

## Indefinite Subjects in Durban Zulu

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Work since, at least, Givón (1975) has noted that subjects cross-linguistically have topic properties: they are typically definite, referential and/or generic. Bantu languages with SVO word order are said to illustrate this generalization: preverbal position for NPs is equated with Topic status and postverbal position with focus (Henderson 2006: 288). Subjects are thus canonically in preverbal position because they are canonical topics. Support for the proposal that preverbal subjects have topic status comes from Bantu languages that do not allow subjects to be focused in situ. Wh-questions on subjects and their answers must be clefted in languages like Zulu, Chichewa, N. Sotho and Makhua. (See Cheng & Downing 2013, Mchombo 2004, van der Wal 2009, and Zerbian 2006, to name a few.) Subjects with presentational focus occur postverbally. (See e.g., Bresnan & Kanerva 1989; van der Wal 2009.) The incompatibility between preverbal subject position and focus is said to follow from the inherent topicality of preverbal subjects.

However, there is a growing body of work showing that preverbal subjects are not necessarily syntactically or semantically equivalent to topics. Work like Cheng & Downing (2012), Morimoto (2000) and van der Wal (2009), argues that, even in some Bantu languages where subjects cannot be focused in situ, one must distinguish a syntactic preverbal subject position (clause internal) from a clause external Topic position. Prosody confirms the distinction between these two positions in languages like Chichewa and Zulu (Cheng & Downing 2009, to appear; Downing & Mtenje 2011). That is, one cannot say subjects are incompatible with in situ focus because they are in Topic position. Zerbian's (2006) careful study of preverbal position in Northern Sotho shows that preverbal subjects also do not meet many of the semantic tests for aboutness topics. For example, subjects can occur preverbally inthetic sentences where the subject (like the rest of the sentence) is new information. And indefinite subjects commonly occur in preverbal position. Zerbian concludes that preverbal subjects are best characterized as being [-Focus], rather than [+Topic].

The study of restrictions on preverbal subjects in Durban Zulu presented in this talk builds on Zerbian (2006). We show that in Durban Zulu, as in Northern Sotho, certain operators associated with weak indefinites – *no one, some, any, about* – cannot occur as preverbal subjects. One cannot account for this restriction by proposing that subjects must be [-Focus], because in general indefinites do not have to be focused. As Zerbian (2006: 189) concedes, this kind of data provides the best support for the proposal that subjects are Topic-like. We explore an analysis in which languages like Zulu cannot accommodate presuppositional indefinites in the subject position, and this may be due to the fact that the verb does not move up high enough to allow the existential closure domain to be extended (following Tsai 2001).