prosody, some of them also do not necessarily express focus through any consistent syntactic means. Indeed, as Zerbian (2006) shows in some detail, in Northern Sotho, focus can only be determined from context. This is illustrated in (2), above, where the same linear string (with the same prosody) is an appropriate answer to two different questions (at least). Similarly, in Chitumbuka, Downing (2008) shows that even focusing enclitics like *-so* ‘also’ do not reliably highlight their focusing argument, as they attach to verbs, whatever word in the sentence they put in focus. This contrasts strikingly with languages like English, where both the focusing particle, *also*, and the word it places in focus are accented:

(4) Chitumbuka focus particle *-so* vs. English *also* Chitumbuka

Q: Is it only the doctor who helps the teacher?

(Ni [β]a-dokotala péera) (a[β]o [β]a-ku-vwíra [β]a-sambízií)?

COP 2P-doctor only 2P.REL2P-TAM-help 2P-teacher

A: No, the chief also helps the teacher.

(Yá:yí), ([β]a-fúmu [β]a-ku-vwiráa-so) ([β]a-sambízi).

no 2P-chief 2P-TAM-help-also 2P-teacher

*cf. English*

Q: Are you going to Italian restaurants only on FRIDAY nights?

A: No, We are also going to an Italian restaurant on SATURDAY night.

The only syntactic focusing strategy found in all of the Bantu languages investigated is that they commonly use cleft constructions (see (1b) above) to express contrastive focus. Further, several of them (Chichewa, Northern Sotho, Zulu) require clefts to question or focus subjects. As Zerbian (2006) discusses in some detail, this subject/non-subject asymmetry in the use of clefts confirms proposals concerning the inherent topicality of subjects, i.e. the inherent property of subjects to introduce what a sentence is about. (See, e.g., Givón (1976) and other papers in Li (1976).) The inherent focus property of the cleft construction is required to override the topicality of a subject.

These results are very surprising for those of us who are native speakers of a language like English or German, where either prosody (and, to some extent, syntax) is a reliable cue to the position of focused elements in an utterance. More importantly, they require us

to modify widely-held theories of the expression of focus, like that schematized in (1), which propose that all languages express focus by some means, either through accent or through syntax. This research shows clearly how work on African languages can play an important role in expanding the range of typological data which informs linguistic theories.

Focus in African languages has also played an important role in a dissertation about indefinite pronouns written at ZAS by Haida (2007). There a study of the language Gurune, spoken in the north of Ghana, yielded evidence for an intimate connection between the marking of focus and the marking of indefinite pronouns when they function as question words. Building on such findings, Haida developed a theory of the form and meaning of focus and interrogativity that highlights their fundamental interactions.

Other work at the ZAS has relied on African language data to contribute to our understanding of areas of linguistic research as diverse as phonetics, prosodic morphology, syntax, and Creole linguistics. For example, in phonetics, it has been claimed that there is a universal correlation between vowel height and intrinsic  $F_0$  (fundamental frequency): high vowels have a higher  $F_0$  than low vowels (Whalen & Levitt, 1995; Connell 2002). However, little work has been done investigating whether this correlation holds in African tone languages. Pompino-Marschall's (2006) phonetic study of Chichewa shows that this Bantu language exhibits intrinsic  $F_0$  effects despite being a tone language, as (declination corrected) vowels with low tongue position are produced with statistically significant lower  $F_0$  than high vowels. In this case, the results confirm a linguistic universal.

In the area of prosodic morphology, in contrast, African languages again prove problematic for a proposed linguistic universal. A central issue in prosodic morphology is how to define the canonical minimal size that many languages impose on words and certain morpheme types. For example, in German (Hall 1999), possible monosyllabic (lexical) words must be bimoraic. (The mora is a unit of phonological length measurement.) That is, they must consist of either a closed syllable, like *Tisch* 'table', or a long vowel, like *See* 'lake', or a diphthong, like *rauh* 'rough', as each of these syllable types is bimoraic in German. No monosyllabic word ends in a short vowel, as a short vowel is universally monomoraic. Cross-linguistically, it is fairly common for languages to require words to be minimally bimoraic or disyllabic. A well-established theoretical account for this tendency notes that stress feet meet the same minimality constraint: they are also optimally minimally bimoraic or disyllabic. In languages that assign stress to all lexical words, the mini-

minimality constraint on words follows, in this account, from the proposed linguistic universal that words must minimally contain a minimal stress foot. (See, e. g., McCarthy & Prince 1999.) It is obvious, though, that this theoretical approach to minimality has nothing to say about non-stress languages. It remains unexplained in this approach why many Khoisan languages, like !Xoǝ (Traill 1985; Güldemann & Vossen 2000), and many Bantu languages, which do not have lexical stress, might impose a minimality requirement on words (and other morphological constructions). An example of this from Bantu languages is provided by the Zulu data below, which shows that verb stems with two or more syllables form the imperative with the bare verb stem. In contrast, monosyllabic stems must be extended to two syllables with an epenthetic syllable, *yi-*:

(5) Zulu imperative minimality; hyphens indicate morpheme boundaries

Stem Imperative sing. Gloss of stem

-thand-a thand-a 'love'

-hlakaniph-a hlakaniph-a 'be wise'

BUT

-dl-a *yi*-dl-a 'eat'

As Downing (2006) argues, a theory of minimality that accounts for both German and Zulu follows from the observation that minimal words can be monomorphemic in German, but in Zulu (and other Bantu languages), words minimally consist of stems, which are bimorphemic, as indicated in the above data. The observed minimality effects show an iconic match between the number of syllables and the number of morphemes required to form a minimal word.

African languages also provide a fruitful testing ground for syntactic theories. With the advent of Chomsky's (1995) copy theory of 'movement' – i. e. grammatically conditioned changes in basic word order – researchers like Fanselow & Cavar (2002) and Nunes (2004) have been able to view constructions like the German *wh*-copy construction in (6), below, as regular, rule-governed variants of the more familiar 'non-copy' versions in (7, 8). In (6), there are two instances of the *wh*-word, 'wen', both of which relate to the semantic object position of 'lieben'. In particular, as (6) and (7) are synonymous, the mystery is why the 'wen' in the left periphery of the subordinate clause is there at all! This can be accounted for, if we assume for (7) that the *wh*-word 'passed through' the intermediate sub-

ordinate clause position in which it appears overtly in (6) to reach sentence-initial position. Proponents of the copy theory of movement are then able to assimilate (6) and (7) to one another directly. They have the same structure, and differ only in that the moved wh-word is pronounced, in (6), both in the intermediate position and in sentence-initial position. (The absence of ‘dass’ is then attributable to a low-level constraint ruling out sequences of wh-words and complementizers, called the *doubly-filled COMP filter*.)

(6) Wen glaubst du wen Maria liebt?

(7) Wen glaubst du dass Maria liebt?

(8) Who do you believe Mary loves?

In many Indo-European languages, copies, when they occur, are of typically mono- or bimorphemic material, which does not put many constraints on the nature of the mechanism which must generate the copies. However, as Kobele (2006) shows, in certain West African languages (such as Yoruba), there are constructions in which the copied material can be unboundedly large (9). (In the interlinear glosses below, RED: reduplicated, REL: relativizer.)

(9) Titi Akin subu ti Jimo ti Akin subu  
 RED-push Akin fall REL Jimo push Akin fall  
 ‘The way Jimo pushed Akin down.’

Sentence (9) above is a verbal relative clause, formed from sentence (10) by copying and nominalizing the verb phrase. By way of contrast, (11) shows a ‘normal’ relative clause:

(10) Jimo ti Akin subu.  
 Jimo push Akin fall  
 ‘Jimo pushed Akin down.’

(11) Omo ti Jimo ti subu  
 child REL Jimo push fall  
 ‘The child that Jimo pushed down.’

Characteristic of the relative clause construction is the presence of the particle 'ti' between the head and the relative clause itself.

Unusual in the case of the verbal relative clause construction (9) is that there is no gap in the relative clause, but rather a full VP, of which the head is a (partial) copy. Such constructions can allow us to probe the nature of the copying mechanism, as hypotheses which yield identical results in the simple cases, might very well show divergent results in more complex cases. This indeed seems to be the case. As shown by the unacceptability of (12) (marked by \*), not just anything can be copied, and as shown in (13), the copy mechanism is not simply looking at surface word strings.

(12) \*Titi Akin ti Jimo ti Akinsubu

(13) Titi subu ti Jimo ti Akinsubu

Instead, what seems to be the case is that copying is sensitive to underlying structure (in current terminology, to the structure of the derivation). Viewing syntactic copying as sensitive to underlying structure gives us certain kinds of expectations about copying phenomena, namely, that there should be instances of 'non-exact' copying (as in (13)), where an underlying copy relation is disrupted by later changes. (This phenomenon is well known from the phonology literature on 'opacity.' (See, e.g., McCarthy 1999).)

Finally, African languages play an important role in research at the ZAS on Creole linguistics. Creole languages are the product of language contact between European and (primarily) West African languages, as one of the results of European colonialization of the Americas. Although it is undeniable that certain continuities from West African languages and cultures exist in Creole languages and cultures, the key question is how to identify such continuities. Price & Price (1972), for example, in discussing personal naming systems in Saramaccan culture (Saramaccan is the name of a Creole language spoken in Suriname), other Creole cultures and West African cultures, argue that a Creole naming system making use of a relatively high proportion of *African* names (e.g. Cudjoe, Kofi, Amba, Kwasi, etc.) can be less similar to (West) African naming systems with respect to creation, conceptualization and usage of names than a Creole exhibiting only few (or no) overtly *African* names in its naming system. The point is that what looks African is not necessarily African in nature, and what is African in nature does not necessarily look African. They relate this to Bastide's (1967: 133–55) distinction between *en conserve* and

*vivante* in discussing religious systems in the New World. The notion *en conserve* refers to cultural systems that “represent a kind of ‘defense mechanism’ or ‘cultural fossilization,’ a fear that any small change may bring on the end,” while the notion *vivante* refers to cultural systems that “are more secure of their future and freer to adapt to the changing needs of their adherents” (Price & Price 1980: 209). Thus, Saramaccan culture (and, in general, Maroon cultures) would be an example of a *culture vivante*, while Gullah culture would count as a *culture en conserve*. (“Maroon” is the term used to refer to communities founded by run away slaves in the Caribbean, and “Gullah” is the name of an African American community living mainly on the Sea Islands off the coast of the southeastern U.S.) They also argue that the focus should be on process rather than on form. Identifying African forms (e.g. lexical items) in Creole languages is not much more than collecting butterflies, however interesting it may be and important for identifying the set of potential substrate languages, but it does not tell us much about the ‘Africanness’ of the organization of Creole grammar. Thus, it is more fruitful to look at the processes underlying particular forms than at the forms themselves.

Perhaps it is easiest to make this point with non-linguistic examples. Price & Price (1980) in their seminal book on Afro-American arts of the Surinam rain forest discuss some false starts in the search for African continuities. They note that in the first half of this century it was fashionable to see Surinam Maroon societies (like Saramaccan) as “Little Africa in America”. In a highly informative and illustrative discussion of different Saramaccan art forms, including woodcarving and textile arts, they show that in many cases the identification of correspondences between a Maroon form and an African form requires in their terms “a substantial leap of faith - from the existence of visual similarity to the existence of historical continuity” (Price & Price 1980: 206). For example, resemblances in arabesque openwork in woodcarving between an Akan throne, made in ca. 1700, and a Saramaccan peanut-grinding board, collected in the 1920’s, are purely coincidental, because this type of ornamentation in Saramaccan woodcarving only developed in the second half of the 19th century. Similarly, what Herskovits (1930) saw as “the survival of the African ornamentation of woodwork with iron” is, in fact, a use of brass studs to enhance curvilinearity which only started mid-nineteenth century and reached a peak in the 1920’s. Again, the similarity is persuasive, but the continuity is only apparent.

Moreover, cultures that never have been in contact can have identical art forms. Price & Price (1980) show that (almost identical) interwoven ribbons in woodcarving can be

found in a Saramaccan peanut-grinding board from the 20th century as well as in an Alsatian Brettstellsthuel from the 19th century, carved in a motif from the High Middle Ages. Although there is a similarity in form, it cannot result from continuity. They conclude that most (if not all) demonstrations of the Africanness of Maroon art make use of the following research procedure: “search for individual pieces that display noticeable visual similarities, and then [...] let the resemblance speak largely for itself as testimony to direct historical continuity” (Price & Price 1980: 204). As they rightly note, such an approach is susceptible to the following criticisms: (i) it is based on a biased selection of examples; (ii) it infers specific historical continuities on basis of visual similarity; (iii) it underestimates Maroon creativity; (iv) it focuses on form rather than on process; (v) it misconstrues the nature of cultural change.

These same investigative problems are relevant in Creole linguistics. As noted in work like Veenstra (1996: 3), a central issue in the field of Creole studies remains whether the distinctive characteristics of these languages is best explained through language universals, including principles of second language acquisition, or through the influence of the native languages – often African languages – spoken in the original contact situation. As Veenstra’s (2006) study of verb morphology in some French related creoles shows, disentangling these factors is not always a straightforward matter. Superficial similarities in form do not always turn out to result from historical continuity. And assessing the relative influence of universals compared to the original native languages is only possible, if one has a good knowledge both of what the original African contact languages were and of their grammatical structures.

So let me come back to the question of why Africanists would find themselves at a linguistics research center in Berlin. Well, Africanists can be found everywhere, as their research, like that of other linguists, depends mainly on a good academic environment. And Africanists are welcome everywhere, as their research is essential to carrying out the universalist, typological program of modern theoretical linguistics.

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