1. Introduction

- In the Bantuist tradition, there is a well recognized correlation between SUBJECT and TOPIC (e.g. Bresnan & Mchombo 1987; Givón 1976)

- Subject/topic correlation is grammaticized in Shona (Bliss and Storoshenko 2008, 2009)
  - EPP has both syntactic and semantic constraints
  - needs either overt DP or covert pro in subject position
  - needs a discourse topic (discourse-old, referential, wide-scoping)

- **Question**: What about thetic / “out-of-the-blue” sentences, where there is no overt DP topic?

- **Proposal**:
  - Thetic sentences license STAGE TOPICS, referring to the discourse-given spatio-temporal context of the sentence (Erteshik-Shir 2007)
  - Stage topics are in subject position, and satisfy the EPP
    - As either overt locative expressions or covert locative pro, visible via agreement

2. Subject = Topic

- Hallmark of Bantu syntax
  - “subject” = “topic”
  - subject agreement on the verb is topic agreement (Morimoto 2006; Henderson 2006, inter alia)

- What does it mean for “subject” to be conflated with “topic”?
  - “Subject” = **syntactic**
    - Structural position (e.g. Spec, IP)
    - EPP requires this position to be filled with either an overt constituent or covert pro
  - “Topic” = **semantic**
    - Information structural
    - (more in §3)

- To say that “subject” = “topic” is to say that there are semantic constraints on the structural position designated for subjects

- Two ways this could be understood:
  1. A general crosslinguistic (and overrideable) tendency for discourse topics to appear in Spec, IP (e.g. Li and Thompson 1976)
  2. A grammaticized principle stating that the structural position designated for subjects is obligatorily occupied by a discourse topic

* Shona is a Narrow Bantu language spoken in Zimbabwe. Unless otherwise noted, data are from the authors’ fieldwork with speakers of the Karanga dialect. Thanks to Calisto Mudzingwa and Stanley Murevesi for sharing their language with us. Mazviita!
Main Claim

- Option #2 is found in Shona
  - A dedicated functional projection in Shona’s clausal architecture licenses the main topic of the sentence
  - EPP requires subject position to be filled by a topic

3. Topics and Stage Topics

- Literature tends to focus on either givenness or aboutness as defining properties of topichood
- We adopt a Strawsonian view of topichood, which assumes both
- Topics must be:
  (i) discourse-given
  (ii) what the sentence is about
  (iii) the pivot of truth value assessment
- The Strawsonian definition yields testable predictions for identifying whether something is topical or not
- Tests for topichood
  (i) discourse-given
  (ii) wide-scoping
  (iii) referential
  (iv) obligatory

- Stage topics appear in thetic (“out-of-the-blue”) sentences
- Stage topic = contextually-defined elements that indicate the discourse parameters of the sentence (Erteschik-Shir 2007)
  - Speaker or Hearer
  - Salient spatio-temporal elements in the discourse
  - “Permanent and temporary fixtures of our world” that need no previous mention

4. Predictions

- Subject position is necessarily occupied by a topic
  - Two types of predictions
  - The constituent that occupies the subject position must meet the criteria for topichood (discourse-given, wide-scoping, referential)
    - No subject expletives: subjects must have semantic (referential) content
  - The main topic of the sentence must meet the criteria of the EPP
    - The topic must be either an overt constituent or covert pro, detectable via agreement on the verb
    - No implicit stage topics
- Both predictions are borne out

5. Canonical Subjects

- In both active and passive clauses, overt non-locative (i.e. “canonical”) subjects meet the criteria for topichood

5.1. Active Sentences

- In active sentences, Shona subjects meet the criteria for topichood
- Shona subjects are discourse-given
• Evidence from *wh*-questions (Demuth and Johnson 1989)
  o Basic declarative sentence can answer object *wh*-question (3), but not subject *wh*-questions (4)

(3) a. *Shingi akadonera payichi?*
    S. a-aka-don-er-a pa-ichi
    S. SUBJ.1-PST-fall-APPL-FV CL17-what
    ‘What did Shingi fall on?’

b. *Shingi akadonera pasi.*
    S. a-aka-don-er-a pa-si
    S. SUBJ.1-PST-fall-APPL-FV CL17-ground
    ‘Shingi fell on the ground.’

(4) Q: *Ndiyana akabika manhanga?*
    ndi-yana a-aka-bik-a ma-nhnaga
    NDI-who AGR1-PST-cook-FV CL6-pumpkin
    ‘Who cooked the pumpkins?’

A: *NdiShingi akabika manhanga.*
    ndi-S. a-aka-bik-a ma-nhangara
    it.was-S. AGR1-PST-cook-FV CL6-pumpkin
    ‘It was Shingi who cooked the pumpkins.’

A: #Shingi akabika manhanga.

• Shona subjects are **referential**

(6) a. *Ndichatenga gwaro mangwana.*
    ndi-cha-teng-a ∅-gwaro mangwana
    1ST-SG-FUT-buy-FV CL5-book tomorrow
    ‘I will buy a book tomorrow.’
    ⇒ speaker may or may not have a specific book in mind

b. *Gwaro richatengwa mangwana.*
    ∅-gwaro ri-cha-teng-w-a mangwana
    CL5-book SUBJ.5-FUT-buy-PASS-FV tomorrow
    ‘The book will be bought tomorrow.’
    ⇒ speaker is referring to a specific book

(7) Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>discourse-given</th>
<th>subject of active sentence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wide-scoping</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>referential</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.2. Subjects of Passive Sentences

• Shona passive provides independent support for the claim that the subject position is occupied by a topic

• Passivization is insensitive to the merge position of its target arguments

• Both arguments and adjuncts can move up

(8) a. *Shingi akabikira Mufaro manhanga.*
    S. a-aka-bik-ir-a M. ma-nhangara
    S. SUBJ.1-PST-cook-APPL-FV M. CL6-pumpkin
    ‘Shingi cooked pumpkins for Mufaro.’
b. *Manhanga akabikirwa Mufaro na Shingi.*
   ma-nhanga a-aka-bik-ir-w-a M. na S.
   CL6-pumpkin SUBJ6-PST-cook-APPL-PASS-FV M. by S.
   “Pumpkins were cooked for Mufaro by Shingi.”

passivized BENEFICIARY

b. *Mufaro akabikirwa manhanga na Shingi.*
   M. a-aka-bik-ir-w-a ma-nhanga na S.
   M. SUBJ1-PST-cook-APPL-PASS-FV CL6-pumpkin by S.
   “For Mufaro were cooked pumpkins by Shingi.”

(9) a. *Murume akafamba nomukadzi wake.*
   Mu-rume a-aka-famb-a no-mu-kadzi wa-ke
   CL1-man SUBJ1-PST-walk-FV with-CL1-woman POSS-CL1
   “The man walked his wife.” (lit ‘his woman’)

passivized COMPANION

b. *Mukadzi akafambwa na-ye nomurume.*
   Mu-kadzi a-aka-famb-w-a na-iye
   CL1-woman SUBJ1-PST-walk-PASS-FV by-3S
   no-mu-rume by-CL1-man
   ‘The woman was walked with by the man’

(10) a. *Murume akafamba musango.*
   Mu-rume a-aka-famb-a mu-sango
   CL1-man SUBJ1-PST-walk-FV CL18-forest
   ‘The man walked in the forest’

passivized LOCATIVE

   Mu-sango m-aka-famb-w-a no-mu-rume
   CL18-forest SUBJ18-PST-walk-PASS-FV by-CL1-man
   ‘In the forest was walked by the man’

• **Passive is not an *A*-movement operation**
  (Bliss and Storoshenko 2008)
  
  o Passive itself (-w) licenses a covert agent, ineligible for the subject/topic position
  o Movement is topicalization, independently motivated for topical subjects in active clauses

• Active Sentence: external argument at [Spec, vP] is default subject, moving to [Spec, TopP]

• Passive Sentence: External argument is suppressed, any topical element in vP domain can check EPP at TopP
6. Stage Topics in Shona

- Thetic contexts require a stage topic

  **Prediction:** Stage topics in thetic contexts satisfy the EPP
  - No implicit stage topics
  - Stage topic = Overt or *pro* locative expressions

- An(other) hallmark of Bantu syntax: Locative Inversion (LI)
  - Locative expression appears in subject position and controls subject agreement on the verb
  - If subject = topic, then LI marks stage topics overtly

- Bresnan and Kanerva (1989) on Chichewa LI:
  - LI is used when a locative expression is a topic
  - LI is used in lieu of subject expletives

- Unlike Chichewa, Shona has both LI and what appear to be subject expletives (Perez 1983)
  - We argue that these apparent expletives in fact have referential content and also instantiate stage topics

6.1. Locative Inversion

- Locative subjects in LI constructions meets criteria for topichood

  - Compare: locative adjunct (11) versus locative subject (12)
    - Require different information structural context

---

(11)  
*Mbatya dzagezwa dzanikwa pamuti kuti dzieome.*
∅–mbatya dz-a-gez-w-a
CL.10-clothes SUBJ.10-PST-wash-PASS-FV
dz-a-nik-w-a pa-mu-ti kuti
SUBJ.10-PST-spread-PASS-FV CL.16-CL.3-tree COMP
dzi-om-e
SUBJ.10-dry-FV
‘The clothes that have been washed have been spread out on a tree to dry’

(12)  
*Pamuti uyo panikwa mbatya.*
pa-mu-ti uyo p-a-nik-w-a
CL.16-CL.3-tree DEM SUBJ.16-PST-spread-PASS-FV
∅–mbatya
CL.10-clothes
‘On that tree are clothes that have been spread to dry.’

Context 1: Speaker is telling the addressee: “I have nothing to wear, nothing to put on right now…”
- ✓ *pamuti* ‘on a tree’ = adjunct (11)
- ✗ *pamuti* ‘on a tree’ = subject (12)

Context 2: Speaker is telling the addressee to watch a certain tree because animals might come and eat the clothes.
- ✗ *pamuti* ‘on a tree’ = adjunct (11)
- ✓ *pamuti* ‘on a tree’ = subject (12)

- Locative subjects in LI constructions (12) are necessarily *discourse-given* and *referential*
6.2. (Non-expletive) Locative pro

- Expletives are defined by their lack of semantic content
- If the Shona EPP probes for a topic, then there should be no expletive subjects in Shona (no semantically empty subjects)
- Three types of expletive subjects in English (Svenonius 2001)
  - Impersonal ‘there’
  - Weather expression ‘it’
  - Extraposition ‘it’
- Shona equivalents of the three English-type expletives are not semantically empty and meet the discourse requirements for stage topics
  - Impersonal ‘there’ \(\rightarrow\) impersonal passives
  - Weather expression ‘it’ \(\rightarrow\) weather expressions
  - Extraposition ‘it’ \(\rightarrow\) zva and ndi

6.2.1. Impersonal Passives

- Impersonal passives are identical in form to canonical passives, but without an overt subject

(13) *Manhanga akabikwa na Mufaro.*  
*ma-nhang-a a-aka-bik-w-a na-M.*  
*CL6-pumpkin SUBJ6-PST-cook-PASS-FV by-M.*  
‘Pumpkins were cooked by Mufaro.’

(14) *Kwakabikwa na Mufaro.*  
*ku-aka-bik-w-a na M.*  
*SUBJ17-REM.PST-cook-PASS-FV by M.*  
‘There was cooking by Mufaro.’

- In the absence of an overt subject, subject agreement is Class 17
  - 16, 17, 18 = locative noun classes (Brauner 1995)

(15) *Shingi akatenga muchero kumusika.*  
*S. a-aka-tenga mu-chero ku-mu-sika*  
*SUBJ1-PST-buy-FV CL3-fruit CL17-CL3-market*  
‘Shingi bought fruit at the market.’

- It has been claimed that Class 17 *ku-* is a default agreement marker, homophonous between locative and expletive uses (Demuth and Mmusi 1997; Marten 2006)
  - However, the discourse context for *ku-* sentences (i.e. impersonal passives) suggests that *ku-* is strictly locative
- Impersonal passives are very context-restricted; they can only be used when an explicit spatio-temporal context is established
  - e.g., (14) is felicitous in a discussion about the catering at a wedding

**Proposal:** Stage topic in impersonal passives is locative pro
  - co-referential with discourse-old spatio-temporal context
  - controls Class 17 agreement

- If Class 17 is not a default expletive form, and if impersonal passives show agreement with a locative pro stage topic, then impersonal passives should be able to occur with other locative noun class agreement
  - Prediction is borne out

(16) *(Pano) pari kubikwa.*  
*pa-no pa-ri ku-bik-w-a*  
*CL16-DEM SUBJ16.AUX CL15-cook-PASS-FV*  
‘Here there is a lot of cooking going on.’  
\(\Rightarrow\) Felicitous in a context of arriving at a potluck party
6.2.2. Weather Expressions

- Like impersonal passives, Shona weather expressions do not require an overt subject, and typically show Class 17 agreement

(17) *Kuri kunaya.*
ku-ri     ku-nay-a
SUBJ.17-AUX  CL15-rain-FV
“It is raining.”

- **Proposal:** Locative *pro* is in in subject position, functioning as the stage topic

- Evidence: *pro* can be substituted with overt locative expressions

(18) a. *Kuno kuri kunaya.*
ku-no     ku-ri     ku-nay-a
CL17-DEM SUBJ.17-AUX  CL15-rain-FV
‘Here it is raining.’

b. *KuVancouver kuri kunaya.*
ku-V.     ku-ri     ku-nay-a
CL17-V.   SUBJ.17-AUX  CL15-rain-FV
“In Vancouver it is raining.”

- Not limited to class 17 locatives:

(19) a. *Pari kunaya.*
Pa-ri     ku-nay-a
SUBJ.16-AUX  CL15-rain-FV
“It is raining.”

b. *Muri zuva.*
Mu-ri     zuva
SUBJ.18-AUX  sun
“It is sunny.”

6.2.3. Extrapositions *zva* and *ndi*

- Shona has two agreement markers which appear to parallel English extraposition ‘it’: *zva* and *ndi*

6.2.3.1. *zva*

- *zva* is a Class 8 agreement marker, and is translated akin to English extraposition ‘it’

(20) *Zvakakosha [kuti Dennis abvise nedbvu dzake.]*
zvi-aka-kosh-a     kuti D. a-bvis-e
SUBJ.8-PST-important-FV  that D. SUBJ.1-remove-FV
nedbvu   dzake
hairs.10  poss.10
‘It is important that Dennis shave.’

- **Proposal:** *zva* is not an expletive, but agreement with the subordinate *kuti* clause (cf. Bresnan & Kanerva 1989)

- **Proposal:** *kuti* clause is the subject, heavy shifted in (20)

- Class 8 *zva* agreement is used where no phi features can be specified (Fortune 1955).

- The subordinate *kuti* clause can precede the matrix verb, which still carries class 8 agreement

(21) *[Kuti Obama akabodirira] zvakashamisa Shingi.*
kuti O. a-aka-bodir-ir-a
COMP O. SUBJ.1-PST-win-APPL-FV
zvi-aka-sham-is-a S.
SUBJ.8-PST-shock-CAUS-FV Shingi
“That Obama won shocked Shingi.”
6.2.3.2. ndi

- ndi is described as a “stabiliser” (Brauner 1995) and functions similarly to a copula

(20) a. Ndi-ye “It is s/he”
   b. Ndi-baba “It is father”
   c. Ndi-Shingi “It is Shingi”

- Cleft constructions are formed with ndi, allowing a new referent to be introduced into the discourse

(21) NdiShingi akabika manhnaga.
    Ndi-Shingi a-ka-bik-a ma-nhnaga.
    NDI-S. SUBJ-REM.PST-cook-FV CL6-pumpkin
    “It was Shingi who cooked the pumpkins.”

- Proposal: ndi provides the stage topic in an existential assertion
  o This assertion introduces the new referent, licensing the pro in the following clause as discourse-given.

7. Conclusions

- Subject=topic is a grammaticized principle in Shona grammar
- EPP in Shona is sensitive to the semantic content of its goal, requiring a discourse-given referential topic to occupy the subject position of the sentence
- In thematic contexts, stage topics are instantiated by overt or pro locative expressions

References


