Bantu *wh*-agreement and the case against probe impoverishment

Many languages exhibit morphological reflexes of syntactic movement. Within Bantu, there are at least three types of this extraction morphology. In “anti-agreement,” extraction of a class 1 subject blocks canonical subject/verb agreement; in its place appears an agreement marker that is comparatively lacking in features (Diercks 2009; Henderson 2009). The term “*wh*-agreement” covers two cases where verbal agreement remains intact but other morphological changes are triggered by syntactic movement. In the first, canonical morphophonology (e.g., Kikuyu downstep (Clements 1984)) fails to appear in extraction contexts. In the second, canonical morphology remains constant across extraction and non-extraction contexts, but extraction contexts require the presence of *additional* morphology. This paper focuses on this last type, showing how it challenges accounts of this range of phenomena that rely on feature impoverishment.

Lahne (2008) presents an analysis within Minimalism and Distributed Morphology (DM) that uses “probe impoverishment” to account for extraction morphology. She argues that extraction to the edge of a phase requires that one of the features on the phase head become an “edge feature,” which agrees with the *wh*-element to trigger movement to the edge of the phase. This deletes the edge feature, thereby impoverishing the probe. Using case studies from Chamorro, Irish, and Kikuyu, she argues that “whenever a language shows different exponents in movement and non-movement contexts, then the marker appearing in movement contexts is less specific than the marker in non-movement contexts” (Lahne 2008: 9). This generalization follows from probe impoverishment and DM’s Subset Principle (Halle 1997) but is undermined by languages where the morphological realization of movement does not replace any canonical morphology but instead adds to it.

In Kinande, a *wh*-agreement marker agreeing in noun class with the extracted element appears in SpecFocP (Schneider-Zioga 2009), but it appears in addition to the standard complementizer, so Lahne’s (2008) analysis of Irish cannot be readily extended to this case. The Irish *wh*-complementizer can be said to be featurally deficient and win the insertion competition against other complementizers when the probe is sufficiently impoverished, but no such competition occurs in Kinande.

The insertion of *no* in (1b) does not reduce the specificity of the morphology in (1a), contra Lahne’s (2008) prediction. The same can be said of the floating high tone verbal prefix that occurs with non-subject extraction in Akɔɔse (Hedinger 2008) and Bakweri (Marlo & Odden 2007).

These cases from Bantu highlight the need for an alternative analysis that does not rely on probe impoverishment.

Duala non-subject extraction is marked by a post-verbal particle *no* (Epée 1976: 194):

(1) a. Kuo a-bodi nu moto kalati kiele
   Kuo 1-give that man book yesterday
   ‘Kuo gave a book to that man yesterday.’

   b. kalati nde Kuo a-bodi no nu moto kiele
      book FOC Kuo 1-give WH that man yesterday
      ‘It’s a book that Kuo gave to that man yesterday.’

The insertion of *no* in (1b) does not reduce the specificity of the morphology in (1a), contra Lahne’s (2008) prediction. The same can be said of the floating high tone verbal prefix that occurs with non-subject extraction in Akɔɔse (Hedinger 2008) and Bakweri (Marlo & Odden 2007).

These cases from Bantu highlight the need for an alternative analysis that does not rely on probe impoverishment.

Word count: 498
References


