On OV and VO at the Bantu/Bantoid borderlands

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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)[1]
- 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-Congoin 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

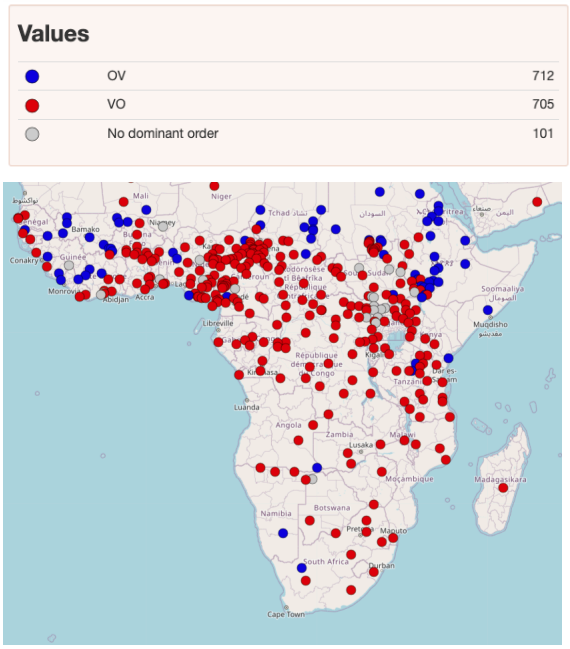


Fig.1. WALS feature 83A (Dryer 2013) [2]

1.2 Tunen OV, Nyokon OV/VO

Previous work on Tunen (Bantu, Guthrie code A44)[3] 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):

[1] Tikar has SVO(X) in perfective and S(TAM)OV(X) in imperfective (Stanley 1997:102). O here applies to both direct and indirect object. All examples I have seen show the same word order for full NPs as pronouns; examples are given in absence of discourse context so the influence of information structural factors is otherwise unclear.

[2] Totals are for the whole world; map cropped to sub-Saharan Africa.

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

(1) a. bá-ndɔ bɛ-kana **tála** ɔ yɔkɔ
SM.2-PRES 8-basket put PREP 7.chair
'They are putting baskets on the chair.'

b. bá-ná bɛ-kana **tála** ɔ yɔkɔ
SM.2-PAST2 8-basket put PREP 7.chair
'They put baskets on the chair.'
(Tunen, Mous 1997:125, adapted)

(2) a. mù nàá: **yìl** wóó nìtān
SM.1SG COP take small stone
'I take a small stone.'

b. ù kìfá ús **yíl**
SM.1 stick short take
'He took a short stick.'
(Nyokon, Mous 2005:5)

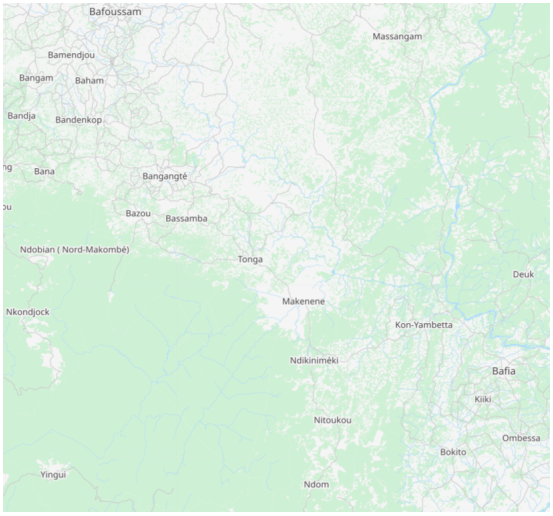
Mous (2005:14): "Data on Nyokon (A45) are very limited and a proper understanding of the syntax of Nyokon (A45) is probably crucial to understand in more detail what happened in Nen (A44)."

1.3 The Bantu/Bantoid borderlands

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

Taking the road from Yaoundé to Bafoussam:

Ndikiniméki
Tunen (Bantu zone A (A44))
↓
Makenene
Nyokon (Bantu zone A (A45))
↓
Tonga, Bangangté
Medumba/Mambəlemɑ
(Bantoid, E. Bamileke)



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 (as we saw in (2) for Nyokon)

⇒ 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:

Proto-Bantu > Proto-Bantoid (?)[4] > Proto-Niger-Congo

[4] I 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.

! **Multiple cycles** possible and likely between Proto-Niger-Congo 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)
- Mous (2005): SOV is an innovation in Tunen; partial SOV found also in Nyokon (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)
- 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 (focussed) 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)

  2021/22: 3.25 months (Ndikiniméki/Yaoundé)
- Study of Nyokon (A45) data (Mous, p.c.; Lovestrand 2020)[5]

[5] Lovestrand's Nyokon data: https://zenodo.org/record/3962412#.YgZwUBPMJZo

+ follow-up fieldwork with 1 Nyokon speaker (2022, Yaoundé) [! transcriptions WIP]

- Other data from published literature, as cited

Tunen: Natural speech, elicitation

Nyokon: Elicitation

Tunen data from my fieldwork are cited with the consultant's initials and unique form id corresponding to the Dative database (to be archived open access at end of project, expected 2023).

3.1 Methodology: Field questionnaires

- Bantu Syntax and Information Structure (**BaSIS**, Leiden University) project methodology on syntax & information structure (IS)[6] (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
- Thetics = SOV
- VP focus = SOV (or cleft)
- Object focus = SOV (or SVáO or left-peripheral cleft)[7]

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

[6] BaSIS methodology available online: https://bantusyntaxinformationstructure.com/methodology/.

[7] Mous (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 as the copula found both in cleft constructions and non-predicational copular clauses. In my thesis I analyse SVáO constructions as synchronically biclausal cleft constructions (with a reduced relative), and therefore not simple VO examples, based on tonal/TAM evidence.

(3) Context: What did the woman give to the other woman? (+ picture)
anɔ́ ɔsɔ́kɔ́ hɛtétɛ́ indi
a-nɔ́ ɔsɔ́kɔ́ hɛ-tétɛ́ indíə́
SM.1-PAST1 other 19-gourd give
'She gave [a gourd]$_{FOC}$ to the other.' [PM 1541]

⇒ SOV for focus on object

(4) Context: You enter the room and see a broken window, someone announces...
Biə́lɛ aná itúbə́ san.
Biə́lɛ a-ná ɛ-túbə́ sana
1.Pierre SM.1-PAST2 7-window break
'Pierre broke the window.' [EE+EB 1669]

⇒ 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)
itə́ ángam ghó
father spider kill
'My father killed a spider.'

(6) Context: What did your father kill? (object focus)
?itə́ 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 (possibly misanalysis of TAM):

(7) Context: What did you give to the child?
mu nda pimbɔtɔ və́.
SM.1SG TMA.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 ndukŋ 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 fʉr anyɛ́ 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) índíə mɔná imit!
indíə mɔ-ná ɛ-mítə
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) tɔ́ɔ́yɛ tɔbanána tɔtɛ́ꜜtɛ́ tɔfítitiə tɔ́fandɛ
tɔ́ɔ́yɛ tɔ-banána tɔ-têtɛ́á tɔ-fítitiə tɔꜜfandɛ
13.DEM.PROX 13-banana 13-small 13-black 13-two
'these two small black bananas' [JO 885]

Possessor-Possessed order with pronominals (associative construction otherwise):

(12) Context: 'Who attacked the hunter?'
á wamíá mukúləkulə.
á wamíá mɔ-kúləkulə
COP POSS.1SG.1 1-neighbour
'It was my neighbour.' [PM 1568]

Time adverbials, locative adjuncts postverbal (SOVX):

(13) aka yayɛ́á miímə lúmə́kə́ ɔ iNdíki naánɛkɔl.
a-ka yayɛ́a miímə lúm-aka ɔ iNdíki naánɛkɔla
SM.1-PAST3 POSS.PRON.1 house build-DUR PREP Ndiki yesterday
'He built his house yesterday in Ndiki.' [JO 1121]

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:

(14) nda manyí ngɔ́m!
give water PRON.1SG
'Give me water!'

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

(15) pí pimbóto pífu
DEM.PROX bananas two
'these two bananas'

(16) Context: announce after visiting a friend's house
punú páa liak tsú.
POSS.2PL children cry much
'Your children cry a lot.'

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 (next page) for Nyokon.

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

Table 1: Tunen tense markers

No clear overlap found between forms in Nyokon TAM paradigm (Table 2), nor clear origin of TAM markers/auxiliaries from verbs that are common sources for a tense marker (cf Heine 1984):

(17)

utɔ'ɔ	'to begin'	*umán*	'to finish'
nyám	'to return'	*ufɛ*	'to come'
utʃɔp	'to go, to leave'	*utʃó*	'to enter'
utʃə́s	'to exit'	*utiin, undukŋ*	'to see'

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
- Surprisingly little overlap between Tunen and Nyokon TAM system

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* (for now glossed as PREP and INF)
- Multiple instances of *ɔ* in embedded clauses:

label	schema	TAM marker	verb stem	OV	remarks
Subjunctive	SPRO\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	**nòó nəkú**		N	built on Far past
Present Continuous	V +T	**nə̌**	no k	N	built on Present; < **nə** COP
Conditional	V +T	**ná**	no k	Y	built on Present continuous
Past Imperfective	S **mbíə́** S (O) V(\PR?) (O)			Y	
Past Imperfective 2	S **mbíə́ ku** V\PAST (O)	**mbíə́ ku**		N	
Background	S **mbíə́** V(\PR?) (O)	**mbíə́**		N	
Background_Past_R	S **mbíə́** V (O)	**mbíə́**		N	
Background Moment	S **màà** S (O) V (O)			Y	
Future	**mə̀**=Spro V\PAST (O)			N	
Narrative	**pí** (+ **kə̌** ~ **kə̀**) + V	**pí**		Y	
Present Subject Focus	Compl INF-V-**à'** (O)			N	
Recent Past Subject Focus	Compl **nóò/nəkú** V\PA (O)	**nóò nəkú**		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) **mbíə́** INF- V\H* Obl			Y obl	
Negative General Present	S **sí** V\H (O) other **á**	**sí**		N	
Negative Present	S **nà~nəkə̀~káŋ** (O) **á**	**nà nəkə̀ káŋ**		N	
Negative Background	S **mbíə́** V (O) **á**	**mbíə́**		N	
Negative Past	S **mbíə́** V\PAST (O) **á**	**mbíə́**		N	

Table 2: Nyokon tense markers (Mous tted).

(18) míndɔ siə **ɔ** mənífə́ **ɔ** **ɔ**nyá.
mɛ́-ndɔ siə ɔ ma-nífə́ ɔ ɔ-nyá
SM.1SG-PRES want PREP 6-water PREP INF-drink
'I want to drink water.'

(19) miɔkɔ́ alé ɔ́sɔ **ɔ** bɛŋgwɛtɛ (**ɔ**) **ɔ**báta.
miɔkɔ́ a-lé óso 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 elswhere as preposition (e.g. *o nioní* 'to the market') and left-peripheral topic marker (e.g. *ɔ béɛɛbɛ bɛlábɔ́néá 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:

(20) 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:

(21) 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.'

→ Shift in VO to OV in Nyokon when embedded clause is finite (with overt subject and TAM marker)

4.4 RQ3 summary

- Multiple grammaticalisation scenarios invoked in literature for OV as innovation (and other innovations argued for for languages of the borderlands region)
- Lack of evidence in support of V > Aux > TAM grammaticalisation (can cognates be identified with further study?)
- 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
- Infinitival 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? Requires data with discourse context, ideally natural speech as well. Preliminary research on Stanley (1997) suggests TAM not IS as primary factor
- What role has contact played? If OV is innovative, to what extent is it a shared innovation? cf innovations in other domains in the region (e.g. ATR vowel harmony)
- Can we identify grammaticalisation sources for the TAM markers?

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Gloss

1, 2, 3...	Bantu noun class marker	PAST1	first-degree past tense (just now)
1SG, 1PL	1st person singular, plural	PAST2	second-degree past tense (hodiernal)
2SG	2nd person singular	PAST3	third-degree past tense (yesterday)
ASSOC	associative marker	POSS	possessive
COP	copula	PREP	preposition
DEM	demonstrative	PRES	present tense marker
DUR	durative verbal extension	PROX	proximal
FOC	focus marker	PRON	pronoun
INF	infinitive	SM	subject marker
NEG	negation	TAM	tense-aspect(-mood) marker

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