

Not cut to fit? Zero-coded passives in African Languages

Friederike Lüpke & Alexander Cobbinah

University of London, SOAS - UK

It is well known that the wider the data base for the investigation of human language is, the weaker universal claims about the structure of possible languages tend to be. The talk will explore a seemingly cross-linguistically rare phenomenon whose existence has consequences on our understanding of language by investigating the passive construction typical for the West-African Mande languages. The presentation will be based mainly on data from the endangered Mande language Jalonke (Guinea) and Bambara, another Mande language spoken as a lingua franca in Mali and adjacent countries. Passives in these two languages are noteworthy for the absence of any morphological coding, which is taken to be an obligatory feature of passives in most definitions of this construction. Yet, the constructions in question are best analysed as passives according to a number of diagnostics, such as frequency of occurrence, productivity, discourse distribution as well as semantic criteria. The talk will argue that marginally attested phenomena such as the zero-coded passives are often overlooked by typologists because they don't fit cross-linguistic definitions for the category in question and are therefore not labelled accordingly. In consequence, these definitions do not take these phenomena into account, resulting in their fallacious exclusion. The talk will argue that linguistic typology and theory building should be more aware of such phenomena. To this end, the talk will introduce the diagnostics used to analyse the Jalonke and Bambara passives as such and then give a typological overview of constructions in a number of African languages that are candidates for morphologically unmarked passives.