

Explaining the synchronic variation of Bantu prohibitives

Maud Devos & Daniël Van Olmen

Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren – Belgium
University of Antwerp - Belgium

In this paper, we are concerned with the expression of negative imperatives or prohibitives in Bantu languages, i.e. those constructions that appeal to the hearer(s) to stop or to refrain from doing something.

*Most Bantu languages exhibit just two positive imperative strategies: imperatives (*VB-á) and subjunctives (*SCd-VB-é) (Meeussen 1967). In contrast, our study of the prohibitive in a geographically diversified sample of one hundred Bantu languages (Nurse 2007) reveals five distinct strategies: negative imperatives, negative subjunctives, (negative) auxiliary structures, negative indicative tenses and infinitives with negative particles. In line with van der Auwera & Lejeune's (2005) worldwide findings, the combination of the imperative with basic clausal negation is not the most frequent strategy. It is even the least frequent type in our sample.*

The first aim of this paper is to describe the different prohibitive strategies in Bantu as a whole, with special attention to matters of analogy and of grammaticalization. Next, we focus on the reflection of the global distinction between two positive imperative strategies and five prohibitive ones in the synchronic variation within individual languages. Zulu, for example, has four different more or less conventionalized ways to convey a prohibitive (Poulos 1998). Finally, we propose and illustrate at least three explanations for the variation: 1. Prohibitives are shown to cover various semantic or functional types (Birjulin & Xrakovskij 2001) such as preventives and cessatives, which may be fertile ground for new constructions; 2. Prohibitive speech acts are argued to be even more face-threatening than positive imperative speech acts (De Clerck 2006). The need for new (and more polite) constructions (like subjunctives) is thus especially strong in the former; 3. In a number of languages, the clear preference for preverbal negation in directives (Horn 1989) plays a role.