The syntax of verb complements and the loss of the applicative in Eton (A71).

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abstract
Eton (A70) is unusual in that it lacks an applicative affix. Benefactive and circumstantial participants can be added without marking, be it head marking (an applicative suffix) or dependent marking (a preposition). This paper argues that the applicative suffix was lost in Eton because it is functionally superfluous. It is further argued that there is no need to posit an object relation in the syntactic description of Eton.

0. Introduction.

This contribution presents work in progress on the syntax of the North-western Bantu language Eton (A70), which differs considerably from the Eastern and Southern Bantu languages in its morphosyntactic makeup. After a brief introduction to the Eton language (Section 1) I will describe two morphosyntactic characteristics that are unusual from a Bantu point of view and then give a tentative explanation for the differences between Eton and what may be called here the Eastern prototype. The first morphosyntactic characteristic to be discussed (Section 2) is a very productive dative shift-like construction, which allows verbs to take a bene/malefactive or circumstantial complement without any marking on either the verb or the complement. Eton lacks the applicative suffix that is needed to licence such complements in languages of the Eastern prototype. The second characteristic, discussed in Section 3, concerns the syntactic properties of agreement/indexation, accessibility to passivisation and accessibility to relativisation (and some others) often referred to as object diagnostics, because they tend to target a limited set of verb complements, which are therefore said to define a syntactic relation, viz. that of object. These properties do not define a grammatical relation in Eton. The point is not that the different object diagnostics do not converge; they probably hardly do so in the languages of the Eastern prototype either. Rather, none of them taken separately targets a specific subset of postverbal elements, and the concept of (direct / indirect / primary / secondary) object therefore proofs to be of little use for the description of Eton. Section 4, finally, argues that the syntactic characteristics that define object status in languages of the Eastern prototype are fundamentally markers of discourse prominence. Eton marks discourse prominence in a radically different way, viz. by means of fronting and the use of discourse particles. Therefore, it does not display the same more or less convergent set of “object diagnostics”
and it has no use for an applicative, which signals that the object relation is occupied by a less inherently prominent element such as a non-nuclear complement or an adjunct.

1. Situation and brief typological characterisation of Eton

Eton, spoken in an area north of the Cameroonian capital Yaoundé, is the northernmost language of the Beti-Bulu-Fang dialect cluster (the A70 group in Guthrie’s classification). It is the only language of the A70 cluster that was previously undescribed, but for none of the closely related languages we have a syntactic description.

The first syllable of prosodic stems is prominent. Syllabic prominence has phonetic/phonological, phonotactic and tonological correlates. Onset consonants of prominent syllables are longer than other consonants and are not subject to lenition rules (phonetics/phonology). Half of the consonant phonemes can occur in the onset of prominent syllables only and some differences in vowel quality are not distinctive outside of prominent syllables (phonotactic). Finally, non-prominent syllables can carry maximally one toneme, whereas two can attach to prominent syllables (tonological). See Van de Velde (2008) for details. Perhaps this initial prominence (and therefore final non-prominence) is a driving force behind maximality constraints on stems. These stipulate that a stem can have no more than three syllables, except when it contains the inflectional suffix -ŋgàŋà, which can bring the absolute maximum to four syllables. Most stems are monosyllabic. A noteworthy characteristic of Eton is the high amount of floating tones and the rather complex tone rules needed to attach them to the available segmental material. This can be illustrated by means of the terminative quasi-auxiliary mà, which can have every tone pattern that is possible on a prominent syllable. In (1) terminative mà is preceded by the past prefix H (a floating high tone) and followed by a suffix of the same form that signals the non-final position of the quasi-auxiliary. The lexical verb is in the infinitive, marked by a floating low tone prefix. The two H’s form a tone bridge on mà. The 1-prefix of the infinitive causes downstep on the stem of the lexical verb.1

(1)  àmà ‘df
|à-H-mà-H 1-df|
I-PST-TMN-NF INF-eat
‘She ate (it).’ (this morning)

The high tone of the Remote past perfective prefix ngá spreads onto mà, which therefore surfaces with a falling tone in (2).

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1 The following abbreviations are used in the examples: 1,2... overt noun class markers; 1,II... agreement prefixes; AU augment; CMP complementiser; CON connective proclitic; CS consecutive verb form; DEM demonstrative; DP discourse particle; FSUB final form of the substitutive; FUT future; FV final vowel; G “g”-form of the verb; H floating high tone; IMPF imperfective; INF infinitive; L floating low tone; LOC locative preposition; LT link tone; NF non-final; NSUB non-final form of the substitutive; PASS passive; PERF perfect; PL plural; PRST present; PST past; RPST remote past; SG singular; SP southern present (dialectal form); SUB substitutive (personal pronoun); TMN terminative; VOL volitional.
2. Applicative arguments

Complements that are licensed by an applicative suffix in most Bantu languages can be added without any marking in Eton. I will call such complements *applicative* here, which should be understood as short for ‘complement that is licensed by an applicative morpheme in other Bantu languages but that can be added without marking on either the verb or the complement in Eton.’ Usually the semantic role of this complement is bene/malefactive (henceforth simply *benefactive*), as illustrated twice in the following fragment from a fairy tale (6).
The following example of a malefactive argument comes from an autobiographical monologue (7). The verb tébê with which it occurs is intransitive. It contains the detransitivising (autocausative) suffix -bà.

(7) mèngáwó kóléd. dɔ̀ òwó úŋgáyí tébê mā

|mà-ŋgá-wó kóléd dɔ̀ ñwó ú-ŋgá-ji ñ-тя̀bà mā| 1SG-RPST-give.birth Colette DP 3-birthgiving III-RPST-VOL INF-stop 1SG.FSUB ‘I had given birth to Colette. Then it seemed that childbirth had stopped for me.’

Depending on the semantics of the verb, some other semantic roles are possible as well. The applicative argument in (8), for instance, can have two interpretations, beneficiary or source.

(8) twàmò àkúz ngwàn ndògò

|tòmá à-ì-kúz-ìì ngò̀n ndògà| Tomo 1-PST-buy-NF 9.girl 9.mango

a. ‘Tomo bought mangoes for the girl.’
b. ‘Tomo bought mangoes from the girl.’

The verb wú ‘die’ can take a crosslinguistically rare circumstantial or causal applicative complement (see Peterson 2007:139), as illustrated in (9), where Judith Akini explains that if one digs up the root of a plant called wogzo-wogzo in order to make medicine with it, one has to be careful to follow and dig up one single root. Otherwise, a child will die because of your actions.

(9) ngé ú’ŋnàŋ ñkàŋ m’pèbè, ùyèngì nà ñ’zà mòd ìàwú ‘wș

|ngé ì-ù-ŋnàŋ-ìì ñ-kàŋ m’pèbè ñ-ù-jìm-ìgì nà ìzà 1-N-òd| if 2SG-take-CS 3-root III-other 2SG-know-G CMP sb.else’s 1-person

|à-à-wú wős| 1-SP-die 2SG.FSUB

‘If you take another root, you must know that somebody else’s child will die because of you.’
Incidentally, this construction with \textit{wú} ‘die’ is at the source of a number of idiomatic expressions, such as ‘die of trouble’, meaning ‘worry, bother’ in (10).

(10) \textit{mòd àbé ‘wú.pjúg!}

\begin{align*}
|\text{n}-\text{ôd} & \text{á-bé} & \text{1-wú} & \text{H} & \text{n-øjúg}| \\
1\text{-person I-NEG INF-die} & \text{LT} & 3\text{-trouble} \\
\text{‘Nobody should bother about it. (lit. ‘Let nobody die of trouble.’)}
\end{align*}

The ability to take a circumstantial applicative complement is lexically restricted. In a small corpus of spontaneous and elicited utterances I found only one more verb that allows it, shown in (11), which is an elicited example.

(11) \textit{múŋà áté ‘jón zâ}

\begin{align*}
|\text{n}-\text{ũŋá} & \text{á-té} & \text{i-ʒóm} & \text{H} & \text{zà}| \\
1\text{-child I-PRST INF-cry} & \text{LT} & 9\text{-hunger} \\
\text{‘The child cries because s/he is hungry.’}
\end{align*}

Instrumental arguments cannot be added as applicative complements. They are obligatorily marked by the preposition \textit{èèy} ‘with’.

Restrictions on the addition of applicative objects in Eton are in need of further study. The following generalisations are made on the basis of a restricted number of (sometimes elicited) utterances. As the examples in (7) and (9-11) show, intransitive verbs (both unaccusative and unergative) can take an applicative object, and the same is shown for monotransitive verbs in (6b) and (8). It is not clear yet whether a benefactive applicative complement can be added to a ditransitive verb if it is not the result of possessor raising (as in (21) below). Some restrictions on applicative complements can be subsumed under the general principle of ambiguity avoidance. For instance, if an argument could in theory be interpreted alternatively as an inherent argument of the verb (e.g. with the semantic role of patient) or as a benefactive applicative argument, only the first interpretation is acceptable. Thus, the non-subject argument in (12) and (13) cannot be interpreted as a beneficiary.

(12) \textit{áté ‘sá ndá}

\begin{align*}
|\text{á-té} & \text{i-sá} & \text{H} & \text{ndá}| \\
1\text{-PRST INF-work} & \text{LT} & [9]\text{house} \\
a. \text{‘He works at (builds/renovates) the house.’} \\
b. \text{‘He works for (in order to be able to purchase) a house.’}
\end{align*}

(13) \textit{áté ‘sá ndá i bôd}

\begin{align*}
|\text{á-té} & \text{i-sá} & \text{H} & \text{ndá} & \text{i=b-ôd}| \\
1\text{-PRST INF-work} & \text{LT} & [9]\text{house IX.CON=2-person} \\
a. \text{‘He establishes a family.’} \\
b. \text{‘He works for his family.’}
\end{align*}

In (14), on the other hand, the complement is an unlikely patient, and it is therefore usually (but not obligatorily) interpreted as a beneficiary.
Another restriction is linked to possessor raising, which is very frequent in Eton. If a complement can be interpreted as the result of possessor raising, it cannot be interpreted as a benefactive applicative complement.

A noun phrase following certain stative verbs has to be inherently definite in order to be interpretable as a benefactive applicative complement (16-17); otherwise it will be interpreted as a secondary predicate (18).

To sum up, Eton has the unusual property among Bantu languages that verbs not marked by an applicative suffix can license a benefactive or circumstantial complement that is immediately adjacent to the verb and is not marked by a preposition. Restrictions on applicative complements turn out to be semantic-pragmatic rather than syntactic.
3. Some “object diagnostics”

This section briefly discusses some of the morphosyntactic properties of verb complements in Eton, viz. those that are sometimes referred to as object diagnostics\(^2\) in the literature. As Schadeberg (1995) and many others have noted, these properties often do not converge on a single set of grammatical relations in a language. Therefore, it can be more useful to define grammatical relations in a construction specific way, as a set of arguments targeted by a specific rule or constraint (Bickel, in press). Subjects do have a set of converging grammatical properties in Eton: they trigger agreement on every finite verb, except on imperatives. Their usual position is immediately before the finite verb, whereas other arguments follow (if not focused or topicalised). Finally they are not expressed in the imperative. As for the traditional object diagnostics, it is not clear whether any of them licenses the recognition of a subset of non-subject arguments as a grammatical relation in Eton. We will here look at agreement, word order, passivisation and relativisation. The goal of this section is to illustrate how the syntactic behaviour of Eton verb complements differs from that of the oft-discussed Eastern languages with respect to these prominent features. Eton does not have a difference between conjoint and disjoint verb forms, nor so-called tonal case marking. Other possibly relevant constructions (e.g. involving cross-clausal control or reciprocals) will not be considered. Eton does not have agreement with or indexation of complements on the verb. Pronominal complements follow the verb (19). In periphrastic verb forms consisting of an auxiliary or quasi-auxiliary and an infinitive form of the lexical verb, complement pronominals are either in between the auxiliary and the lexical verb (20a) or after the lexical verb (20b), with a preference for the former.

(19) \[ \text{àvé mâ yɔ́} \]
\[|\text{à- H-v} \quad \text{ɛ́-H mà jɔ́}| \]
1-PST-give-NF 1SG.NSUB VII.SUB
‘He gave it to me.’

(20) a. \[ \text{àté mâ yɔ́ ivé} \]
\[|\text{à-Lt} \quad \text{ɛ́ mà jɔ́} \]
1-PRST 1SG.NSUB VII.SUB INF-give
‘He gives it to me.’

b. \[ \text{àté ivé mâ yɔ́} \]
\[|\text{à-Lt} \quad \text{1-vé} \quad \text{H mà jɔ́}| \]
1-PRST INF-give LT 1SG.NSUB VII.SUB
‘He gives it to me.’

The order of (pro)nominal postverbal arguments is determined solely by their semantic role: beneficiary - recipient - patients (19-22). The heaviness of constituents is irrelevant for the mutual ordering of postverbal arguments (23). There is one kind of an exception, due to

\(^2\) Note that the term \textit{object diagnostics} contains the presupposition that it makes sense to assume for every language that there is a special set of arguments that forms a grammatical relation \textit{object}, also when the usefulness of this concept for the analysis of this language is not immediately apparent.
the fact that pronominal complements can precede the lexical verb in periphrastic verb forms, whereas nominal complements cannot (24).

(21) àvé mà múngá ɪʼpága
\[|á-\text{I-PST}-\text{give-NF} \ 1\text{SG.NSUB} \ 1\text{-child} \ 7\text{-present}|\]
‘He gave my child a present.’

(22) àvé ɪʼpága múngá.
\[|á-\text{I-PST}-\text{give-NF} \ 7\text{-present} \ 1\text{-child}|\]
‘He gave the child to the present.’

(23) àvé úmód àtè sòm bó
\[|á-\text{I-PST}-\text{give-NF} \ \text{AU}-1\text{-person} \ \text{I-PRST} \ \text{INF}-\text{hunt} \ \text{II.SUB}|\]
‘He gave them to the hunter (the person who hunts).’

(24) mètè bó vé nèglè
\[|m\text{-I-PST}-\text{give LT} \ 1\text{-teacher}|\]
‘I give them (e.g. the books) to the teacher.’

The next oft-cited object diagnostic is accessibility to passivisation. The occurrence of passive constructions is relatively rare in spontaneous Eton discourse and I therefore have to rely heavily on elicitation. Passive verbs are formed by means of the suffix -bàn (or -àn, depending on the stem type to which it attaches), which can also have a reflexive (25) or potential (26) meaning.

(25) mèkègbàn
\[|m\text{-I-PST}-\text{shave-PASS}|\]
‘I shaved.’

(26) àwòndo àtè pùmbàn ávól
\[|àwòndo \ à-\text{I-PST} \ \text{INF}-\text{uproot-PASS} \ \text{LT} \ 3\text{-quick}|\]
‘Groundnuts harvest easily.’

There are restrictions on the accessibility of verb complements to subjectification in passive constructions, which are in need of further study. For the purpose of this contribution it suffices to point out that certain restrictions found in other languages do not apply to Eton. Example (27) illustrates that an applicative benefactive complement (27b) can be subjectivised. Thus, Eton contradicts the claim put forward in Hyman & Duranti
(1982:237) that “if a Bantu language does not have clitics, the patient object has exclusive access to subjectivization” (as opposed to the benefactive, which is claimed to have equal or greater access in languages with cliticisation).

(27) a. àjám mà kpèm

\[
\text{[à-H-ŋám-H mà kpèm]} \\
i-\text{PST-prepare-NF 1SG.NSUB [9]cassava.leaves} \\
'\text{She prepared cassava leaves for me.'}
\]

b. mějámbán kpèm

\[
\text{[mè-H-ŋám-bàn-H kpèm]} \\
iSG-PST-prepare-PASS-NF [9]cassava.leaves} \\
'I was prepared cassava leaves for.'
\]

The patient of a trivalent verb is also accessible to passivisation (28).4

(28) ndán iŋgábé ‘vébëngàn bòd

\[
\text{|ndán ì-ŋgá-bé 1-vé-b-ŋgàn b-òd|} \\
[9]\text{ndan IX-RPST-IMPF INF-give-PASS-G 2-person} \\
'A ndan (tambourine name) was given to people.'
\]

Note that complements of a preposition are not excluded from passivisation either (29c).

(29) a. àkúb méndlúm á sí

\[
\text{|à-H-kúb-H mà-ndím á sí|} \\
i-\text{PST-pour-NF 6-water LOC [9]ground} \\
'He poured water on the ground.'
\]

b. měndím mékúúbán á sí

\[
\text{|mà-ndím mà-H-kúb-bàn-H á sí|} \\
6\text{-water VI-PST-pour-PASS-NF LOC [9]ground} \\
'Water was poured on the ground.'
\]

c. sí líkúúbán mé‘ndím

\[
\text{|sí 1-H-kúb-bàn-H mà-ndím|} \\
[9]\text{ground IX-PST-pour-PASS-NF 6-water} \\
'The ground was poured water on.'
\]

The last syntactic process discussed here is relativisation. In the majority of TAM forms relative verbs are not formally marked as such. Relative constructions can be recognised in that their antecedent is marked by the prefix î- called augment, which also marks some

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3 With clitics Hyman and Duranti mean object agreement and/or indexation on the verb.

4 A small number of elicited examples suggest that the patient of a monotransitive verb to which a benefactive applicative complement was added is also accessible to passivisation, but some more examples from more speakers are needed to be certain of this.
pronominalised modifiers and nouns modified by a demonstrative (compare 30a to 30b). Accessibility to relativisation is not restricted to a certain subset of arguments. As the following examples show, both the patientive complement (30c) and the benefactive applicative complement (30d) are accessible to relativisation.

(30) a. ŋ̀kúŋkúmá ú’té kùz jì’néglé kálàdà
   [N-ŋkúŋkúmá ú’té 1-kùz H N-jéglà kálàdà]
   3-chief III-PRST INF-buy LT 1-teacher book
   ‘The chief buys the book for the teacher.’

b. ŋ̀kúŋkúmá ú’té kùz jì’néglé kálàdà
   [H-N-ŋkúŋkúmá ú’té 1-kùz H N-jéglà kálàdà]
   AU-3-chief III-PRST INF-buy LT 1-teacher book
   ‘the chief who buys the book for the teacher’

c. kálàdà ŋ̀kúŋkúmá ú’té kùz āsú négglé
   [I-kálàdà N-ŋkúŋkúmá ú’té 1-kùz H = N-jéglà]
   AU-book 3-chief III-PRST INF-buy for III CON=1-teacher
   ‘the book the chief buys for the teacher’

d. jì’néglé ŋ̀kúŋkúmá ú’té kùz kálàdà
   [H-N-jéglà N-ŋkúŋkúmá ú’té 1-kùz H kálàdà]
   AU-1-teacher 3-chief III-PRST INF-buy LT book
   ‘the teacher for whom the chief buys the book’

When the antecedent of a relative clause is the complement of a preposition, a resumptive pronoun takes its place in the relative clause (31), except when the preposition in question is locative á, which is omitted in the relative clause (32).

(31) mébálá úté kwàm ëèy m̩, mën̩ yá?
   [H-mà-bálá ú’té 1-kóm ëj m̩ m̩-nè já]
   AU-6-medicine 2SG-PRST INF-do with VI-SUB VI-COP how
   ‘The medicines with which you heal, what (lit. how) are they?’

(32) a. ŋ̀kúŋkúmá á’kú zgí kálàdà á mákíd
   [N-ŋkúŋkúmá à H-kúz G H kálàdà á H mákíd]
   3-chief I-PST-buy G NF book LOC 6-market
   ‘The chief bought the book on the market.’

b. mákíd ŋ̀kúŋkúmá á’kú zgí kálàdà mën̩ újàb vá
   [I-m-ákid N-ŋkúŋkúmá à H-kúz G H kálàdà m̩-nè ú-ʤ̃áb v̩]
   AU-6-market 3-chief I-PST-buy G NF book VI-be 3-far here
   ‘The market where the chief bought the book is far from here.’

Thus, relativisation in no way distinguishes between unmarked verb complements.

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5 The augment ́- has an allomorph H that appears before syllabic nuclei.
4. A tentative explanation for the absence of an applicative suffix in Eton

The most unusual morphosyntactic characteristic of Eton, from a Bantu point of view, is probably the absence of an applicative suffix. Maximality constraints in themselves do not explain this absence, since there are plenty of other derivational suffixes. Note, incidentally, that some Eton verbal suffixes are probably not direct reflexes of Proto-Bantu forms, e.g. passive -bàn (clearly not from *-o) and causative -(l)à (not from *-i or *-icó). In this section I assume that the applicative suffix was lost and I argue that no new applicative marker was created, because the syntax of Eton makes an applicative marker functionally superfluous.

The function of applicatives depends on whether they are obligatory or optional. In the former case their function is clear, viz. to enable the expression of arguments such as beneficiaries. It is hard to imagine that applicatives were obligatory in Eton at the time they were lost. In the latter case, i.e. when applicative constructions are optional in that there is an alternative oblique instantiation for the applicative object, their function is less obvious. Peterson (2007:234) concludes that the primary function of applicatives involving animate objects appears to be indication of a highly topical object whereas that of applicatives involving inanimate objects is granting accessibility to other constructions (e.g. relativisation, pronominalisation and passivisation). In fact, pronominalisation or passivisation is obligatory for certain applicative objects in a number of Bantu languages. Thus, Bukusu (E30) locative applicative objects must be either pronominalised or extracted (Peterson 2007:159n) and an instrumental applicative must appear as the subject of a passive verb in the Chichewa (N31) dialect described by Trithart (1976:56-58). In fact, most of the morphosyntactic characteristics typically referred to as object diagnostics are related to high topicality. Semantic roles typically expressed by animate referents, such as benefactive and recipient, which are inherently more topical, are normally placed closer to the verb than less inherently topical ones (see e.g. Bearth 2003:136 for Swahili). In Bantu languages that have object agreement, there is often a link between object agreement and (inherent) topicality of the object. In Kirimi, for instance, agreement is obligatory with an object that is both animate and definite (Hualde 1989:180).

Creissels (2006:78) as well notes that the use of applicatives is sometimes motivated as a means to making participants otherwise expressed by obliques more accessible to syntactic operations such as passivisation. But whereas Peterson states that the indication of a high relative topicality status for a semantically peripheral participant is the primary motivation behind the use of applicative constructions, Creissels (2006:83) draws attention to a use of the applicative in Tswana that has as its only motivation to focalise a locative complement without any change to the marking of this locative (33b).

(33) a. \( O \quad su-l-e \quad ko \quad Yuropa \)
\( \text{I.SUB die-PERF-FV in Europe} \)
‘He died in Europe.’

b. \( O \quad sw-ets-e \quad ko \quad Yuropa \)
\( \text{I.SUB die-APPL-PERF-FV in Europe} \)
‘He died in EUROPE.’
Creissels explains this use by pointing out the privileged relation between the syntactic relation of object and the discourse relation of focus, noting among other things that objects in Tswana are placed immediately after the verb and that this position is also, or more fundamentally, a focus position (e.g. the preferential position of interrogatives). Summarising, the functions of an optional applicative are (i) marking discourse prominence of non-nuclear terms and (ii) making non-nuclear terms accessible to passivisation, relativisation, agreement, immediate postverbal position, etc. The second function, which amounts to giving “object properties” to non-nuclear terms, is fundamentally a manifestation of the first function: passives are a means to ensure topic continuity, object agreement goes together with high topicality and the immediate postverbal position often has a special discourse function. The reason that Eton does not have applicatives, nor objects clearly definable in terms of a converging set of object diagnostics, can therefore be sought in its marking of discourse prominence, which is radically different from that of Eastern Bantu languages. In Eton discourse prominence is marked by discourse particles, emphatic pronouns and fronting. Example (34) illustrates that wh-words can remain in situ or be frontal, showing that clause-initial position serves as a focus position.

(34) a. ùyén zá
|ù-ɪ-h-jén.  2SG-PST-see-NF who |
zá |
‘Whom did you see?’

b. zá úyén
|zá ù-ɪ-h-jén| who 2SG-PST-see
‘Who did you see?’

Any preposition is fronted with the wh-word.

(35) ëëy bò zá á’ké á mákíd?
|ëj bò zá á-ɪ-h-ké- á mákíd| with PL who 1-PST-go-NFLOC market
‘With whom (plural) did she go to the market?’

Contrastive focus is illustrated in (36), where the speaker insists that he is interested in the names of certain plants, not in the way they are used. In the first clause, the nominal part of the PP complement ëëy mwé ‘with names’ is fronted and followed by the focus particle yî. A resumptive pronoun takes its place after the preposition which remains in situ. In the second clause mwé is fronted as well, but here it is not the complement of a preposition.

(36) mwé yî mà métè dâŋ  ‘yág ëëy mó.
|m-òé jì mà mà-ɪ-té  ɪ-dân  ɪ- jág  ɪ- ëj mî|m-óé jì mà mà-ɪ-té
6-name FOC 1SG.NSUB 1SG-PST INF-cross LT INF-need LT with VI.SUB
mwé yî mà métè yì.
|m-òé jì mà mà-ɪ-té  ɪ- jì|m-óé jì mà mà-ɪ-té
6-name FOC 1SG.NSUB 1SG-PR INF-want
‘It’s the names I need most! The names I want.’
An example of topicalisation of a verb complement by fronting can be seen in the fairy tale fragment in (6b), repeated here as (37).

(37) "bídí bî, zá ̀ayì bî yèm?"

| H-bì-dí bi zá à-a-jì bi L-jèm |
|AU-8-food VII.DEM who I-PRST-FUT 1PL.NSUB INF-know |

“This food, who will test it for us?”

Complements and adjuncts of verbs are highly accessible to focalisation and topicalisation, as they are to relativisation and passivisation, with no restrictions in terms of nuclear versus oblique terms. Example (38) illustrates the optional fronting of the circumstantial kídì ‘tomorrow’.

(38) a. mètè kè kídì

| mètè tà kídì |
| 1SG-PRST INF-go [9]tomorrow |

‘I leave tomorrow.’

b. kídì mètè kè

| kídì mètè tà |
| [9]tomorrow 1SG-PRST INF-go |

‘Tomorrow I leave.’

5. Conclusion

Eton is unusual for a Bantu language in that (i) it lacks an applicative construction and (ii) it does not allow to define an object relation on the basis of the typical object diagnostics used in the Bantu syntactic literature. The hypothesis put forward in this contribution is that the absence of these two characteristics has the same functional motivation, viz. the fact that discourse prominence is predominantly marked by means of fronting and discourse particles in Eton, rather than by the set of characteristics and processes that define the object relation in Bantu languages of the Eastern prototype.

REFERENCES


