What do nominals need? The ins and outs of structural licensing in Zulu

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The questions of whether and how nominals are syntactically licensed in Bantu languages have been a matter of recent active debate (e.g. Diercks 2012; Halpert 2015, 2019; van der Wal 2015; Sheehan and van der Wal 2018; Carstens and Mletshe 2016; Pietraszko 2020). While a number of languages and phenomena throughout the Bantu family seem to lack evidence of the typical 'signature' of case-licensing (Diercks 2012), others show more straightforward case patterns (van der Wal 2015). Sheehan and van der Wal (2018) suggest the term Vergnaud Licensing to refer to nominals' requirements for particular syntactic configurations and show that Bantu languages show differing behavior on a variety of Vergnaud Licensing metrics. In this talk, we'll take a tour of aspects of Zulu nominal distribution that demonstrates specific morphosyntactic licensing conditions, focusing in particular on passives (Halpert and Zeller 2016, Halpert to appear), infinitives (Halpert to appear) and possessor raising constructions, all of which show hallmarks of structural case alternations. In passives and infinitives, external arguments become optional and are morphologically marked when they appear. I demonstrate that these marked overt external arguments are in fact structurally licensed in Spec,vP. In possessor raising, a morphologically marked postnominal possessor alternates with an unmarked prenominal possessor that can be targeted by A- and A-bar processes in the main clause. I propose that in all of these environments, an acategorial Linker head is involved in licensing (cf. Baker and Collins 2006, Schneider-Zioga 2015, Pietraszko 2019). As we look closely at more environments in a Bantu language like Zulu, the picture of nominal distribution and licensing becomes richer and more complex. I suggest that the emerging picture provides increasingly strong evidence that Vergnaud is relevant—and starts to shape a path toward a deeper understanding of the various licensing mechanisms within Zulu and the types of variation we find across the Bantu language family and beyond.