

# **A First Approach to Information Structuring in Xitsonga/ Xichangana\***

**Sabine Zerbian**

University of the Witwatersrand, Sabine.Zerbian@wits.ac.za

## **1. Introduction**

Studies on information structuring in Bantu languages show that the grammatical expression of information structure ranges from prosodic over morphological to syntactic means. With respect to prosodic means, research has shown that under focus suprasegmental changes occur which are associated with phonological phrasing (Byarushengo et al. (1976) for Haya, Kanerva (1990) for Chichewa) or not (Stucky (1979) for Makua), boundary tones are inserted (Hyman (1990) for Kinande), or downdrift is manipulated (Downing et al. (2004) for Chichewa). With respect to morphological means, mainly verb morphology has been reported (e.g. Givón (1975) for Kirundi and Bemba, Güldemann (1996), Hyman & Watters (1984) for Aghem). With respect to syntactic means, a syntactic immediately postverbal focus position has been claimed for some languages (e.g. Hyman & Watters (1984) for Aghem), as well as syntactic displacement in conjunction with a focus marker for others (e.g. Bergvall (1987) for Kikuyu, Sabel & Zeller (2006) for Nguni languages).

The present paper investigates the grammatical means for the information structuring of a sentence that have been reported for the South-east Bantu language Xitsonga, paying attention to prosodic, morphological and syntactic phenomena. The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 presents a brief introduction to Xitsonga. Section 3 investigates the studies that are relevant to information structuring in detail, starting with syntax (section 3.1), morphology (section 3.2) and prosody (section 3.3). Section 4 concludes and shows areas for further research.

## **2. The Xitsonga language**

Geographically, Xitsonga is spread over a wide area in the South-Eastern part of Southern Africa. It is one of the eleven official languages of South Africa, it is widely used in southern Mozambique as a lingua franca (referred to as Xichangana), and is also spoken in Zimbabwe. It is spoken by 1 992 207 people in South Africa (Statistics South Africa 2004) and by 1 379 045 in Mozambique (INDE 1997).

Next to the language name Xitsonga as documented in the constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the alternate names Tsonga, Thonga, Tonga (not to be confused with the Tonga spoken in Zambia and Malawi), and Shangaan/Changana are used interchangeably for the various linguistic varieties as well as the name of the standardised variety used in South Africa (which is based on the Nkuna and Gwamba varieties). Xitsonga is grouped as S50 in Guthrie's classification (1967-71) and is thus not closely related to any of the other Bantu languages spoken in South Africa, like Sesotho (S30) or Isizulu (S40). However, in light of the synchronic similarities that the different Xitsonga dialects share with the Nguni and Tekeza languages, Baumbach (1987: 2) suggests that Xitsonga be classified under the Tekeza cluster of the Nguni group.

---

\* This research was funded by a DFG, Grant to the Center for General Linguistics, Berlin. I am grateful to SF Matsinhe and PH Nkuna for feedback and discussion, and to Mary-Anne Harenberg for help in compiling the literature.

The linguistic group classified as Xitsonga is generally taken to comprise at least three distinct but mutually intelligible subgroups, namely Tsonga/Shangaan (S53), Tshwa (S51), and Ronga (S54). Though the Xitsonga varieties share the distinctness in their linguistic features, Herbert (2002: 316), in referring back to Junod (1896), points out that next to the shared linguistic features there is “neither a sense of common identity among the people nor a commonality of custom”.

For a bibliography on linguistic work on Xitsonga up to 1983 see Bill (1984).

### 3. Expression of information structure in Xitsonga

Structurally, Xitsonga shares the properties that are common to Bantu languages like the agglutinative structure, the rich noun class system, SVO word order, and tone. The current section investigates if and how these properties are exploited for the indication of information structure within the sentence.

#### 3.1 Syntax

##### 3.1.1 Agreement

Whereas concordial agreement between the preverbal subject and the verb is obligatory in all Bantu languages, there is variation with respect to agreement with the object. In Makua, for example, object agreement is obligatory with [+human]-objects. In Swahili, object agreement occurs more frequently with [+human]-objects (Krifka 1995: 1407).

In Xitsonga, concordial agreement with the object is not obligatory. Object agreement is reported to have a discourse-pragmatic effect in that, according to Beuchat (1962: 111), object concord on the verb together with the full object constituent results in emphasis, “being represented twice”.<sup>1</sup> An example is given in (1).

- (1) Xitsonga (Beuchat 1962: 114)
- a. Hi-lává toná tín-gúvu  
1PL-want 10.ABSPR 10-cloth  
‘We want the clothes’
- b. Ha-ti-lává toná tín-gúvu  
1PL-OC10-want 10.ABSPR 10-cloth  
‘As for the clothes, we want them’ (more emphatic)

Du Plessis et al. (1995) differentiate between object concord and full object constituent being separated by comma intonation or not. With comma intonation (i.e. a pause after the verb), no special emphasis is placed on the object. Without comma intonation, however, the “sentences have a semantic feature of emphasis” (du Plessis et al. 1995: 22), as in (2).

- (2) Xitsonga (du Plessis 1995: 22)
- Vava-vuna va yi dlaya nyimpfu  
2-man SC2 9OC slaughter 9sheep  
‘The men do slaughter a sheep.’

<sup>1</sup> But see Beuchat (1962: 113) for the report of no effect of emphasis with right-dislocated objects.

Thus, the existing literature indicates that object agreement triggers information structural effects.<sup>2</sup>

However, object concord needs further investigation for several reasons: (a) the term ‘emphasis’ used both by Beuchat (1962) and du Plessis et al. (1995) remains undefined, (b) the scope of emphasis in examples such as (2) as to either the object or the whole sentence (as suggested by the translation provided in the original source) is unclear, (c) the role of prosody in syntactic dislocation needs further investigation, and (d) the association of emphasis and object concord in Xitsonga is somewhat surprising given that in neighbouring languages such as Nguni and Sotho object concord indicates that the object is discourse-old information (cf. Louwrens (1979) for Northern Sotho).

### 3.1.2 Word order-Preposed objects

Word order and word order changes together with resulting differences in meaning have received little detailed attention in the study of Xitsonga grammar, though both Beuchat (1962: 111) and du Plessis (1995: 23) explicitly mention that changes of word order are used for emphasis and that therefore different word orders depend on previous discourse.

Du Plessis et al. (1995: 23) report that if subject and object agreement are present on the verb, a simple sentence may theoretically have six different alternate forms (cf. Bresnan & Mchombo (1987) for Chichewa), as in (3).

- (3) Xitsonga (du Plessis et al. 1995: 23)
- a. Va-na va swi lava swa-kudya.  
2-child SC2 OC8 want 8-food  
Lit.: ‘Children want it, food.’ (SVO)
  - b. Va swi lava swakudya vana. (VOS)
  - c. Swakudya vana va swi lava. (OSV)
  - d. Swakudya va swi lava vana. (OVS)
  - e. Va swi lava vana swakudya. (VSO)
  - f. Vana swakudya va swi lava. (SOV)

Also Beuchat (1962: 111) reports that the object has to co-occur with an object concord when it is displaced from its normal postverbal position.

However, the data given in Kisseberth (1994) show preposed object constituents without a corresponding object concord on the verb. Examples are provided in (4).

- (4) Xitsonga (Kisseberth 1994: 154)
- a. ti-ho:mú, xi-hontlovila x!á-xá:va  
10-cow 7-giant SC7-buy  
‘As for the cattle, the giant is buying.’
  - b. ma-ta:ndzá, mu-lungu w!á-xá:va  
6-egg 1-white.person SC1-buy  
‘As for eggs, the white person is buying’

<sup>2</sup> In contrast to object agreement, subject agreement does not bear a special discourse-pragmatic meaning (Beuchat 1962: 111), as subject agreement is obligatory.

The translation of the examples in (4), provided by the author, indicates that preposed objects receive a topic interpretation. Topics can be paraphrased by ‘*as for...*’ constructions in English.

Existing studies show that word order is relevant for the information structure of a sentence in Xitsonga, and again several questions arise that need further investigation: (a) the definition of emphasis as used both by Beuchat (1962) and du Plessis et al. (1995) is undefined. Consequently, (b) it is unclear if their term ‘emphasis’ refers to discourse salience as encoded in the topic interpretations of the examples in (4), (c) it remains also unclear if there are two different syntactic constructions of preposing in Xitsonga (with corresponding differences in information structure), one necessitating the object concord (as in (3)), the other one not requiring the object concord (as in (4)).

The absence of the object concord with a preposed object in Xitsonga, as in (4), is in contrast to comparable structures in neighbouring languages such as Zulu (Zeller 2004) or Northern Sotho (Zerbian 2006) in which a resumptive object concord on the verb is obligatory when the object is preposed.

With respect to the definition of the term ‘emphasis’ used in the works cited above, one can hypothesize that it differs from focus, defined as a set of alternatives (Rooth 1992). The short description of the formation of interrogative sentences in Baumbach (1987: 265) shows that focus is expressed in-situ in Xitsonga. The examples in (5) illustrate this point. Question words of every kind appear in postverbal position in which the constituents also appear in unmarked word order.

(5) Xitsonga (Baumbach 1987: 265ff)

- a. U lava yini?  
2SG want what  
‘What are you looking for?’
- b. U lava mani?  
2SG want who  
‘Who do you want?’
- c. Xi hlakula hi yini?  
SC7 hoe with what  
‘With what does she hoe?’
- d. Va ta hakela vava-nuna va-hi?  
SC2 FUT pay 2-man 2-which  
‘Which men will they pay?’
- e. Va tshama kwihhi?  
SC2 sit where  
‘Where do they sit?’

The examples in (6) suggest that the position of the question word in the examples in (5) is really in-situ and not sentence-final, as in (6) a local adverb follows the question word.

(6) Xitsonga

- a. Va von-e va-mani lahaya?  
2 see-PST 2-who there  
‘Who all did they see over there?’ (Baumbach 1987: 265)
- b. U von-e va-nhu lavo kwihhi?  
2SG see-PST 2-person DEM2 where  
‘You saw those people where?’ (du Plessis et al. 1995: 28)

When a questioned adverb does not follow the object, as in (6), but precedes it, the object has to co-occur with object concord on the verb. This is shown in (7).

- (7) Xitsonga (du Plessis et al. 1995: 28)
- a. U wu kum-e kwihi Themba movha?  
 SC1 OC3 find-PST where Themba 3car  
 Lit. 'He got it where, Themba, this car?'
  - b. U ta n'wi heleketa njhani mu-dyondzi loyi?  
 2SG FUT OC1 accompany how 1-student DEM1  
 'How will you accompany this student?'
  - c. Ndzi wu endl-e yini muti lowu?  
 1SG OC3 do-PST what 3village DEM3  
 'What did I do to this village?'

The presence of the object concord has been interpreted as evidence for the full object constituent to be moved out of and to be adjoined to the core clause (Bresnan & Mchombo, 1987). Consequently, the generalization still holds that the questioned adverbs in (7) appear in their basic postverbal position, all other constituents being adjoined to the core clause.

### 3.1.3 Word order- Subjects

My Own elicitation shows that Xitsonga displays a subject/non-subject asymmetry. Whereas the preceding section has shown that objects and adverbs are focused in their canonical position, logical subjects cannot be questioned in their canonical preverbal position, as shown in (8).

- (8) Xitsonga (Zerbian, notes)
- a. \*Mani u xava swa-kudya.  
 who 1SC buy 8-food  
 Intend.: 'Who is buying food?'
  - b. \*Wihi n'wana u nyika xi-hlangi swa-kudya  
 1-which 1child 1SC give 7-baby 8-food  
 Intend.: 'Which child gives the baby food?'
  - c. \*Mani u tirha?  
 who 1 SC work  
 Intend.: 'Who is working?'

Instead, logical subjects are questioned either by means of a cleft structure or postverbally. The use of a cleft construction for subject focus has also been observed in the neighbouring languages Zulu (Sabel & Zeller 2006) and Northern Sotho (Zerbian 2006, 2007). The focused logical subject appears as the head noun, which is followed by a structure that parallels a relative clause. This is shown in (9).

- (9) Subject questions in Xitsonga
- a. I mani a xava-ka swa-kudya?  
 COP who SC buy-PRES 8-food  
 'Who is buying food?'
  - b. Hi wihi n'wana loyi a nyika-ka xi-hlangi swa-kudya?  
 COP 1-which CL1.child DEM1 SC give-PRES 7-baby 8-food  
 'Which child gives the baby food?'

- c. I     mani   loyi    a   tirha-ka?  
 COP   who    DEM1 SC   work-PRES  
 ‘Who is working?’

The use of a cleft structure in (9) is suggested by the presence of *i/hi* which is also used in other copula constructions (*I wanuna*. ‘It is a man.’), and by the presence of a ‘relative pronoun’, *loyi* in the examples in (9).

Next to the cleft structure, logical subjects can also appear postverbally in an impersonal construction in Xitsonga. Cole-Beuchat (1959) and Beuchat (1962) present data on postverbal logical subjects in Xitsonga. Examples are given in (10).

- (10) Xitsonga (Cole-Beuchat 1959: 137)
- a. Kú-tírhá     tin-tombí.  
 SC17-work   10-girl  
 ‘There work the girls, i.e. it is the girls who are working’
- b. Kú-étlélé    xí-hlángi.  
 SC17-sleep   7-baby  
 ‘There sleeps the baby, i.e. it is the baby who is sleeping’

In the sentences in (10), the logical subject, which encodes the highest (only) thematic role, appears postverbally and does not agree with the verb in noun class features. Instead, the verb shows a subject concord marker of class 17. Class 17 was originally reserved for locative expressions, but is used as default prefix also in the other Southern Bantu languages like Nguni and Sotho.

In neighbouring languages, such as Sotho-Tswana, similar constructions to the one in (10) have been shown to encode either presentational focus (Demuth & Mmusi 1997) or narrow focus on the subject (Demuth & Mmusi 1997, Zerbian 2006). The analysis in du Plessis et al. (1995: 103) and also the use of the cleft sentence in the translation provided by Cole-Beuchat (1959) can be interpreted as evidence for a narrow focus interpretation of the subject. In cleft sentences, the clefted constituent is traditionally considered narrowly focused (see e.g. Bresnan & Mchombo 1987).

Support for this view comes from du Plessis et al. (1995: 103) who investigate in more detail the properties of the postverbal, logical subject. Their examples show that a postverbal, logical subject cannot solely be expressed by a concord marker on the verb, (11a). It can, however, be represented by an absolute pronoun, (11b). The context in (11c) shows that the postverbal subject can be considered focused in the sense of a set of alternatives (cf. Rooth 1992), as it appears in the context of focused negation.

- (11) Xitsonga (du Plessis et al. 1995: 103)
- a. \*Ku   n’wi   nghena.  
 SC17   OC1   enter  
 Intend.: ‘There enters he.’
- b. Ku   nghena   yena.  
 SC17   enter    ABSPR1  
 ‘There enters she (nobody else).’
- c. Ku   tirha   vava-nuna,   kungari   vava-sati.  
 SC17   work   2-man        but        2-woman  
 ‘There are working men, not women.’

Existing studies thus show that the postverbal, logical subject in an impersonal construction is focused. Work by du Plessis et al. (1995) furthermore provides a definition of the term focus that allows cross-linguistic comparability.

Nevertheless, there are still open issues with respect to the postverbal subject. The syntactic status of the postverbal subject in impersonal constructions remains an issue of further debate, not only in Xitsonga but in Bantu languages more generally (Bresnan & Mchombo, 1987, Thwala, 2006). Tonal evidence has been interpreted as evidence for the close connection of postverbal, logical subject and verb in Chichewa and Sesotho (Bresnan & Mchombo, 1987, Demuth & Mmusi, 1997), although it does not show the traditional object properties, like pronominalization, passivization, and relativization.

The relevant data in Xitsonga show that the postverbal subject does not show object properties either (for pronominalization see (11a)). Neither does the tonal evidence give conclusive indication of the syntactic structure in Xitsonga.<sup>3</sup> Depending on the dialect, the postverbal subject is sometimes phrased together with the verb, as in (12a) or separated from it by a phrase boundary, as in (12b).

(12) Xitsonga

- a. Kú-ta-fám-bá va-lungu  
SC17-FUT-go 2-white.person  
'There will leave the white people.' (Beuchat 1962: 121)
- b. Kú-tírhá mú-cháyéri.  
SC17-work 1-driver  
'There works the driver.' (Cole-Beuchat 1959: 137)

In (12a), the high tone of the verb/subject prefix does not spread into the following noun, which is, according to Kisseberth (1994: 152), diagnostic for a phrase boundary separating the verb and the postverbal subject. This pattern is found in the Xitsonga dialects of the former Transvaal (Cole-Beuchat 1959: 137). In (12b), however, the high tone of the subject prefix does spread into the following logical subject. According to Kisseberth (1994: 152), this spreading behaviour is indicative of the verb and following subject constituting one prosodic phrase, just like verbs and objects do. This tonal behaviour is found in the Xichangana dialects of Mozambique and in the Xitsonga dialect that is spoken near Tzaneen (Cole-Beuchat, 1959: 137).

In addition, a focused logical subject in postverbal position has been reported to be grammatical mainly in intransitive structures in other Bantu languages (see Marten (2006) for an overview). Like in Herero (Marten 2006), in Xitsonga a postverbal subject can also be found in transitive structures, as the example (13b) shows.

(13) Xitsonga (du Plessis et al. 1995: 104)

- a. Va-na va tlanga bolo  
2-child 2 play 9ball  
'The children are playing soccer.'
- b. Ku tlanga va-na bolo  
SC17 play 2-child 9ball  
Lit. 'There are playing the children soccer.'

<sup>3</sup> Beuchat (1962) shows that the surface tone pattern of a constituent in Xitsonga is dependent on surface structure (as either preverbally or postverbally) and not on syntactic function (either subject or object). It is therefore questionable if the surface realization of tone can give evidence for the syntactic status of a constituent in Xitsonga.

## 3.2 Morphology

### 3.2.1 Verbal domain

Southern Bantu languages (with the exception of Shona) show an alternation in the verbal paradigm of at least the Present Tense, which has been brought into relation with information structure (see e.g. Doke 1927, Givón 1975, Güldemann 1996). Also for Xitsonga, such an alternation can be observed. Baumbach (1987: 219) states that “[i]n the present tense, continuous aspect affirmative, the *a*-form of the subject concord [...] is used when the verb is emphasised”. The examples in (14) illustrate the point.

- (14) Xitsonga (Baumbach 1987: 219)
- |    |                      |                         |
|----|----------------------|-------------------------|
| a. | ndza dyondza         | ‘I am <i>studying</i> ’ |
| b. | ndzi dyondza swinene | ‘I am studying hard’    |

The subject concord in (14a) is argued to consist of the underlying subject concord in (14b) followed by the vowel /a/ (cf. Junod 1896). There is a contraction of these concords with the vowel /a/, and this contraction produces /ndza/.

For the Southern Bantu languages Isizulu and Sesotho it has been argued that the use of the so-called long/disjunctive verb form (for terminology see Creissels 1996) is governed by syntax rather than discourse semantics. The long/disjunctive form is used when the verb appears final in the core clause (van der Spuy 1993, Buell 2006, Zerbian 2006). Evidence for this claim comes from among others the observation that in transitive sentences the long/disjunctive form can only appear when the object is moved out of the core clause, which is mirrored by the appearance of an object concord on the verb. Compare the examples in (15) from Northern Sotho, the western neighbour of Xitsonga. Examples (15a-b) correspond to the Xitsonga sentence in (14). In (15d), the long form of the verb appears with an object. Simultaneously, an object concord (here of class 9) appears on the verb, which is an argument for analysing the verb being final in the core clause.

- (15) Northern Sotho
- |    |                     |                         |
|----|---------------------|-------------------------|
| a. | ke a ithuta         | ‘I am studying.’        |
| b. | ke ithuta ka maatla | ‘I am studying hard.’   |
| c. | ke rata nama        | ‘I like meat.’          |
| d. | ke a e rata nama    | Lit. ‘I like it, meat.’ |

In Xitsonga, however, the long form of the Present Tense can be used in transitive sentences without an object concord appearing on the verb. This is illustrated in (16).

- (16) Xitsonga (Baumbach 1987: 219)
- |    |                   |                              |
|----|-------------------|------------------------------|
| a. | ndzi pfuna manana | ‘I am helping mother’        |
| b. | ndza pfuna manana | ‘I am <b>HELPING</b> mother’ |

The verb in (16b) appears in the *a*-form of the subject concord. According to the comment by Baumbach (1987: 219), the verb in (16b) carries emphasis (marked by capitals in the English translation). However, in contrast to Sotho and Nguni languages, no object concord appears on the verb.

The data presented in Webster (1999), given in (17) below, argues against an analysis solely based on discourse-pragmatics, however.

- (17) Xitsonga (Webster 1999: 108)
- a. A-ni-dondr-I buku, ni-dondra [phaphela]<sub>F</sub>.  
NEG-1SG-read-NEG 9book 1SG-read 9letter  
'I am not reading a book, I am reading a letter.'
  - b. A-ni-tral-i phaphela, ni-[dondra]<sub>F</sub> phaphela.  
'I am not writing a letter, I am reading a letter.'

Though the example in (17a) shows that the *i*-form is used when the verb is background information, the example in (17b) shows that the *i*-form is also used when the verb is in focus, as indicated by the context of focused negation, as long as some other constituent follows the verb.

As a further means of emphasis in the verbal domain, du Plessis et al. (1995) report that reduplication of the verb expresses emphasis. An example is given in (18).

- (18) Xitsonga (du Plessis et al. 1995: 24)
- U n'wi langute a n'wi languta  
SC1 OC1 look.at SC1 OC1 look.at  
'She kept on looking at him.'

In (18), the verbal stem without tense marker is reduplicated. The reduplication results, according to du Plessis et al. (1995), in emphasis on the verb. As the translation by the authors indicates, the term 'emphasis' is used in this connection as denoting an iterative, insisting action.

### 3.2.2 Nominal domain

Beuchat (1962: 111) reports that the use of absolute pronouns before or after the noun has influence on the information status of the constituent. Examples of preverbal pronouns are given in (19).

- (19) Xitsonga (Beuchat 1962: 114)
- a. Voná vá-nhu vá-chává Xikwembu  
ABS<sub>PR</sub>2 2-person SC2-fear God  
'(As for) people they fear God.'
  - b. Vá-xá-vísá xoná xi-rhundzu  
SC2-OC7-sell ABS<sub>PR</sub>7 7-basket  
'They are selling it, the conical basket (that is).'

Example (19a) shows the use of an absolute pronoun *vona*, which precedes the subject of the sentence. Example (19b) shows the absolute pronoun *xona* preceding the object. In both cases, the translation of the author suggests that the constituents' emphasis is rather related to discourse saliency (topicness) than focus as defined as set of alternatives.

Louwrens (1985) reports that the substitution of a noun phrase by an absolute pronoun adds the notion of 'emphasis' to this constituent in Northern Sotho. If the absolute pronoun co-occurs with the noun phrase, the semantic contribution of the pronoun depends on its position: if it appears in post-nominal position, it adds the semantic notion of contrast ("contrasting the discourse referent [...] with one or more other referents within the same context of discourse", Louwrens 1985: 59). If it appears in pre-nominal position, the pronoun adds the semantic notion of emphasis ("special prominence with which a particular referent is presented at a given point in a discourse", *ibid.*).

### 3.3 Prosody

No work has yet been carried out on the prosodic expression of focus in Xitsonga. This is not surprising as in general, prosody is often neglected in work on African languages (Bearth 1999, Creissels 1996), and only a handful studies approached this topic in Bantu languages (cf. Downing et al. 2004, Kanerva 1990, Downing 2006, Jokweni 1995). In neither of these studies pitch accent has been found to indicate the focused constituent, as is the case in intonation languages like English and German. Nevertheless, prosodic means are also used in Bantu tone languages to mark the information structuring of the sentence. Three parameters are involved: Tonal changes, lengthening and the manipulation of overall downdrift occur at boundaries that are inserted by focus.

Like most of the other Bantu languages, Xitsonga is a tone language that makes use of a two-tone system. Tone is used both for lexical (20a) and grammatical distinctions (20b).

(20) Xitsonga minimal pairs (Endemann 1952: 62)

- a. Lexical minimal pairs
 

mbí:lá	‘dough’
mbí:la	‘rock rabbit’
mbila	musical instrument
- b. Grammatical minimal pairs
 

á-hí-tshá:mi	‘we do not sit’
á-hi-tshá:mi	‘Let us sit!’

Beuchat (1962: 106) reports that surface tone patterns in Xitsonga are determined by the word’s position in the sentence, the presence of modifiers, and the tone of the preceding verb only. In investigating the prosody of focus in Xitsonga, it seems therefore necessary to distinguish between two effects of focus.

#### 3.3.1 Phono-syntactic reflexes of focus

Prosodic changes that occur in combination with syntactic changes will be referred to as phono-syntactic reflexes of focus. In these cases, focus is only indirectly expressed by prosody as it is assumed here that the primary expression is through syntax. Beuchat (1962) already notes that changes in word order result in tonal changes. This is exemplified in (21).

(21) Xitsonga (Beuchat 1962: 107, 113, 113, 109)

- a. Xi-hlangi xí-vóná n’ánga.  
7-baby SC7-see 9doctor  
‘The baby sees the doctor.’
- b. Hi-ta-yi-nyíká nyáma n’anga.  
1PL-FUT-OC9-give 9meat 9doctor  
‘We shall give him meat, the doctor (that is).’
- c. N’anga vavá-byí vá-yi-láva lókó vavá-byá.  
9doctor 2-sick SC2-OC9-want when SC2-sick  
‘(As for) the doctor, patients want him when they are ill.’
- d. N’anga yá-hiná yí-rhándzá swi-koxa.  
9doctor POSS-1PL SC9-like 8-old.people  
‘Our doctor likes these old people.’

The data in (21) show that the tonal realization of *n'ganga* 'the doctor' depends on its position within the sentence. It is realized with an initial high tone if it appears in postverbal position following a high-toned verb, as in (21a). As a right-dislocated object, however, it remains toneless, as in (21b). In preverbal position it is also toneless, independent of its syntactic function, as in (21c, d).

According to Beuchat (1962), the object is emphasized in (21b) and (21c). The emphasis is, however, not due to the tone pattern with which the object is realized but because of the presence of the object concord in both cases. Consequently, the view is held here that suprasegmental changes reflect information structure only indirectly in cases as (21).

### 3.3.2 Purely prosodic reflexes of focus

Purely prosodic reflexes of focus are independent of syntactic changes, and occur under focus in languages like English and German, when the focused constituent is marked by a pitch accent as such. Beuchat (1962: 106) reports that surface tone patterns in Xitsonga are influenced by a word's position in the sentence, the presence of modifiers, and the tone of the preceding verb only. She thus does not suggest that focus is a decisive factor in the modulation of the surface tone structure.

However, it is a topic for further research to investigate a potential influence of focus on tone and intonation in Xitsonga, as Xitsonga shows all three of the properties that have been reported in other Bantu languages to be influenced by focus: tonal processes that are sensitive to prosodic boundaries, lengthening at phrase boundaries, and downdrift. Space restrictions do not permit to go into detail but see Baumbach (1987), Kisseberth (1994) for penultimate lengthening, and Louw (1983) for high tone spread in Xitsonga and Endemann (1952) for downdrift. This research shows that suprasegmental processes such as penultimate lengthening, tone sandhi and downdrift are sensitive to syntactic boundaries in Xitsonga (cf. Herbert 1992). Work on other languages, including other Bantu languages, has shown that these parameters are sensitive to information structure and can be manipulated by focus. Consequently, further research needs to show if focus is expressed prosodically also in Xitsonga.

On the other hand, there are studies that have shown that focus is not necessarily expressed prosodically in tone languages (see Hartmann & Zimmermann (2007) for Hausa). The lack of prosodic expression of focus has also been shown for Northern Sotho, the western neighbour of Xitsonga (Zerbian 2006, to appear). A close investigation of prosodic properties of the Southern Bantu languages therefore contributes to assumed differences in the tone systems across Bantu, as stated by Doke (1938: 147): "Chewa belongs to that belt of Bantu languages across Central Africa, which are distinguished tonetically by 'peaks of tone', so distinct from the languages of the South-eastern Bantu zone or the Congo zone with their complicated tone system".

## 4. Summary and conclusion

Grammatical expression of information structure is still understudied in Xitsonga. From the existing literature enough evidence could be gathered that indicates that this is a rewarding area of research, though, as interactions from different grammatical areas are to be expected.

First of all, information structural units need to be defined in order to allow cross-linguistic comparison. Particularly, focus needs to be separated from emphasis understood as discourse salience, as it is expected that these two categories have different grammatical properties.

Like in all other Bantu languages, word order has a major influence on information structure. A definition of the exact syntactic and morphosyntactic restrictions with respect to the occurrence of agreement markers and discourse-pragmatic restrictions on the subject need more detailed investigation though. Also the verbal morphosyntax has been argued to be sensitive to information structure, as in most of the other Southern Bantu languages. More detailed investigations have to work out if this relation is a direct or an indirect one. The use of absolute pronouns, though bearing information structural meaning, is not directly related to focus, but rather to discourse saliency. Lastly, prosody does not seem to play a prominent role in information structuring in Xitsonga although further research has to confirm this.

### References

- Baumbach, Erdmann J. M. (1987) *Analytical Tsonga Grammar*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Bearth, Thomas. (1999) The contribution of African linguistics towards a general theory of focus. Update and critical review. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 20: 121-156.
- Bergvall, Victoria L. (1987) *Focus in Kikuyu and universal grammar*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International.
- Beuchat, Phyllis D. (1962) Additional notes on the tonomorphology of the Tsonga noun. *African Studies* 21: 105-122.
- Bill, Mary C. (1984) 100 years of Xitsonga publications, 1883-1983. *African Studies* 43: 67-81.
- Bresnan, Joan and Sam A. Mchombo. (1987) Topic, pronoun, and agreement in Chichewa. *Language* 63: 741-782.
- Buell, Leston. (2006) The Zulu Conjoint/Disjoint verb alternation: Focus or constituency? *ZAS Papers in Linguistics* 43: 9-30.
- Byarushengo, Ernest R., Larry M. Hyman and Samuel Tenenbaum. (1976) Tone, accent, and assertion in Haya. In Larry M. Hyman (ed.) *Studies in Bantu Tonology*. Los Angeles: University of California, 183-205.
- Cole-Beuchat, P.-D. (1959) Tonomorphology of the Tsonga noun. *African Studies* 18: 133-145.
- Creissels, Denis. (1996) Conjunctive and disjunctive verb forms in Setswana. *South African Journal of African Languages* 16: 109-115.
- Demuth, Katherine & Sheila Mmusi (1997) Presentational focus and thematic structure in comparative Bantu. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 18: 1-19.
- Doke, Clement M. (1938) Book review: A Grammar of Chichewa by M.H. Watkins. *Bantu Studies* 12: 147-148.
- Doke, Clement M. (1927) *Textbook of Zulu Grammar*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman. [Reprinted in 1992].
- Downing, Laura J., Al Mtenje and Bernd Pompino-Marschall. (2004) Prosody and Information Structure in Chichewa. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics* 37: 167-187.
- Downing, Laura J. (2006) The Prosody and Syntax of Focus in Chitumbuka. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics* 43: 55-80.
- Endemann, Theodor M.H. (1952) Die intonasie van Tsonga ('n Sinkroniese Studie van die Tsonga-Spreektone). D.Litt et Phil. thesis, University of South Africa.
- Givón, Talmy. (1975) Focus and scope of assertion. Some Bantu evidence. *Studies in African Linguistics* 6: 185-205.
- Güldemann, Tom. (1996) *Verbalmorphologie und Nebenprädikation im Bantu*. Vol. XXVII. Bochum: Universitätsverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer.

- Hartmann, Katharina and Malte Zimmermann. (2007) In place - out of place? Focus in Hausa. In K. Schwabe and S. Winkler (eds.) *On Information Structure, Meaning and Form*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 365-403.
- Herbert, Robert K. (1992) Phonological words and syntactic constituents in Xitsonga. *South African Journal of African Languages* 12: 17-24.
- Herbert, Robert K. (2002) The political economy of language shift: language and gendered ethnicity in a Thonga community. In Raj Mesthrie (ed.) *Language in South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 316-335.
- Hyman, Larry M. and John R. Watters. (1984) Auxiliary Focus. *Studies in African Linguistics* 15: 233-273.
- Hyman, Larry M. (1990) Boundary Tonology and the Prosodic Hierarchy. In Sharon Inkelas and Draga Zec (eds.) *The Phonology-Syntax Connection*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 109-126.
- INDE (Instituto Nacional de Estatística) (2000) *Situacao Linguistica de Mocambique*, Gregório Firmino (ed.) Maputo: Instituto Nacional de Estatística.
- Jokweni, Mbulelo W. (1995) *Aspects of Isixhosa Phrasal Phonology*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Illinois.
- Junod, Henri A. (1896) *Grammaire ronga*. Lausanne: Georges Bridel.
- Kanerva, Jonni M. (1990) *Focus and Phrasing in Chichewa Phonology*. New York, London: Garland Publishing.
- Kisseberth, Charles W. (1994) On Domains. In John Cole and Charles W. Kisseberth (eds.) *Perspectives in Phonology*. Stanford: CSLI, 133-166.
- Krifka, Manfred. (1995) Swahili. In Joachim Jacobs, Arnim von Stechow, Wolfgang Sternefeld and Theo Vennemann (eds.) *Syntax: An International Handbook of Contemporary Research*. Berlin: Mouton, 1397-1418.
- Louw, Jacobus A. (1983) Some tone rules of Tsonga. *Afrika und Übersee* 66: 13-24.
- Louwrens, Louis J. (1979) Naamwoord-funksies in Noord-Sotho. D. Litt thesis, University of Pretoria.
- Louwrens, Louis J. (1985) Contrastiveness and the so-called absolute pronoun in Northern Sotho. *South African Journal of African Languages* 5: 58-61.
- Marten, Lutz. (2006) Locative inversion in Otjiherero: More on morphosyntactic variation in Bantu. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics* 43: 97-122.
- du Plessis, Jacobus A., N.E. Nxumalo and Mariana Visser. (1995) *Tsonga syntax*. Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch.
- Rooth, Mats. (1992) A theory of focus interpretation. *Natural Language Semantics* 1: 75-116.
- Sabel, Joachim and Jochen Zeller. (2006) Wh-question formation in Nguni. In John Mugane et al. (eds.) *Selected Proceedings of the 35th Annual Conference on African Linguistics*. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project, 271-283.
- van der Spuy, Andrew. (1993) Dislocated Noun Phrases in Nguni. *Lingua* 90: 335-355.
- Statistics South Africa. (2004) *Census 2001: Primary Tables South Africa: Census '96 and 2001 compared*. Pretoria: Statistics South Africa. Available at [www.statssa.gov.za](http://www.statssa.gov.za)
- Stucky, Susan. (1979) The interaction of tone and focus in Makua. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 1: 189-198.
- Thwala, Nhlanhla. (2006) Parameters of variation and complement licensing in Bantu. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics* 43: 209-233.
- Webster, Gabriel. (1999) Evidence for weight subcategorization in Ronga. *University of Washington Working Papers in Linguistics* 16: 97-114.
- Zeller, Jochen. (2004) Left dislocation in Zulu. Ms. University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.

- Zerbian, Sabine. (to appear) Investigating the prosodic expression of focus in Northern Sotho. In Enoch O. Aboh, Katharina Hartmann and Malte Zimmermann (eds.) *Focus Strategies in Niger-Congo and Afroasiatic – On the interaction of Focus and Grammar in some African Languages*. Berlin: Mouton.
- Zerbian, Sabine. (2007) Subject/object-asymmetry in Northern Sotho. In Kerstin Schwabe and Susanne Winkler (eds.) *Information Structure and the Architecture of Grammar: Typological Perspective*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 323-346.
- Zerbian, Sabine. (2006) *Expression of Information Structure in the Bantu Language Northern Sotho*. Ph.D. dissertation, Humboldt-University, Berlin.