The value of typology in solving certain Zulu linguistic issues

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A typological study of a language family can throw light on specific linguistic issues in a language belonging to such a family. In Zulu there is for instance uncertainty regarding the use of the object agreement marker in conjunction with its co-referential noun in the basic sentence position. A typological investigation of object agreement in other Bantu languages shows that this uncertainty might be ascribed to the fact that Zulu seems to be going through a transitional phase concerning object-verb agreement. Another problem concerns the invariable form of the reflexive prefix in Zulu. A typological study indicates that 'reflexiveness' surfaces in different ways in the Bantu language family. Therefore the origins of the invariable reflexive prefix in Zulu can possibly be explained against the background of a continuum representing the various surface realizations of the reflexive in other Bantu languages.

'n Tipologiese studie van 'n taalfamilie kan lig werp op spesifieke taalkundige kwessies in 'n taal wat aan so 'n familie behoort. In Zulu heers daar byvoorbeeld onsekerheid aangaande die gebruik van die voorwerpskakel in kombinasie met sy ooreenstemmende naamwoord in die basiese sinsposisie. 'n Tipologiese ondersoek oor voorwerpskongruensie in ander Bantoetale dui aan dat hierdie onsekerheid toegeskryf kan word aan die feit dat Zulu klaarblyklik in 'n oorgangsfase is wat voorwerpskongruensie aanbetref. 'n Ander probleem raak die onveranderlike vorm van die refleksief-prefiks in Zulu. 'n Tipologiese studie dui aan dat 'refleksiwiteit' op verskillende maniere in die Bantoetaalfamilie sy verskyning maak. Derhalwe kan die oorsprong van die onveranderlike refleksiefprefiks in Zulu moontlik verduidelik word teen die agtergrond van 'n kontinuum wat die onderskeie oppervlakterealisings van die refleksief in ander Bantoetale verteenwoordig.

Introduction

As reaction to papers I have given on typological perspectives of issues in Zulu linguistics, the question has often been asked: why is it necessary to draw comparisons with other Bantu languages, especially Bantu languages which are geographically far removed from the main language that I am working on, namely Zulu? It is for this reason that in this article I focus on the value of typology. This will first of all involve a short background of linguistic typology and then a discussion of typology as applied to certain linguistic issues in Zulu, but especially to object agreement and reflexives. Although the latter discussion is based on certain problematic aspects of Zulu linguistics, the fact that we are approaching the aspects concerned from a typological point of view, by implication involves reference to examples from numerous other languages.

Language typology is an approach which attempts to clarify the concept 'language' by investigating the nature and extent of language variety. The typological approach, which has attracted a great deal of interest in recent years, is based on the claim that the nature and structure of language is not only reflected in the common characteristics of different languages, but also in the differences between languages. Here it is important to mention that language universals, which is an approach concerned with the study of similarities across languages, goes hand in hand with typology.

Although there had been great interest in language typology during the 19th century already, this interest was not in conjunction with the study of language universals. It is only since the second half of this century that linguists have made serious attempts to carry out typological research in conjunction with universals research. On the surface it might seem a contradiction to handle these two areas of study together, but on closer investigation it will become clear

'that one important relationship between them is that of

using the results of typological research to provide material for establishing language universals' (Mallinson & Blake, 1981: 7).

Although typology is generally regarded as a-historic and therefore also a-genetic, Hendrikse & Barnes (1985: 50) states that neither the genetic relationship between languages nor the diachronic change in language can be ignored. Poulos (1984: 244) in fact argues that the importance of large-scale investigations within each of the families of languages is not sufficiently emphasized in typology. He refers specifically to Bantu linguistic analysis when he says that

'The employment of a data base that is purported to be representative of all the language families of the world but which at the same time highly restricts the number of languages that should be recognized from each family, presents serious stumbling-blocks...' (1984: 244).

Subsequently the following two questions are asked:

- If a choice of a language or even a few languages were to be made from the Bantu language family, which languages could then be chosen to be a true representation of this family?
- Is it possible to reach conclusions about variables which may exist within a word category or construction in a single family, if a large-scale investigation of the languages of the family is not undertaken?

Poulos (1984: 245) suggests that a researcher should first of all identify the variables that exist in a construction and also try to establish the reasons underlying such variations, before the postulations of any generalizations or for that matter genetic tendencies, can be made. The variables could then be interpreted as a representation of different sub-types within a language family or language type.

Diminutive

By means of an 'inter-genetic' investigation of the formation of the diminutive in Bantu, Poulos (1984: 245-6) proves that

in one and the same construction, different formations are possible. In general the diminutive in Bantu is formed by means of certain prefixes to nouns or noun stems, as illustrated in the following Swahili example:

Swahili

- (1) *kilima* (7) 'hill' cf. *mlima* (3) 'mountain'
pl. *vilima* (8)

In some languages, however, diminutives are instead derived by means of suffixes. This type of formation is manifested in languages such as Zulu and Northern Sotho. Consider the following examples.

Zulu

- (2) *intatshana* (9) 'small mountain' cf. *intaba* (9) 'mountain'

Yet another pattern of formation exists, namely the use of both a prefix and a suffix, as in Tsonga and Venda, e.g.

Tsonga

- (3) *ximutana* (7) 'small village' cf. *muti* (3) 'village'
pl. *swimutana* (8)

Thus we find three possible derivations of the diminutive in Bantu, namely prefix only, prefix together with suffix, and suffix only. Interestingly enough, there are languages, e.g. Venda, which use all three ways of forming diminutives:

Venda

- (4a) *kutavha* (20) 'small mountain'
(4b) *kutavhana* (20) 'very small mountain'
(4c) *thavhana* (9) 'small mountain' cf. *thavha* (9)
'mountain'

Formations such as these of the diminutive represent sub-types in Bantu, and it is only after a thorough investigation of numerous languages in a language family that sub-types can be established.

In the same vein I shall now illustrate how a typological study within a genetic family might reveal tendencies in language change, since

'no language shows the characteristics of a particular language type constantly or without alteration. Each language is constantly undergoing change to a greater or lesser degree' (Hendrikse & Barnes, 1985: 50).

I shall also indicate the importance of a historical perspective of the problematic issues to be dealt with.

When doing a linguistic study, certain observations can simply be made. Traditional grammar works are in fact characterized by such observations and classifications, i.e. they are taxonomic in nature. What I am trying to show in this article, however, is that one has to go further; one has to delve into the origins of forms. Let us observe for instance, how a typological study can throw light on specific linguistic issues in Zulu.

Relative suffix -yo

First of all, I shall deal with the relative suffix -yo, which is invariable in form and which is used in certain syntactic environments. Surely a researcher would be interested to know more

about -yo, and would ask where it comes from. Once he asks questions of this nature, the implication is that he has to look at other languages too, and that is exactly what typological investigation does.

By looking at other languages, Poulos (1986) has shown that the relative suffix -yo in Zulu has emerged from a series of concordial forms. Although the form of the relative suffix in the other South-Eastern Bantu languages is also invariable, and therefore does not give much of an indication regarding the origins of such a relative suffix, Poulos found a clue in the relative suffixal form of Swahili, where co-variance exists between the relative suffix and the antecedent, e.g.

Swahili

- (5a) *mtu asomaye* 'A man who reads ...'
(5b) *kengele iliayo* 'A bell which rings...'

By delving further into the origins of this suffix and by asking the question: why does the relative suffix have an invariable form in each of the South-Eastern Bantu languages, whereas in Swahili it co-varies with the class of the antecedent? Poulos (1985) hypothesized that initially the relative suffixal form was also a co-varying one in the Bantu language family. However, a well attested process in general language study, namely semantic bleaching, which involves the most general form becoming an invariable form, has played a role here. By means of this process, the anaphoric pronoun of class 9 has become an inflectionally invariable form in Zulu. Poulos continues by saying

'it is not surprising that a dialectal variant of the Zulu relative suffix -yo, has the form -*kho* (representing class 17)' (1986: 286)

since it has been adequately shown that classes 9 as well as 17 are among the classes that cover a greater domain of reference than the other classes.

Object agreement

Another problematic issue in Zulu linguistics which can be explained by means of a typological investigation is that of object agreement. The realization of the object concord in Zulu is determined by factors related to word-order, pronominalization etc. but in one instance, namely that of the object concord co-occurring with the object noun in its basic sentence position there seems to be uncertainty as to the use of the object concord, e.g.

- (6) *Abafundi bayawafunda amabhuku*
'The students are reading the books'

There are contradicting opinions by Zulu grammarians as far as the function of the object marker is concerned when used in conjunction with its co-referential noun in the basic sentence position in Zulu as has already been shown by Bosch (1985: 12ff). It is not clear whether object agreement is optional in such cases, or whether the use of the object concord has semantic implications.

There are a number of important observations concerning object agreement in other Bantu languages that can be made in order to shed more light on the situation in Zulu. I have

identified a number of varieties concerning the use of the object agreement marker, the most important of which are:

- a. The co-occurrence of an object agreement morpheme with an object noun phrase in its basic position after the verb is not allowed, as in a language such as Dzamba (Bokamba, 1976: 61), e.g.

- (7a) *O-nga na-bang-dki oPɔsɔ*
I Ag-call-impf Pɔsɔ
'I called Pɔsɔ'
(7b) *O-nga na-mo- bang-dki*
I Ag-her-call-impf
'I called her'
(7c) **O-nga na-mo-bang-aki oPɔsɔ*
I Ag-her-call-impf Pɔsɔ

- b. The object agreement morpheme accompanied by an object noun in its normal sentence position, i.e. following the verb directly, does occur, but is a topic reference morpheme and not a mere agreement marker. In other words, it is used to achieve certain discourse effects. This is illustrated in the following Northern Sotho example:

- (8) *Bana ba a mo thuša Maria*
'The children help her, Mary'

- c. The object agreement marker of certain nouns is obligatory regardless of the object noun appearing in its basic sentence position or not. Consider the following examples from Swahili, where object agreement with human objects (definite or indefinite) is obligatory:

- (9a) *ni-li-mwona mtoto*
I-PAST-him-see child
'I saw a child'
(9b) *ni-li-mw-ona yule mtoto*
I-Past-him-see the child
'I saw the child'
(9c) **ni-li-ona (yule) mtoto*
I-PAST-see (the) child (Givon, 1984: 371)

These findings clearly indicate and substantiate the view that the situation in Bantu languages as far as object agreement is concerned, is not uniform and is unlike that of subject agreement where the occurrence of the subject concord is predictable. In fact it appears as though object incorporation in a verb is at different stages of development in the different languages.

Returning to Zulu, it would appear that it is difficult to predict the occurrence of object concords in cases of definite object nouns appearing in their basic sentence position directly after the verb. However, the foregoing typological investigation of object agreement in other Bantu languages, sheds light on the fact that Zulu might be going through some transitional phase or other concerning object-verb agreement. In this regard Bosch concludes that

'Zulu finds itself in a stage between Northern Sotho, where the use of "true" object agreement results in object focus, and Swahili, where "true" object agreement has become compulsory in the case of [+human] nouns' (1985: 80).

This view is confirmed by Givon (1979: 243) who observes that in Zulu the object agreement morpheme is losing its anaphorical function and is being re-analyzed as an automatic agreement marker.

Reflexive prefix

One prefixal formative that is sometimes related to the object concord in grammatical studies, is the so-called reflexive prefix. As regards the form of the reflexive prefix in the South-Eastern Bantu languages, an interesting situation has emerged in that unlike subject/object concordial agreement, there is only one form of reflexive prefix for the various classes e.g.

Zulu

- (10) *Umfana wazigeza*
'The boy washed himself'

Questions arising now are: why is the reflexive prefix an invariable form? Where does this prefix come from? Or: how has it evolved? By resorting to a typological investigation once again, possible answers to these questions can be found.

In most of the Bantu languages I investigated, the reflexive is also formed by means of a prefixal formative which is invariable as is the case in Zulu, and which is inserted in the object pronominal slot in the verb. Let us look at a few such examples in (11). (The reflexive prefix is printed in bold italics in each case):

- (11a) kiMbundu (Congo zone):
eme ngi ri zola
'I love myself' (Chatelain, 1888: 81)
(11b) Chagga (Eastern zone)
akukapa
'He hits himself' (Raum, 1964: 72)
(11c) Swahili (North-Eastern zone)
Nilijificha
'I hid myself' (Ashton, 1949: 43)
(11d) Luvala (West-Central zone)
Mwalitwika citeli
'He puts a load on himself' (Horton, 1949: 117)

There are, however, certain Bantu languages in the North-Western zone which use a lexical item to convey reflexive significance as we know it. The lexical item used appears to carry the meaning of one of the following: body, soul, spirit, head.

In Babungo a reflexive relationship is expressed by using the word for 'body' plus a possessive pronoun, which agrees with the coreferential subject noun, e.g.

- (12) Babungo (North-Western zone)
mə sɔ ɲwāa ɲwāa
I wash-pf body my
'I washed myself' (Schaub, 1985: 110)

In Londo, the word for 'body' is used on its own without a possessive pronoun, e.g.

- (13) Londo (North-Western zone)
 ò-' sà-kpèm-i -n-ódò
 you s.-NEG-watch out PF 9-body
 'you don't watch out for yourself' (Kuperus, 1985: 319)

Chimwi:ni, a Bantu language very closely related to Swahili, and in fact spoken in the North-Eastern zone, uses the morpheme *ru:hu-*, a loanword from Arabic meaning 'soul/spirit', followed by a possessive pronoun ending, to express reflexivity, e.g.

- (14) Chimwi:ni (North-Eastern zone)
 mw-a:na Ø lum- ì-e ru:hu-y-e
 child SP-bite-T2-TV soul his
 'The child bit himself' (Abasheikh, 1976: 14)

Thus it is clear that 'reflexiveness' surfaces in different ways in the Bantu language family. In some cases as we have seen, it is invariable in form and yet in others it is expressed by a full lexical item. With this observation in mind, the question would arise as to whether these different surface realizations can in any way tell us something about the origins of the *-zi-* form in Zulu.

Faltz (1977) in a study on universal syntax with specific reference to reflexivization, distinguishes morphologically between two main types of reflexives, namely NP-reflexives which may consist of a nominal morpheme acting as head of the reflexive noun phrase; and verbal reflexives, consisting of reflexive pronouns which are cliticized onto the verb.

By means of examples from French reflexives, Faltz shows that no clear distinction between NP-reflexives and verbal reflexives can be drawn.

'Rather these two types are opposite ends of a continuous spectrum. Languages may move from one pole towards the other, in fact, such movement is necessarily from the NP-reflexive pole towards the verbal reflexive pole' (1977: 57).

Applying this point of view to the Bantu languages would show that Babungo and Chimwi:ni with their NP-reflexives occur on the one end of the continuum, whereas Zulu and Swahili for instance, with their verbal reflexives occur on the other end.

The fact that a concept such as 'reflexiveness' is interpreted by an independent word in some languages and by a prefix in others, reminds one of a very common linguistic process involved in the development of grammatical forms in language, that is the change from a fully fledged lexical item to a grammatical morpheme.

This process is sometimes referred to as grammaticalization and has already been attested in the development of certain other morphemes in Zulu. For example Poulos (1986: 288ff) has discussed in detail the development of the diminutive suffix *-ana* from a fully fledged lexical item, namely a noun stem **-yana* which still occurs in many languages and which expresses the meaning of 'child'.

With this grammatical process in mind I would like to offer two possible derivations for the reflexive morpheme as we know it in Zulu.

Firstly, that the reflexive morpheme has developed from a fully fledged lexical item such as 'body/soul/spirit' which, as we have seen from our typological investigation, occurs in certain Bantu languages as they are spoken today. By way of interest, in order to establish this derivational process one would need to look at the original starred forms for 'body' and 'spirit'. Guthrie (1971) for example, lists up to five different forms for 'body' and three different forms for 'spirit':

- (15) 'body'
bidi*, **-dímbà*, (-dútù*, **-jútù*) **-yútù*
 'spirit'
-dímu*, **-kúì*, (-pépò*)

The second possible explanation could be that the reflexive morpheme has developed from some type of concordial system, perhaps such as the possessive pronouns which, as we have seen, still occur in some languages, albeit in combination with a noun. A definite indication of this derivation would be if one were to find a Bantu language with varying reflexive prefixes.

The question now arising of course is why has *-zi-* emerged as the invariable form and no other prefix? I believe that the answer here might lie in the understanding of the process of semantic bleaching, though this would require further typological investigation. In terms of this process, as already explained earlier on, the most general semantic features (or classes) survive the longest. This prefix appears to be related to class 8, and it has already been shown for example that in certain languages, such as Venda, this class is used as a general class in certain constructions, where the antecedent is not specifically mentioned (Poulos, 1990: 109). Other classes have also appeared to emerge as general classes, for example classes 9 and 17 as mentioned earlier in this discussion of the relative suffix.

Conclusion

To conclude, I have tried to show in this article the importance of comparing languages in solving specific linguistic problems in the language under investigation. I believe that there are many unanswered questions in the study of Bantu linguistics which could be answered when studied against the background of typology. After all, Lehmann remarked:

'Typological analysis is of fundamental importance in linguistics because of the framework it provides for the description, explanation and understanding of individual languages' (1978: 30).

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