

# Morpho-syntactic variation in a Xhosa microvariation project:



analysing structures in spoken texts

# Aim

- To argue for the use of spoken texts in analysing morphosyntax (complemented by careful elicitation)
- Give an example of a construction found in a spoken text but not in elicitation
- Argue that there is Agreeing Inversion in Xhosa

# Microvariation

- A branch of linguistic research that studies subtle but systematic differences in grammar between very closely related linguistic varieties
- Different from traditional dialect research as it focuses on grammatical structure rather than lexicon and phonology
- Also different kinds of microvariation studies:
  - large-scale dialect syntax projects (ASIS, SAND). Aim at homogenising the sample; geographical
  - compilations of work from different researchers, certain constructions like ‘The car needs repaired’ (Yale grammatical diversity project: English in North America); geographical and sociolinguistic
  - parametric studies
- Homogenising the sample very difficult for Xhosa

# Challenges with written and oral elicitation in the Xhosa project (cf. European projects)

- No agreed way to write the home variety. Influence of the standard writing system should be avoided.
- Low literacy and education levels, unfamiliarity with questionnaires
- Dialects often do not have prestige.
- On the other hand, the important ethnonyms can lead to hypercorrection. A speaker can also discard a construction based on the wrong use of a lexeme, although the construction itself is correct
- No tone marking in orthography
- Influence of interview language
- The possibility that speakers do not understand the aim of the questionnaire or the sentences, that there is a difference in interpretation, and the linguist cannot be sure that the phrase is a translation of what s/he intended.

# Example: accepted once, not the next time

*Kúlé:qé abantwana*

17SM-chase.PRF 2.children

'The CHILDREN were chasing (the cat)' [NH150505E]

- Did the speaker in question made a mistake during the first or the second session?
- Is the phrase is marginally acceptable in certain contexts and in that case which contexts?
- Especially in a micro-variation study, in which we study the subtle differences between how people speak, this forms a challenge

- And when accepted, is it really used?
- Instrument inversion is accepted in elicitation in Xhosa

*imoto i-hamba uSipho*  
9.car 9-travel Sipho

‘SIPHO is travelling by car’  
literally ‘the car travels Sipho’

# Working with recorded, transcribed, glossed text



- Folktale story of course not much used in everyday speech
- But more natural than elicited examples: not a written text but freely told from the mind of the narrator

# Common construction type in the story

*lâ:-ha:mb(a) izim*

5SM.PST-walk 5.giant

'The giant went'

- VS
- In the remote past
- Right-dislocated subject, not in IAV  
(Immediately After Verb) position
  - Evidenced by penultimate  
lengthening

(parentheses indicate vowel liaison)



# As expected:

Used for semi-active concepts:

i.e. concepts that have been mentioned earlier in the text or that can be inferred from context.

The giant in the story is, after introduction, picked up as topic through the APS (Agreeing Postverbal Subject) construction, often after not having been mentioned for a couple of sentences

*lâ:-fî:k(a)      ízi:m    lá-vál(a)      e-mnyá:ngo*

5SM.PST-arrive 5.giant 5SM.PST-open LOC-3.doorway

‘The giant arrived and opened the door’

# A bit less expected:

Phonological phrasing often ‘fails’

*wá-bâs(a) uNomaha:mle*  
1SM.PST-kindle uNomahamle  
‘Nomahamle kindled the fire’

This makes the construction resemble Agreeing Inversion (AI), a core inversion construction

- Used for inactive, non-topical concepts (subject focus or presentational focus/thetic sentences).
- The verb agrees with the post-verbal subject and is in a close bond with that subject:
  - phonological phrasing
  - conjoint form in tenses where the conjoint/disjoint distinction is relevant; not the past

# How do we tell APS and AI apart?

- AI so far not reported for Xhosa (nor Zulu)
- Of the inversion constructions, there is DAI (Default Agreeing Inversion):
  - used for subject focus or presentational focus
  - the verb has a default subject marker *ku-*
  - conjoint form of verb
  - Phrased with the logical subject

*kú-khála nê:-ntá:ka*

17SM-sing and-10.birds

‘and the birds were singing..’

## APS common throughout the story

- with and without penultimate lengthening
- mostly in remote past, also future

*lá:-ba:lé:k(a) izim*

5SM.PST-run 5.giant

'The giant ran'

*bâ:-zo-phúm(a) ábantwana kw-ézi ngxo:wa*

2SM-FUT-come.out 2.children LOC-10.DEM.PRX 10.bag

'The children will come out through these holes'

## Lengthening not relevant in remote past?

- For Zulu, it has been shown that the penultimate lengthening is relevant even in tenses in which there is no morphological marking of the forms as conjoint/disjoint ([Zeller et al. To appear](#)).
- The study concerned object complements in IAV but the results for subjects in IAV should be similar.
- It also showed, however, that there is more overlapping in vowel length between the morphologically unmarked forms. I.e. the medial and final forms differ less clearly in length in the remote past tense than in the present.

# Examples checked in elicitation

*lá-súkum'*      *izi:m*

*lá-súkúma*      *i:zim*

5SM.PST-stand.up 5.giant

'the giant stood up' [NF160404E]

When changed to the present, penultimate lengthening is very clear:

*li-ya-súkû:ma i:zim*

5SM-DJT-stand.up 5.giant

'the giant stands up' [NF160404E]

## What about other evidence for the close bond between a verb and a subject in IAV?

- Object marking (add an object in elicitation)

*lá-m-fá:ka*      *ízim*

5sm.pst-1om-put 5.giant

'The giant put her (inside)' [NF160404E]

*lá-m-fák(a)*      *ízim*

5SM.PST-1OM-put 5.giant

'The giant put her (inside)' [NF160404E]

Clear evidence for dislocation

BUT, also forthetic sentences this construction is possible

No penultimate lengthening

*kwâ:sa            za-khál(a)   ínku<sup>h</sup>ku*  
in.the.morning 10SM.PST-cry 10.rooster  
'In the morning the roosters crowed.'

*lâ:-tshona   ilanga*  
5sm.pst-set 5.sun  
'The sun set'



- In elicitation, it was also possible to change a DAI

*ku-khála né-ntá:ka*

17SM-sing and-10.birds

‘and the birds were singing..’ [NF160404E]

*za-khála né-nta:ka*

10SM.PST-sing and-10.birds

‘and the birds sang’ [NF160404E]

# What this shows us

- There is Agreeing Inversion (AI) occurring in Xhosa.
- However, so far it appears to only function as a thetic expression (maybe also only as a certain type of thetic expression).
- AI does not occur at all in my data as subject focus.
- It also does not occur as answer to subject focus questions in elicitation.
- Moreover, in elicitation, it is (so far) never given as a thetic sentence in answer to ‘what happened?’.

# Conclusions

- This shows the importance of considering spoken texts in order not to rely entirely on elicitation.
- Also, the examples show that even when subjects are dislocated in APS constructions, phonological phrasing is not enough evidence for APS, at least not in a naturally spoken text.
- Analysing spoken texts is necessary in order to find out what constructions are used in a language and how frequent they are. But can they be used to establish variation? In this specific case, many more narratives spoken by different people need to be analysed in order to know if all speakers use APS to reactivate semi-active concepts, if phonological phrasing is different between speakers, and if AI is used by all speakers as athetic construction.