

The Phrase In Xitsonga And Sepedi: Implications For Language Learning

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Abstract

The aim of this article was to compare and describe the phrase in Xitsonga and Sepedi. The article also discusses the implications of the phrase for the learning of one language by speakers of the other language. Data was collected through autoethnography, which allowed the researchers to self-collect data as native speakers of the two languages. The article is underpinned by the head parameter, the X-bar model and the pro-drop theory, which account for the properties of phrases. The results of the study reveal that the two languages exhibit two internal structures of the headship of phrases: the phrasal, and the head levels; and that both are head-first languages. It is also found that in both languages, the phrase, which is manifested through lexical categories, take the form of either single words or groups of related words. Furthermore, data shows that the head-modifier dichotomy in the phrases of both languages can be examined in terms of distributional, morphosyntactic, technical and semantic features. In addition, nominal and locative phrases are identified as special kinds of phrases; and that the head-modifier distinction of phrases agree in both noun class and number in both languages. It is also observed that it is possible to identify headless noun phrases; and that the noun class system is at the heart of the unity of phrases in both languages. Finally, the results show that the similarity in the structure of the phrase in Xitsonga and Sepedi has implications for language learning.

Keywords: phrase; head parameter; x-bar theory; pro-drop theory; headship.

Introduction

Xitsonga and Sepedi, which are spoken mainly in the northern parts of South Africa, are two of the country's eleven official languages. The former comprises at least three distinct but mutually intelligible subgroups, namely Tsonga/Shangaan, Tshwa, and Ronga, which are widely spoken in Zimbabwe and southern Mozambique as a lingua franca (Zerbian, 2007), and the latter, which is also spoken in Botswana, is mutually intelligible to Setswana and Sesotho (Zerbian, 2006), which are also official languages in South Africa. Xitsonga and Sepedi are mutually unintelligible, and therefore, unrelated, at least, from a linguistic point of view. However, both are identified by

the noun class system, which is a key criterion in the identification of Bantu languages (Miti, 2006). From this broader theoretical perspective, the two languages have a common ancestor, and consequently, have more underlying commonalities than dissimilarities. The aim of this article is to compare and describe the phrase in the two languages. The article argues that the noun class system has a major influence in the phrasal construction of both languages, and that the internal phrasal similarities between the two languages has implications for language learning.

The structure of phrases in Xitsonga and Sepedi

Apart from phonemes, morphemes and words, languages are made up larger constituents known as phrases (Kim and Sells, 2008), which can neither constitute nor act as a sentence (Radford, 1981). Specifically, a phrasal expression comprises either a single word, or a

grammatically ordered groups of related words that functionally belong together as a meaningful unit (Evans and Green, 2006; Verspoor and Sauter, 2009). Consider the following respective examples in both Xitsonga and Sepedi.

- (1) a. Vafana/ (one-word phrase) (Xitsonga)
 Bašemane (Sepedi)
 ‘Boys’
- b. Yindlu ya mabyasi leyikulu/ (four-word phrase) (Xitsonga)
 Ntlo ya mabjang ye kgolo (five-word phrase) (Sepedi)
 House of grass big
 big thatched roof house’ ‘A

The expressions in (1a) and (1b) above can be recognised as one-word and four-word phrases in the two languages. Each of the expressions functions as a grammatical and meaningful unit. The nouns vafana/bašemane ‘boys’, for example, represent noun phrases. In addition, the Xitsonga constituent **yindlu ya** mabyasi **leyikulu** ‘a big thatched house’ is a unified four-word phrase whose adjective leyikulu agrees with the noun yindlu in terms of noun class and number. In the same vein, the Sepedi string ntlo ya mabjang ye kgolo ‘a big thatched house’ is also an integrated five-word phrase whose qualificative particle ye and the adjective kgolo ‘big’ is in agreement with the noun ntlo ‘house’. Again, both are singular and belong to noun class 9. In short, the data above suggest that there is no limit to the length of a phrase. There are different types of phrases in Xitsonga and Sepedi.

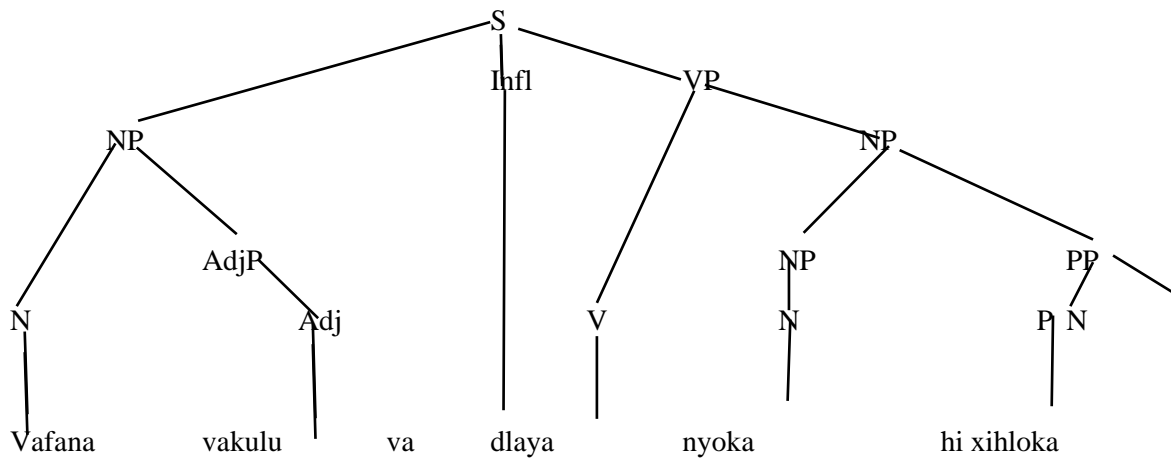
Types of phrases

There are many types of phrases in both Xitsonga and Sepedi. Consider the following examples:

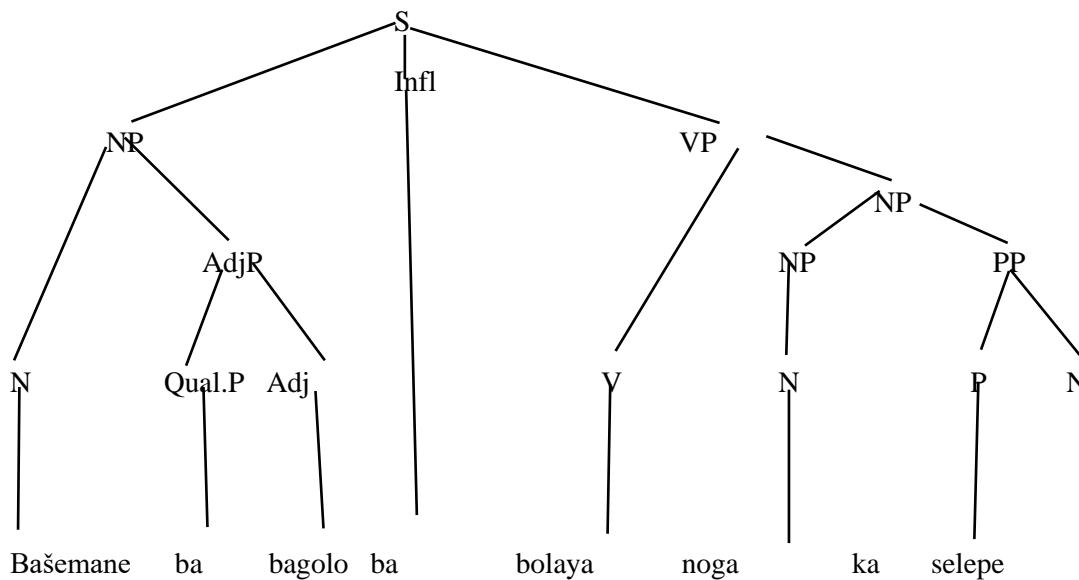
- (2) a. Vafana vakulu va dlaya nyoka hi xihloka.
 (Xitsonga)
 Boys older Agr kill snake with axe.
 ‘Older boys kill a snake with an axe’.
- b. Bašemane ba bagolo ba bolaya noga ka selepe.
 (Sepedi)
 Boys Agr older Agr kill snake with axe.
 ‘Older boys kill a snake with an axe’.

The sentences in (2a and b) above can be illustrated in tree diagrams in (3) and (4) below:

(3)



(4)



In the tree diagrams in (3) and (4) above, it is clear that the AdjPs vakulu/ba bagolo 'older people' are located inside the NPs vafana vakulu/bašemane ba bagolo 'older boys', and the PPs hi xihloka/ ka selepe 'with an axe' appear inside the NPs nyoka hi xihloka/noga ka selepe 'snake with an axe', which are located inside the VPs dlaya nyoka hi xihloka/bolaya noga ka selepe 'kill a snake with an axe'. Notably, in Sepedi, the adjective bagolo 'old

ones' is preceded by and agrees with the qualificative particle (QP) ba, in terms of both class (noun class 2) and number. More importantly, the inflections va/ba, which occur between the NP and the VP, unlike in languages such as English, are separate agreement markers (Agr). The underlying regularities in terms of phrase structures in both Xitsonga and Sepedi can be summarised in (5) below.

(5) Phrase	example	gloss	equivalent
AdjP ba bagolo	vakulu/	older-people	'older people'
NP	vafana vakulu/ bagolo	older boys	'older boys' bašemane ba
PP	hi xihloka/	with an axe	'with an axe' ka selepe
VP	dlaya nyoka hi xihloka/ bolaya noga ka selepe	kill snake with axe	'kill snake with an axe'

Phrases in Xitsonga and Sepedi also take the form of ideophonic phrases (IdeoPs), adverbial phrases (AdvPs) and locative phrases (LocPs). Consider the following:

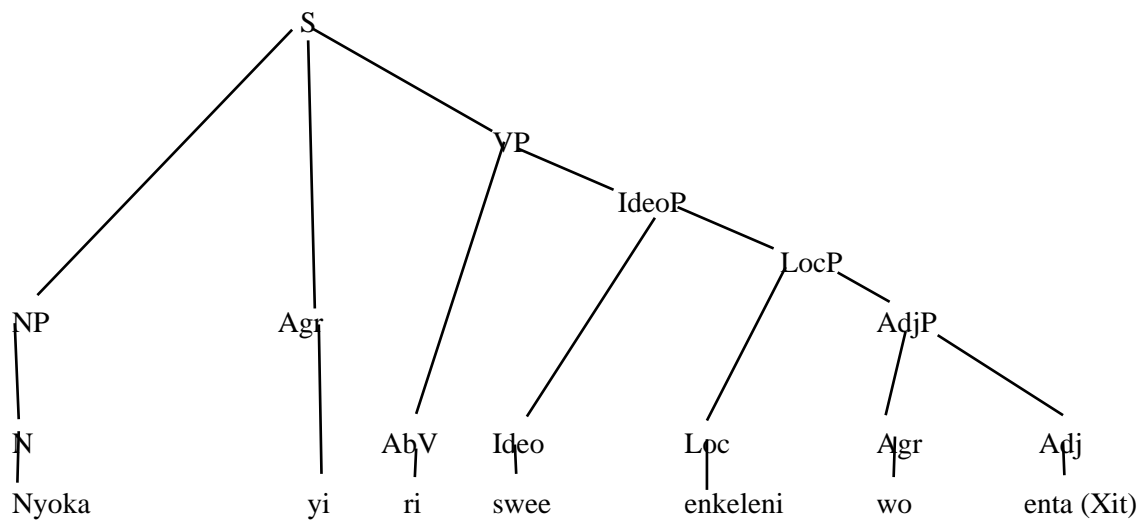
- (6) a. Nyoka yi ri swee, enkeleni wo enta. (Xitsonga)
 Noga e re sobe, moleteng wa go sobeletša. (Sepedi)
 Snake Agr do hole, enter! 'A
 snake enters a deep hole'.
- b. Namuntlha ku hisa ngopfu. (Xitsonga)
 Lehono go fiša kudu. (Sepedi)
 Today it-is hot very-much. 'It
 is very hot today'.

From the expressions in (6) (a) and (b) above, the following ideophonic (IdeoP), adverbial (AdvP) and locative (LocP) phrases can be observed.

(7) Type of phrase	example	gloss	equivalent
IdeoP	swee/ sobe	Ideo-enter	'enter'
AdvP	ngopfu/ kudu/	very-much	'very much'
LocP	enkeleni wo enta/ moleteng wa go sobeletša deep	in-a-hole of	'in a deep hole'

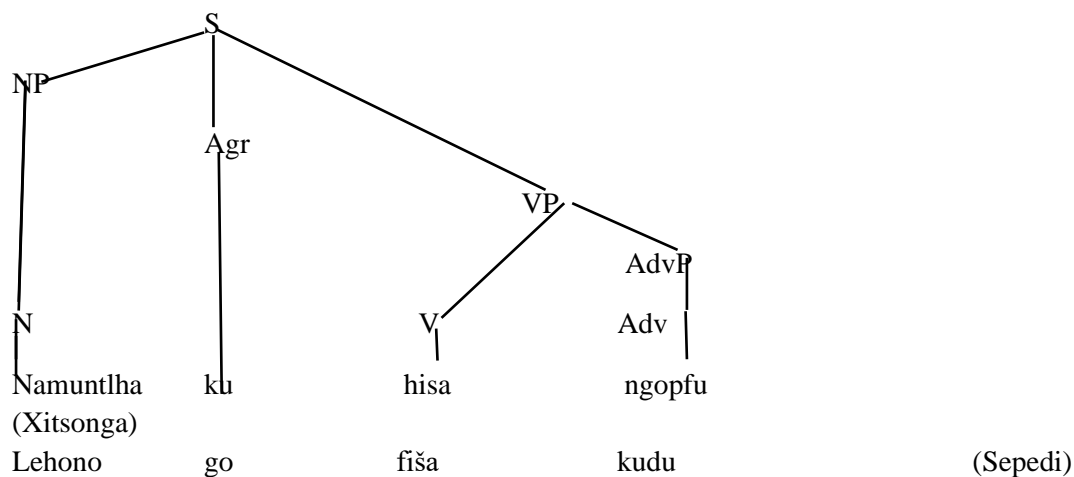
The IdeoP swee 'enter', the AdvP ngopfu 'very-much' and the LocP enkeleni wo enta 'in a deep hole' can be represented in a tree diagram as follows:

(8)



The adverbial phrase can be illustrated as follows:

(9)



From the foregoing, it is apparent that there are many different types of phrases in Xitsonga and Sepedi, including noun phrases, verb phrases, adjectival phrases, adverbial phrases, prepositional phrases, locative phrases, and ideophonic phrases. But phrases can be described in terms of features.

Features of phrases

A phrase comprises a head (Rahmani and Abudolmanafi, 2012), otherwise also known as the syntactic head (Nespor and Sandler, 2017), which is the main (Kim and Sells, 2008), central

or dominant idea of the phrase in question, thereby projecting the identity of the phrase; and two different kinds of modifiers, namely, specifiers and complements (Towell and Hawkins, 1994; Fromkin, et al., 2018). It is heads of phrases that are responsible for the selection of appropriate modifiers (Evans and Green, 2006). Stated differently, the modifiers orient to the head by modifying it (Delahunty and Garvey, 2010). Phrases are named after heads because the categorical features of the head are projected to and represented in the phrasal construction (Kwokwo, 2017). In this

way, the head, which is usually realised by verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and in Xitsonga and Sepedi, also by ideophones and locatives around which it is built, controls the entire phrase in which it occurs (Fromkin, et al., 2018). But heads of phrases can be discussed in terms of a number of features (Hoeksema, 1992).

In terms of the distributional feature, the head of X is part of the same distribution as X. Thus, the head of the phrase should be intersubstitutable with the whole phrase in question.

- (10) Yindlu ya mabyasi
 (Xitsonga)
 Ntlo ya mabjang
 (Sepedi)
 House of grass.

‘A thatched roof house’.

In the genitive construction in (10) above, the NPs *yindlu ya mabyasi* and *ntlo ya mabjang* ‘a thatched roof house’ can be intersubstitutable with *yindlu* and *ntlo* ‘house’, respectively. In other words, instead of saying: *leyi i yindlu ya mabyasi* or *ye ke ntlo ya mabjang* ‘this is a thatched roof house’, we can still say *leyi i yindlu/ye ke ntlo* ‘this is a house’.

Secondly, heads of phrases can be examined in terms of their morphosyntactic features, which identify the head as the locus of inflection in the case of pluralisation. In *yindlu ya mabyasi/ntlo ya mabjang* ‘a thatched roof house’, the words *yindlu/ntlo* ‘house’ and not *mabyasi/mabjang* can be pluralised as *tindlu/dintlo* ‘houses’. Thus, the phrase is about the *tindlu/dintlo* ‘houses’ and not *mabyasi/mabjang* ‘grass’.

In the third place, an NP can be studied from the point of view of the technical definition, which states that the head of X is the part that determines the category of X. This entails that it is the head of a phrase that determines the category of that phrase. Since the nouns *yindlu/ntlo* ‘house’ are recognised as heads of

the phrases *yindlu ya mabyasi/ ntlo ya mabjang* ‘a thatched roof house’, then *yindlu ya mabyasi/ ntlo ya mabjang* ‘a thatched roof house’ are noun phrases. This also means that if the head of a particular phrase is an adjective, then the phrase becomes an adjectival phrase; and if an ideophone heads a phrase, then it becomes an ideophonic phrase. For this reason, since the heads *yindlu/ntlo* ‘house’ are nouns, the phrase *yindlu ya mabyasi/ ntlo ya mabjang* are noun phrases.

Lastly, in terms of the semantic definition, the head of A is a hypernym of A. In the phrases *yindlu ya mabyasi/ ntlo ya mabjang* ‘a thatched roof house’, the words *yindlu/ntlo* ‘house’ are the hypernym of the phrase. Consequently, *yindlu* and *ntlo*, and not *mabyasi* and *mabjang* are the heads because they are the hypernyms of the respective phrases. All the other elements of the phrases, such as *ya mabyasi/ya mabjang* ‘of grass’ revolve around the heads *yindlu/ntlo* because each can minimally stand for the whole phrase (Rahmani and Abudolmanafi, 2012). In other words, the word class of the head determines the word class of the entire phrase. Since the word class is a noun, then the whole phrase is a noun phrase. This finds support in Tallerman’s (2014) assertion that the head bears the most important semantic information. At this stage, it is instructive to shift attention to the properties of the headship of phrases.

The properties of the headship of a phrase

The properties of the headship of a phrase can be accounted for by a fundamental setup shared by every single human language known as the Head Position Parameter, or simply the head parameter (Christophe, et al., 2003; Ghorbanpour, 2016). Parameters are binary values concerning the location of the head in relation to modifiers (Maleki, 2006). The head values capture the manner in which languages contrast in terms of the position of heads within phrases (Haegeman, 2008; Inaba and Tokizaki, 2018) because languages differ regarding the order in which the head of a phrasal construction and its modifiers are placed (Bley-

Vroman and Chaudron, 1988; Kwokwo, 2017). The function of the parameter is to capture this contrast or binary.

The head parameter theory is based on the cross-linguistic tendency for the head to occur in a fixed position concerning its modifiers, and for this order to be the same across all phrases within a language (Ghorbanpour, 2016). The parameter specifies whether the head of a phrase appears initially or towards the end of a phrase depending on a language (Maleki, 2006). A distinction can be made between head-first or head-initial languages, on the one

hand; and head-final or head-last languages, on the other (Hoeksema, 1992; Polinsky, 2012; Ghorbanpour, 2016). Whereas the hierarchical relations between the head and modifiers are regarded as universal because every phrase must possess a lexical head that determines the nature and function of various categories within the phrase (Chomsky, 1988; Kwokwo, 2017), the linear relations are not (Evans and Green, 2006).

The relationship between the head of a phrase and its modifiers can be illustrated as follows:

(11) Phrase	specifier	head	complement	
NP	tin'wana	tinyoka	hi xihloka	(Xits)
	dingwe	dinoga	ka selepe	(Sep)
	'some'	'snakes'	'with an axe'	
PP	tinyoka	hi	xihloka	(Xits)
	dinoga	ka	selepe	(Sep)
	snakes	'with'	'an axe'	
VP	u	dlaya	nyoka hi xihloka	(Xits)
	o	bolaya	noga ka selepe	(Sep)
	1sg.Agr.	kill	snake with axe	
AdjP	vanhu	vakulu	ngopfu	(Xits)
	batho	ba bagolo	kudu	(Sep)
	'people'	'older'	'very'	
AdvP	vakulu	ngopfu	-----	(Xits)
	ba bagolo	kudu	-----	(Sep)
	'older'	'very'		
LocP	nghena	enkeleni	wo enta	(Xits)
	tsena	moleteng	wa go sobeletša	(Sep)
	'enter'	'in-the-hole'	'deep'	
IdeoP	nyoka	swee	enkeleni	(Xits)
	noga	sobe	moleteng	(Sep)
	'snake'	'enter'	'in-the-hole'	
IP	vafana	va	-----	Xitsonga
	Bašemane	ba	-----	Sepedi
	2pl.	2pl.Infl.		

In the data in (11) above, the main idea of the NPs tinyoka hi xihloka/dinoga ka selepe is the noun itself, and the central ideas of the PPs hi xihloka and ka selepe 'with an axe' are prepositions hi and ka 'with', respectively.

Likewise, the VPs dlaya nyoka hi xihloka/ba bolaya noga ka selepe 'kill a snake with an axe' are dominated by the verbs dlaya/bolaya 'kill' and so on. This state of affairs supports the assertion that phrases are projected from lexical

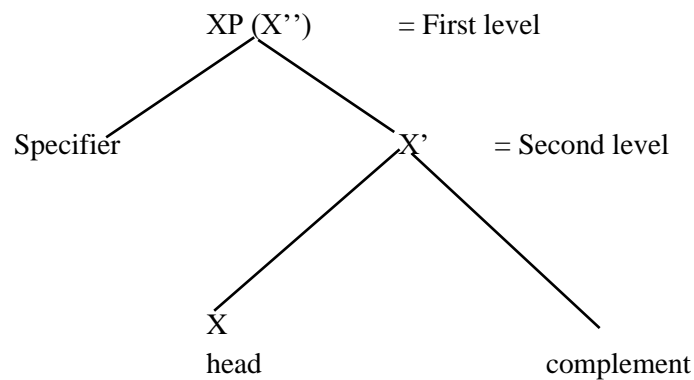
categories such as nouns (e.g nyoka/noga), verbs (e.g dlaya/bolaya), adjectives (e.g vakulu/ba bagolo), prepositions (e.g hi/ka) (Kim and Sells, 2008) and so on. Each of these lexical categories are recognised as heads of the respective phrases, which not only determine the meanings of the respective phrases (Rahmani and Abudolmanafi, 2012), but also act as the only necessary elements of each of those phrases. In fact, the heads of the respective phrases regulate the syntactic or grammatical category of the phrases, thereby determining the internal grammar of each of the phrase (Delahunty and Garvey, 2010). Since heads of phrases make the phrase to be what it is, they can, therefore, not be omitted (Tallerman, 2014).

The data in (11) further alludes to the fact that it is possible to identify specifiers and complements in Xitsonga and Sepedi phrasal expressions. On the one hand, the head of the NPs tinyoka hi xihloka/dinoga ka selepe ‘snakes with an axe’, for example, are specified by tin’wana/dingwe ‘some’. The VPs dlaya nyoka hi xihloka/bolaya noga ka selepe ‘kill snake with axe’ are specified not by the noun mufana/mošemane ‘boy’, but by the agreement markers u/o (1sg.Agr.) and so on. On the other hand, NPs can be complemented by adjectives (e.g vanhu vakulu/batho **ba bagolo**– ‘older people’ and direct objects in the case of transitive verbs (e.g nyoka hi **xihloka**/noga ka **selepe** ‘snake with an axe’. Complements, which can be seen as complete phrases in themselves (Cook and Newson, 1988), can also take the forms of prepositional phrases (e.g hi xihloka/ka selepe – ‘with an axe’, noun phrases (e.g xihloka/selepe – ‘an axe’) and adjectival phrases (e.g wo enta/wa go sobeletša). It is evident that complements appear on the right side of their respective heads in both Xitsonga and Sepedi. For this reason, it can be concluded that the two languages are head-first languages.

The fact that heads of phrases appear consistently on the right of the phrases in relation to their complements in both Xitsonga and Sepedi is supported by literature, which suggests, for example, that English is a predominantly head-initial language; and Japanese is a head-final language (Bley-Vroman and Chaudron, 1988). However, the universal nature of this rule is problematic. Chinese, for example, parameterise on both ends: NP objects follow the verb (head-initial); the object of a PP follows the preposition; but the complement to a noun in an NP precedes it (Bley-Vroman and Chaudron, 1988). Thus, different values are applicable at every category. So, although Xitsonga and Sepedi represent clear-cut examples of the head parameter rule, the case of Chinese lends credence to Dryer’s (2004) observation that the notion of headedness of phrases, in particular of noun phrases, cannot be construed as universal.

Apart from the head parameter, the relationship between the various elements of a phrase can also be accounted for by a second linguistic universal known as the X-bar theory, or X-bar schema (Cook and Newson, 1988), which relates to the levels between the head X and the phrasal level XP (Evans and Green, 2006). In terms of this model, all types of phrases need two internal levels of structure referred to as X to indicate that they bear the same categorial status or word class as X, but are somewhere between the word and the phrase. Thus, level X is a variable that can be instantiated by any lexical category. So, if X is a verb, XP is a verb phrase; and if X is a preposition, then XP is a prepositional phrase (Evans and Green, 2006). In terms of this model, X’ comprises the head and possible specifiers, and X’ is made up of the head X and possible complements (Cook and Newson, 1988). The X-bar theory can be illustrated in (12) below:

(12)

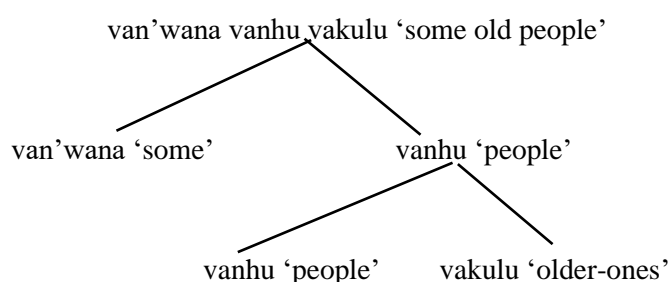


As represented by X, the head is the obligatory element of the phrase, which not only projects the identity of the phrase, but also plays a crucial role in selecting appropriate specifiers and complements (Evans and Green, 2006). Hence, specifiers and complements are not mandatory elements of phrases (Towell and Hawkins, 1994). On the one hand, specifiers “modify the [head + constituent] to form another constituent: [specifier + [head + constituent]]” (Towell and Hawkins, 1994, p.62). In this way, specifiers contain unique elements that occur at one of the ‘edges’ of the phrase, and belong alongside the X’ (Evans and Green, 2006). On the other hand, complements

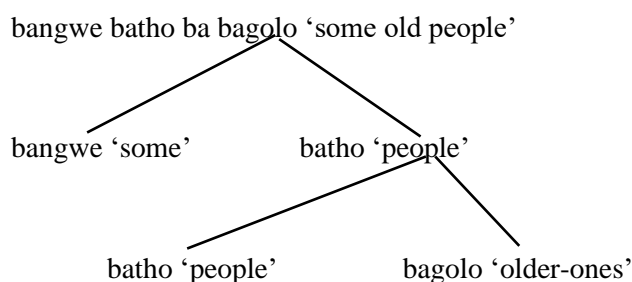
are those elements in the phrase that are closely connected with the head or the lexical category itself, and form a constituent with it (Towell and Hawkins, 1994; Evans and Green, 2006). They, therefore, belong alongside the X. In fact, the head and its complements are sisters in the phrase (Cook and Newson, 1988) because they complete the meaning of the head (Evans and Green, 2006).

Consider the representations of the phrases van’wana vanhu vakulu and bangwe batho ba bagolo ‘some older people’ in Xitsonga and Sepedi in the X-bar models in (13a) and (13b) below, respectively.

(13) a.



(13) b.



As can be observed from the X-bar structures above, the NPs *van'wana vanhu vakulu* and *bangwe batho ba bagolo* 'some older people' comprise two internal structures apiece. The first structure is specified by the lexical item *van'wana/bangwe* 'some', and the second is complemented by *vakulu/ba bagolo* 'older-ones'. The question becomes: how do heads of phrases select their complements?

The role of category selection in phrasal modification

Heads of phrases select their complements through a process known as category selection (c-selection), which can be described as the ability by a lexical item to determine the type of complement that it may have (Cook and Newson, 1988). The plural noun class 2 NPs *vanhu/batho* 'people', for example, can c-select the adjectives *vakulu/ba bagolo* 'older-people' and not *yikulu/legolo* 'big-ones' because *vakulu/ba bagolo* are associated with the same

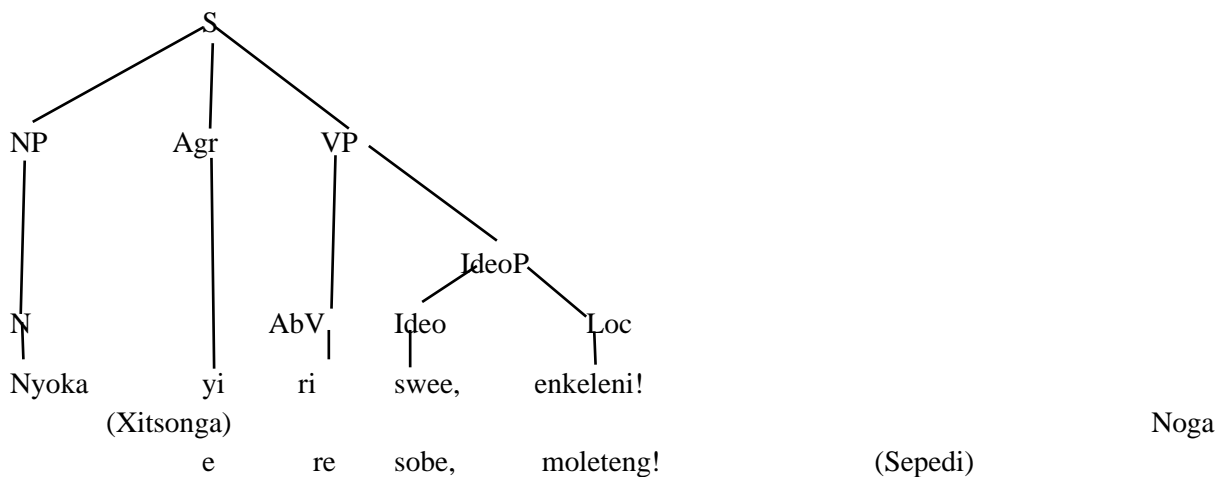
noun classes as the nouns, respectively. Although the adjectives *leyikulu/le legolo* have the same respective semantic content as *vakulu/ba bagolo*, the difference is that the nouns and the adjectives are linked to different noun classes. Thus, the use of the adjectives *leyikulu* and *le legolo* with the respective noun classes 2 results in grammatically incoherent phrasal units. For example, **vanhu letikulu/*batho le legolo*. In the same vein, the ideophones *swee/sobe* 'enter' c-select the locative complements *enkeleni/moleteng* 'in-the-hole', as opposed to, for example, nouns *nkele/molete* 'hole'. It makes no sense, for instance, to say: **nyoka yi ri swee, nkele* or **noga e ile sobe, molete* 'a snake enters hole'.

According to Cook and Newson (1988), the c-selection process is represented in the lexicon in terms of the subcategorisation frame as follows:

- (14) NP: *vanhu/batho* [____ 2Adj] (Xitsonga/Sepedi)
- IdeoP: *swee/sobe* [____ Loc] (Xitsonga/Sepedi)

The lexical entries above imply that the nouns vanhu/batho and the ideophones swee/sobe c-select noun classes 2 adjectival complements and unspecified locative complements, respectively. With respect to the IdeoP, this means that it is not possible for an object to be

(15)



At this point, it is important to consider both the noun phrase and the locative phrase as special kinds of phrases.

The headship of noun phrases

- (16) a. Vafana vakulu/ bašemane ba bagolo (Xitsonga/Sepedi) 'older boys'
 2boys 2older / 2boys 2QP. 2older boys'
- b. Vafana vambirhi/bašemane ba babedi (Xitsonga/Sepedi) 'two boys'
 2boys 2two / 2boys 2QP. 2two boys'

The NPs in (16 a and b) above suggest that where the phrase is an NP, both the head and the adjectival or numeral complement must agree in class. In other words, where the head is a noun class 2, the adjectival or numeral complement must also be associated with the

- (17) a. *Munhu vakulu / *Motho ba bagolo (Xitsonga/Sepedi)
 1sg.person. 2pl.older 1sg.person. 2QP. 2pl.older
- b. *Vafana yimbirhi /*bašemane le lebedi (Xitsonga/Sepedi)
 2pl.boys 4pl.two 2pl.boys 4.QP. 4pl.two

The NPs *munhu vakulu and *motho ba bagolo in (17a) above deviate from grammar rules of both languages because the heads munhu and

described as having the property swee/sobe unless an animate object enters a particular location. The status of enkeleni and moleteng as respective locative complements of Xitsonga and Sepedi ideophones swee and sobe can also be illustrated diagrammatically as follows:

Noun phrases are unique phrases, and therefore deserve special attention. Consider the following NPs.

same noun class. This also applies in terms of number (singular or plural). The following NPs cannot be considered grammatical and meaningful units because there is no agreement between the head and the complements in terms of both class and number.

motho, on the one hand, and the complements vakulu and ba bagolo, on the other hand, do not agree in both noun class and number,

respectively. Whereas the respective nouns belong to noun class 1, the adjectives belong to noun class 2. This explains why the nouns are singular in each case, and the adjectives are plural. More importantly, this also indicates that the adjectives in both Xitsonga and Sepedi possess the feature number. Similarly, the NPs in (17b) are in violation of rules of grammar in the sense that the nouns *vafana* and *bašemane* belong to noun class 2 and are thus plural in number, and the numerals *leyimbirhi* and *le lebedi* while also plural, belong to noun class 5.

It is revealing that heads of phrases govern features such as noun class, number and in

(18) Meaningful LocPs

a. 3sg.enkeleni. 3sg.wa nyoka
3sg.wa noga
the-hole of snake
'in the hole of a snake'

b. 4eminkeleni-pl. 4pl.ya. nyoka
4pl.ya. noga
in-the-holes of snake
the holes of a snake'

meaningless LocPs

*3sg.enkeleni. 4pl.ya nyoka (Xitsonga) 3sg.moleteng
*3sg.moleteng 4pl.ya noga (Sepedi) in-

*4eminkeleni-pl. 3sg.wa nyoka (Xitsonga) 4meleteng-pl.
*4meleteng-pl. 3sg.wa noga (Sepedi)

'in

The Xitsonga LocPs *enkeleni wa nyoka* 'in the hole of a snake' and *eminkeleni ya nyoka* 'in the holes of a snake', on the one hand, and their Sepedi counterparts, *moleteng wa noga* and *meleteng ya noga*, on the other, are grammatically correct because the heads of the respective locatives (e.g *eminkeleni*) and their possessive markers (e.g *ya*) agree in noun class and number. However, the LocPs **enkeleni ya nyoka* and **moleteng ya noga* depart from grammar rules because there is no agreement between the head *enkeleni* and the possessive marker *ya*, on the one hand, and *moleteng* and *ya*, on the other, in terms of both noun class and number. The respective heads are singular and belong to noun class 3, and the respective possessive markers are plural and associated with noun class 4. On the same note, the heads of the LocPs in **eminkeleni wa nyoka* and **meleteng wa noga* are plural, whereas their possessive marker *wa* is singular. Consequently, there is no grammatical

some cases, person, of their complements in noun and locative phrases: if the head is singular, the NP must be singular; if the head is plural, so must be the NP. If the head is a class 1 noun, the adjectival or numeral complement should also be associated with the same noun class. Apart from the NP, the second type of phrase that deserves focused attention is the locative phrase.

The headship of locative phrases

Heads of LocPs must also agree with their possessive complements in terms of noun class and number. Consider the following:

congruence between the two sets of data in both languages, respectively.

From the foregoing, it is apparent that if the head of a LocP is singular, then the complement should be reflected as such through the singular possessive marker. This supports the claim that phrases have heads; and that the head of a phrase is a core element of that phrase in that it plays a crucial role in selecting appropriate complements, and in determining the possible distribution of the phrase in question (Towell and Hawkins, 1994). At this juncture, it is important to point out that some noun phrases lack heads. It is to this issue that we now turn.

Headless noun phrases

Noun phrases without nouns involve the ellipsis of the head noun which can be recoverable to the hearer (Dryer, 2004). In Xitsonga and Sepedi, the headless noun phrase position can be expressed by an adjective, a numeral, a

demonstrative or an inflection. Consider the following data:

(19) a. Vakulu va dlaya nyoka / 2older 2Agr kill snake. ‘Older-people kill a snake’.	Ba bagolo ba bolaya noga. 2QP 2older 2Agr kill snake. ‘Older people kills a snake’.	(Xit/Sep)
b. Vambirhi va dlaya nyoka / 2older 2Agr kill snake. ‘Two-people kill a snake’.	Ba babedi ba bolaya noga. 2QP. 2older 2Agr kill snake. ‘Two-people kill a snake’.	(Xitsonga/Sepedi)
c. Lava va dlaya nyoka / 2older 2Agr kill snake. ‘These-people kill a snake’.	Ba ba bolaya noga. 2QP. 2older 2Agr kill snake. ‘These-people kill a snake’.	(Xitsonga/Sepedi)
d. Va dlaya nyoka / 2Agr kill snake. ‘They kill a snake’.	Ba bolaya noga. 2Agr kill snake. ‘They kill a snake’.	(Xitsonga/Sepedi)

Although the sentences in (19a-d) lack NP subjects, they are grammatically coherent. Instead of NP subjects, the sentences begin with the adjectives *vakulu/ba bagolo* ‘older-people’ in (a), numerals *vambirhi/ba babedi* ‘two-people’ in (b), demonstratives *lava/ba* ‘these-people’ in (c), and inflections *va/ba* in (d), all of which are associated with noun class 2 in both languages, respectively. The nouns that can be recoverable to the hearer as inferred by the headless noun phrases represented by the adjectives, numerals, demonstratives and the inflections include *vafana/ bašemane* ‘boys’, *vanhu/batho* ‘people’, *varisi/badiši* ‘shepherds’ and so on. But the exact noun to which each refers can be recovered from context of speech.

A more plausible way of accounting for inflection as headless NPs is to invoke the notion of the pro-drop parameter. The word ‘pro-drop’, which originates from pronoun-dropping, refers to a language in which certain

classes of subjects or pronouns may be omitted or suppressed because they can, in some sense, be pragmatically inferable from context (Crystal, 2008). The pro-drop parameter is binary in nature in the sense that it presents two settings in a language: a language is either a pro-drop, or a non-pro-drop language (Radford, 2006). Also known as null-subject languages, pro-drop languages usually have a rich inflectional or agreement system that accounts for the suppressed subject (Van Valin, 2001; Carnie, 2007). Evidence of a rich agreement system can be found in languages such as Xitsonga and Sepedi, which are characterised by the noun class system, whereby each noun class (noun classes 1-21 in Xitsonga and 1-24 in Sepedi) has its own inflection marker for subject agreement. As in the case of (19d) above, when used alone without NP subjects in sentences, inflectional elements of noun classes 1, 2, 3 and 4 in both Xitsonga and Sepedi can be summarised as follows:

(20)	u/o	va/ba	wu/wo yi/ye	(Xit/Sep)
Noun class	1	2	3	4
Number	sg.	pl.	sg.	pl.
Person	3 rd	3 rd	3 rd	3 rd
Example	<i>munhu/</i> <i>Motho</i>	<i>vanhu/</i> <i>batho</i>	<i>murhi/</i> <i>mohlare</i>	<i>mirhi/</i> <i>mehlare</i>

Gloss	‘person’	‘persons’	‘tree’	‘trees’
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The examples in (20) above suggest that the inflectional elements *u/o*, *va/ba*, *wu/wo* and *yi/ye* are able to occupy NP subject positions because they contain the features noun class, number and person. In other words, inflection, which is one of the three types of categories, that is, apart from lexical and empty categories (Kayne, 1994), is able to function as a subject NP on its own without the assistance of lexical categories such as nouns, adjectives, numerals and demonstratives. In this way, it (inflection) can be seen as a phrase in its own right. This can further be exemplified by the following sentence demonstrating class 1 inflectional element *u* and *o* in Xitsonga and Sepedi, respectively:

- (21) U dlaya nyoka.
 O bolaya noka.
 INFL3sg kill snake.
 ‘He/she kills a snake’.

Pro-drop languages such as Xitsonga and Sepedi violate the subject constraint, which states that all sentences have subjects because the structure of sentences requires a subject position (Carnie, 2007). In these languages, the subject position may be filled by an empty category, *pro*. For this reason, the sentence in (21) above can be represented as follows in the deep structure:

- (22) a. *pro* u dlaya nyoka.
 b. *pro* o bolaya noka.
 ‘He/she kills a snake’.

In line with the subject constraint, in the sentences in (22) (a) and (b) above, the empty category *pro* is used to fill the subject position of the subject because the sentence has no NP subject. More importantly, the two sentences indicate cooperation between the three categories: the headless noun phrase, which is supposed to occupy the subject position; the empty category, which fills the subject position

in the deep structure; and the inflection, which acts as the subject in the surface structure.

Conclusion

This study set out to compare and describe the phrase in two unrelated and mutually unintelligible languages, Xitsonga and Sepedi, both of which are indigenous languages spoken in parts of Southern Africa. Data suggests that in addition to the common noun and the verbal, adjectival, adverbial and prepositional phrases, the locative and ideophonic phrases occur. This indicates that locatives and ideophones are also lexical categories in their own right in the two languages. The study further found that the head-modifier contrast and other properties of phrases of both languages can be accounted for in terms of distributional, morphosyntactic, technical and semantic features, including the the head parameter, and the X-bar model, which consistently confirm the left-headedness of both languages. The data further identified noun and locative phrases as special kinds of phrases in the two languages. It has been observed, for example, that for an NP or a LocP to be grammatically coherent, both the head and the modifier of the phrase in question must agree in both noun class and number.

As supported by literature, it has also become apparent that it is possible to identify headless noun phrases, where adjectives, numerals, demonstratives and inflectional elements assume the function of noun phrases. The pro-drop theory, in terms of which every language is assumed to have a subject, accounts for the ability by inflection to function as a subject NP without accompanying syntactic categories such as nouns, adjectives, numerals and demonstratives. This has lent credence to the hypothesis that inflection is a phrase in its own. The ability by the noun class system to ensure the unified nature of the phrase in terms of both class and number implies that the system is at the centre of phrasal cohesion in both Xitsonga and Sepedi. For this reason, at a structural,

phrasal level, despite the lack of mutual intelligibility, there appears to be more similarities than differences between the two languages. Clearly, more needs to be done to unpack the role of the noun class in the syntactic organisation of African languages.

When children are born, they possess the principles of universal grammar, which comprise a biologically determined knowledge set (Caron, 1992). Apart from the lexicon, all that the child is required to do to acquire a language is to be exposed to the particular values that are assumed by the language. But the learning of a second language, which usually occurs in adulthood, seems to be more taxing in terms of memory and mental effort, and therefore requires a high level of intrinsic motivation. However, the similarities in the internal structure of two languages can expedite the learning of one language by speakers of the other language. It has been observed, for instance, that both Xitsonga and Sepedi are not only head-last languages, but also share the parametric values of being pro-drop languages. In terms of these properties, it can be assumed that speakers of Xitsonga will find it less strenuous to learn Sepedi compared to learning a language with divergent characteristics. Likewise, native Sepedi speakers will learn Xitsonga with less effort relative to the learning of head-first and non-pro-drop languages such as English. This is not surprising given that although the two languages are regarded as mutually unintelligible, they are both Bantu languages.

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