Clause Chaining in Bantu languages:
Narrative verb sequences with and without-morphological marking

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Many Bantu languages have one or more 'narrative' markers on verbs, illustrated in (1). Narrative markers tend to occur on the verbal predicate of clauses that follow an initial clause with a non-narrative-marked verb, see (1) and (2). Some Bantu languages also construct similar sequences of clauses with unmarked or infinitival-marked verbs or use different strategies for different tenses.

Such constructions are in many ways similar to the 'clause chains' (cf. Sarvasy & Aikhenvald 2024) that have been noted and described for languages around the world, including those of the Americas, Ethiopia, the Himalayan region and throughout Central Asia, and Melanesia.

(1) Sesotho (S33; Guma 1971, cited in Posthumus 1991:92)
     Ke-fihl-ile   hae **ka**-besa,   **ka**-fiela,
     SM1SG-arrive-PERV home SM1SG.NAR-light_fire SM1SG.NAR-sweep
     ka-pheha
     SM1SG.NAR-cook
     'I arrived home, made the fire, swept, and cooked'

(2)   Swahili (Nurse 2008:121)
     Wa-li-ku-nywa   wa-**ka**-la.
     SM2-PST-ST-drink   SM2-NAR-eat
     'They drank and ate'

Initial descriptions of these Bantu patterns as clause chains can be found in Riedel, Sarvasy and Demuth (2019), Sarvasy (2019), and Riedel and Gibson (2024). However, the Bantu structures remain under-examined and under-described, so it is still unclear how they fit within the broader typological literature on clause chains. Within the Bantu literature, the treatment of the verb types in these structures as 'narrative tenses' has meant that syntactic, semantic and pragmatic properties of these constructions have remained mostly unexplored (but see, for example, Persohn 2017:229-247 for a discussion of semantic and pragmatic aspects). Our aim for this workshop is to bring together experts on a range of Bantu languages to explore these topics in more depth and to encourage more comparative work.

The structures in which narrative-marked verbs occur in Bantu languages differ from prototypical clause chains in at least four major ways: ordering, morphology, distribution in discourse, and frequency/salience. We provide brief typological overviews below.

First, the majority of clause chaining languages around the world have verb-final constituent order, and, perhaps correspondingly, have clause chains that end with the

apparently fully-specified verb, not begin with it. Bantu clause chain equivalents are the opposite: they begin with the non-narrative (usually tense- and/or aspect-marked) verb, then subsequent, related clauses in the same sequence of events may bear narrative marking instead of tense and/or aspect marking. If we accept that the tense-marked verb is 'finite,' then it is most common for clause chains to end in the finite verb, rather than begin with the finite verb, as in Bantu languages. This difference makes drawing more general, cognition-related inferences about the 'utility' of clause chaining for speakers and listeners difficult.

Second, it is most common for clause chaining languages to have a particular participle-like verbal inflection (sometimes called a 'converb' or 'medial verb'), usually under-specified for tense, aspect, negation, subject, or other categories, with the dedicated function of serving as the repeated non-finite verb form in clause chains (Sarvasy & Aikhenvald, 2024). In Bantu languages, however, narrative-marked verbs are generally not under-specified morphologically: they may have all the same morphological 'slots' as other finite verbs. The relationship between the narrative 'tense' and other tenses in Bantu languages is, at least morphologically, different from the relationship between the specialized converb/medial verb forms and general finite verb forms in other clause chaining languages.

Third, in prototypical clause chaining, the converb/medial verb relates back directly to the preceding clause in a chain, but in at least one Bantu language, narrative forms can exist in long-distance relationships with antecedent clauses (Riedel et al., 2019). This might call into question the core semantics and function of the Bantu narrative form-- does it, unlike converb/medial verbs in other languages, convey semantics of 'as previously mentioned'?--but it is as yet unknown whether such long-distance 'chains' are used widely in other Bantu languages.

Finally, Bantu language speakers and writers seem to use strings of narrative-marked forms considerably less than speakers of other clause chaining languages use clause chains. For instance, in many Papuan languages, the most appropriate way to describe multiple related events is using clause chains. A sample of 49 narratives of different lengths in the Papuan language Nungon revealed that the number of clause chains per narrative increases linearly with narrative length (in seconds), with a narrative lasting 10 minutes predicted to contain about 100 clause chains (Sarvasy, 2022). But it is as yet unclear whether some Bantu languages approach this kind of regularity and predictability in narrative marker distribution, for any genre.

The aim of this workshop is to boost the empirical base for research into Bantu narrative verb sequences by exploring the following questions, for any Bantu language(s):
- what is the morphology?
- what is the syntax?
- what are the semantics?
- what are the pragmatics?
- what are the corpus distributions?
- do apparent long-distance dependencies occur?

- do multi-speaker narrative sequences occur?

We invite contributions on the questions above, or on Bantu clause chains from a typological perspective, or any related morphosyntactic issues, including the properties of subordination or coordination as they relate to clause chains.

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