

# On OV and VO at the Bantu/Bantoid borderlands

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# Introduction

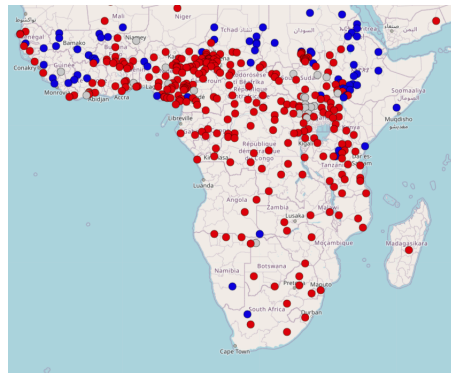
Today:

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

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

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

- Niger-Congo languages in WALS sample overwhelmingly **VO**
- Tunen (Bantu, Cameroon) as outlier as **OV**
- Tikar (Bantoid, Cameroon) coded as 'no dominant order'
- Some other **OV** in broader Niger-Congo (+Cushitic; Khoi; San), e.g. Ijo in Nigeria, Mande



(Dryer 2013)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Totals are for the whole world; map cropped to sub-Saharan Africa. See handout for other sources on rarity of OV in Niger-Congo.

# Tunen OV, Nyokon OV/VO

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

b. bá-ná bɛ-kana **tála** ɔ́ yɔkɔ  
SM.2-PAST2 8-basket put PREP 7.chair  
'They put baskets on the chair.'

(Tunen, Mous 1997:125, adapted)

(2) a. mù nɛ̀ɛ́: **yíl** wóó nìtān  
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.'

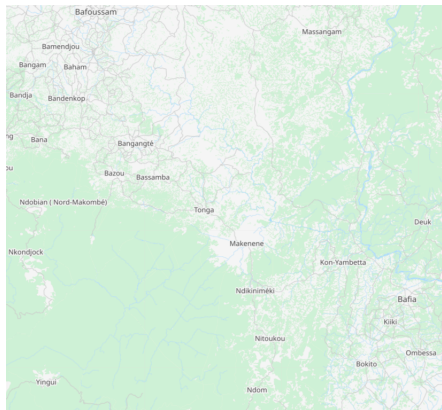
(Nyokon, Mous 2005:5)



# The Bantu/Bantoid borderlands

Where zone A Bantu borders  
(non-Bantu) Bantoid in  
central/West Cameroon

- Ndikiniméki:  
**Tunen (Bantu zone A);**
- Makenene:  
**Nyokon (Bantu zone A);**
- Tonga, Bangangté:  
**Medumba/Mambølema  
(Bantoid, E. Bamileke)**



# Background

# Reconstructions of word order

Different proposed reconstructions for Proto-Niger-Congo:

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

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! 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)

# Reconstructions of word order

Different time depths of reconstruction:

Proto-Bantu > Proto-Bantoid (?) > Proto-Niger-Congo

**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?

# 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 (see handout for references)

# 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

# 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 Is OV at the borderlands historical or innovative?

# Methodology



# Methodology

- Fieldwork on Tunen (A44) as part of Bantu Syntax and Information Structure (BaSIS) project
  - 2019: 3.5 months (Ndikinioméki/Yaoundé)
  - 2021/22: 3.25 months (Ndikinioméki/Yaoundé)
- Study of Nyokon (A45) data (Mous, p.c.; Lovestrland 2020)<sup>2</sup>  
+ follow-up fieldwork with 1 Nyokon speaker (2022, Yaoundé;  
!transcriptions WIP)
- Other data from published literature



**Tunen:** Natural speech, elicitation



**Nyokon:** Elicitation

<sup>2</sup>Lovestrland's Nyokon data:

# Methodology: Field questionnaires

- Bantu Syntax and Information Structure (**BaSIS**, Leiden University) project methodology on syntax & IS<sup>3</sup> (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?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://bantusyntaxinformationstructure.com/methodology/>



# RQ1

## 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



# RQ1: Tunen

- (3) Context: What did the woman give to the other woman?

aná ὡσόκό ηετέτέ indi

a-nó ὡσόκό ηε-τέτέ indió

SM.1-PAST1 other 19-gourd give

'She gave [a gourd]<sub>FOC</sub> to the other.'

[PM 1541]

⇒ SOV for focus on object

- (4) Context: You enter the room and see a broken window, someone announces...

Bióle aná itúbó san.

Bióle a-ná ε-túbó sana

1.Pierre SM.1-PAST2 7-window break

'Pierre broke the window.'

[EE+EB 1669]

⇒ SOV in out-of-the-blue context

# RQ1: Nyokon

**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?

Nyokon:

- Alternation between OV and VO dependent on tense (see Mous submitted 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

# Nyokon

Past tense: OV regardless of IS context

- (5) Context: What did your father do? (VP focus)  
 / What did your father kill? (object focus)

itá ángam ghó

father spider kill

'My father killed a spider.'

- (6) Context: What did your father kill? (object focus)

?itá 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



# General syntactic profile

- 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, placement of non-arguments (SOVX vs verb-final SOV)

# RQ1: 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

# RQ1: Tunen

VO (V-IO-D0) in imperatives:

- (7)  $\acute{\iota}\nu\acute{\delta}\acute{\iota}\acute{\theta}$   $m\alpha\nu\acute{\alpha}$   $i\mu\acute{\iota}t!$   
 $\acute{\iota}\nu\acute{\delta}\acute{\iota}\acute{\theta}$   $m\alpha\text{-}\acute{n}\acute{\alpha}$   $\epsilon\text{-}m\acute{\iota}t\acute{\epsilon}$   
 give 1-child 7-calabash  
 'Give the child a calabash!' [JO 1594]

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

- (8)  $t\acute{o}\acute{\upsilon}\gamma\epsilon$   $t\alpha b\alpha n\acute{\alpha}n\alpha$   $t\alpha t\acute{\epsilon}^1 t\acute{\epsilon}$   $t\alpha f\acute{\iota}t\acute{\iota}t\acute{\iota}\alpha$   $t\acute{o}f\alpha n\delta\epsilon$   
 $t\acute{o}\acute{\upsilon}\gamma\epsilon$   $t\alpha\text{-}b\alpha n\acute{\alpha}n\alpha$   $t\alpha\text{-}t\acute{\epsilon}t\acute{\epsilon}\acute{\alpha}$   $t\alpha\text{-}f\acute{\iota}t\acute{\iota}t\acute{\iota}\alpha$   $t\alpha\text{-}f\alpha n\delta\epsilon$   
 13.DEM.PROX 13-banana 13-small 13-black 13-two  
 'these two small black bananas' [JO 885]

# RQ1: 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

# RQ1 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

# RQ2

## RQs

RQ2 Is OV at the borderlands historical or innovative?

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

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

# RQ2: V > Aux

V > Aux (> TAM) grammaticalisation path:

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

## RQ2: Tunen

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

**Table:** Tunen tense markers



# Nyokon

label	schema	TAM marker	verb stem	OV	remarks
Subjunctive	Strng/H VH	-		Y	subject pronoun obligatory
Recent past	HV	-		Y	
Far past	VH	-		Y	
Remote past	VHk	-	k	Y	built on Far past
Perfect	VH	nóó níkú		N	built on Far past
Present Continuous	V+T	ná	no k	N	built on Present; < no COP
Conditional	V+T	ná	no k	Y	built on Present continuous
Past Imperfective	S mbíi S (O) V (Pst?) (O)			Y	
Past Imperfective 2	S mbíi ku V/PAST (O)	mbíi ku		N	
Background	S mbíi V (Pst?) (O)	mbíi		N	
Background_Past_R	S mbíi V (O)	mbíi		N	
Background Moment	S mbíi S (O) V (O)			Y	
Future	mí-Síma V/PAST (O)			N	
Narrative	pí (+ ká - ká) + V	pí		Y	
Present Subject Focus	Compl INF-V-á' (O)			N	
Recent Past Subject Focus	Compl nóó/níkú V/PA (O)	nóó níkú		N	
Far Past Subject Focus	Compl Verb/PA (O)			N	
Remote Past Subject Focus	Compl Verb-K/PA (O)			N	
Procedural	(O) INF-MB-VH* Obi			V	obl
Procedural2	(O) mbíi INF-VH* Obi			V	obl
Negative General Present	S sí VH (O) other á	sí		N	
Negative Present	S ná-níkú-káq (O) á	ná níkú káq		N	
Negative Background	S mbíi V (O) á	mbíi		N	
Negative Past	S mbíi V/PAST (O) á	mbíi		N	

Source: Mous (submitted)

# V > Aux grammaticalisation

- Surprisingly little overlap between Tunen and Nyokon TAM systems
- No clear cognates with verbs known to grammaticalise into auxiliaries in other languages (Heine 1984):

## (9) Nyokon verbs

<i>utɔ'ɔ</i>	'to begin'	<i>umán</i>	'to finish'
<i>nyám</i>	'to return'	<i>ufe</i>	'to come'
<i>utɔɔp</i>	'to go, to leave'	<i>utɔ́o</i>	'to enter'
<i>utɔ́ás</i>	'to exit'	<i>utiin, undukɛ</i>	'to see'

# RQ2 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

# RQ2: Infinitival path

- Infinitival grammaticalisation path proposed by Mous (2005) for Tunen

*"[...] 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:

(10) *míndɔ siə ɔ mənífé ɔ ɔnyá.*

*mé-ndɔ siə ɔ ma-nífé ɔ ɔ-nyá*  
 SM.1SG-PRES want PREP 6-water PREP INF-drink  
 'I want to drink water.'

(11) *miɔkó alé ɔso ɔ beŋgwete (ɔ) ɔbáta.*

*miɔkó a-lé óso ɔ be-ŋgwete 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 béεεβε beláβónéá béεεβε, ...* 'As for this food here, ...')

# Infinitival constructions

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

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

OV syntax with finite embedded clause:

(13) Vivianə yár usáá Roger kú a kəndáf náám  
 Vivianne want SM.1-say Roger TAM A pork cook  
 ‘Vivianne wants Roger to cook the pork.’

# Infinitival constructions

- 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

# Conclusion



# Conclusion

- 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

# 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?
- Can we identify grammaticalisation sources for the TAM markers?

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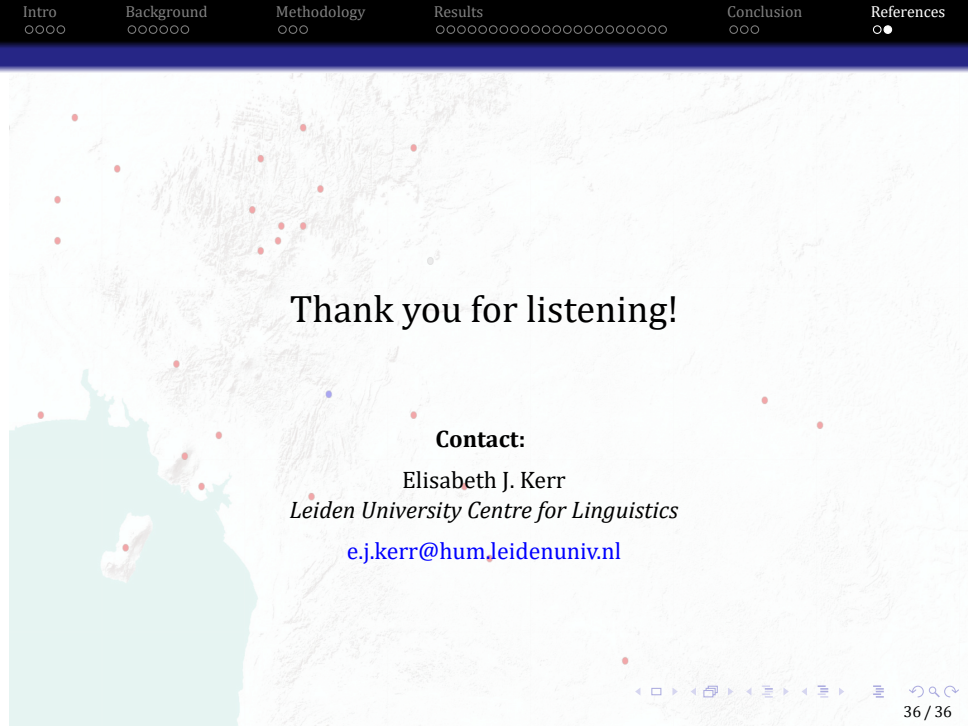
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All data unless otherwise stated from fieldwork conducted by Elisabeth J. Kerr in Mar-Jun 2019 and Nov 2021-Feb 2022 in Ndikiniméki and Yaoundé, Cameroon under MINRESI permits no. 90000061/MINRESI/B00/C00/C10/C12 and 000157/MINRESI/B00/C00/C10/C13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



Thank you for listening!

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