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Prenasalisation in Tonga (M64): A Morphosyntactic Perspective

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Abstract- In this study I explore the influence/use of the morphemen- in Tonga. This morpheme is mainly viewed and/or regarded as the first person singular pronoun in many Bantu languages. In this study, I argue that in addition to being a first person singular morpheme, n- can also be used as a second person pronoun in Tonga. It is shown in the study that the morpheme is in fact part of the discontinuous morpheme, the other part of the discontinuous morpheme being the terminal vowel – e. Further, I demonstrate that the tone on all the syllables succeeding n- determines the semantic out-put of the syntactic unit, resulting from prefixing n- to a verb. I end by positing a rule for the phenomenon, which I have suspected is endemic in other Bantu languages.

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Prenasalisation in Tonga (M64): A Morphosyntactic Perspective

Khama Hang'ombe

Abstract- In this study I explore the influence/use of the morpheme n- in Tonga. This morpheme is mainly viewed and/or regarded as the first person singular pronoun in many Bantu languages. In this study, I argue that in addition to being a first person singular morpheme, n- can also be used as a second person pronoun in Tonga. It is shown in the study that the morpheme is in fact part of the discontinuous morpheme, the other part of the discontinuous morpheme being the terminal vowel –e. Further, I demonstrate that the tone on all the syllables succeeding n- determines the semantic out-put of the syntactic unit, resulting from prefixing n- to a verb. I end by positing a rule for the phenomenon, which I have suspected is endemic in other Bantu languages.

I. Introduction

This study takes a Morphosyntactic perspective in discussing the morpheme *n-*. This morpheme is responsible for prenasalisation in Tonga (M64) and many other Bantu languages. Tonga (M64) varieties are spoken in Zambia and Zimbabwe. The examples used in this study are drawn from the Plateau Tonga variety, a variety spoken in Zambia. The study exposes the influence of the morpheme *n-* on the verbs. Precisely, the study shows that the morpheme *n-* is responsible for converting simple verbs into syntactic units. At the same time, it is shown in this study that the morpheme in question is a component of discontinuous morpheme, the other component being the terminal vowel *–e.* The study also demonstrates that the tone on the terminal vowel is crucial in determining the semantic out-put of the syntactic units resulting from the prefixation of the morpheme *n-* to verbal forms.

In Bantu languages, studies on the morpheme *n-* abound, though it seems that there is none in Tonga. Studies that discuss this morpheme in Bantu languages concentrate on its phonological influence on segments in its environment (cf Peng, 2007; Mberia, 2002; Kula, 1999; Nancy and Lutz, 1998; Katamba 1974). It appears that studies that focus on the Morphosyntactic influence of this morpheme in Bantu are rare. In fact I did not come across any such studies.

Distributed Morphology (henceforth DM) is used as the underpinning theoretical perspective in this study. DM, an outgrowth of Generative Grammar, was propounded by Halle and Marantz (1993). DM is concerned with the ways in which words, together with their underlying structure, relate to syntactic structures. In other words, the theory is concerned with the relation between words-derivational rules and syntactic-derivational rules. Thus, in this study, DM is used to show that prefixing the morpheme *n-* to simple verbs changes the simple verbs into syntactic units.

Muhammad (2019:47) holds that DM "is a syntactic, piece based, realizational approach to morphology in which there are at least some 'late insertion' of phonological material into terminal nodes". In the context of the present study, the prenasalising morpheme *n-* can be taken to be a 'late insertion' phonological material which converts simple verbs (to which it is attached) into syntactic units, and also affects their phonological out-put, in some cases. The focus of DM is succinctly expressed by Embick and Noyer (2005:2) who state that DM "proposes architecture of grammar in which a single generative system is responsible both for word structure and phrase structure". This means that DM can account for both morphological and syntactic processes; it is a Morphosyntactic oriented theoretical framework. Other studies which show that DM is concerned with the relationship between structures of words and syntactic structures are Harley and Noyer (1999); and Halle (1997). Using DM as the theoretical perspective, the present study shows that prefixing the morpheme *n-* to verbal forms converts simple verbs to syntactic units. Put in other words, DM is used to show that *n-* serves as a derivational morpheme in Tonga.

II. Prenasalisation in Bantu

I have already noted that studies on prenasalisation specifically focusing on the morpheme *n-* in Bantu languages abound. I have also noted that it seems that most of such studies assume a morphophonological perspective. The focus in these studies is mainly on the influence of the morpheme on the segments it precedes. As such, the concept 'prenasalisation' is ordinarily taken to be associated with morphology and phonology only. However, a cursory morphosyntactic view of the morpheme *n-* in Tonga indicates that the morpheme is analysable morphosyntactically. This is because it appears that the besides having a phonological influence on segments in its environments (as can be seen from Hubbard, 1995; Nancy and Lutz, 1998), the morpheme also has a morphosyntactic influence on verbs to which it can be

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prefixed. Thus, the forms to which it is prefixed, especially verbal forms, render themselves readily to a morphosyntactic analysis. For this reason, I suggest that the concept 'prenasalisation' should not be restricted to the morphophonological domain, but it should also be accommodated in the morphosyntactic domain. This is on the account that the morpheme is also responsible for formation of syntactic units out of verbs, as shown in this study.

Literature on the morpheme *n-* proffers the morpheme as being a first person singular prefix (cf Peng, 2007; Kula, 1999; Johnson, 1979). However, it appears that in some contexts, this morpheme serves as a second person prefix. Such contexts are given and discussed in this study. Thus the study uses the morphosyntactic perspective to demonstrate that the morpheme *n-* is does not only serve/function as a first person singular pronoun.

III. Findings and Discussion

a) *Prenasalised verbs in Tonga*

Since this study approaches prenasalisation from a morphosyntactic perspective, the phonological influence of the morpheme under focus is ignored. The only phonological aspect incorporated in the study is tone; tone in the verbal forms used as examples is marked. A marking of the tone in the examples helps in distinguishing the syntactic units which result from a prefixation of the morpheme *n-*.

The morphosyntactic influence of the morpheme *n-* is demonstrated in Table 1 serving as example (1):

Table 1: Prenasalisation in Tonga verbs A

S/N	In-put simple verb	Out-put syntactic unit
1.	Bona 'see'	(a) n-bone > m-bónè 'That **I** may see'
		(b) n-bone > m-bóné 'Can **you** see **me**'
2.	Bala 'read'	(a) n-bale > m-bálè 'That **I** may read'
		(b) n-bale > m-bálé 'Can **you** read **me**'
3.	Cenga 'lie'	(a) n-céngè That **I** may lie'
		(b) n-céngé 'Can **you** lie to **me**'
4.	Ccilila 'follow'	(a) n-cílílè 'That **I** may follow'
		(b) n-cílílé 'Can **you** follow **me**'
5.	fwusa 'throw'	(a) n-fwúsè 'That **I** may throw'
		(b) n-fwúsé Can **you** throw **me**'
6.	Gonka 'cut'	(a) n-gónkè 'That **I** may cut'
		(b) n-gónké 'Can **you** cut **me**'
7.	Gusya 'remove'	(a) n-gúsyè 'That **I** may remove'
		(b) n-gúsyé 'Can **you** remove **me**'
8.	Kwela 'pull'	(a) n-kwélè 'That **I** may pull'
		(b) n-kwélé 'Can **you** pull **me**'
9.	komba 'worship'	(a) n-kómbè 'That **I** may worship'
		(b) n-kómbé 'Can **you** worship **me**'
10.	langa 'look'	(a) n-dángè 'That **I** may look'
		(b) n-dángé 'Can **you** look at **me**'
11.	lumba 'thank'	(a) n-dúmbè 'That **I** may forget'
		(b) n-dúmbé 'Can **you** forget **me**'
12.	mena 'swallow'	(a) n-ménè 'That **I** may swallow'
		(b) n-méné 'Can **you** swallow **me**'
13.	mana 'finish'	(a) n-mánè 'That **I** may finish'
		(b) n-máné 'Can **you** finish **me**'
14.	nyonsya 'breast feed'	(a) n-nyónsyè 'That **I** may breast feed'
		(b) n-nyónsyé 'Can **you** breast feed **me**'
15.	nyamuna 'lift'	(a) n-nyámúnè 'That **I** may lift'
		(b) n-nyámúné 'Can **you** lift **me**'
16.	ponya 'heal'	(a) m-pónyè 'That **I** may heal'
		(b) m-pónyé 'Can **you** heal **me**'
17.	pandula 'cut open'	(a) m-pándúlè 'That **I** may cut open'
		(b) m-pándúl-é 'Can **you** cut **me**'
18.	sala 'choose'	(a) n-sálè 'That **I** may choose'
		(b) n-sálé 'Can **you** choose **me**'
19.	sola 'try'	(a) n-sólè 'That **I** may try'
		(b) n-sólé 'Can **you** try **me**'
20.	tola 'take'	(a) n-tólè 'That **I** may take'

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		(b) n-tólé 'Can **you** take **me**'
21.	tanda 'chase'	(a) n-tándè 'That **I** may chase'
		(b) n-tándé 'Can **you** chase **me**'

There are phenomena that can be noted from the examples in Table 1. One of the phenomena worthy of note is that prefixing the morpheme *n-* to a verb (with one meaning) produces a syntactic unit which has two different but related meanings. The difference in meaning, as can be seen in the difference in meaning between (a) and (b) in each example, is perceived from the difference in the in the tone of the terminal vowel in each syntactic unit.

The phenomenon that can be noted from the examples in Table 1 is that the morpheme *n-* can take two different cases: the subjective case or the objective case, depending on the meaning one intends to put across, or depending on the tone of the terminal vowel. In the table, the morpheme assumes that subjective case in (a) and objective case in (b) in each example. As can be seen in (a) in each example, the morpheme takes the subjective case when the terminal vowel has a low tone while, as can be seen in (b) in each example, it takes the objective form when the terminal vowel has a high tone.

Related to the foregoing, the third phenomenon that can be noted from Table 1 is that when the terminal vowel has a high tone and the *n-* assumes the objective case, the subject position is occupied by the second person pronoun. Thus, we suggest that in the sequence: n- + H + H (+H), *n-* is the second person (singular or plural). In this case, *n-* should be viewed as a component of discontinuous morpheme *n-...-e*, and the tone of the last morpheme *-e* (which I have referred as terminal vowel in some cases) should be factored in. This sequence pushes the first person singular to the object position of a syntactic unit. On the other hand, in the sequency: *n-* + H (+H) + L, *n-* is the first person singular. Similarly, in this case, *n-* should be viewed as a component of discontinuous morpheme *n-...-e*, and the tone of the last morpheme *-e* should equally be factored in. In this sequence, there is no lexical item serving as an object.

Furthermore, as already allude to, it can be noted from Table 1 that the morpheme *n-* which is usually taken to be the first person singular in Bantu languages can also serve as a second person (singular or plural) in Tonga, and probably other Bantu languages. The determinant factor on whether the morpheme is used as first person singular or second person is the tone assigned to the syllables succeeding the morpheme *n-*. In fact, the tone assigned to the syllables also determines the semantic out-put of the syntactic unit resulting from the prefixation of the morpheme.

There are cases when the morpheme *n-* only gives the following sequence: *n-* + L + H (+ H). In these cases first, the out-put syntactic unit has one meaning, second, the morpheme *n-* serves a subjective case, third, it serves as a first person singular, fourth, there is no object in the syntactic unit, and fifth, the terminal vowel of the out-put syntactic unit is similar to that of the in-put verb. It seems that this is the default morphosyntactic characteristic of the morpheme *n-*. Examples of this case are provided in Table 2:

Table 2: Prenasalised Tonga verbs B

S/N	In-put simple verb	Out-put syntactic unit
1.	seka 'laugh'	n-sèká 'I laugh'
2.	bala 'read'	n-bàlá > m-bàlá 'I read'
3.	cenga 'lie'	n-cèngá 'I lie'
4.	ccilila 'follow'	n-cìlílá 'I follow'
5.	fwusa 'throw'	n-fwùsá 'I throw'
6.	gonka 'cut'	n-gònká 'I cut'
7.	gusya 'remove'	n-gùsyá 'I remove'
8.	kwela 'pull'	n-kèwlá 'I pull'
9.	komba 'worship'	n-kòmbá 'I worship'
10.	langa 'look'	n-dàngá 'I look'
11.	lumba 'thank'	n-dùmbá 'I forget'
12.	mena 'swallow'	n-mènà 'I swallow'

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13.	mana 'finish'	n-màná 'I finish'
14.	nyonsya 'breast feed'	n-nyònsyá 'I breast-feed'
15.	nyamuna 'lift'	n-nyàmúná 'I lift'
16.	ponya 'heal'	m-pònyá 'I heal'
17.	pandula 'cut open'	m-pàndúlá 'I cut'
18.	sala 'choose'	n-sàlá 'I choose'
19.	sola 'try'	n-sòlá 'I try'
20.	tole 'take'	n-tòlá 'I take'
21.	tanda 'chase'	n-tàndá 'I chase'

The examples in Table 2 show that if the terminal vowel of the out-put syntactic unit is similar to that of the in-put verb, the influence of the morpheme *n-* is minimal, in comparison to its influence when the terminal vowel of the out-put syntactic unit is different from that of the in-put verb. In Table 2, the terminal vowel of the in-put verbs is *–a*, and the vowel of the out-put syntactic unit is also *–a.* In this case, the out-put syntactic unit only has one meaning and one tonal sequence. On the other hand, (as seen in Table 1), if the terminal vowel of the out-put syntactic unit is *–e*, the there are two possible tonal sequences (as already discussed) on the syllables succeeding the morpheme, and each tonal sequence feeds into the semantic out-puts of the syntactic out-puts.

If a comparison is made between the examples in Table 1 and those in Table 2, it can be said that in Table 1, the morpheme *n-* together with the terminal vowel *–e* form a discontinuous morpheme. On the other hand, in Table 2 the morpheme *n-* stands on its own as a morpheme signifying the first person singular. The discontinuous morpheme *n-...-e*, as can be seen from Table 1, is the one which produces a syntactic unit which has two meanings. In the next section, posit a rule for the phenomenon in the examples in Table 1.

b) Prenasalisation rule in Tonga

In this section, I propose a rule which summarises or simplifies the phenomenon in the examples in Table 1.

The rule:

n- + syllable^{H} (+syllable^{H}) + syllable^{H} = first person singular, while n- + syllable^{H} (+syllable^{H}) + syllable^{L} = second person (singular or plural), where H signifies the high tone, and L; low tone.

The rule should be interpreted as follows: when there is a sequence *n-* plus a syllable with a high tone, plus an optional syllable with a high tone, plus another syllable (whose nucleus is *-e*) with high tone, the morpheme *n-* serves as a second person morpheme (together with the nucleus of the last syllable which is always be *–e*, in this case). On the other hand, when there is a sequence *n-* plus a syllable with a high tone, plus an optional syllable with a high tone, plus a syllable (whose nucleus is *-e*) with a low tone, the morpheme *n-* serves as a first person singular (together with the nucleus of the last syllable which is always *–e*). The weakness of this rule is that it is mainly located in the domain of Phonology. This problem stems from the fact that the examples in Table 1 can also be taken to be words because Tonga, just like other Bantu languages, are agglutinative in nature.

The rule I have posited shows that the morpheme *n-* in Tonga should not be taken as a first person singular morpheme only, especially when the terminal vowel of the verbal form it is prefixed to is *–e*; it can also be used as second person (singular or plural), depending on the tone of the terminal vowel; *-e*. It is possible that the phenomenon described in this study is also found in other Bantu languages. As such, I invite linguists to vet prenasalition in different languages so as to establish whether what I have observed in Tonga exists in other languages.

IV. Conclusion

In this study, I have attempted to describe the influence of the morpheme *n-* on Tonga verbs from a Morphosyntactic perspective. Even if the main locus of the study is Morphostyntax, I have also touched on the phonology and semantics aspects relating to the morpheme in an attempt to show that the morpheme *n-* should not only be taken as a first person singular pronoun; rather, in addition, it can also be as second person pronoun. I have argued that in this case, tone is crucial, and in addition, the morpheme should be seen as being part of the discontinuous morpheme; the other component of the discontinuous morpheme being the terminal vowel *–e*.

I have also attempted to provide the two (tonal) sequences which can be considered if one is to appreciate the morphosyntactic influence of the

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morpheme when it is prefixed to a verb. It has been shown in the study that the two sequences serve a very critical role in informing the semantic out-put of the syntactic unit resulting from prefixing the morpheme to a verb. In explaining the phenomenon, I have posited a rule. Owing to a suspicion that the phenomenon discussed in this study is endemic in many other Bantu languages, I have recommended that studies of similar nature as the present one be carried out to establish whether truly this phenomenon is endemic in other Bantu language.

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