The Hidden Conjoint/Disjoint Alternation in Chichewa

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1. Introduction

As is well-known, in many Bantu languages, a verb may take different forms depending on whether it is the linearly final element in a particular domain. In Zulu, for example, an extra affix obligatorily occurs on the verb if there is no complement directly following it (1b); by contrast, if the verb is not domain-final, the extra affix is missing (1a). Traditionally, the two forms are called the *disjoint* form and the *conjoint* form, respectively (Meeussen 1959). Note that across Bantu, the conjoint form is uniformly zero-marked (1a), whereas the disjoint form involves an extra exponent (1b):

(1) a. a-ba-fana [ba=cul-a i-ngoma]
2-2-boys 2.SM=sing-FV 9-9.song
'the boys are singing a song'

b. a-ba-fana [ba=ya=cul-a]
2-2-boys 2.SM=DJ=sing-FV
'the boys are singing' (Zulu; Buell 2006:10)

At first glance, the conjoint/disjoint alternation does not seem to be found in Chichewa, another Bantu language. As shown in (2a) and (2b), while a complement may or may not cooccur with the optionally transitive verb *phunzitsá* 'to teach', the verbal morphology looks the same:[1]

(2) a. mavútó [a=ku=phúnzííts-á]
Mavuto 1SM=PROG=teach-FV
'Mavuto is teaching'

b. mavútó [a=ku=phúnzíts-á cí-céewa]
Mavuto 1SM=PROG=teach-FV 7-Chewa
'Mavuto is teaching Chichewa'

Because the alternation is found in Bantu languages that are not necessarily geographically adjacent (see van der Wal 2017), and multiple scholars have argued that it already existed in Proto-Bantu (Meeussen 1967, Nurse 2008, among others), it is reasonable to posit that Chichewa used to be a conjoint/disjoint language morphologically, at an earlier stage, but it has systematically lost the alternation. Since the disjoint form is invariably the formally marked one, i.e., languages showing the alternation have a dedicated morpheme for disjoint contexts, the loss of the alternation in Chichewa may be understood as the loss of an overt disjoint exponent.

In this paper, I argue that the loss of disjoint morphology in Chichewa is only a surface one, and that the conjoint/disjoint alternation still plays an important role in modern Chichewa grammar, though in a more abstract manner. It will be shown that transitive verbs without object markers in Chichewa in general are

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[1] Examples without a reference are from my own fieldwork. I follow Downing & Mtenje's (2017) system in transcribing Chichewa data (cited examples are adapted accordingly). As an independent low-level phonological phenomenon, the penult vowel of a phonological phrase-final element is automatically lengthened (indicated as vowel doubling).

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non-final in their domain, postverbal in-situ object DPs being unable to be overtly dislocated. I will argue that this is because the disjoint morpheme is not lost entirely in Chichewa, but becomes phonologically defective, which requires the copy directly following the verb in the verbal domain to be pronounced.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces Halpert's (2015) analysis of the conjoint/disjoint alternation. Section 3 shows that a transitive verb in Chichewa without object makers cannot be the linearly final element of its domain in general; thus there is a striking parallelism between Chichewa transitive verbs and conjoint verbs attested in other Bantu languages. It is where a disjoint form is expected that one finds a number of peculiarities in Chichewa, which I argue in section 4 are due to the defectiveness of the disjoint morpheme. Section 5 discusses why the covert disjoint morpheme is only found in transitive constructions in Chichewa. It will be suggested that the licensing head L responsible for the conjoint/disjoint alternation is bundled with v*, but not v in general, the latter being unable to agree. Section 6 concludes.

2. The conjoint/disjoint alternation as a consequence of Agree

Buell (2006) makes the descriptive generalization that (i) a disjoint verb form is final in its domain, and (ii) a conjoint verb form is non-final in its domain. The distribution of the two forms is captured by Halpert's (2015) analysis, which I will follow throughout; it is briefly introduced in this section. Halpert (2015) proposes that a functional head L right above vP is responsible for the conjoint/disjoint alternation. Consider the Zulu data (1) for instance. The agreeing L head merges with vP and probes into the entire verbal domain searching for elements with phi-features. The probing is successful in (1a), since there is a DP complement within vP; L therefore gets conjoint morphology (i.e., zero), as in (3a). In (1b), by contrast, the probing fails; L is then spelled out as the marked disjoint form (3b) (it is assumed here that the failure of probing does not lead to ungrammaticality; see Preminger 2014):

(3) a. $[_{LP}$ Ø= $[_{vP}$ cula $[_{DP}$ ingoma]]] [probing is successful]

b. $[_{LP}$ ya= $[_{vP}$ cula]] [probing fails]

Furthermore, Halpert (2015) points out that the alternation is sensitive to movement: an element moved out of the vP is not visible to L. As (4) shows, an unaccusative verb takes the disjoint form if the internal argument moves (4a), otherwise the unmarked conjoint morphology is used (4b):

(4) a. i-ncwadi i=fik-il-e
9-9letter 9SM=arrive-DJ-FV
'a letter arrived'

b. ku=fik-é i-ncwadi
17SM=arrive-FV 9-9letter
lit. '(there) arrived a letter' (Zulu; Carstens & Mletshe 2015)

The analysis captures the fact that a conjoint/unmarked verb is always non-final in its domain. The next section shows that in Chichewa, even though an overt disjoint exponent is missing systematically, transitive verbs without object markers are domain-non-final as well.

3. The non-finality of transitive verbs in Chichewa

This section discusses the distribution of Chichewa transitive verbs, which demonstrates several intriguing properties that call for an explanation. I first show that fronting the object DP entirely is generally banned in Chichewa (3.1). However, if the object DP involves more than one phonologically independent piece (e.g., the object is a DP with [N modifier] structure), it is possible to dislocate part of the DP (3.2). I then show that while Chichewa wh-objects occur in situ (they cannot be fronted), they are strikingly sensitive to island effects, suggesting that wh-objects in Chichewa in fact move in narrow syntax (3.3).

The last subsection points out that Chichewa transitive verbs show parallel distribution to conjoint verbs in languages that have overt disjoint exponents (3.4).

3.1. Obligatory VO order

First, as observed by Bresnan & Mchombo (1987), when an object marker is missing, the basic VO order is obligatory in Chichewa (VOS is also possible, as the subject may be dislocated freely):

(5) a. njúuci zi=ná=lúm-a a-leenje
10.bees 10SM=PST=bite-FV 2-hunters
'the bees bit the hunters'

b. *a-leenje njúuci zi=ná=luum-a
2-hunters 10.bees 10SM=PST=bite-FV
intended: 'the hunters, the bees bit' (Bresnan & Mchombo 1987)

(6) a. ndi=ná=péz-á ci-thúnzi cá=óphunziila
1P.SG=PST=find-FV 7-picture 7.ASSOC=1.student
'I found the/a picture of the student'

b. *ci-thúnzi cá=óphunziila ndi=ná=pééz-á
7-picture 7.ASSOC=1.student 1P.SG=PST=find-FV
intended: 'the/a picture of the student, I found'

(5b) and (6b) indicate that object DPs cannot be fronted overtly. While one may simply suggest that object topicalization is not possible in Chichewa (a perhaps typologically uncommon property), I show that (5b) and (6b) are in fact not ruled out syntactically, but are problematic at PF.

3.2. Partial object dislocation

While total dislocation of the object DP is in general banned in Chichewa (5b&6b), it is in fact possible to front part of the DP. This is represented in (7):

(7) ci-thúunzi ndi=ná=péz-á cá=óphunziila
7-picture 1P.SG=PST=find-FV 7.ASSOC=1.student
lit. 'the/a picture, I found the student's'

Another set of examples is given in (8). As demonstrated by both (7) and (8c), the noun within the object DP with [N modifier] structure can actually be fronted, while leaving its modifier behind (note that using different types of modifiers does not change the pattern).

There is evidence that partial object dislocation involves syntactic movement, i.e., the fronted noun is not base-generated. As shown in (9), discontinuous DPs are island-sensitive (the head noun also cannot be extracted from an adjunct island or a subject island; corresponding data are not given here for space reasons). Note that partial dislocation can be long-distance in principle, as long as no island intervenes.

(8) a. a-tsíkána á=mfúumu a=a=gul-á mbúzi zákúuda
2-girls 2.ASSOC=9.chief 2SM=PERF=buy-FV 10.goats 10.black
'the chief's girls have bought black goats'

b. *mbúzi zákúuda a-tsíkána á=mfúumu a=a=guúl-á
10.goats 10.black 2-girls 2.ASSOC=9.chief 2SM=PERF=buy-FV
intended: 'black goats, the chief's girls have bought'

c. mbúuzi a-tsíkána á=mfúumu a=a=gul-á zákúuda
10.goats 2-girls 2.ASSOC=9.chief 2SM=PERF=buy-FV 10.black
lit. 'goats, the chief's girls have bought black [ones]'
(Mchombo 2006; supplemented with personal fieldnotes)

(9) *vúuto cikoondi a=ná=péz-á [yankho li-méné lí=ma=kónz-á lá=kále
5.problem 1.Chikondi 1SM=PST=find-FV 5.answer 5-COMP 5SM=HAB=solve-FV 5.ASSOC=old
lii-ja]
5-that
intended: 'Chikondi found an answer that solves that old problem' [complex DP]

The above data however do not actually tell us what exactly is moving. It is worthwhile to point out here that it is typologically not common for a language to allow the object DP to be discontinuous, while excluding total dislocation of the object in general.[2]

3.3. Island-sensitive wh-objects

Chichewa shows an interesting subject/object asymmetry that wh-subjects are not able to occur in situ (Downing 2011, Downing & Mtenje 2017), while wh-objects do (10a);[3] (10b) demonstrates that fronting of a wh-object is not an option in Chichewa:

(10) a. m-kángó u=ku=sáúts-á ndaání ?
3-lion 3SM=PROG=bother-FV who
'who is the lion bothering?'

b. *ndaání m-kángó u=ku=sáuuts-a?
who 3-lion 3SM=PROG=bother-FV
'it is who that the lion is bothering?'

One may take it for granted that Chichewa wh-objects in this respect are just like wh-objects in 'canonical' wh-in-situ languages such as Chinese or Japanese. However, the following examples illustrate that wh-objects in Chichewa unexpectedly show island effects (similar to the discussion of partial dislocation, embedded wh-elements do not cause a problem as long as no island intervenes):[4]

(11) *mavúuto a=ná=gúl-a gálimooto [ci-fukwá w=a=mang-a ci-yáani]?
1.Mavuto 1SM=PST=buy-FV 5-car 7-for.reason 1SM=PERF=build-FV 7-what
'*what did Mavuto buy a car because he built ____?' [adjunct]

(12) *[ku=ímb-il-a ndaání] ndi=kósávúuta?
INF=call-APPL-FV 1.who
'*whom is to call ____ easy?' [sentential subject]

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[2] For example, Czech allows both (ia) and (ib) (Corver 1990):

(i) a. její knihu čte Petr
her.ACC book.ACC reads Peter
lit. 'her book Peter is reading'

b. její čte Petr knihu
her.ACC reads Peter book.ACC
lit. 'her Peter is reading book' (Corver 1990:9)

Normally, if a language allows the object to split (e.g., traditional left-branch extraction), it also allows dislocation of the entire object (i.e., (ib) implies (ia), but not vice versa).

[3] Another common strategy for forming a wh-question is clefting, which I ignore in this paper.

[4] Note that the presence of island effects is not attested in many other wh-in-situ Bantu languages (Zentz 2016); cf. Bergvall 1983, where it is reported that *wh*-in-situ in Kikuyu also shows island sensitivity.

As exemplified in (11–12), an object cannot be questioned if it occurs within an island. By contrast, the counterparts of these examples are grammatical in 'canonical' wh-in-situ languages like Chinese or Japanese. The island sensitivity of in-situ wh-objects in Chichewa strongly suggests that these wh-objects in fact move in narrow syntax, while in Chinese or Japanese they do not, as is generally assumed.

3.4. The parallelism

The above discussion suggests that a Chichewa transitive verb without object marking simply cannot occur domain-finally. This distribution is highly parallel to the distribution of *conjoint* verbs in languages that still clearly have the conjoint/disjoint alternation. However, in many cases in Chichewa, when verbs are expected to take the disjoint form, ungrammaticality arises. Subsection 3.3 suggests that Chichewa wh-objects move in syntax but are pronounced in situ; that is, the in-situ wh-object in (10) must involve lower copy pronunciation. A more detailed analysis is given in the next section.

4. The analysis

4.1. Lower copy pronunciation

The copy theory of movement states that what is left behind by a moved element is not a trace, but a copy of the element itself, which bears all the features (including phonological features) contained in that element at the point the copy is created (Chomsky 1993, 1995). It is expected under this theory that pronouncing a lower copy is in principle possible (Franks 1998, Nunes 2004, among others), though importantly, to avoid overgeneration problems, lower copy pronunciation must be a restricted option (see next subsection). To begin with, the fact that Chichewa wh-objects are pronounced in situ even though they undergo syntactic movement is directly captured by the lower pronunciation approach:

(13) ~~ndaní~~$_i$ mkángó ukusáútsá ndaání$_i$?
who lion is.bothering who

Because the theory of lower copy pronunciation must be highly restrictive, there must be an independent PF reason that the postverbal copy of an object is obligatorily pronounced. The PF reason here, intuitively, is that the verb cannot be pronounced in a domain-final position, so the copy (of the object) directly following the verb cannot be deleted entirely, even if it is a lower copy. Though discussion of the exact condition of this operation is deferred slightly to 4.2, it suffices to point out now that the same non-finality condition also excludes (5), where the object DP is topicalized and fronted overtly (the only difference between the ban on overt topicalization and wh-fronting is that wh-objects must undergo syntactic movement, while other object DPs may stay freely in situ in syntax if they are not topics/foci).

We now turn to the derivation of discontinuous DPs discussed in 3.2. Since total dislocation of the object is banned for surface reasons, namely transitive verbs in Chichewa cannot occur domain-finally, I propose that those partial dislocation cases, e.g., (7), are derived via scattered deletion: the entire object undergoes movement in syntax, but at PF, part of the moved element is pronounced in the highest copy, while the other part is pronounced lower (Bošković 2001, Fanselow & Ćavar 2002, among many others). This is illustrated in (14):

(14) cithúunzi ~~cá=óphunzila~~$_i$ ndinápézá ~~cithúnzi~~ cá=óphunziila$_i$
picture of.student I.found picture of.student

That is, partial dislocation in Chichewa is in fact syntactic total dislocation *plus* scattered deletion at PF. Due to space limitations, I am not able to provide a full discussion of how scattered deletion works in Chichewa in general, which is not the major point of the current study; I am also unable to argue against an alternative what-you-see-is-what-you-get analysis in detail in this short paper (i.e., partial dislocation involves subextraction of the noun out of the object DP; c.f., Branan & Davis 2022), but it is necessary to note that the subextraction account is not immediately compatible with the assumption that N-initiality in Bantu is a result of head movement (thus the initial noun does not form a phrasal constituent by itself),

which is standardly assumed (see Carstens 1997 particularly for Chichewa). The remaining question, then, is what exactly conditions the non-finality of Chichewa transitive verbs, which is the topic of the next subsection.

4.2. The defectiveness of the disjoint morpheme

From a cross-Bantu perspective, in Chichewa, no particular problems are caused in cases where a conjoint form is expected; it is in cases where one would expect the occurrence of the disjoint form that a number of peculiarities are observed. Because Chichewa arguably used to have the conjoint/disjoint alternation overtly at an earlier stage (see section 1), it is reasonable to suggest that those peculiarities discussed in section 3 and 4.1 are residues of the loss of the disjoint form. To capture this, I hypothesize that the disjoint morpheme has not disappeared entirely, but has developed into a silent one, as a result of the general process of phonetic reduction (Newmeyer 2000). Now, it is independently observed in English that a contracted auxiliary cannot be followed by an unpronounced copy (Bresnan 1971, Kaisse 1983), because the contracted auxiliary is phonologically weak:

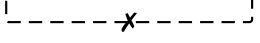
(15) a. I know (where)$_i$ John is (~~where~~)$_i$ tonight
b. *I know (where)$_i$ John's (~~where~~)$_i$ tonight

It can then be suggested that the silent disjoint marker in Chichewa induces the same effect, as it is obviously also phonologically weak. Cases like (5b) (repeated as (16b)) are ungrammatical exactly because the covert disjoint marker (the verb stem being its host) is followed by an unpronounced copy left by the object. Following Halpert's (2015) approach to the conjoint/disjoint alternation (see section 2), the relevant structures of (16a) and (16b) are represented below. In (17a), since the object stays in vP, the probing of L is successful, resulting in conjoint/unmarked morphology, as expected. In (17b), however, the object moves out, so no goal is visible to L (recall that the conjoint/disjoint alternation is sensitive to movement). In this case one would expect disjoint morphology. However, since the disjoint morpheme in Chichewa is a defective one (it is zero), (17b) is correctly ruled out, for purely PF reasons (recall from section 2 that, by assumption, the failure of probing per se does not result in ungrammaticality):

(16) a. njúuci zi=ná=lúm-a (a-leenje)
10.bees 10SM=PST=bite-FV 2-hunters
'the bees bit the hunters'
b. *(a-leenje) njúuci zi=ná=luum-a
2-hunters 10.bees 10SM=PST=bite-FV
intended: 'the hunters, the bees bit' (Bresnan & Mchombo 1987)

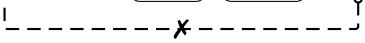
(17) a. [$_{LP}$ ∅= [$_{vP}$ luma (alenje)]] [conjoint morphology]

b. *[$_{LP}$ DJ= [$_{vP}$ luma (~~alenje~~)]] [disjoint morphology]



Scattered deletion provides a way of obviating the defective effect. As shown in (18), since the conjoint/disjoint alternation is sensitive to movement, which is syntactic by nature, one would expect disjoint morphology here. Now, because part of the lower copy of the object is pronounced (as a sort of last resort), the defective disjoint morpheme does not cause a PF problem:

(18) [$_{LP}$ DJ= [$_{vP}$ gulá (~~mbúzi~~) (zákúda)]] [disjoint morphology]



Recall that lower copy pronunciation must not be free (to avoid serious overgeneration problems): it has been argued by multiple authors that it is possible only if the default, pronouncing-the-highest-copy option is ruled out, for independent reasons (Franks 1998, Nunes 2004, Bošković & Nunes 2007). Moreover, since conceptually, deciding on which copies to pronounce is a process that happens at PF, conditions on lower copy pronunciation must be stated exclusively in PF terms, which, by essence, are language-particular; LF or narrow syntax should not play a role. Otherwise, non-trivial modularity problems may be caused. The current account of partial object dislocation in Chichewa is in line with this idea. Scattered deletion in (18) is possible because the defective disjoint morpheme requires that phonological features of the copy following the verb cannot be deleted completely; the defectiveness of the morpheme (i.e., it is contracted and needs a following overt element) is stated purely in PF terms. Again, neither (17b) nor (18) is problematic in syntax; it is PF that excludes the former.

5. The bundling of L and v*

We have focused on transitive constructions in Chichewa. This section discusses how intransitive verbs fit into the picture. Consider (19–21), which show that intransitives may occur freely in Chichewa with SV order. However, if unaccusatives and passives involve an internal argument moving out of the vP domain, as standardly assumed, it is not immediately clear why (20) and (21) are grammatical, if they both involve a defective disjoint head which requires the postverbal copy to be pronounced. This issue is most obvious in a comparative view, as languages that have overt disjoint exponents do use them in these cases (cf. Halpert 2015).

(19) a-tsíkána a=ku=víin-a [unergative]
2-girls 2SM=PROG=dance-FV
'girls are dancing in the room' (Mchombo 2004:93; adapted)

(20) njovu i=náa=gw-a [unaccusative]
9.elephant 9SM=PST=fall-FV
'the/an elephant fell' (Mchombo 2004:93; adapted)

(21) ma-úngú a=ku=phík-iidw-a [passive]
6-pumpkins 6SM=PROG=cook-PASS-FV
'pumpkins are being cooked' (Mchombo 2004:81; adapted)

While one can simply leave it as a descriptive fact that the licensing head L selects v*P but not vP in Chichewa (so L is absent in intransitives) without explaining why it is so, I show that this generalization is in fact derivable in a principled way. The proposal is that L is not only morphophonologically defective, it is also a syntactically defective one: L is obligatory bundled with the highest probing head in the verbal domain, and crucially, as discussed below, only v*, but not v in general, agrees in Chichewa. The conjoint/disjoint alternation in Chichewa can thus simply be viewed as the (covert) morphological realization of v*.

To illustrate this idea further, it is necessary to consider the nature of object markers in Chichewa, which we have left aside in previous sections. Bresnan & Mchombo (1987) argue that object markers in Chichewa are incorporated pronouns, rather than pure agreement markers. While the readers are referred to the original paper for full arguments, I would like to address some of them here. First, as shown in (22), a wh-element cannot be associated with an object marker:

(22)?* (kodí) mu=ku=cí=fúún-á ci-yáani ?
Q 2P.PL=PROG=7OM=want-FV 7-what
'what do you want (*it)?' (Bresnan & Mchombo 1987)

Second, a full DP that is associated with the object marker is obligatorily pronounced outside the verbal domain. As in (23a), even though the DP *alenje* 'hunters' linearly follows the verb, they cannot be

pronounced in the same phonological phrase (the clue is from phonological phrasing; recall from fn.1 that the penult vowel of a phonological phrase is automatically lengthened):

(23) a. njúuci [$_{vP}$ zi=ná=wá=luum-a] a-leenje
10.bees 10SM=PST=2OM=bite-FV 2.hunters
'the bees bit them, the hunters'

b. a-leenje njúuci [$_{vP}$ zi=ná=wá=luum-a]
2.hunters 10.bees 10SM=PST=2OM=bite-FV
'the hunters, the bees bit them' (Bresnan & Mchombo 1987)

As indicated by (23b), with the presence of an object marker, the full DP associated with it can also occur clause-initially (note also that it is the disjoint form that is used in cases parallel to (23a&23b) in languages with overt conjoint/disjoint alternation; see below).

Furthermore, these obligatorily dislocated DPs are not sensitive to island effects (see Bresnan & Mchombo 1987 for examples). It can thus be concluded that they do not result from movement out of vP; instead, dislocated DPs associated with object markers are adjuncts base-generated outside the verbal domain, and it is the object marker itself, being a pronominal clitic, that is the 'true' object.

The surface distribution of 'true' objects in Chichewa is thus highly predictable: (i) weak pronominal objects are pronounced at the left edge of vP, as a result of cliticization, and (ii) full object DPs directly follow the verb, at least partially (3.3), due to the defectiveness of the disjoint morpheme. Following Baker (2018), I assume that clitic objects, though themselves not being agreement markers, express an Agree relation between the object and the verb. Crucially, if this is so, it is reasonable to suggest that there is also an Agree relation between transitive verbs and their internal arguments that are full DPs (in which case an object marker cannot occur). Suppose that the agreeing head v* probes phi-features into its c-commanding domain; the process itself should not be able to discriminate the internal structure of the goal (either it is a weak pronoun or a full DP), as long as the goal has phi-features (see Carstens 2017, where it is argued that the phi-features of a Bantu nominal are all carried by D, due to N-to-D movement, making the phi-features visible to all clause-level probes). Thus, the fact that clitic pronouns and full DPs are pronounced in different positions can be viewed as a surface phenomenon: as suggested by Baker (2018), this may simply be because v* in Bantu only tolerates heads but not full phrases as its specifier, possibly due to pronounceability reasons. In other words, object shift into SpecvP requires Agree, but Agree does not guarantee the occurrence of object shift, the latter being also subject to PF factors.

While the above suggests that transitive verbs *always* agree in Chichewa, I show that intransitive verbs *never* agree. As illustrated below, while the internal argument of an intransitive verb may occur postverbally, e.g., in cases of inversion (24a), it cannot be expressed by an object marker (24b):

(24) a. pa=mu-dzí pá=dá=gw-a njaala
16.in=3-village 16SM=PST=fall-FV 9.hunger
'in the village fell hunger'

b. *pa=mu-dzí pá=dá=íí=gw-á (njaala)
16.in=3-village 16SM=PST=9OM=fall-FV 9.hunger
intended: 'in the village fell it (, the hunger)' (Mchombo 2004:26)

Note that (24b) is ruled out not because of a definiteness effect, which, as shown by Bresnan & Kanerva (1989), is not manifested in Chichewa locative inversion (25). (It is reported by Bresnan & Mchombo (1987) that object marking in Chichewa does not even entail definiteness.)

(25) ku=mu-dzi ku=na=bwér-á a-lendóo=wo
17.to=3-village 17SM=PST=come-FV 2-visitors=2.those
'to the village came those visitors' (Bresnan & Kanerva 1989)

I take the above facts to mean that the intransitive v is not an agreeing head in Chichewa in general, as object makers are never associated with it. Furthermore, Bresnan & Mchombo (1987) report a case (26) where a wh-subject occurs in the so-called immediately-after-the-verb position (Hyman 1979):

(26) ci=na=ónék-a ci-yani ?
7SM=PST=happen-FV 7-what
'what happened?' (Bresnan & Mchombo 1987:775)

The verb *oneka* 'happen' is unaccusative (inversion constructions are available only for unaccusative verbs in Chichewa). Evidence from phonological phrasing shows that the wh-subject is located in the vP domain. Importantly, in (26), the postverbal wh-element agrees with T, as indicated by the subject marker *ci=*.[5] (By contrast, in many other Bantu languages that show VS order similar to (26), T exhibits default agreement (Carstens & Mletshe 2015).) The reason why T can agree with a postverbal element within the verbal domain in (26), I suggest, is that an intransitive v is not a probe in Chichewa. Assuming that a goal is deactivated when an Agree relation is first established between it and a probe, i.e., it becomes invisible to other probes that come into play later in the derivation (Chomsky 2000), the presence of a probe in the verbal domain would prevent the postverbal subject from being agreed with T.[6]

If v* always agrees but v never does in Chichewa, one notices immediately that whether the highest head in the verbal domain (v* or v) can agree is related to the presence/absence of L responsible for the conjoint/disjoint alternation, which in Chichewa appears to be able to select only v* but not v. This is hardly a coincidence. I thus suggest that L and v* are in fact bundled: related to the diachronic loss of the conjoint/disjoint alternation in morphology, L arguably also lost its independence in syntax. It is then a single head, labeled as L-v* for ease of convenience, that is responsible for everything: it takes care of transitivity; it probes into the verbal domain for phi-features; it triggers the shift of clitic objects to its left; it is the locus of covert disjoint morphology if the probing fails, which is phonologically week and needs its following element in the domain to be pronounced. Consider again (23). Here, the transitive verb is object-marked and is domain-final, in which case a disjoint marker is expected (this is directly observable in other Bantu languages), but the two sentences are just grammatical even though the disjoint morpheme is argued to be morphologically defective. However, since L and v* are syntactically bundled, it is reasonable to suggest that it is the object marker that is the morphological realization of the L-v* head in (23), in which case the dedicated disjoint morpheme is simply absent. The object marker invariably has a full syllabic structure and is morphologically not defective. (Note finally that in languages where L and v* are not bundled, object markers and the disjoint morpheme are separate, and may cooccur.)

6. Conclusion

I argued in this paper that Chichewa is a concealed conjoint/disjoint language, even though the alternation may not be directly detectable if one simply looks for the presence of an overt disjoint exponent. I proposed that due to the gradual historical loss of an overt disjoint exponent, the disjoint morpheme in Chichewa has become a defective one both phonologically and syntactically. In phonology, the morpheme is a silent/weak one, which requires its following element in the same domain to be pronounced. This gives rise to a number of cases involving lower copy pronunciation, as discussed in sections 3–4. In syntax, the defectiveness of L is realized as the unavailability of it to project independently. L, being responsible for the conjoint/disjoint alternation, is obligatorily bundled with v*. This explains why the disjoint effect in Chichewa is only attested in transitives; Chichewa intransitive verbs simply do not agree.

[5] As shown by Bresnan & Mchombo (1987) and Mchombo (2004), in contrast to object markers, which are unambiguously clitic pronouns, subject markers in Chichewa are ambiguous between a pronoun and an agreement marker.
[6] This is subject to variation, as it is cross-linguistically not rare that a goal may be agreed with multiple probes (see Deal to appear and references therein). At any rate, it seems to be a descriptive fact that T and v in the same clause are not able to agree with the same DP in Bantu in general.

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