

# African Languages and Syntactic Theory: Impacts and Directions

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## 1. Introduction

Twenty years ago, on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference on African Linguistics, also held at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Joan Bresnan gave a plenary address ‘African Languages and Syntactic Theories’ in order to assess the impacts of African languages on syntactic theory (Bresnan 1990). Now on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> ACAL meeting, it is appropriate for us to revisit that topic and ask how African languages have impacted syntactic thinking since Bresnan (1990), and what prospects there may be for the future.

In undertaking what happily turns out to be a rather large task, however, I will limit the breadth of my discussion in two major ways. First, when assessing the impacts of African languages on syntactic theory, I will exclusively be talking about the so-called Chomskyan tradition of generative syntax.<sup>1</sup> This reflects a bias in my training and research, but also makes for interesting discussion since, until fairly recently, one would have said the impact of African languages in this tradition had been minimal. The second, somewhat looser limit on this talk today is that I will chiefly focus on Bantu linguistics. Again, this is a bias in my training and research, but it also reflects the fact that Bantu languages have had a significant impact on syntactic theory.

In her 1989 address, Bresnan outlined sub-areas of syntactic theory which African languages had impacted. These included logophoricity, topic/subjecthood, agreement, argument asymmetries, and the syntax of verbs. Overall, however, her assessment was that African languages had had a fairly mild impact on syntactic theories, concluding that the research ‘has not yet had the same revolutionary impact upon syntax that Africanists research has had on phonology, where a fundamental restructuring of phonological theory was brought about.’ Quoting Eyamba Bokamba, Bresnan also pointed out that many of the reasons for this were pragmatic. Quite simply, at the time there were only a handful of syntacticians working in detail on African languages.

Thus, perhaps we might first conclude that the most significant development in this area over the past twenty years has been the exponential increase in syntax researchers who are interested in African languages, along with the sheer volume of work they have produced. This is attested by the many conferences and workshops held each year devoted exclusively to issues of African languages and linguistics. Yet in many cases it might still be said that Bresnan’s assessment remains true: while African languages have played significant roles in the analysis of particular phenomenon (one thinks of logophoricity and serial-verb constructions in particular), in most cases these phenomena are taken to be peripheral to the core understanding of syntax. Still, there are a few areas where the influence of

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\* I would like to thank Eyamba Bokamba and the organizers of ACAL 40 for inviting me to the event as well as conference participants and the editors of this volume for their valuable comments.

<sup>1</sup> In doing so, I am unfairly ignoring the critical and central role African languages have played in the development of Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG) by Bresnan, Kaplan and others since the 1970s (see Bresnan 2001).

African languages has been more central to the development of core syntactic principles, and I wish to focus on them here. I will discuss three main topics. The first is the topic of grammatical relations and morphosyntactic structure. Here I believe we can state without hesitation that African languages have played (and are playing) a significant role in a fundamental shift in the field. The second is a topic which I believe perhaps has the greatest potential for impact in the near future, namely, the syntax of agreement. The third is a suggestion for future work on African languages to take on a comparative character.

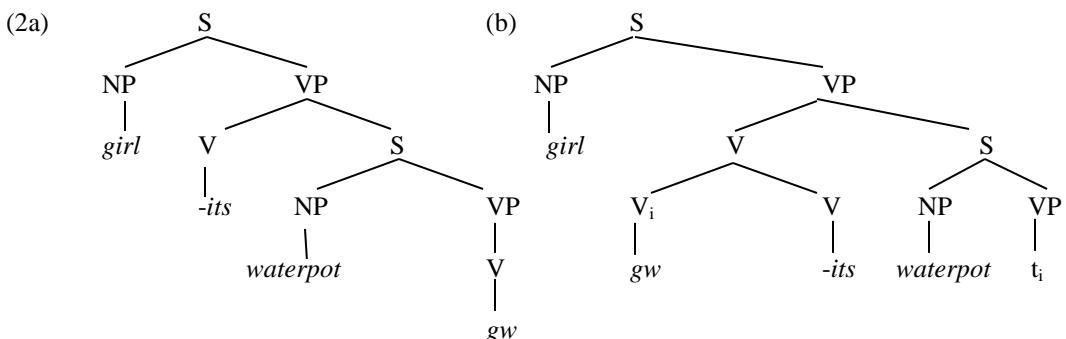
## 2. Grammatical Relations and Morphosyntax

The topic of grammatical relations was of great debate in the 1980s and early 1990s, centering around the ontological status of grammatical relations in syntax. Should grammatical relations be taken to be primitives or should they be derived from more basic principles? Related discussions centered around how grammatical function (GF) changing operations like the passive, applicative, causative and other alternations should be characterized. In this discussion, Bantu languages naturally began receiving a great deal of attention due to the fact that most have clear morphological reflexes of GF-changing operations – applicative, causative, and passive morphemes are easily identified and their properties examined. Native speaker researchers like Sam Mchombo, Mohammad Abasheikh, Lioba Moshi, Alexandre Kimenyi and others, along with their collaborators, played crucial roles in bringing these facts to light and offering insightful analyses. There were also two book-length treatments of grammatical relations that appeared at this time, offering generative treatments of the Bantu facts, namely Marantz’s (1984) *On the Nature of Grammatical Relations*, in which data from Chichewa and Chimwi:ni were important parts of the analysis, and Baker’s *Incorporation* (1988) which relied strongly upon data from Chichewa (much of it provided directly by Sam Mchombo) as well as data from other Bantu languages.

Baker and Marantz offer significantly different technical treatments of grammatical relations and the mechanics of grammatical function changing operations, but they have in common that both argue for a significant syntactic component in forming complex verb forms that include applicatives, causatives, and passive morphemes. This can be seen most clearly in Baker’s system in which all grammatical function changing is essentially a result of constrained syntactic head movement. I illustrate here with a Chichewa causative sentence in which an intransitive verb takes a causative suffix, making it transitive:

- (1) Mtsikana anau-gw-ets-a                      mtsuko                      *Chichewa*  
 girl            AGR-fall-CAUS-ASP    waterpot  
 ‘The girl made the waterpot fall’                      (Trithart 1977)

For Baker, causative verb forms like that in (1) are formed in the syntax from an underlying bi-clausal structure analogous to a sentence like ‘The girl made the waterpot fall.’ In the structure in (2), the verb of the lower clause, *fall*, undergoes head movement to incorporate into the upper verb, which is the causative morpheme itself.

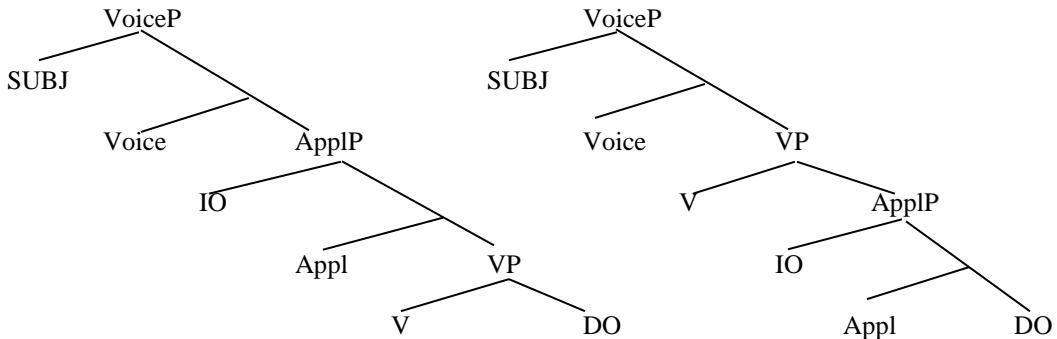




- b. mlenje a-ku-lémb-ér-a mfúmú \*(chimangirizo) *Chichewa*  
 1-hunter 1S-PR-write-APPL-FV 9-chief 7-essay  
 ‘The hunter is writing for the chief’ (Alsina and Mchombo 1993; ex 12a)

Pylkannen’s basic structures for these two kinds of applicatives are given in (4) (DO = direct object; IO = indirect object).

- (4) a. High Applicative (Kichaga)      b. Low Applicative (Chichewa)



While Pylkannen was chiefly concerned with accounting for semantic variation, it has been well-known since at least Bresnan and Moshi (1993) that there are also strong syntactic co-variations in applicative structures. This includes the fact that in Chichewa only the higher object of an applicative structure can passivize or be expressed as an object marker while in Kichaga either object can passivize or be expressed as an object marker. Since Pylkannen’s account has become known, these syntactic correlations have been revisited by McGinnis (2001) as well as Jeong (2006), both of whom attempt to show that the syntactic variation falls out from the different structures that Pylkannen’s account of the semantic variation requires.

Thus, this line of work has come full circle and in a very successful way. The discussion of Bantu argument structures and asymmetries led Baker and Marantz to the conclusion that syntax manipulates units smaller than words, which led in part to the strong realizational approach to morphology adopted by Distributed Morphology and other separationist frameworks. This thinking made Pylkannen’s account of the variation in the semantics of applicative structures possible, which in turn has made it possible to return to the original argument asymmetries discussed in the Bantu literature and offer explanatory accounts based purely upon general syntactic principles (rather than upon idiosyncracies of theta theory or case theory, as Marantz and Baker had originally argued). The success of this program is widely recognized and has led to a large number of scholars to consider event and argument structure in a wide variety of languages in similar terms. We can see then, that for Chomskyan generative syntax, African languages have played a very important role in shaping the way we think about the very architecture of the grammar. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine this evolution of the grammar taking place without these languages. It may be safe to say that no other aspect of African languages has impacted the field of syntax so deeply in quite so many ways.

### 3. Agreement

The second topic I would like to bring up in this context is one which I judge has not had a strong impact on syntactic theory yet, but is perhaps beginning to and certainly has the potential to strongly influence work on syntax. This is the topic of agreement. Given that agreement is so complex and ubiquitous in the Bantu languages, it is surprising how little an impact these languages have had on the current understanding of agreement. This is especially true when one considers that Bantu languages display a number of agreement properties that are unexpected from the point of view of Indo-European

languages, the latter still being the languages upon which current theories of agreement are largely based.

The study of agreement in Bantu is finally, I think, beginning to have an impact on syntactic theories of agreement, but there is a long way to go. Take, for example, very recent proposals regarding the nature of agreement proposed in Chomsky (2007, 2008). This system assumes that uninterpretable phi-features typically associated with subject-verb agreement originate in C and are transferred to C's complement T through a process known as feature inheritance. The reasons for this are largely theory-internal and have to do with phase theory, but these do need to concern us here. What is interesting, however, is that this system makes the implicit assumption that in any given C-T system, there can only be one set of phi-features present, and therefore one agreement relation. But anyone who has studied Bantu languages knows this is often not the case. In relative clauses, for instance, very often the C-T system displays two distinct agreement relations – the canonical subject-verb agreement relation and an agreement relation between the relative complementizer in C and the relativized NP in Spec,CP.

- (5) mbatya dza -v-aka son-era vakadzi mwenga Shona  
 10clothes 10REL-3PL-T-sew-APP 2women 1bride  
 'clothes which the women sewed for the bride' (Demuth and Harford 1999)

It is difficult to see how this sort of data could be accommodated by a theory in which the entire C-T system only has room for a single set of phi-features. Carstens (2010) points out this problem in a recent paper, arguing that C and T must be allowed to have independent and independently probing sets of phi-features (see also Henderson 2006), an assertion that is fairly devastating to Chomsky's system and the phase-related justifications for it (Richards 2007).

But the problems for current theories of agreement are larger than issues surrounding phases and feature inheritance. Assuming uninterpretable agreement features can occupy C and T and probe independently, the probing of C's features over a lexical subject or valued set of phi-features in T would pose a problem for standard views of minimality, the idea that features must agree with the closest possible goal. We can see this in the structure in (6). Uninterpretable phi-features [uφ] in C cannot agree with the relative operator over the lexical subject since the lexical subject is closer and possesses a set of interpretable phi-features [iφ].

- (6) a.  $T_{u\phi}$  [VP SUBJ [ V OBJ<sub>REL</sub> ]  
           └─── Agree ───┘
- b. SUBJ  $T_{u\phi}$  [VP <SUBJ> [ V OBJ<sub>REL</sub> ]  
           ↑          └─── Move ───┘
- c.  $C_{u\phi}$  [TP SUBJ  $T_{u\phi}$  [VP <SUBJ> [ V OBJ<sub>REL</sub> ]  
           └─── Agree ───┘ ~~X~~

In Henderson (2006), I argued that this situation requires that the computation of the locality of agreement be delayed until the end of the derivation, once other relevant operations have taken place. Thus for a structure such as the one in (5), I argue that the relative operator undergoes movement to Spec,CP in order to check the REL feature in C. Only after this movement has taken place is locality for the Agree relation computed. At that point, the operator is the most local goal for the probing features in C, being in SpecCP. In this way, locality relations between features may change during the course of a derivation due to feature checking itself. I refer to this as Dynamic Locality.

- (7) a.  $C_{u\phi(REL)}$  [TP SUBJ  $T_{u\phi}$  [VP <SUBJ> [ V OBJ<sub>REL</sub> ]  
           └─── Agree, [REL] ───┘

- b. [CP OBJ<sub>REL</sub> C<sub>u $\phi$ , REL</sub> [TP SUBJ T<sub>u $\phi$</sub>  [VP <SUBJ> [ V <OBJ<sub>REL</sub>>]]
- ↑  
Move
- c. [CP OBJ<sub>REL</sub> C<sub>u $\phi$ , REL</sub> [TP SUBJ T<sub>u $\phi$</sub>  [VP <SUBJ> [ V <OBJ<sub>REL</sub>>]]
- └─┬─┘  
Agree, u $\phi$

This view of Dynamic Locality preserves the basic probe-goal view of feature checking relations, but allows for a constrained way in which expected minimality effects can be obviated, namely when an independent checking relation is involved. It also needn't assume stipulations about activation, delayed feature erasure, or even phasehood – tools often used to explain apparent minimality obviations of this kind.

My point here is not to argue for my particular view of things, but only to point out that much of the discussion surrounding the syntax of agreement has centered around languages which actually show a fairly small amount of morphological agreement themselves. African languages offer us a plethora of agreement phenomena that raise incredibly interesting questions about the nature of agreement that simply have not been fully dealt with or resolved. Since Bokamba's work in the 1970s, for instance, the so-called subject-object reversal constructions so common in many central Bantu languages continue to receive much attention by African language specialists, but have not received adequate attention in formulating theories of agreement. Again, there are some counter examples in recent work (Carstens 2005; Henderson 2006, 2011; Ndayiragije 1999, among others), but it isn't clear that this work has had a wider impact in the discussion of the nature of agreement.

For those unfamiliar with the phenomenon, subject-object reversal is a kind of topicalization construction in which a non-subject is fronted, triggering morphological agreement on the verb that replaces subject-verb agreement and leaves the subject post-verbal, often with a kind of focus interpretation. Relative clauses with similar agreement and word order structures also exist in many languages, as discussed in some of Bokamba's earliest work:

- (8) a. Omwana a-tom-aki imukanda Dzamba  
1child 3SG-send-PST 5letter  
'The child sent a letter.'
- b. Imukanda mú-tom-aki omwana.  
5letter 5AGR-send-PST 1child  
'The letter, the child sent it.' (Bokamba 1979)

Other agreement phenomena have received very little attention, such as the Bantu associative construction, a fascinating construction with no straightforward analysis (see Carstens 2000; Koopman 2006). It isn't clear syntactically, for instance, what the head of this construction is. Is it the head noun, as Carstens (2000) assumes? Or is it the associative marker itself? This would seem to depend upon whether one considers the associate marker and object to be a complement to the noun or whether one takes the associative marker to be analogous to a relative complementizer. It seems to me there is a very interesting debate there which might have a strong impact on theories of agreement.

- (9) kitabu ch-a mwalimu Kiswahili  
7book 7-ASSOC 1teacher  
'the teacher's book.'

Another quite mysterious phenomenon is the complementizer agreement that occurs in some Luuyia languages (see Wasike 2007; Diercks 2010). In this construction, a sentential complementizer agrees with the subject of the matrix clause.

- (10) a. ba-bol-el-a      Alfredi ba-li a-kha-khil-e  
 2S-said-AP-FV 1Alfred 2-that 1S-FUT-conquer  
 ‘They told Alfred that he will win.’
- b. Alfredi ka-bol-el-a      baba-ndu a-li      ba-kha-khil-e  
 1Alfred 1S-said-AP-FV 2-person 1-that 2S-FUT-conquer  
 ‘Alfred told the people that they will win.’ (Diercks 2010: 279-280)

Note that it is difficult to know how to approach the agreement in (10) in a standard framework of agreement that relies on c-command between the agreeing head and its valuing goal since here of course it is difficult to imagine that the complementizer could possibly c-command the matrix subject at any point in the derivation.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, while it is well-known that agreement interacts with other syntactic principles, in few places can these interactions be seen clearer than in Bantu. Yet they have scarcely been investigated. For example, it has long been known that languages like Berber and Turkish show so-called anti-agreement effects in which an extracted subject fails to trigger canonical agreement on the verb (Ouhalla 1993), and there are various proposals about the nature of this interaction between movement and agreement. Yet only very recently have anti-agreement effects in Bantu been brought into the discussion. In fact, there have been several papers in just the past few years on this topic (Cheng 2006, Schnieder-Zioga 2007; Baker 2008; Henderson 2009, to appear; Diercks to appear). All have shown that the richness of Bantu agreement morphology results in Bantu anti-agreement having interesting properties that distinguish it from similar effects in other languages, and suggest that previous understandings of the phenomenon require revision. To provide one interesting fact, (11) below shows that the subject extraction context in Bemba (as in many other Bantu languages) does not result in the absence of agreement nor a ‘default’ third singular agreement as in many languages (see languages surveyed in Ouhalla 1993), but rather the appearance of a completely different morpheme:

- (11) a. umulumendo a-ka-belenga      ibuku      *Bemba*  
 1boy      3SG-FUT-read 5book  
 ‘The boy will read the book.’
- b. umulumendo ú-u-ka-belenga      ibuku  
 1boy      1REL-AAE-FUT-read 5book  
 ‘the boy who will read the book’
- c. \*umulumendo ú-a-ka-belenga      ibuku  
 1boy      1REL-3SG-FUT-read 5book      (Cheng 2006)

While I cannot delve into the details of particular analyses here, Kinyalolo (1991) as well as Carstens (2005) have characterized the anti-agreement morpheme as reflecting agreement with an A-bar operator, Cheng (2006) as the minimal pronominal spell-out of a copy of the extracted subject, Schneider-Zioga (2007) as an underlying lack of phi-features, and Henderson (2009; to appear) as agreement with the referential properties of phi-features in C. Each of these would seem to require a re-thinking of the nature of anti-agreement that has been previously presented.

Henderson (2006) also shows that there are interactions between agreement with and extraction of an object. In many Bantu languages, for instance, an extracted object necessarily cannot co-occur with an object marker on the verb, while in others this is optional or conditional, and in still others it is obligatory.

<sup>2</sup> Diercks (2010) analyzes agreement on the complementizer as agreement with a null logophoric pronoun bound by the local c-commanding subject, but questions remain about this analysis.

- (12) a. imundondo í-mú -(\*)mu)- kpa- áki omoto *Dzamba*  
 3jug RE - 3AGR-3OM-took-PST 1person  
 ‘the jug which the person took’ (Bokamba 1976a)
- b. kitabu amba-cho Juma a-li-(ki)-soma jana *Swahili*  
 7book *amba*-7REL Juma 3SG-PST-7OM-read yesterday  
 ‘the book that Juma read yesterday’
- c. incwadi isitshudeni a-isi-\*(yi)-funda-yo *Zulu*  
 9letter 7student REL-7SA-9OM-read-RP  
 ‘the letter that the student is reading’

I also argued that many of the markers that occur in Bantu languages in extraction contexts and often referred to as relative markers or relative suffixes could be understood as resumptive pronouns. In the languages that have them these markers sometimes appear as enclitics on the verb, but sometimes also climb to the second position of the clause, as in Swahili.

- (13) a. kitabu u-soma-**cho** Swahili (RP = resumptive pronoun)  
 7book 2SG-read-**7RP**  
 ‘the book that you (always) read’
- b. kitabu amba-**cho** u-li-soma  
 7book COMP-**7RP** 2SG-PST-read  
 ‘the book that you read’

There seems to be great variation across Bantu languages with regard to these markers. Some languages have them while others do not. In some languages, they agree with their antecedents while in others they do not. In some languages, they may co-occur with object markers while in others they cannot. Henderson (2006) tackled some of these generalizations, but much more investigation along these lines is needed, including more thorough empirical investigations regarding the locality restrictions on the appearance of these markers. It seems to me that such work would provide an important missing piece of the puzzle when it comes to theories of the interaction of movement, resumption, and agreement.

Clearly, there is astounding potential for impact once agreement in African languages is fully investigated and integrated into the discussion of the syntax of agreement. Bantu languages in particular would seem to be a gold mine here.

#### 4. Other Topics Unfairly Left Out

There are other topics I have not mentioned here for lack of space, but which in a longer paper would receive in-depth discussion. These include the syntax-phonology interface. Work on Chimwiini in the 1970s provided a crucial foundation for the development of this prominent research program (Kisseberth and Abasheikh 1974) and African languages in general have played a strong role in its development (see Selkirk 1986, Seidl 2000, among many others). There is also the theory of movement where languages like Nupe have provided important support for the copy theory of movement, as shown in work by Kandybowicz (2008). There is further the rather large body of literature discussing the topic/subject status of subjects in Bantu, going back at least to Givón (1976), the oft-cited Bresnan and Mchombo’s (1987), and including recent work by Schneider-Zioga (2007) which suggests that movement and minimality effects play a crucial role in subject position in Kinande. And of course the work on verbal syntax begun by Koopman in the 1980s and continued today in important work by Enoch Aboh, as well as others. All of these topics deserve recognition and discussion, which unfortunately there is no space for here.

## 5. Future Directions

In the space I have left, I would like to mention one general direction for the future of syntactic research on African languages, namely the need for more comparative work. Much of the early insights of generative grammar stemmed from careful comparison of structurally similar Indo-European languages. It stands to reason that equally deep insights might arise from comparative research on African languages. Over the past 20 years, syntactic work on African languages has grown exponentially. We no longer have the problem identified by Bresnan and Bokamba that there are simply too few researchers to have an impact. Rather, work on African languages has reached the critical mass necessary to make insightful comparative work between African languages possible. I think this is especially true of the Bantu languages, for perhaps no other language family possesses so many distinct languages that have so much in common syntactically. This makes comparison between these languages potentially very fruitful since it is relatively easy to seek explanation for variation while holding other syntactic factors constant.<sup>3</sup> We now have in-depth formal treatments of phenomena in dozens of Bantu languages – Kirundi, Lingala, Emakhua, Zulu, Xhosa, Lunda, Sesotho, Bemba, to name a few, taking us far beyond the important but limited early work on Chichewa, Chaga and Swahili. This descriptive and theoretical base makes formal micro-parametric work possible in ways that it simply was not 20 years ago.<sup>4</sup> We know now it is not the case that once you have seen one Bantu language, you have seen them all. Henderson (2006) attempts to tackle some of this variation in Bantu relative clauses, looking at systematic variation in whether or not languages have agreeing complementizers, employ agreeing resumptive pronouns, and require or allow agreement with extracted objects. Many other points of variation exist. The Table in (14) is only part of a larger table adapted from important recent and ongoing work by Marten, Thwala, and Kula (2007), and shows several interesting points of variation, all of which deserve more attention and raise interesting, non-trivial questions for syntactic explanation. These points of variation involve whether or not the object concord (OC) marker can co-occur with an overt object NP, occur with locative nouns, whether a verb form can support multiple OCs (and if so, whether it can support more than two), and whether the language allows symmetric double object constructions. As the table shows, the nine Bantu languages examined vary considerably in these properties.

(14) Variation in Bantu Object Concord (Marten, Thwala, and Kula 2007)

Objects & OC	Swa	Chaga	Ha	Bemb	Chew	Nseng	Tswan	Swati	Herer
1 OC-NPobj	yes	No		yes	yes?	yes	yes		no
2 OC loc class	yes	Yes		yes	yes	yes	no?	no	yes
3 Multiple OC	no	Yes	yes	no	no	no	yes	no	no
3a More thn 2	no		no	no	no	no	yes	no	no
4 sym DO	no	Yes		yes	no	yes	yes		yes

Why is it that some languages allow multiple object markers and others do not? Why do some allow locative inversion and others do not or restrict it? Why do some allow lexical objects to co-occur with an object marker and others do not? Are there implicational relationships amongst these properties? Doubtlessly many of these puzzles have insightful syntactic answers.

Of course, comparative work is warranted not only between African languages, but also between African and non-African languages as well. This would seem to be occurring more frequently. Worth mentioning is the 2006 conference and subsequent published volume entitled, ‘The Bantu Romance Connection,’ an idea which grew out of the realization that Bantu and Romance languages have much in common, including rich clitic and agreement systems, complex left peripheries, similar DP

<sup>3</sup> An excellent example of this sort of work is Riedel’s recent thesis (Riedel 2009) on Sambia object marking. The study is situated in the context of a rich comparative study of object marking across Bantu languages.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, such comparative work was not entirely lacking. Notably, Bokamba’s 1976 thesis was an attempt to examine properties of Bantu question formation from a comparative perspective.

structures and verb movement to high positions. Hopefully this work is a sign of a continuing trend of integrating formal work on African languages into the broader discussion of syntactic theory.

## 6. Conclusion

It is a hopeful sign that in writing this account I have had to omit so much important work on the syntax of African languages. While 20 years ago we might have justly assessed that the impact of African languages on syntactic theory had been minimal, this is no longer the case. The study of African languages has had long and lasting effects on syntactic thinking and theorizing and is today more than ever seen as an important resource for syntactic reasoning. I fully expect that as work on African languages continues, particularly within a comparative approach, the impact of such work on syntactic theory will become deeper and more significant.

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