

“Prosodic Asymmetries in Nominal vs. Verbal Phrases in Bantu”

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Investigations into phonological differences between nouns and verbs focus almost exclusively on the lexical (word) level, showing that underlying contrasts are more numerous and stable (“faithful”) on nouns which may also show morphophonemic alternations and idiosyncracies distinct from verbs (see Albright 2007, Berg 2000, Kelly 1992, Smith 2001, 2011, Plank & Kabak 2016, among others). This raises the question of whether these (or other) alleged differences in word level phonology generalize to the nominal vs. verbal phrase. The Bantu family provides an ideal testing ground for such an investigation, as the ca. 500 Bantu languages supply countless variations of discrete (categorical) phonological processes operating above the word level. In this paper I report on a survey in progress that addresses the question: Are there significant differences between the phonological processes that operate on syntactic nominal expressions vs. those which apply to the verb and its arguments, adjuncts, and inflectional operators? In my survey I control for the different potential grammatical triggers as well as possible targets beside the head noun or verb, e.g. whether the head noun phrases with possessive pronouns (Poss), genitive noun phrases (Gen), adjectives (Adj), numerals (Num) and demonstratives (Dem)—also whether the lexical verb phrases differently in the presence of objects, obliques, and adverbials. While nouns have been shown to host and preserve more underlying contrasts than verbs in the lexical phonology, many of the Bantu cases I will present reveal that nouns are more likely to undergo modification at the phrase level than verbs, thereby showing less “faithfulness” (Smith 1998, 1999) to the input than verbs. Even in languages where both nominal and verbal phrases undergo postlexical changes (= the majority case), nominal phrases show more distinct outputs and complex idiosyncracies than their verbal counterparts. While verbs often show only one prosodic effect from co-phrasing, outputs can be quite distinct and varied with different nominal modifiers. To make my point, I begin briefly outside Bantu with a rather clearcut case from Kalabari (an Ijoid language of Nigeria) where every noun modifier (Poss, Gen, Adj, Num, Dem) assigns a different tone pattern to the whole noun phrase (Harry & Hyman 2014). I then turn to Bantu noun/verb asymmetries in (i) rules of H tone plateauing (HTP), H tone deletion (HTD), and H tone insertion (HTI) in Luganda and its closest relatives (Lusoga, Runyankore, Rukiga, Haya, Runyambo, Zinza, Kikerewe, Jita, Ruri); and (ii) rules of vowel shortening and lengthening in Kimatuumbi (Odden 1996) and seven different dialects of Makonde (Rolle & Hyman 2019). After establishing that there are distinct asymmetric properties in the phrasing of nominal vs. verbal constituents in Bantu, I raise the question of what causes these asymmetries and whether they are general or pertain only to Bantu/African languages.

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