

Syntax Seminar (LIN 4930/6932): Object Marking in Bantu Languages

Syllabus

Basic Course Info

Logistical Info

Instructor: Michael Diercks ([website](#))

Email: michael.diercks@uf.edu

(I will likely end up responding from mjkdiercks@gmail.com, you can reach me at either)

Class: MWF 10am-11am:

[Class Zoom Link](#)

Office Hours: by appointment, appointments available at mjkd.youcanbook.me

Office Hours Location:

[Office hours Zoom Link](#)

Class Format:

- Synchronous
 - Zoom discussions of readings and data, during class time
- Asynchronous
 - co-reading of texts via the annotation app hypothes.is
 - Collaborative investigation of Kuria, using tools like Google Drive and Google Docs
 - Class discussion will be recorded for asynchronous access

Relevant Course Links

- [Course Schedule](#)
- [This syllabus](#)
- [hypothesis group](#)
- Guidelines for:
 - [Annotations](#)
 - [Critical Summaries](#)
 - [Final Project](#)
- [Link to Dropbox folder with class recordings](#)

Class Summary

This syntax seminar will introduce you to current developments in generative syntactic theory, focusing specifically on the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995, 2000, 2001). The Minimalist Program attempts to get to the core of the nature of the syntax of human language, seeking to characterize its fundamental cognitive properties. A parallel goal of the course is to expose you to past and current research in a specific empirical domain: we will be investigating object marking constructions in Bantu languages. Many languages have inflectional morphemes that

cross-reference objects in a sentence, such as the object marker *mu-* in the Lubukusu example in (2).

- (1) n-á-bon-a weekesa [Lubukusu]
1sgSM-REM.PST-see-FV 1Wekesa
'I saw Wekesa.'
- (2) n-á-**mu**-bon-a (#weekesa)
1sgSM-PST-1OM-see-FV (#1Wekesa)
'I saw him.' (licit in a context where *Wekesa* is salient in the discourse)

Similar morphemes are sometimes called object agreement and/or object clitics in other languages. A major area of investigation is whether or not object markers can co-occur with overt object noun phrases, and if so, under what conditions. Depending on the outcome, this can raise many interesting theoretical questions.

The Bantu languages turn out to be a highly productive area of research on this topic, as a wide range of interpretive effects are associated with the co-occurrence of an object marker and its associated noun phrase. One example is the emphatic reading illustrated in (3).

- (3) n-aa-**bu**-l-íílé **búu-suma** [Lubukusu]
1sgS-PST-14O-eat-PFV 14.14-ugali
'I DID eat the ugali!'

We will therefore be reading about a range of intersecting areas of theory and data, including the syntax of agreement and the syntax of information structure. These goals intertwine, as understanding the MP will aid you to understand object marking, but the object marking research that we read and discuss will likewise elucidate the principles of the Minimalist Program.

The class will involve reading core research on/in the Minimalist program (original work and overview/textbook type work), reading existing literature on object marking, analyzing novel data on object marking from Kuria (Bantu, Kenya), and constructing potential diagnostic contexts to be evaluated in Kuria. Writing a final term paper on Kuria object marking is one option for the course.

Student Outcomes

1. To understand and be conversant in the basic framework of the Minimalist Program
2. To become relatively proficient at reading and interpreting original syntactic research, including being able to understand core contributions of a paper (although usually without understanding everything discussed in a paper).
3. To become proficient at criticizing a research paper/proposal, but also balancing this with understanding the contribution of that paper/proposal and valuing the paper/proposal as a balance of the two.

4. To gain/hone skills for writing syntactic research papers, including:
 - a. Summarizing previous work
 - b. Organizing, evaluating, and presenting data
 - c. Utilizing syntactic evidence to support or critique a hypothesis
 - d. Building a syntactic argument
5. To deepen your understanding of how theory informs our understanding of empirical puzzles in a language (especially understudied languages), and how those empirical puzzles inform our theory as well.
6. To gain an appreciation for the almost-unfathomable detailed complexity of human syntactic knowledge.
7. In terms of transferrable skills, these are the kinds of intellectual and practical skills I've seen students develop in this course:
 - a. A deepened understanding of the interplay between theory and data, and therefore deeper comfort levels interpreting abstractions in light of evidence, and adjusting the abstractions in light of evidence.
 - b. Skills at summarizing complex information in very brief formats.
 - c. Higher comfort levels with partial/developing understanding of a complex situation, and therefore increasing courage to ask for help filling gaps in knowledge.
 - d. A robust understanding of the nature of knowledge as partial (there's stuff we don't know) and dynamic (it changes), yet real (there are ways to have confidence that we actually know things).

Evaluation:

Intro to Skills-based Grading

- This class is using a form of grading/evaluation that is known as skills-based grading (SBG), aka standards-based grading.
 - ◆ In traditional grading: you get a score on each task, and a weighted average of these is your final grade.
 - ◆ In SBG, each task provides an opportunity to demonstrate proficiency on a variety of skills—and, of course, an opportunity to learn by doing.
 - ◆ Grades are not averages of your performances on tasks: they are a measure of whether the intended skills/standards are demonstrated.
- In this course, there are 5 categories of skills/standards that you have to demonstrate (along with timeliness, see below), with a variety of individual skills/standards in each one. The [skills/standards tab in the course schedule](#) explains what parts of the course are opportunities to demonstrate which skills. The categories are:
 - ◆ Participation Standards (for 1. daily class events, and for 2. writing)
 - ◆ Summary Skills
 - ◆ Writing Skills
 - ◆ Technical Skills

- The analytical and writing skills are [explained in this document \(forthcoming\)](#).
- This course has a [specialized grading scheme](#) based on the total demonstrations of skills/standards that are available.
- Throughout the course, there are multiple opportunities to demonstrate each skill.
 - ◆ To help you see how you're doing, I'll also let you know when you're "approaching proficiency" on a skill in your writing, though this doesn't count towards the grade.
 - ◆ I'll show you what this looks like in the gradebook, and how you can use it to track your progress.
 - ◆ The analytical and writing skills are explained in [this document \(link forthcoming\)](#).
- This sounds complicated—why do it?
 - ◆ The short answer: a growing body of research suggests that traditional grading is inaccurate at assessing mastery, and less effective in promoting learning.
 - ◆ Students tend to like SBG because they know which skills to focus on (and don't waste time worrying about things they're already proficient in) and get more opportunities to practice things they don't understand.
 - ◆ The intention is that it is less stressful and focuses energy on the subject matter.
 - ◆ Plus, I think it's actually not that complicated once we get used to it.
- Timeliness Standards
 - ◆ Within SBG there are not strict requirements that skills/standards be demonstrated on a particular timeline: all human growth takes individualized trajectories and this allows for that.
 - ◆ There is flexibility built in for both how/when skills are demonstrated
 - ◆ That said, as a group we cannot proceed through the course without staying roughly on the same schedule: the timeliness standard is intended to prompt this.
 - On-time assignments count for 0 days late.
 - Any assignment after the assigned time on the due date counts as 1 day late, as does anything turned in the next day (up until 11:59pm).
 - The evaluation of timeliness is separate from the evaluation of the work itself, but creates a threshold effect for grades, noted in the [Grading Scheme tab](#) of the course schedule.
 - ◆ The idea is that high grades require keeping up with the course overall.
 - ◆ This is my first time using this, so if it creates unintended effects, I will adjust it (only ever in your grade's favor, never to its detriment)

Writing Expectations

Because one of the course goals is to give you a forum to grow and improve in linguistic writing and specifically syntactic writing, papers are graded on form, style, and presentation as well as on content. That is to say, you are graded on your writing along with the technical aspects of syntax.

Critical Summaries: A major goal of this class is to give you experience distilling large and complicated arguments to their core components, and to communicate these clearly. (This is a task you will likely use in many areas of your professional lives later on.) This comes through in the “Critical Summary” task. Crucially, “critical” here does not mean that you are mainly critiquing, but rather that you are applying critical thinking and analysis in summarizing the paper. The [separate instructions for Critical Summaries](#) explains this in more depth.

Final Project: There are two main options for final projects: a student-choice project, or writing up a paper about Kuria object marking. [The project is explained here.](#)

COURSE POLICIES

Canvas is the central repository for this course. Readings, assignments, and other course-related documents are posted. Anything hosted elsewhere (e.g. Dropbox, Google, etc) will be linked to from Canvas. Grades will be recorded in the Gradebook on Canvas. Please confirm that the grades recorded in Canvas are accurate to your understanding, and let me know if you see any discrepancies.

Email should be used for communications with me.

Office hours will be held by Zoom (link above).

Class recordings will be [posted on Dropbox](#).

Announcements regarding class will be made either in class or via a Canvas announcement that will also be sent to your email. You are responsible for knowing about announcements made in either of these venues.

Participation in the course is a critical aspect of seminar courses, and as such participation standards make up a large portion of your grade (critical summaries and annotations). You are held accountable for your reading via annotations and via critical summaries.

Annotations of readings will be performed via [hypothes.is](#), at the reading links provided in the course schedule. [Instructions for annotations are provided here.](#)

Academic honesty: All students are expected to adhere to the standards of academic honesty as laid out in the [Student Honor Code](#). Students are therefore expected to not participate in any form of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism and cheating but extending to all actions specified in the Honor Code. I take academic dishonesty very seriously, and it will be reported to the appropriate office.

Regarding disability-related accommodations: Please arrange for accommodations through the appropriate office at your school. I encourage communicating with me as soon as you are aware of your need for accommodations so we can make appropriate arrangements, but I will also request that you arrange the accommodations officially through the school as well.