Bantu DP-internal person agreement: a typological rarity

Bantu languages exhibit a complex system of DP-internal agreement with respect to person and gender. Kinyarwanda (Rwanda), for example, shows all three logically possible agreement types DP-internally: no-agree, gender, and person agreement. This paper shows that this typologically rare system is a natural outgrowth of the cliticization of two agreement types: pronominals giving rise to person agreement morphology and noun classifiers giving rise to gender agreement morphology. The analysis is informed by both the synchronic and diachronic morphosyntactic facts of Bantu.

 Person agreement within the DP is typologically very rare; person agreement is preferred between nominals and verbal categories, and rare for adnominal adjectives and determiners (Lehmann 1988, i.a.). In some Bantu languages, however, certain post-nominal quantifiers agree in person:

(1) [Twebwe tw-ese] tu-ri ba-re-ba-re. (Kinyarwanda)
  We 1PL-all 1PL-COP CL2-tall
  'All of us are tall.'

As shown, –ese 'all' patterns with verbs (here, the copula), not adjectives, showing person and not gender agreement. Contrasting with (1), the example below shows post-nominal adjectives show gender but not person agreement:

(2) [Twebwe ba-re-ba-re] tw-a-gi-ye   ku i-duka. (Kinyarwanda)
  we   CL2-tall 1PL-PST.go-PERF to CL5-store
  'We tall ones went to the store.'

This example shows that adjectives show class-2 gender agreement (the gender class for plural animates), not the person agreement found on verbs and post-nominal determiners.

 The crucial difference that permits person agreement on –ese 'all' and not on –re –re 'tall' is analyzed as consistent with Bantu person marking arising from rightward cliticization of pronoun specifiers onto their heads (Bresnan and Mchombo 1987, Baker 2008, i.a). Post-nominal determiners and verbs are alike in that they are both heads that take pronoun specifiers. Historically, these specifiers cliticized onto the phrasal head. This contrasts with adjectival agreement, which is incapable of entering into the head-specifier relationship that is found with post-nominal quanitifers and verbs.

 Syntactic evidence for the post-nominal quantifiers—cf. (1)—as heads come from the synchronic syntactic facts of Bantu: these categories are syntactically separable from the pronoun, while other determiners, such as the quantifier buri 'every' are not separable. Namely, the syntactic structure of the DP in which a person-agreeing quantifier appears is conducive to the historical cliticization process.

 This approach to DP-internal person agreement captures facts regarding Bantu that are missed by other, purely synchronic, accounts of this phenomenon. Baker (2008), for example, posits (among other machinery) that the controller of agreement in Bantu must c-command the target of agreement. However, his theory incorrectly predicts that pre-nominal gender agreement should never occur. Kinyarwanda shows this kind of agreement:

(3) aba   ba-ntu b-ose…
  CL2.these CL2-people CL2-all
  'All these people…'

This example, in which the pre-nominal determiner aba 'these' shows gender agreement, is critical evidence against Baker's theory. The current theory, however, can explain all forms of DP-internal agreement in Bantu: person agreement is an outgrowth of cliticization onto certain synctactic configurations, while gender agreement is a feature that is spread throughout the DP.