

Presentational focus and thematic structure in comparative Bantu¹

KATHERINE DEMUTH AND SHEILA MMUSI

Abstract

Locative inversion has often been treated as an unaccusativity phenomenon in languages as typologically different as English and Chichewa (for example Bresnan 1990). Yet Bantu languages show some diversity in the thematic structure of verbs that can occur with locative inversion and related expletive/impersonal constructions. This paper provides a detailed examination of locative inversion and expletive constructions in Setswana, showing that this class of presentational focus constructions exhibits morphological, syntactic, agreement, and discourse characteristics that differ from those of Chichewa and other Bantu languages. It shows that these differences, the result of morphological loss during historical change, can best be understood synchronically within a theory of partial information structures (Bresnan 1982).

1. Locative inversion and presentational focus constructions

Bresnan and Kanerva (1989) observe that inverted locatives in Chichewa function as grammatical subjects, where both the locative and subject marker inflect for the full range of locative noun class prefixes (classes 16, 17, and 18). The Chichewa inverted locative thus shows various properties typical of subjects in general (that is, subject raising, subject extraction), and undergoes subject pro-drop, where the subject marker retains locative reference. These Chichewa constructions are, however, limited to cooccurrence with unaccusative verbs, leading Bresnan and Kanerva (1989) to suggest that locative inversion is restrict-

1. This work has been supported in part by NSF Grant #BNS-8919880. We thank Joan Bresnan, Denis Creissels, 'Malillo Machobane, and two anonymous reviewers for comments and discussion. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 23rd Annual Conference on African Linguistics, Michigan State University.

ed to constructions where the highest thematic role is *theme*.

Bresnan (1990) notes further that locative inversion in Chichewa and English are very similar, both being cases of 'unaccusativity'. She suggests that this similarity can be captured from the perspective of Lexical Mapping Theory (Bresnan and Kanerva 1989; Alsina and Mchombo 1990; Alsina 1992, 1993), where arguments are assigned intrinsic values depending on whether they exhibit restricted or unrestricted grammatical properties [+/-r], and whether they can have object properties or not [+/-o]. For example, Agents are typically classified as non-objects [-o] (that is, they can only function as subjects or as obliques (under passivization), but generally cannot function as objects of the verb). In contrast, Themes are generally classified as [-r] (i.e. they can function as objects that may become subjects, as in the case of unaccusative verbs or the passivization of transitive verbs). Locative inversion in both English and Chichewa occurs when *theme* is the highest thematic role (i.e. with unaccusative verbs, or with passivized transitives).²

From a comparison of Chichewa and English it appears that locative inversion, and presentational focus constructions more generally, are characterized by a uniform set of unaccusativity phenomena. However, an examination of other languages quickly demonstrates that this is not the case: Harford (1990) shows that locative inversion in Chishona is identical to that in Chichewa, except that in Chishona it is permitted so long as *agent* is not the highest thematic role. Harford suggests that languages may differ in their intrinsic marking of thematic roles, and that the *theme* must be left underspecified in Chishona. Furthermore, Demuth (1990) shows that presentational focus constructions in Sesotho cooccur with a larger class of verbs than that reported for Chishona. As this paper will show, Setswana shows a similar pattern, suggesting that the intrinsic marking of thematic roles in these two languages will have to be modified even further.

The paper proceeds as follows: In section 2 we present the basic Setswana locative inversion facts, discussing issues of subject-verb agreement, and providing evidence from subject raising and subject relatives that Setswana locatives can function as grammatical subjects. In section 3 we examine cases of locative subject *pro*-drop, showing that the class 17 subject marker *go*- subsequently functions as a semantically empty expletive. In section 4 we show that these presentational focus constructions occur with a wide range of verb types, being disallowed only when both *agent* and *theme* are present in the same construction (that is, in transitive and ditransitive actives). We conclude in section 5 with a discussion of how such findings can be handled within a theory of partial information structures, providing a principled mechanism for understanding processes of historical change.

2. The classification of arguments in causative constructions is somewhat more complex. Readers are referred to Alsina (1992, 1993) for a fuller treatment of these issues.

2. Setswana locative inversion constructions

Setswana is a southern Bantu language spoken in Botswana and parts of northern South Africa. Data for this paper is drawn primarily from the Rolong dialect of Setswana, the mother tongue of the second author, and the basic dialect used in descriptive grammars (for example Cole 1955). Like Chichewa, Setswana appears to exhibit productive use of locative noun class prefixes 16 **fa-**, 17 **ko/kwa-** and 18 **mo-**.³ However, like closely related Sesotho, Setswana locatives are marked also with an invariant locative suffix **-ng**, and the subject marker takes the invariant class 17 formative **go-**. In other words, Setswana shows the rich locative nominal morphology of languages like Chichewa, but the restricted verbal “agreement” morphology of languages like Sesotho. These phenomena, and their syntactic consequences, are discussed below.

2.1. *Locative noun class prefixes and locative “agreement”*

Nouns in Bantu languages are generally inflected with a noun class prefix, and the locative prefix is subsequently prefixed to this already inflected nominal form. Unlike closely related Sesotho, Setswana shows productive (though optional) use of the locative noun class prefixes 16, 17, and 18 (**fa-**, **kwa/ko/go-**, **mo-**). Nominal modifiers generally show agreement with the noun class of the nominal stem (1a–c), but can alternatively employ agreement with the locative itself, providing locative emphasis (2a–c) (from Cole 1955: 353).⁴

- (1) a. **fá-se-tlharé-ng sé-se-léélé**⁵
16-7-tree-LOC 7-7-tall
'by the tall tree'
- b. **kó-mo-tse-ng ó-le**
17-3-village-LOC 3-DEM
'to yonder village'

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3. Denis Creissels (personal communication) argues from tonal evidence that these morphemes are not locative noun class prefixes, but rather demonstrative pronouns: As shown in the examples in (1), they exhibit high tone rather than the low tone of noun class prefixes.
4. Glosses are as follows: APP = applicative, COP = copula, DEM = demonstrative, FUT = future tense, INF = infinitival marker, LOC = locative, OB = object marker, PASS = passive, PAST/CONT = past continuous, PERF = perfect aspect, POSS = possessive marker, PN = independent pronoun, PREP = preposition, PRES = present tense, REL = relative marker, RL = verbal relative suffix, SUB = subject marker, WH = *wh*-question word, 8 = gender/number class #8, 15 = infinitive class #15, 1SG = 1st person singular, ´ = high tone, ¯ = mid tone, low tone = unmarked.
5. Adjectives in Bantu languages are traditionally referred to as “relative” constructions (for example, see Cole 1955). This is more clearly seen in the alternative reading for examples like (1a) — ‘by the tree (which is) tall’. In effect, the first of the agreement markers on the adjective functions as a copula.

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- c. **mó-le-fátshé-ng lé-le-talá**
18-5-country-LOC 5-5-entire
'in the green world'
- (2) a. **Fá-se-tlharé-ng gó-go-léelé.**
16-7-tree-LOC 17-17-tall
'By the tree it is tall.'
- b. **kó-mo-tse-ng kwá**
17-3-village-LOC 17:DEM
'at the village yonder'
- c. **Mó-le-fátshé-ng gó-go-talá.**
18-5-country-LOC 17-17-entire
'In the world it is green.'

Note, however, that agreement on locative modifiers is only realized with class 17: Agreement with class 16 or class 18 is ungrammatical (2a' and c').

- (2) a'. ***Fá-se-tlharé-ng fá-fa-léelé.**
16-7-tree-LOC 16-16-tall
'By the tree it is tall.'
- c'. ***Mó-le-fátshé-ng mó-tlhe.**
18-5-country-LOC 18-all
'In the world it is green.'

Thus, while Setswana exhibits productive use of all three locative prefixes, only class 17 is productive in locative nominal agreement. We will see in the following section that class 17 is also the only class to show locative-verb agreement.

2.2. *Locative-verb "agreement"*

Grammatical subjects in Bantu languages generally agree with the verb through the use of a subject-verb agreement morpheme (SUB). Along with much of the recent syntax literature, we assume that the subject raises from VP-internal position to the (SpecIP) position in front of the verb, thereby triggering subject-verb agreement, as in (3).

- (3) a. **Ba-símané bá-éme fá-se-tlharé-ng.**
2-boys 2SUB-stand:PERF 16-7-tree-LOC
'The boys are standing by the trees.'
- b. **Roná re-tla-ya kó-Maúng maríga.**
1pPN 1pSUB-FUT-go 17-Maung winter
'We shall go to Maung in winter.'

- c. **Di-kgomó dí-fúla mó-le-fátshé-ng.**
10-cattle 10SUB-graze 18-5-country-LOC
'The cattle are grazing in the country.'

As in Chichewa and other Bantu languages, Setswana allows locatives to occur in both post-verbal position (3) and in pre-verbal, or "inverted" position (4). When the locative NP is in pre-verbal (subject) position it triggers agreement on the verb and the logical subject is left behind (in SpecVP — see Demuth and Harford 1996 for discussion). The logical subject of these constructions is presentationally focused.

- (4) a. **Fá-se-tlharé-ng gó-émé ba-símané.**
16-7-tree-LOC 17SUB-stand:PERF 2-boys
'By the tree stand the boys.'
- b. **Kó-Maung gó-tlá-ya roná maríga.**
17-Maung 17SUB-FUT-go 1PL.DEM winter
'To Maung we shall go in winter''
- c. **Mó-le-fátshé-ng gó-fúla di-kgomó.**
18-5-country-LOC 17SUB-graze 10-cattle
'In the country are grazing the cattle.'

As in the case of locative nominal agreement (2), the "subject agreement" marker, or subject marker, is always class 17. One might wonder if perhaps the examples in (4) are not simply topicalized locatives, as suggested for Sesotho (Demuth 1990). However, if the locative is topicalized, subject agreement remains with the logical subject of the sentence (5a) and no presentational focus results. Furthermore, the use of locative class 17 subject marker *go-* in topicalized constructions is ungrammatical (5b).

- (5) a. **Mó-le-fátshé-ng di-kgomó dí-á-fula.**
18-5-country-LOC 10-cattle 10SUB-PRES-graze
'In the country the cattle are grazing.'
- b. ***Mó-le-fátshé-ng di-kgomó gó-á-fula.**
18-5-country-LOC 10-cattle 17SUB-PRES-graze
'In the country the cattle are grazing.'

It would appear, then, that the class 17 subject marker *go-* functions as a general locative agreement marker, with the inverted locatives in (4) functioning as grammatical subjects. However, other grammatical tests are necessary to verify the subject status of inverted locatives. We turn now to a consideration of subject raising and subject extraction, showing that the inverted locative functions as a grammatical subject, just as Bresnan and Kanerva (1989) argue for Chichewa, and as Machobane (1995) argues for Sesotho.

2.3. *Subject raising*

Although subject raising constructions are limited crosslinguistically, Setswana has verbs such as **go-bonahala** 'to seem' and **go-lebeleletswe** 'to be expected' that allow subject raising, as shown in (6).⁶

- (6) a. **Ba-sádi_i bá-bónágala t_i go-tsófála ká bonako.**
 2-women 2SUB-seem 15SUB-age PREP fast
 'Women seem to age fast.'
- b. **Ba-sádi_i bá-lébélelés-w-é t_i go-bóa.**
 2-women 2SUB-expect-PASS-PERF 15SUB-return
 'The women are expected to return.'

In these examples the subject of the matrix clause has been raised from subject position of the lower clause, as indicated by the coindexed trace. That these verbs exhibit true subject raising (as opposed to the raising of any NP) is shown by the ungrammaticality of (6c).

- (6) c. ***Ba-sádi bá-lébélelés-w-é ba-ína_i go-bápádisa t_i.**
 2-women 2SUB-expect-PASS-PERF 2-men 15SUB-tease
 'The women are expected to be teased by the men.'

If these verbs also permit the raising of locatives, this would provide evidence that locatives can function as grammatical subjects. The examples in (7) indicate that this is the case.

- (7) a. **Kwá-noké-ng_i gó-bónágala t_i go-thíba.**
 17-9:river-LOC 17SUB-seem 15SUB-cloudy
 'At the river it seems to be cloudy.'
- b. **Kwá-Gáúte-ng_i gó-lébélelés-w-é t_i go-na.**
 17-G-LOC 17SUB-expect-PASS-PERF 15SUB-rain
 'In Johannesburg it is expected to be rainy.'

As subject raising is, by definition, limited to subjects, it would appear that inverted locatives in Setswana can function as grammatical subjects.

Further support for the subject status of Setswana inverted locatives comes from the subject relative constructions discussed below.

6. Note that the infinitival class 15 subject marker is morphologically similar to the locative class 17 subject marker. There is, however, a tonal distinction, the former exhibiting low tone, the latter exhibiting high tone.

2.4. *Subject relatives*

Relative clauses in Setswana employ a relative complementizer (REL) that agrees in noun class with the head noun, and an invariant relative marker **-ng** suffixes to the embedded verb. This is illustrated in the subject relative in (8a), the object relative in (8b), and the oblique relatives in (8c, d). When the head noun is a locative, the relative complementizer can agree with either the locative prefix (8c), or the inherent class of the noun itself (8d).

- (8) a. **Ba-símané bá bá-éme-ng fá-se-tlharé-ng.**
 2-boys 2REL 2SUB-stand:PERF-RL 16-7-tree-LOC
 'The boys who are standing by the trees.'
- b. **Di-buka tsé ba-símané bá-di-bálá-ng.**
 10-books 10REL 2-boys 2SUB-10OB-read-RL
 'The books that the boys are reading (them).'
- c. **Fá-se-tlharé-ng fá ba-símané bá-éme-ng téng.**
 16-7-tree-LOC 16REL 2-boys 2SUB-stand:PERF-RL there
 'By the trees where the boys are standing (there).'
- d. **Fá-se-tlharé-ng sé ba-símané bá-éme-ng téng.**
 16-7-tree-LOC 7REL 2-boys 2SUB-stand:PERF-RL there
 'By the trees where the boys are standing (there).'

Note that a resumptive pronoun is required with object and oblique relatives. In the case of the locative (8c, d), the resumptive locative **teng** 't/here' is optional but highly preferred. The presence or absence of the resumptive pronoun therefore provides a useful diagnostic for determining the grammatical function of the locative head noun.

Now consider the locative relatives in (9), where the locative appears to be functioning as an extracted subject.

- (9) a. **Fá-se-tlharé-ng fá/sé gó-émé-ng ba-símané.**
 16-7-tree-LOC 16/7REL 17SUB-stand:PERF-RL 2-boys
 'By the tree where stand the boys.'
- b. **Kó-se-kólo-ng kó/sé gó-yá-ng roná maríga.**
 17-7-school-LOC 17/7REL 17SUB-go-LOC 1PL.DEM winter
 'To school where we go in winter.'
- c. **Mó-le-fátshé-ng mó/lé gó-fúlá-ng di-kgomó.**
 18-5-country-LOC 18/5REL 17SUB-graze-LOC 10-cattle
 'In the country are grazing the cattle.'

We showed in (8) that extracted obliques function like extracted objects in that both take a resumptive pronoun. The resumptive locative **teng** 'there' is permitted in (9), but the preferred structure is without it. Thus, it would appear that the locatives in (9) are functioning as true subjects (where no resumptive

pronoun is required), and not as extracted obliques. Again, agreement on the relative marker can be with either the locative or the inherent class of the noun itself.

In sum, the evidence presented above indicates that inverted locatives in Setswana can function as grammatical subjects. In (4) and (5) we showed that inverted locatives use class 17 for subject–verb agreement, and that these constructions are preferred to fronted, or topicalized locatives, even though the latter are “grammatical”. In (6) we showed that inverted locatives can occur in subject raising constructions. Finally, in (9) we showed that inverted locatives can function as subjects of relative clauses. Setswana inverted locatives therefore appear to function syntactically like those of Chichewa (Bresnan and Kanerva 1989). Setswana differs from Chichewa, however, in that no locative reference remains when the locative subject is dropped, as is possible in null-subject languages (see Machobane 1995 for discussion of similar facts in Sesotho). We turn to a discussion of this issue in the following section.

3. Presentational focus and expletive *go-*

In section 2 we saw that inverted locatives can function as grammatical subjects, and that they agree with the verb using the class 17 subject marker *go-*. As Setswana is a null subject language, we expect *go-* to have locative reference even when the locative subject is dropped, as is the case in Chichewa (Bresnan and Kanerva 1989). Interestingly, however, when the Setswana locative subject is dropped, *no locative reading remains*. Thus, the sentences in (4) (= [10]) have no locative interpretation when the locative is dropped in (11): Only a “presentational focus” reading persists.⁷

- (10) a. **Fá-se-tlharé-ng gó-émé ba-símané.**
 16-7-tree-LOC 17SUB-stand:PERF 2-boys
 ‘By the tree stand the boys.’
- b. **Kó-Maung gó-tlá-ya roná maríga.**
 17-Maung 17SUB-FUT-go 1PL.PN winter
 ‘To Maung we shall go in winter.’

7. There is no adequate translation of these sentences into English, though the glosses given provide a rough “presentational focus” equivalent, somewhat like that of English locative inversion constructions such as **Into the room came a man**. Focus is on the postverbal NP (the logical subject), but it is presentationally focused rather than contrastively focused. An alternative translation for sentences such as (10a) would be ‘It is the boys (who are) standing by the tree’, but this provides the English-speaker with a contrastive focus reading which in Setswana is achieved with a cleft/relative construction.

- c. **Mó-le-fátshé-ng gó-fúla di-kgomó.**
 18-5-country-LOC 17SUB-graze 10-cattle
 'In the country are grazing the cattle.'
- (11) a. **Gó-émé ba-símané.**
 17SUB-stand:PERF 2-boys
 'It's the boys that stood up.'
- b. **Gó-tlá-ya roná maríga.**
 17SUB-FUT-go 1PL.PN winter
 'It's we who shall go in winter.'
- c. **Gó-fúla di-kgomó.**
 17SUB-graze 10-cattle
 'It's cattle that are grazing.'

The Setswana class 17 subject marker appears to fill two grammatical functions, one as a grammatical agreement marker with locative subjects, and the other as a dummy expletive subject. What is not entirely clear, however, is how and why the class 17 subject marker loses its locative agreement "features" when the locative NP is not present. To address this issue we turn to a discussion of the grammatical status of the subject marker.

3.1. *The grammatical status of the subject marker*

Bresnan and Mchombo (1987) argue that the subject marker in Chichewa is functionally ambiguous between a grammatical agreement marker and an incorporated pronominal. They suggest that when the lexical subject is present, the subject marker functions as a grammatical agreement marker. On the other hand, when *pro*-drop occurs and no lexical subject is present, they suggest that the subject marker is an incorporated pronominal and assumes the grammatical role of subject, with the complete ϕ -feature specification (person, number, gender features) of the lexical subject itself. This appears to be an adequate representation of the Chichewa facts, where locative anaphoric reference remains when the locative subject has been dropped.

However, treating the subject marker as ambiguous between an agreement marker and an incorporated pronominal is problematic in the case of Setswana (and Sesotho — Demuth 1990; Machobane 1995) if no locative features remain when the locative subject is dropped. Demuth and Johnson (1989), drawing on independent evidence from Setswana — a northern dialect of Setswana, argue that all subject markers function consistently as incorporated pronominals, and

that lexical subjects are actually topics.⁸ If locative subject markers robustly carry the ϕ -features of their lexical heads, as in Chichewa, these features will remain when the locative is dropped. However, it appears that in languages like Sesotho and Setswana, where locative subject markers are only available in the invariant form of class 17, locative features are only active in the presence of the locative subject itself. In other words, the class 17 subject marker serves only as a conduit for transmitting locative features, and is presumably necessary for the wellformedness and interpretation of the expression. We suggest that languages with two or more locative subject markers will retain locative reference, as locative features will still be “productive”. However, when only one locative subject marker remains, semantic as well as morphological contrasts are leveled, and the form is available for reinterpretation as a dummy subject — syntactically required, but void of semantic ϕ -features.

In this section we have shown that the Setswana class 17 subject marker *go-* functions as an expletive when no lexical locative subject referent is present. We suggest that this is made possible due to processes of morphological leveling which have brought about a lack of active locative ϕ -features in this form. The resulting constructions are presentational focus constructions — much like their locative inversion counterparts, but with no locative reference. In the next section we explore the possibility that the expletive nature of Setswana locative subject markers may effect the thematic representations (verb–argument structures) permitted in presentational focus constructions.

4. Presentational focus and thematic representations

Bresnan and Kanerva (1989) note that locative inversion in Chichewa occurs only with unaccusative verbs and passivized transitives. Like presentational focus constructions in English, they suggest that locative inversion is restricted to unaccusative constructions. Bresnan and Kanerva (1989) develop this notion further by appealing to the thematic role hierarchy and a set of Lexical Mapping functions, suggesting that locative inversion is only allowed when the highest available thematic role is a *theme* (that is, unaccusative actives, as well as transitive and ditransitive passives). The different classes of verbs and their thematic representations are listed in Table 1 below.

8. The subject marker *can* also be thought of as Agr in other syntactic frameworks. See Demuth (1989, 1990), Demuth and Gruber (1995), and Demuth and Harford (1996) for analyses along these lines, and for evidence of subjects as topics in Sesotho and more generally across Bantu languages.