

On OV and VO at the Bantu/Bantoid borderlands

Elisabeth J. Kerr (Leiden University Centre for Linguistics)

Banto1d, University of Hamburg

24th March 2022

1 Introduction

Today:

- Object-verb (OV) vs verb-object (VO) patterns at the Bantu/Bantoid borderlands
- Investigating relevance of information structure (IS) and tense-aspect marking (TAM) for OV vs VO word order
- Syntactic profile beyond OV vs VO
- Implications for syntactic reconstruction

1.1 OV and VO: WALS 83A (Order of object and verb)

- Niger-Congo languages in WALS sample overwhelmingly VO
- Tunen (Bantu, Cameroon) as outlier as OV (Bearth 2003; Mous 1997, 2003, 2005)
- Tikar (Bantoid, Cameroon) coded as ‘no dominant order’ (Stanley 1997)
- No languages in Central, East and Southern Bantu-speaking areas with OV (blue points on map are Cushitic/Khoi/San)
- Some other OV found in broader Niger-Congo in West Africa (Gensler 1994):
 - Ijo (Ijoid, Nigeria; Williamson 1965, cited in Givón 1975);
 - Senufo branch of Gur (Gensler 1994);
 - Mande (Gensler 1994; Nikitina 2011)

→ OV as dominant word order is very rare in Niger-Congo, but found in some languages in central/W. Africa

Values		
●	OV	712
●	VO	705
○	No dominant order	101

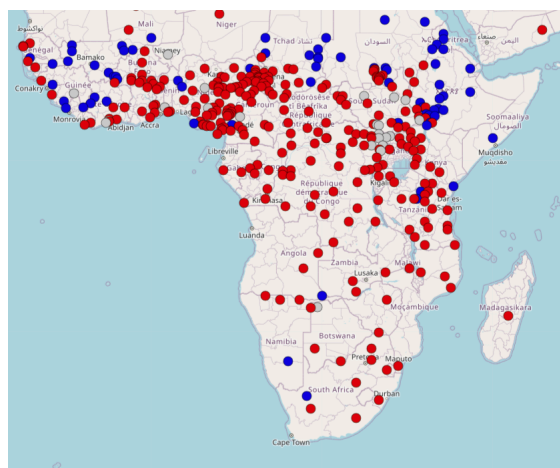


Fig.1. WALS feature 83A (Dryer 2013) ¹

1.2 Tunen OV, Nyokon OV/VO

Previous work on Tunen (Bantu, Guthrie code A44)² provides evidence for OV as the basic word order (Dugast 1971; Mous 1997, 2003, 2005, 2014). The neighbouring language Nyokon (Bantu, Guthrie code A45) has an alternation between VO and OV argued to be dependent on tense (Mous 2005):

¹Totals are for the whole world; map cropped to sub-Saharan Africa.

²See Maho (2003, 2009) for Guthrie classification of Bantu languages; the classification is geographic.

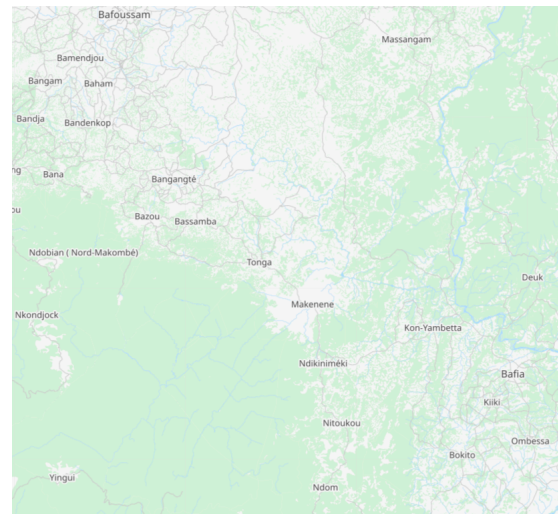
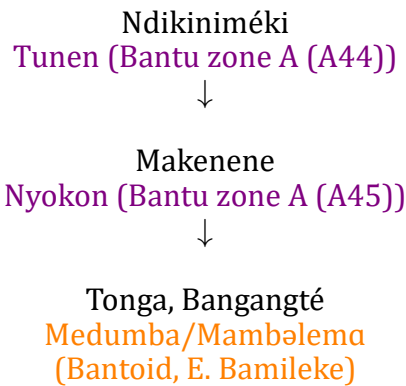
- (1) a. bá-ndɔ́ bɛ-kana tála ɔ́ yɔkɔ́
SM.2-PRES 8-basket put PREP 7.chair
'They are putting baskets on the chair.'
- b. bá-ná bɛ-kana tála ɔ́ yɔkɔ́
SM.2-PAST2 8-basket put PREP 7.chair
'They put baskets on the chair.'
(Tunen, Mous 1997:125, adapted)

- (2) a. mù nòó: yíl wóó nítān
SM.1SG COP take small stone
'I take a small stone.'
- b. ù kífá ús yíl
SM.1 stick short take
'He took a short stick.'
(Nyokon, Mous 2005:5)

1.3 The Bantu/Bantoid borderlands

Bantu/Bantoid borderlands as the region where zone A Bantu (Guthrie classification; Maho 2003) borders Bantoid in central/West Cameroon:

Taking the road from Yaoundé to Bafoussam:



2 Background

2.1 Reconstructions of word order

Different proposed reconstructions for Proto-Niger-Congo:

*SOV	Givón 1975; Hyman 1975
*SVO	Heine 1984; Claudi 1993
*S-AUX-O-V	Gensler 1994; Gensler and Güldemann. 2003

! Gensler (1994, 1997): Misleading to frame the choice of reconstruction as a dichotomy between OV and VO, because (i) there can also be the intermediate 'syntagm' S-Aux-O-V, (ii) a language may have multiple orders at once to different extents

⇒ Instead of "OV or VO?", ask "what was the word order syntax of Proto-Niger-Congo actually like?" (Gensler 1997:90)

Different time depths of reconstruction:

! **Multiple cycles** possible and likely between PNC and modern-day (e.g. Gensler 1997; Hyman 2011)

⇒ Can we meaningfully reconstruct the syntax of an intermediary stage before Bantu?

⇒ Are the rare OV patterns independent innovations or are they linked historically?

2.2 SOV and reconstruction

- Dugast (1971:6): Tunen OV order is “à ma connaissance absolument unique en bantu” [to my knowledge completely unique in Bantu] (see also Gensler 1994:6; Bearth 2003) (A45, Cameroon), though not in Gunu (A62a) or Nomaande (A46)
Mbam languages share other **innovations** such as ATR vowel harmony (cf Güldemann 2008a on MSB)
- Mous (2005): SOV is an innovation in Tunen; partial SOV found also in Nyokon
- Rare/partial S(Aux)OV(X) patterns found in Gur (Senufo), Mande, Ijo

2.2.1 SOV and reconstruction: The influence of IS

- Güldemann (2008b):
IS is relevant: OV in Benue-Congo associated with object as “less focal or even extrafocal, non-asserted information” (p83)
IS effect visible e.g. in OV/VO dependent on object being pronominal or full (focused) NP, TAM combos linked to IS
- Good (2010) on Naki (Bantoid, Cameroon):
Naki’s ‘canonical’ word order is SVO but also find SOV, VSO, ...
Naki syntax is more accurately characterised as **Topic Field - Focus Field** than in terms of grammatical role

2.3 Research questions

RQs

- RQ1 To what extent do TAM and IS influence OV vs VO word order in Tunen and Nyokon? Is it accurate to classify such borderland languages as canonically OV?
- RQ2 To what extent do the languages with OV orders differ syntactically from languages with VO orders?
- RQ3 Is OV at the borderlands historical or innovative?

3 Methodology

- Fieldwork on Tunen (A44) as part of Bantu Syntax and Information Structure (BaSIS) project
2019: 3.5 months (Ndikiniméki/Yaoundé)

³I use ‘Proto-Bantoid’ as a placeholder term for an intermediate stage further back than Proto-Bantu (capturing zone A Bantu and (some) Bantoid) but not as far removed as Proto-Niger-Congo, without committing to ‘Proto-Bantoid’ as a meaningful ontological stage.

2021/22: 3.25 months (Ndikiniéki/Yaoundé)

- Study of Nyokon (A45) data (Mous, p.c.; Lovstrand 2020)⁴
+ follow-up fieldwork with 1 Nyokon speaker (2022, Yaoundé)
- Other data from published literature, as cited



Tunen: Natural speech, elicitation



Nyokon: Elicitation

3.1 Methodology: Field questionnaires

- Bantu Syntax and Information Structure (**BaSIS**, Leiden University) project methodology on syntax & information structure (IS)⁵ (building on QUIS, Skopeteas et al. 2016)
⇒ How does IS influence syntax?
- Consequences of Head-Argument Order on Syntax (**CHAOS/C08**, Universität Potsdam) project questionnaire on OV/VO patterns (draft version)
⇒ What other syntactic features correlate with VO/OV order?

4 Results

4.1 RQ1: TAM and IS

RQs

RQ1 To what extent do TAM and IS influence OV vs VO word order? Is it accurate to classify such borderland languages as canonically OV?

To do:

- Investigate range of TAM contexts
- Investigate IS (e.g. topic, focus, contrast) using controlled elicitation and natural speech

4.1.1 RQ1: Tunen

- S-TAM-O-V-X syntax across tenses (see handout)
- Thetics = SOV
- VP focus = SOV (or cleft)
- Object focus = SOV (or SVáO or left-peripheral cleft)⁶

→ OV as neutral word order in Tunen, found across tenses

⁴Lovstrand's Nyokon data: <https://zenodo.org/record/3962412#.YgZwUBPMJZo>

⁵BaSIS methodology available online: <https://bantusyntaxinformationstructure.com/methodology/>.

⁶Mous (1997, 2005) analyses SVáO as a monoclausal construction with á as a marker indicating contrast. My data show that á occurs in exhaustive focus contexts and is the copula found both in cleft constructions and non-predicational copular clauses. I analyse SVáO constructions as synchronically biclausal cleft constructions (with a reduced relative), and therefore not simple VO examples.

- (3) Context: What did the woman give to the other woman? (+ picture)
 anó ɔsókó hetété indi
 a-nó ɔsókó he-tété indíá
 SM.1-PAST1 other 19-gourd give
 'She gave [a gourd]_{FOC} to the other.' [PM 1541]
- (4) Context: You enter the room and see a broken window, someone announces...
 Biále aná itúbé san.
 Biále a-ná ε-túbé sana
 1.Pierre SM.1-PAST2 7-window break
 'Pierre broke the window.' [EE+EB 1669]

⇒ SOV for focus on object

⇒ SOV in out-of-the-blue context

4.1.2 RQ1: Nyokon

Nyokon:

- Alternation between OV and VO dependent on tense (see Mous tted for further detail)
- Thetics = SOV or SVO dependent on tense
- VP focus = SOV or SVO dependent on tense

→ TAM is primary conditioning factor for OV vs VO order, not IS

Past tense: OV regardless of IS context

- (5) Context: What did your father do? (VP focus)
 / What did your father kill? (object focus)
 ité ángam ghó
 father spider kill
 'My father killed a spider.'
- (6) Context: What did your father kill? (object focus)
 ?ité ghó ángam.
 father kill spider
 'My father killed a spider.'

⇒ SOV in broad focus and narrow focus on object in past tense, SVO is marginal for narrow focus on object

NB: 1 example in data of VO in past tense with focus on direct object and given indirect obj:

- (7) Context: What did you give to the child?
 mu nda pimbɔɔ vé.
 SM.1SG give bananas PRON.3SG
 'I gave him bananas.'

All present tense examples VO **regardless of IS context**, e.g. narrow focus on numeral (3); verum (4).

- (8) Context: How many chickens do you see?
 táá ndukɛ ikɔ'ɔ itá.
 SM.1PL see chickens three
 S V O Num
 'We see three chickens.'
- (9) Context: Kinyo is sick. Can Kinyo eat rice?
 áa, u fɛr anyé álif.
 yes SM.1 can eat rice
 . S V V O
 'Yes, she can eat rice.'

4.2 RQ2: Syntactic profile

RQs

RQ2 To what extent do the languages with OV orders differ syntactically from languages with VO orders?

To do:

- Investigate general syntactic profile of language, considering head-finality in other domains and placement of non-arguments (SOVX vs verb-final SOV)

4.2.1 RQ2: Tunen results

Tunen:

- No low subjects allowed (cf subject inversion in other Bantu)
- Imperatives = VO (V-IO-DO)
- N-Mod order
- C-Comp order
- Cop-Compl order
- Adjuncts and locative arguments typically postverbal (SOVX)

→ Patterns with SVO languages vs ‘true’ verb-final SOV languages
VO (V-IO-DO) in imperatives:

- (10) índíá mɔná imít!
 indíá mɔ-ná ε-míté
 give 1-child 7-calabash
 ‘Give the child a calabash!’

[JO 1594]

Head-initiality elsewhere in the syntax (DP, PP, CP), N-Mod order:

- (11) tóoye tɔbanána tɔté¹té tɔfítitiə tɔfandε
 tóoye tɔ-banána tɔ-tétéá tɔ-fítitiə tɔ-fandε
 13.DEM.PROX 13-banana 13-small 13-black 13-two
 ‘these two small black bananas’

[JO 885]

4.2.2 RQ2: Nyokon results

- No low subjects allowed (cf subject inversion in other Bantu)
- Imperatives = VO (V-DO-IO)
- N-Mod order
- C-Comp order
- Cop-Compl order
- Adjuncts and locative arguments typically postverbal (SVOX/SOVX)

→ Patterns with SVO languages vs ‘true’ verb-final SOV languages
VO (V-DO-IO) order in imperatives:

- (12) nda manyí ngóm!
 give water PRON.1SG
 ‘Give me water!’

Head-initiality elsewhere in the syntax, N-Mod order:

- (13) pí pimbóto pífu
 DEM.PROX bananas two
 ‘these two bananas’

4.2.3 RQ2 results

- Both Tunen and Nyokon share syntactic similarities with VO languages despite having (partial) OV syntax
- Expected if recently grammaticalised from VO origin
- However, Tunen OV order is pragmatically neutral (RQ1) and therefore looks to be the base word order for the verb phrase

4.3 RQ3: OV/VO grammaticalisation

RQs

RQ3 Is OV at the borderlands historical or innovative?

- If historical: need to derive VO in other languages
- If innovative: derive OV via grammaticalisation/contact
- Grammaticalisation paths proposed in the literature:
 - V > Aux (> TAM)
 - IS status of object (e.g. pronoun/NP)
 - Serial verbs (Givón 1975)
 - Verbal nouns (N-Gen vs Gen-N)
 - Infinitival constructions (Mous 2005)

⇒ Do we find evidence for one or more of these paths for the Tunen/Nyokon data?

⇒ If OV is innovative, are such innovations independent or related through shared history / contact?

4.3.1 RQ3: V > Aux

V > Aux (> TAM) grammaticalisation path:

- Do auxiliaries/TAM markers have observable verbal source in Tunen/Nyokon?
- Do Nyokon tense markers differ in syntactic/grammaticalisation status?

4.3.2 RQ3: Tunen & Nyokon

See Table 1 for Tunen tense markers and Table 2 for Nyokon.

4.3.3 RQ3 results

- Tunen + Nyokon TAM marker appears with SM separate from the verb (S-TAM-OV/VO)
- No clear verbal source for Tunen/Nyokon TAM markers (see handout)
- Surprisingly little overlap between Tunen and Nyokon TAM system

Marker	Gloss	Time point
-ηɔ	FUT	future from tomorrow onwards
-ndɔ	PRES	present, immediate future
-nɔ́	PAST1	recent past, just an instant ago
-ná	PAST2	a few hours ago (same day)
-ka/- ^h ná	PAST3	yesterday and before
-le	PAST4	far past; many years ago, before birth

Table 1: Tunen tense markers

4.3.4 RQ3: Infinitival path

- Infinitival grammaticalisation path proposed by Mous (2005) for Tunen based on initial variability caused by different interpretation of the object:

“[...] Nen (A44):
 LOC O V (argument)
 LOC V ‘O’ (circumstantial)”

(Mous 2005:12)

- i.e. OV order is first possible in infinitival constructions and then generalised
- No OV found in Nyokon infinitives: “There is no example of Object-Infinitive order in the limited Nyokon (A45) data.”

Tunen

- Preposition and infinitive marker are homophonous, ɔ
- Multiple instances of ɔ in embedded clauses:

(14) míndɔ siə ɔ mənífə ɔ ɔnyá.
 mɛ́-ndɔ siə ɔ ma-nífə ɔ ɔ-nyá
 SM.1SG-PRES want PREP 6-water PREP INF-drink
 ‘I want to drink water.’

(15) miɔkɔ alé ɔso ɔ bɛŋgwɛtɛ (ɔ) ɔbáta.
 miɔkɔ a-lé ɔso ɔ bɛ-ŋgwɛtɛ ɔ ɔ-báta
 chicken SM.1-NEG can PREP 8-potato PREP INF-collect
 ‘The chicken wasn’t able to collect up her potatoes.’

- ɔ used elsewhere as preposition (e.g. *o nioní* ‘to the market’) and left-peripheral topic marker (e.g. *ɔ béɛɛbɛ bɛlábɔ́nɛ́á béɛɛbɛ*, ... ‘As for this food here, ...’)

Nyokon infinitival constructions Multiple marking of locative preposition/infinitival prefix also found in Nyokon with marker *a*, with VO syntax:

(16) Vivianə (nə) yár a náám a kɔndáf
 Vivianne COP want A cook A pork
 ‘Vivianne wants to cook pork.’

OV syntax with finite embedded clause:

- (17) Vivianə yár usáá Roger kú a kɔndáf náám
Vivianne want SM.1-say Roger TAM A pork cook
'Vivianne wants Roger to cook the pork.'

4.4 RQ3 summary

- Infinitival constructions are alternative grammaticalisation scenario for Tunen and Nyokon OV syntax
- Nyokon retains VO in embedded non-finite clauses but had OV in finite example; Tunen has OV consistently
- Path is less clearly argued than some others in literature, but a possible candidate given the presence of the multiple *ɔ/a*-marking constructions in both languages (possibly through contact)

5 Conclusion

5.1 Summary

- Tunen has a fully established SOV order, Nyokon has partial SOV with TAM as primary factor
- Both languages have other syntactic properties that fit the typical syntactic profile of a VO language
- Reconstruction: TAM-dependent, though no clear verbal source synchronically; infinitival path could have applied for both languages
- IS may have been a factor historically, but synchronically is not significant

5.2 Outstanding questions

- Do other languages at the Bantu/Bantoid borderlands show OV patterns?
Is OV in Tikar predictable by TAM or IS?
- What role has contact played? If OV is innovative, to what extent is it a shared innovation? cf innovations in other domains (e.g. ATR vowel harmony)
- Can we identify grammaticalisation sources for the TAM markers?

6 Acknowledgements

Tunen: *Équipe de Recherche sur la Langue Tunen (ERLT)*: Patient B. Batanoken, Edmond Biloungloun Bikok, Emmanuel Enganayat, Alain Georges Essomo, Angel Molel, Pierre Molel, Jeanne Ongmolaleba + Angel Blandine Engandine, Daniel Mbel, Marie Claire Mouketel, Patience Nambi, Joseph Ombang, Étienne Ondjem; Augustine Ongbaboule, Madeleine Ongiolok, Marie Celine Outekélék, Richard Tengue

Nyokon: René Atchon; Maarten Mous; Joey Lovestrand

Other: Jenneke van der Wal; Ginger Boyd; *CHAOS/C08* team, Universität Potsdam: Gisbert Fanselow, Andreas Hölzl, Andreas Schmidt



References

- Bearth, T. (2003). Syntax. In Nurse, D. and Philippson, G., editors, *The Bantu Languages*, pages 283–306. Routledge.
- Claudi, U. (1993). *Die Stellung von Verb und Objekt in Niger-Kongo-Sprachen: Ein Beitrag zur Rekonstruktion historischer Syntax*. Universität zu Köln.
- Dryer, M. S. (2013). Order of object and verb. In *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online*. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. (Available online at <http://wals.info/chapter/83>, Accessed on 2022-02-11.).
- Dugast, I. (1971). *Grammaire du Tunen*, volume 8. Éd. Klincksieck.
- Gensler, O. D. (1994). On reconstructing the syntagm S-Aux-O-V-Other to Proto-Niger-Congo. *Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society: Special Session on Historical Issues in African Linguistics*, pages 1–20.
- Gensler, O. D. (1997). Grammaticalization, typology, and Niger-Congo word order: Progress on a still-unsolved problem [review of Claudi 1993]. 18:57–93.
- Gensler, O. D. and Güldemann, T. (2003). S-Aux-O-V-Other in Africa: Typological and areal perspective. *Workshop on Distributed Predicative Syntax (S P O V X), 4th World Congress of African Linguistics (WOCAL), Rutgers University, June 2003*.
- Givón, T. (1975). Serial verbs and syntactic change: Niger-Congo. In *Word Order and Word Order Change*, pages 47–112. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Good, J. (2010). Topic and focus fields in Naki. In *The expression of information structure: A documentation of its diversity across Africa*, pages 35–67. John Benjamins.
- Güldemann, T. (2008a). The Macro-Sudan belt: Towards identifying a linguistic area in northern sub-Saharan Africa. pages 151–185.

- Güldemann, T. (2008b). Preverbal objects and information structure in Benue-Congo. In *Focus strategies in African languages*, pages 83–112. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter.
- Heine, B. . M. R. (1984). *Grammaticalization and reanalysis in African languages*. Hamburg: Helmut Buske.
- Hyman, L. (2011). The macro-sudan belt and niger-congo reconstruction. *Language dynamics and change*, 1:3–49.
- Hyman, L. M. (1975). On the change from sov to svo: Evidence from niger-congo. In *Word order and word order change*, pages 113–147. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Maho, J. (2003). A classification of the Bantu languages: an update of Guthrie’s referential system.
- Maho, J. (2009). NUGL online: The online version of the New Updated Guthrie List, a referential classification of the Bantu languages.
- Mous, M. (1997). The position of the object in Tunen.
- Mous, M. (2003). Nen (A44). *The Bantu Languages*, pages 283–306.
- Mous, M. (2005). The innovative character of object-verb word order in nen (bantu a44, cameroon). *Studies in African Comparative Linguistics with Special Focus on Bantu and Mande. Tervuren: MRAC*, pages 411–24.
- Mous, M. (2014). Tam-full object-verb order in the mbam languages of cameroon. *Preverbal Domain (s)*, page 72.
- Mous, M. (submitted). The tenses of Nyokon (nɪ̀pò̀ɔ̀, Bantu A45, Cameroon).
- Nikitina, T. (2011). Categorical reanalysis and the origin of the S-O-V-X word order in Mande. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics (JALL)*, 32:251–273.
- Stanley, C. (1997). *Description Morpho-Syntaxique de la langue Tikar (parlée au Cameroun)*. Societe Internationale de Linguistique (SIL).
- Williamson, K. (1965). *A grammar of the Kolokuma dialect of Ijò*. West African Monographs 2. Cambridge: University Press.

All data unless otherwise stated from fieldwork conducted by Elisabeth J. Kerr in Mar-Jun 2019 and Nov 2021-Feb 2022 in Ndikiniméki and Yaoundé, Cameroon under MINRESI permits no. 90000061/MINRESI/B00/C00/C10/C12 and 000157/MINRESI/B00/C00/C10/C13 as part of the NWO BaSIS project (PI Jenneke van der Wal, Leiden University).

Contact:

Elisabeth J. Kerr
 Leiden University Centre for Linguistics
e.j.kerr@hum.leidenuniv.nl

label	schema	TAM marker	verb stem	OV	remarks
Subjunctive	S _{PRO} \H V\H	-		Y	subject pronoun obligatory
Recent past	H\V	-		Y	
Far past	V\H	-		Y	
Remote past	V\H:k	-	k	Y	built on Far past
Perfect	V\H	nóó nàkú		N	built on Far past
Present Continuous	V+T	nǎ	no k	N	built on Present; < nǎ COP
Conditional	V+T	nó	no k	Y	built on Present continuous
Past Imperfective	S mbió S (O) V(\PR?) (O)			Y	
Past Imperfective 2	S mbió ku V\PA _{ST} (O)	mbiá ku		N	
Background	S mbió V(\PR?) (O)	mbiá		N	
Background Past R	S mbió V (O)	mbiá		N	
Background Moment	S máá S (O) V (O)			Y	
Future	mǎ=S _{PRO} V\PA _{ST} (O)			N	
Narrative	pí (+ kǎ ~ kà) + V	pí		Y	
Present Subject Focus	Compl INF-V-á' (O)			N	
Recent Past Subject Focus	Compl nóó/nàkú V\PA (O)	nóó nàkú		N	
Far Past Subject Focus	Compl Verb\PA (O)			N	
Remote Past Subject Focus	Compl Verb-k\PA (O)			N	
Procedural	(O) INF-MID-V\H* Obl			Y obl	
Procedural2	(O) mbiá INF- V\H* Obl			Y obl	
Negative General Present	S sí V\H (O) other á	sí		N	
Negative Present	S ná~nàkǎ~káŋ (O) á	nà nàkǎ káŋ		N	
Negative Background	S mbió V (O) á	mbiá		N	
Negative Past	S mbió V\PA _{ST} (O) á	mbiá		N	

Table 2: Nyokon tense markers (Moustted).