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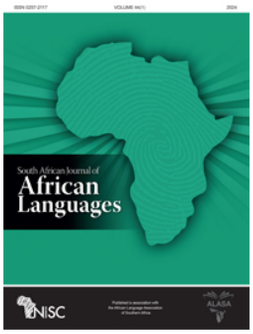

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The exploration of syntactic links: subject-verb agreement defilement in Sesotho

Madira Thetso

Languages, Literacies and Literatures, Wits School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
Correspondence: madira.thetso@wits.ac.za

The article explores the violation of grammatical agreement in Sesotho. Grammatical agreement is a significant characteristic in sentence construction. There should be covariance relations between the noun phrase (NP) subject and the device that links it with the verb phrase. However, I have observed that language users violate this agreement relation in their daily conversation. Using the Minimalist Program, sentences collected from native speakers casual conversations were analysed to identify the type of NPs that are commonly associated with the non-corresponding agreement device. The collected sentences were further examined to investigate factors that contribute to the phenomenon. The analysed data reveal that NPs that comprise titles and metaphoric nouns are the ones mostly used in sentences that violate the agreement relation, while lack of knowledge of syntactic rules, semanticity of noun classification and negligence are the contributing factors.

Introduction

Word order in natural languages has long been of interest to researchers as this phenomenon is highly significant in sentence construction. The elements that constitute a sentence are not just thrown about haphazardly; rather, they are arranged in accordance with syntactic rules. Languages of the world differ in the ordering of the elements of the sentence. In some languages such as Japanese and Korean, the verb occupies a position at the extreme right or at the end of a sentence, rendering the order subject-object-verb (SOV), while in others such as the Bantu languages and English, the words are in the order SVO with the verb in the middle. In Sesotho, as in most Bantu languages, the basic word order is SVO. The Sesotho sentence is divisible into two major units, namely the noun phrase (NP) and the verb phrase (VP). The former can comprise either a stand-alone noun/pronoun (substantive), or substantive and nominal complements, while the latter can comprise only the headword, or the head word and verbal complements. The presence of both nominal and verbal complements yields complex phrases.

The VP (regardless of its position) is the meaning-bearing unit and is thus an important part of a sentence. The SVO word order adheres to the phenomenon of *agreement*, which links the elements of a sentence. By *agreement*, I refer to a systematic sharing of properties between grammatical items. The agreement can occur within the elements of the determiner phrase (DP) and is termed internal agreement or concord (Lusekelo, 2015). It can also occur between the DP and the VP as an external agreement in Lusekelo's (2015) view. The concept of agreement involves the NPs as both heads and controllers and a target element, which is a non-head, resulting in covariance between the two. The examples below illustrate both external and internal covariance.

(1a) *Thabo o rata dijo.*
1-Thabo 1-AGR PRES-like 10-food
'Thabo likes food.'

(1b) *Thabo oa di rata dijo*
1-Thabo 1-AGR 8-AGR PRES-like 10-food
*'Thabo likes them food.'

(1c) **Thabo di rata dijo*.

In sentence 1(a), the *o* in the VP agrees with the NP subject *Thabo*, whereas *di* in (1b) agrees with the NP *dijo*, both located in the VP. The NP that occurs in the verb phrase serves the grammatical function of object, resulting in the basic word order SVO. The subject controls the device that connects both the NP and the VP. As Machobane (2010) indicates, noun prefixes function as the controllers for subject, object and qualificative concords. Taljard and Bosch (2006) further clarify that the concordial morphemes closely resemble the noun prefixes. The concordial agreement is therefore referential and can be used to track the referent throughout the text, hence the significance of the agreement relations in the construction of grammatically correct sentences. Violation of the agreement relation renders the structure unacceptable (Letsholo, 2004), as illustrated in (1c).

The rich agreement attribute of Bantu languages permits the omission of the NP subject without tampering with the intended meaning of the construction, and this results in the languages being termed pro-drop i.e., 'pronoun dropping' (van der Wal, 2015; Duguine, 2017), or pro-omission (Machobane et al., 2007). The following examples demonstrate:

(2a) *Bana ba ngola Sesotho.*
2-children 2-AGR PRES-write 7-Sesotho
'Children write Sesotho.'

(2b) pro *Ba ngola Sesotho.*
2-AGR PRES-write 7-Sesotho
'They write Sesotho.'

The lexical subject can be extended with modifiers, which according to the Minimalist Program linguistic theory, are adjoined to the specifier position of the inflectional phrase. The number of modifiers in the phrase is indefinite because they are not needed for configuration purposes. The NP complements in Sesotho are qualificatives and they follow the headword in the word order, resulting in the left-to-right direction structure (van der Wal, 2015; Matambirofa, 2013). Although the lexical subject can be omitted, the subject agreement marker cannot be left out. It is an obligatory element of a basic sentence, so its absence renders a sentence ungrammatical (with the exception of directives). The inclusion of the complements separates the subject and the verb; however, the agreement relationship is normally maintained, as Machobane (2010) indicates that the subject noun prefix determines the form of subject-verb agreement, object agreement and qualificative agreement as exemplified below:

(3a) [*Ngwana [oa sekolo] [sa Machache]]] o pasitse hantle*
1-child POSS-of school POSS-of Machache PERF-passed ADV-well
'The Machache school student has passed well.'

(3b) Batswadi *ba bana ba sehlopha sa meteriki ba tlile phuthehong*
2-parents POSS-of children POSS-of matric class PERF-have come ADV-to the meeting
'The parents of matric children have come to the meeting.'

The noun complements *oa sekolo* and *sa Machache* separate the NP subject *ngwana* 'child' and the verb *pasa* 'pass' in Example (3a). Similarly, the noun complements *ba bana* and *ba sehlopha sa meteriki* separate both the noun *batswadi* and the verb *tlile* 'have come' in (3b). However, the agreement relation is not interrupted in any way, thus proving Mpofu's (2009) point that other parts of speech that modify the head noun have to be in agreement with it. And that the lexical noun releases the number feature to its dependent elements.

In contrast to the given background, some Sesotho native speakers construct sentences in which the grammatical agreement is not adhered to, as illustrated below.

(4a) *Phala ea sepolesa sa Lesotho o boletse jwalo.*
9-whistle POSS-of police POSS-of Lesotho 1-AGR PERF-said ADV-so
'The CEO of the Lesotho police said so.'

(4b) *Lefielo la mofumahadi wa rona yena o itlotsa melomo a apere*
5-Broom POSS-of our queen PRON-her PRES-applies lipstick in sodality uniform
'The queen's caretaker applies lipstick while wearing the sodality uniform.'

As Lusekelo (2013) indicates, the feature number is found in the subject noun. Through its prefixal marker, the lexical subject copies the feature to all the succeeding elements in the DP as well as in the VP. This follows that the lexical noun takes the lead, while the other dependents, namely modifiers and determiners, follow it in word order. The class membership in such cases determines the agreement carried by the modifiers and complements of the noun (Lusekelo, 2013). Contrarily, there is non-correspondence observed between the lexical subjects and the agreement devices in Example (4). The nouns *phala* 'whistle' and *lefielo* 'broom' belong to classes five and nine respectively, but are both used with the class one agreement device *o*. It is against this background that this article seeks to identify the types of NP subjects that are commonly associated with incorrect agreement devices and to investigate the factors that influence the violation of the agreement relationship that holds between the lexical subject and the agreement device.

Theoretical framework and methodology

This study is based on the premise of the Minimalist Program. Minimalism advocates the concept of phi-features that include person, number, case and gender. Through the merge operation, the nucleus of a phrase as a searching syntactic unit locates an expression with which to check or share any of the features. In the case of a noun phrase, the noun merges with its modifiers with which it agrees in number, and this, according to Letsholo (2004) is termed DP-internal agreement. The feature number in Southern Sotho is embedded in the nominal prefix. It surfaces on the modifiers, which are adjoined to the specifier position and extends further outside the boundaries of the NP, resulting in an agreement between DPs and inflectional phrases (IPs). That is the prefix of the head-noun surfaces both within the NP and the VP. The noun roots check for number in the node above it, as Lusekelo (2013) specifies that the feature number is higher and controls the concord, thus the feature becomes inherent in the noun through its prefix.

The study is descriptive in nature and thus qualitative. Data samples were collected from the native speaker's casual conversations and from listening and watching Lesotho Television news to find sentences in which there is a mismatch between the lexical subject and the agreement marker. Collected sentences were then analysed to identify the types of NPs with which the non-corresponding devices are associated. The categorisation of data was then followed by the investigation of possible reasons for the violation of the agreement patterns. Semi-structured interviews were held with ten native Sesotho speakers to solicit grammaticality judgements and their views on what underlies the defilement of subject-verb agreement. The participants were randomly selected from different categories to avoid biased results. The sample comprised three university lecturers, three students and four native speakers with a basic education. Since grammaticality judgement is intuition based, individuals seemed to differ in their judgments of the given constructions.

The nature of the subject-verb agreement in Sesotho

The concept of agreement has been widely researched in African languages from different perspectives, ranging from acquisition (Gxilishe et al., 2007; Smouse, 2013; Sagarra & Rodriguez, 2022) and its syntactic aspects (McCormack, 2007; Lusekelo, 2009; 2015; van der Wal, 2015). As a central phenomenon in sentence construction, it surfaces in several studies (e.g. Mpofu, 2009; Machobane, 2010; Matambirofa, 2013).

Subject-verb agreement in Sesotho occurs through the prefixation of the element that takes the form of a subject noun, as Lusekelo (2015) indicates that Bantu languages demonstrate concord and agree through prefixes. The agree element functions to index the noun in a text. The prefix is referred to as a subject marker (Letsholo, 2004), concord (Lusekelo, 2015), or agreement marker (Carstens, 2000; Hofherr 2020), while the exhibition of the matching characteristics is termed agree/agreement. Chomsky (2000; 2001) defines agreement as a syntactic process of asymmetric connection between two elements. Defining it as both clausal and DP-internal in Bantu languages, Letsholo (2004) indicates that the relation occurs between the head-noun and its predicate or modifiers. In the process, a constituent with certain inherent features matches the feature of another constituent that is in need of the features but lacks them. The feature-possessing element becomes a controller or goal, while the feature-seeker is a probe or target.

Subject-verb agreement has some defining characteristics. Firstly, it is referential. As was indicated earlier, subject-verb agreement is triggered by the subject, resulting in the agreement device being dependent upon the subject. The agreement, therefore, functions to facilitate the tracking of its referent in a text. Secondly, the agreement can be local or non-local. Locality in this regard is defined by the absence of intervening elements between the subject NP and the subject concord, while the presence of intervening elements renders the relationship non-local as the two grammatical elements are far apart from each other.

(5a) *Mahokela ke bano ha ba so pataloe le kajeno esale ba tshepisoa.*
6-Community police forums COP-are there VERB-have not been paid since they were promised
'Community police forums are there and have not been paid ever since they were promised.'

(5b) *Thabo o rata dijo*
1-Thabo 1-AGR PRES-likes 8-food
'Thabo likes food.'

In sentence (5a), the copulative *ke bano* is positioned between the lexical subject and the subject marker *ba,* while in (5b) there is no intervening element between *Thabo* the lexical subject and *o*, the subject marker in the verb phrase. In some cases, there can be more than one intervening element, but the agreement relationship is equally maintained.

The other feature is the strictness of the covariance. Due to its referential nature, the agreement relations between the subject and the agreement are strict. The agreement device copies the prefix of the subject noun, thus the bond between the two is strict. However, the strictness is challenged as evidenced by the mismatches observed in the daily conversations of the native speakers. Table 1 shows the noun prefixes as distributed through the noun class system and their corresponding pronouns and concords. Each noun should be used with the corresponding subject marker to construct grammatically correct sentences.

Table 1: Sesotho noun classes, pronouns and subject markers

Noun class	Noun prefix	Absolute pronoun	Subject markers
1	*mo-, ~m-,~ngo*	*eena*	*-o-*
2	*ba-, ~be-*	*bona*	*-ba-*
3	*mo-, ~m-, ~ngo-,*	*oona*	*-o-*
4	*me-*	*eona*	*-e-*
5	*le-*	*lona*	*-le-*
6	*ma-, ~me-*	*'ona, eona*	*-a-, e*
7	*se-*	*sona*	*Se*
8	*di-*	*tsona*	*-li-*
9	*n-*	*eona*	*-e-*
10	*li-*	*tsona*	*-li-*
14	*bo-*	*bona*	*-bo-*
15	*ho-*	*hona*	*-ho-*

Types of NPs used with mismatching subject concords

In this section, noun phrases that are commonly associated with the non-corresponding agreement markers are identified. The NP is considered simple if it comprises the stand-alone head (noun/pronoun), or complex if it is extended by the incorporation of nominal complements. The complements of the head noun in Sesotho are referred to as qualificatives (Thetso, 2018). Looking at the collected sentences, both simple and complex NPs are used with non-corresponding subject markers. The examples below illustrate the simple noun phrases:

(6a) *Ngaka o itse ke khutle hape beke e tlang ka Laboraro*.
9-doctor 1-AGR PERF-say PRES-come ADV-again ADV-next week ADV-wednesday
'The doctor said that I should come again next week Wednesday.'

(6b) *Bo-Tjopa di ile tsa hokeloa motlakase empa bo-Mpao tsa sala.*
2-Tjopa AGR-10 PAST-connect 3-electricity CONJ-but 2-Mpao PAST-remain'.
'Tjopa and others were connected to electricity but Mpao and others were not connected.'

(6c) *Letona o itse dinomoro polata di kgutliswe ka nako ya dikgwedi tse pedi.*
5-minister 1-AGR PERF-say 10-number plates 10-AGR PASS-return ADV-two months' time
'The minister said number plates should be returned in two months' time.'

Looking at the examples in (6) above, the subjects *ngaka, bo-Tjopa le letona* are stand-alone lexical nouns, thus they constitute simple noun phrases. They belong to the noun classes 9, 2, and 5 respectively; however, the subject concords used with them are taken from classes 1, 10 and 1, hence a mismatch. There is no one-to-one correlation between the lexical subjects and the subject markers associated with them. Note should be taken that the NP *bo-Tjopa* relates to a village not a person and this prefix is different in meaning from the *bo-* plural form of class 2a (Moloi & Thetso, 2014).

It is also observed that both *ngaka* and *letona* are occupational titles, which are mostly used as personal

names. For example, *ntate ngaka* 'Mr doctor' and *ntate letona* 'Mr minister' are therefore associated with class one nouns whose semanticity is human beings. In all the examples, there are no intervening elements between the lexical subject and the subject marker.

Similarly, the data also presents sentences in which the subject NP is simple but there are other intervening elements between the lexical subject and the subject concord. The following are examples:

(7a) *Sechaba ka mafapha ohle ba lokela ho thuswa ho utlwisisa bohlokwa ba toti.*
8-people PP-from all sectors 2-AGR VERB-should be assisted INF-to understand the benefits of waste
'The people from all sectors should be assisted to understand the importance of waste.'

(7b) *Sechaba kantle kamane ba lebeletse ho fumantshwa ditshebeletso.*
8-people ADVP- outside there 2-AGR VERB-expecting INF-to receive services
'The people out there are awaiting service delivery.'

In Examples (7a) and (7b) above, *sechaba* 'people' is a subject, while *ba* is a subject marker. The two are separated by the phrases *ka mafapha ohle* and *kantle kamane* respectively, neither of which complements a noun. The subject markers exhibit a form different from the prefixes of the nouns which they should be indexing. The question remains, can the distance between the two grammatical items justify the mismatch? However, the intervening syntactic elements do not form part of the subject NP. As such, the NP remains simple not complex.

Contrary to what we have seen in (7) above, there are subject NPs that are extended with qualificatives, from which the mismatch between the subject and the subject marker is observed. The following are examples:

(8a) *Tona-kholo ea Lesotho o re Basotho ba ka hlola Covid-19 ka ho ipoloka malapeng.*
9-prime minister POSS-of Lesotho 1-AGR VERB-say 2-Basotho VERB-can overcome Covid PP-by staying home
'The Lesotho Prime Minister says Lesotho can overcome COVID by staying at home.'

(8b) *Litilatile tsa Basotho ba ne ba phuthehile ho lakaletsa masole tsela-tšoeu.*
10-multitudes POSS-of Basotho 2-AGR VERB-were gathered INF-to wish the soldiers safe travel
'Multitudes of Basotho were gathered to wish the soldiers safe travels.'

(8c) *Lelapa labo mofu ba rata ho leboha bohle ba ba phalletseng lefung la mora wa bona.*
5-family POSS-of the bereaved 2-AGR VERB-like to thank OBJ-all who attended their son's funeral
'The family of the deceased would like to thank everyone who attended their son's funeral.'

(8d) *Boholo ba masole a ile a tsamaya pejana kgweding ena.*
14-most POSS-of soldiers VERB-went away ADVP-earlier this month.
'Most of the soldiers travelled earlier this month.'

(8e) *Phala ya sepolesa sa Lesotho o re ditlolo tsa molao di atile haholo bathong ba bacha.*
9-whistle POSS-of police POSS-of Lesotho 1-AGR VERB-say OBJ-criminal offences are many ADV-amongst the youth
'The police spokeperson indicates that criminal offences are increasing alarmingly among the youth'

(8f) *Mokhahlelo oa ho qetela wa masole a Lesotho a tsamaile kajeno ho leba Mozambique.*
3-group POSS-of last POSS-of Lesotho soldiers VERB-left today for Mozambique
'The last group of Lesotho soldiers left for Mozambique today.'

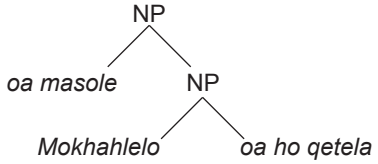
The examples in (8) illustrate complex subject NPs (comprising one or more qualificatives) which separate both the lexical subjects and the subject markers. The lexical subjects in (8b), (8c) and (8f) are collective nouns, while the subjects in (8a) and (8e) are occupational titles that bear zero morpheme prefixes. While both *tona-kholo* and *phala* are occupational titles, the latter is metaphorical. It is regarded thus since it reflects a kind of comparison. The common noun *phala* 'whistle' is used symbolically to represent someone who talks for the team (PRO). The nature of the person's duty is compared to the noun *phala,* a class 9 inanimate noun.

The examples provided show both simple and complex NPs. However, in both simple and complex structures, we observe the use of occupational titles, metaphoric nouns and collective nouns. We further notice that in some instances, while some of the NPs are simple, the structures involve intervening elements between the lexical subject and the agreement marker. With the complex NPs, there is a varying number and types of qualificatives involved in the structures, ranging from one to three and from similar types to different types of qualificatives.

Factors that influence the mismatch

In the previous sub-section, we discussed the types of NPs that surface in the mismatch between the two grammatical items. Looking at Table 1, one would expect strict covariance between the two grammatical items. However, the examples given demonstrate a mismatch between the lexical subject and the subject marker, but are acceptable. This, therefore, shows syntactic variation in Sesotho. The question then remains: How do we account for the lack of one-to-one correlation as depicted in the examples? A number of factors can be anticipated.

In a minimalist view, the subject merges with its complements in the NP. The subject NP as the nucleus or the head of the phrase has the feature number embedded in it. It therefore copies its number feature to its modifiers, as Lusekelo (2015) asserts that it is the lexical noun which bears the feature number and diffuses the feature to its dependents, as illustrated here:



The head has its sister nodes as its dependents which trigger agreement with the head (Croft, 2013). The elements are merged through binary branching and the features of the head projects onto the new syntactic object. This is a case of internal agreement. The subject noun prefix determines the form of the subject-verb agreement. As is the case with the internal agreement, the expectation would be to have *o* as the subject marker matching the number feature of *mokhahlelo* 'category', which heads the subject noun phrase. However, native speakers use the mismatching *a* as a subject marker as follows:

(9) *Mokhahlelo oa ho qetela oa masole a tsamaile kajeno ho leba Mozambique*.
3-group POSS-last POSS-of soldiers PERF-go ADV-today INF-to go to Mozambique
'The last group of Lesotho soldiers have left for Mozambique today.'

In the example, the features of the dependent element and not of the head have projected. That is, the prefix of the dependent element, not the controller or head is copied, violating the minimalist principle. Most of the native speakers did not notice the agreement mismatch in this sentence, proving a lack of knowledge of syntactic rules that govern Sesotho sentence construction. While the construction is grammatically correct, it has violated the rule of agreement thus bringing in the concept of variation. From a descriptive perspective, we observe language as used at a particular point in time and try to explain the rule that is portrayed.

Looking at other sentences that illustrate non-correspondence between the lexical subject and the subject marker, I observe that the semanticity of the noun classes can be a determining factor. In such cases, native Sesotho speakers use occupational titles for names in addressing people. The occupational titles belong to different noun classes, thus resulting in the mismatch between the two grammatical elements. The sentences in (6a) and (6b) are repeated here for ease of reference.

(10a) *Ngaka o itse ke khutle hape beke e tlang ka Laboraro*.
9-doctor 1-AGR PERF-say PRES-come ADV-again ADV-next week ADV-wednesday
'The doctor said that I should come again next week Wednesday.'

(10b) *Letona o itse dinomoro polata di kgutliswe ka nako ya dikgwedi tse pedi.*
5-minister 1-AGR PERF-say 10-number plates 10-AGR PASS-return ADV-two months' time
'The minister said number plates should be returned in two months' time.'

The nouns *ngaka* and *letona* have been used like proper nouns, so their association with class 1 group prefixes instead of classes 9 and 5 to which they correctly belong. In conversations with native speakers, the argument was that the concord is correct because both *letona* and *ngaka* are people and not animals, therefore the sentences with the relevant subject concord sound like the people are considered non-human. Their argument shows influence from the semanticity aspect of noun classification. In their opinion, using the correct subject markers shows a lack of respect for the concerned individual addressed in this way. That is, saying *letona le* or *ngaka e* refers to the referent as non-human and it does not match their status.

Similarly, with examples such as (8e), the metaphoric NP lends itself to use with mismatching subject concord. The word *phala* 'whistle' lacks the human feature and is semantically interpreted as [-HUMAN]. Its use with reference to a human being compels the speakers to use it with the class 1 concord. It is noted, however, that the speakers neglected the use of the modifying words which alter the meaning to refer to a human being. Consider the two examples below:

(11a) *Phala ya ka e lahlehile*.
9-whistle POSS- mine PERF-lost
'My whistle is lost.'

(11b) *Phala ya sepolesa sa Lesotho o re ditlolo tsa molao di atile haholo bathong ba bacha*.
9-whistle POSS-Lesotho police 1-aGR PRES-say 10-crime PERF-increase ADV-much ADV-among the youths
'The police spokeperson indicates that criminal offences are increasing alarmingly among the youth.'

The modifier *ya sepolesa sa Lesotho* and the context in which the word is used have assigned the word *phala* a new meaning. The speakers' negligence of the context and the new meaning compelled them to use the noun with the non-corresponding subject concord thus bringing in variation in the agreement relation phenomenon.

The use of collective nouns as subjects is also a significant factor. Collective nouns are nouns that refer to a group of things or people. From the data, the examples such as *lelapa* 'family' and *sechaba* 'people' are collective nouns. Native speakers, knowing that these terms denote a group of human beings, associate them with class 2, which is the plural of class 1. In this way, their understanding of the collective nouns is that of pluralisation not of collectiveness, hence there is a violation of the agreement relation between the subject NP and the subject marker. However, in all the examined sentences, defilement of the syntactic relationship does not distort the speaker's intended meaning.

Conclusion

The article investigated the violation of subject-verb agreement relations in Sesotho sentence construction to uncover the types of NPs that are commonly involved and the factors underpinning the phenomenon. With regard to the types of sentences, the findings show both simple and complex subject NPs which comprise metaphoric, collective and occupational titles. The nouns belong to different classes and bear different prefixes that should determine the type of agreement with other elements that are in syntactic relations with them. However, they are used with non-corresponding subject markers, resulting in variation and a challenge to the strictness feature that is carried by this type of agreement.

Factors such as negligence, lack of knowledge of syntactic rules and the concept of semanticity associated with noun classification contribute to the violation of the subject-verb

agreement relations. While most of the nouns denote human beings, they are used with the subject agreement markers for classes 1, and 2 in the plural, violating the rule of agreement. This has resulted in variation in these syntactic relations, thus calling for more investigation to detect the occurrence of this variation in other Bantu languages and to uncover the group of speakers that is most responsible for the phenomenon. While this article discusses the phenomenon in the spoken form of the language, research can also be conducted to trace this variation in the written form of language.

Note

[1] Abbreviations used

AGR	Agreement
ADV	Adverb
CONJ	Conjuction
DP	Determiner phrase
INF	Infinitive
IP	Inflectional phrase
OBJ	Object
PAST	Past tense
PERF	Perfect tense
POSS	Possessive
PP	Prepositional phrase
PRES	Present tense
PRON	Absolute pronoun

ORCID iD

Madira Thetso – https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1144-1392

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