

Object-marked NPs in isiZulu in relation to definiteness and specificity

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Abstract

The use of object markers as a device to mark an object NP as definite or specific has been noted for a number of Bantu languages (see e.g. Woolford 2001 for Ruwund; Riedel 2009 for Haya; Kimambo 2018 for Swahili). Doke (1997: 299) suggests that by object-marking an NP in isiZulu, "the nearest approach to the significance of the definite article [...] is conveyed", while according to Visser (2008: 15), object marking in isiXhosa "constitutes an instance of the morphosyntactic realization of specificity."

In this paper I offer a systematic investigation of the semantic effects of object marking in isiZulu (Nguni; S42) that takes into account different types of indefiniteness and (non)-specificity. By applying a number of tests put forward in the literature (Dayal 2017; Carstens & Mletshe 2019), I show that NPs doubled by an object marker can be interpreted as indefinite, (1). Furthermore, I also show that bare NPs in isiZulu can sometimes take narrow scope in relation to quantificational expressions, (2). Since narrow scope corresponds to non-specific interpretations (Lyons 1999), this shows that object marking is not consistently correlated with specificity in isiZulu.

- (1) U-John u-ya-li-dl-a i-aphula,
AUG-1a.John 1.SM-DJ-5.OM-eat-FV AUG-5.apple
futhi u-Mary u-ya-li-dl-a i-aphula.
and AUG-1a.Mary 1.SM-DJ-5.OM-eat-FV AUG-5.apple
'John is eating an apple, and Mary is eating an apple.' (different apples)
- (2) Ba-ya-yi-hlab-a ma-sonto onke i-n-kukhu.
2.SM-DJ-9.OM-slaughter-FV 6-Sunday 6.every AUG-9-chicken
'They (do) slaughter a (different) chicken every Sunday.'

I also offer an analysis of the putative correlation between object marking and definiteness/specificity in isiZulu by arguing that it follows as a consequence of the fact that object-marked objects in isiZulu are obligatorily realized in a VP-external position (Cheng & Downing 2009; Zeller 2014).

Keywords: isiZulu morpho-syntax; object marking; definiteness; specificity; scope

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