

The Information Structure of Preverbal Domains in Mbuun, Nsong and Nsambaan (Bantu B80, DRC)

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Preliminary research on Mbuun (B87), a western Bantu language from the Kwilu region in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), has pointed out that preverbal domains play a crucial role in the marking of argument focus (Bostoen & Mundeke 2011, 2012). Focalising a non-verbal constituent in Mbuun obligatorily involves deviations from the canonical SVO order. A focused object is fronted immediately before the verb in Mbuun, resulting in a SOV word order, which runs counter to the narrow focus site immediately after the verb in many other Bantu languages. The object also moves in Mbuun when other non-verbal clause constituents are focused. Both subjects and oblique arguments are focused in situ but their focalisation triggers a movement of the object to clause-initial position resulting in an OSV word order. This OSV construction, along with an impersonal 3PL construction, can be considered to be the functional equivalent of a true morphological or periphrastic passive, which is common in Bantu but missing in Mbuun. In this paper, we examine whether the prominence of preverbal domains in the marking of argument focus is also observed in Nsong (B85d) and Nsambaan (B85F), two closely related languages sharing several rather atypical phonological innovations with Mbuun (Bostoen & Koni Muluwa 2014; Koni Muluwa & Bostoen 2012). In contrast to the preliminary research on Mbuun, which was almost entirely elicitation-based, this will be done by means of the Nsong and Nsambaan text corpora, which Joseph Koni Muluwa has been collecting, transcribing and annotating in 2013 and 2014 as part of the endangered language documentation project funded by the DoBeS program of the Volkswagen Foundation through a 3-year grant (2012-2015) (cf. <http://www.kwilubantu.ugent.be/>).

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