

Auxiliary constructions in Southern Bantu languages

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Abstract

The use of auxiliaries in complex verbal constructions is widespread across Bantu languages (Nurse 2003). These auxiliary constructions are commonly formed through the use of an auxiliary form and an accompanying lexical main verb. There is a high degree of microvariation found in auxiliary constructions in Bantu languages. In some languages, both the auxiliary and the main verb host subject information (1), while in other languages the main verb appears in an uninflected form (1). Languages also vary with respect to the specific tense-aspect-mood interpretations with which auxiliary constructions are associated (3), as well as the ordering of the auxiliary and the main verb and the total number of auxiliary forms attested (Gibson and Marten 2015, Lee and Hlungwani 2015).

- (1) Swahili
Tu-ta-kuwa tu-na-imb-a
SM1pl-FUT-AUX SM1pl-PROG-sing-FV
'We will be singing'
- (2) Chichewa
Ti-na ku-gúla
SM1pl-AUX.PAST INF-buy
'We were buying.' (Nurse 2003:91)
- (3) siSwati
Ngi-ta-be ngi-tawu-nats-a
1sg-FUT-be 1sg-FUT-drink-FV
'I shall be about to drink' (Nichols 2011:58)

This talk focuses on variation in auxiliary constructions in Southern Bantu languages. Of particular interest is the presence of constructions in Southern Bantu languages in which multiple auxiliaries can co-occur. This can be seen in the examples from siSwati (4) and Xitsonga (5) where the lexical main verb is preceded by two auxiliary forms. Similarly, in these constructions, the tense-aspect information appears to be distributed across the forms in a range of ways which reflect micro-variation within the Southern Bantu languages, as well as variation within the language family more widely.

- (4) siSwati
Ba-fana ba-phidze ba-ngahle ba-bheme
2-boys SM2-might SM2-repeat SM2-smoke
'The boys might smoke pot again' (Thwala 2006: 9)
- (5) Xitsonga
Ndzi-hatla ndzi-éngétá ndzí-nwa mati
SM1sg-quickly SM1sg-again SM1sg-drink water
'I quickly drink water again' (Lee and Hlungwani 2015: 131)

Other features of variation include the total inventory of auxiliary forms, subject marking properties and the possibility of intervening elements between the auxiliary and main verb. The

talk presents an overview of the variation found in auxiliary constructions across a sample of Southern Bantu languages. This is done with the goal of providing a more detailed description of these construction types, gaining a better understanding of the variation attested, as well as the patterns of grammaticalization which may have given rise to these constructions.

Keywords: auxiliaries; tense-aspect-mood; Southern Bantu languages

References

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