

The Bantu verbal prefixes and S-Aux-O-V order in Benue-Congo

Jeff Good (good@eva.mpg.de) and
Tom Güldemann (guedeman@eva.mpg.de)
Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology

1 Introduction

[1] The traditional schema for the Bantu verb prefixes (based on (Meeussen 1967:108–111), with modifications found in Güldemann (2003a:184))

(PREINITIAL)	INITIAL	(POSTINITIAL)	(PRERADICAL)	STEM
TAM	Subject	TAM	Object	
Negation		Negation		
Clause type		Clause type		

[2] Basic claim of paper: The prefix system is the result of relatively recent grammaticalization, along the following lines. (See Gensler (1994:13–15) for an early, similar proposal.)

General pattern I: SUBJ AUX OBJ VERB
Frequent pattern I: PRON_{SUBJ} AUX PRON_{OBJ} VERB
Resultant pattern I: SM-TMA-OM-STEM

General pattern II: NP_{SUBJ} AUX VERB NP_{OBJ}
Frequent pattern II: PRON_{SUBJ} AUX VERB NP_{OBJ}
Resultant pattern II: SM-TMA-STEM NP_{OBJ}

[3] Goals of presentation

- [a] Present comparative evidence on distinct functions of preverbal versus postverbal objects.
- [b] Present evidence for a linguistic area in Africa stretching from West Africa to Ethiopia south of the Sahara and north of the rainforest.
- [c] Show how these facts support the proposed grammaticalization scenario given above.
- [d] Discuss consequences of the proposal for Proto-Bantu reconstruction

[4] We are only interested here in the origin of the verbal prefixes.

[5] We do not believe the type of grammaticalization scenario presented here will easily extend to the verbal suffixes (with the possible exception of the *-jɔ̄-e perfective)—at least at the relevant time depth.

2 Preverbal and postverbal objects in Benue-Congo

2.1 Introduction

[6] Güldemann (forthcoming b) surveys uses of OV order in Benue-Congo languages, with a focus on the information structure properties of that order.

[7] Here, three “triggers” of OV word order in Benue-Congo will be discussed:

- [a] Auxiliary verbs
- [b] Pronominal objects
- [c] Information structure

[8] Understanding the conditions under which objects can be preverbal in Benue-Congo should be able to give us insights into the prefixal object position in Bantu.

2.2 Effects of Auxiliaries

[9] Preverbal, post-auxiliary objects in Tikar (Bantoid) examples (Stanley 1991)

- [a] *wǔ shê m̀̀n, m̀̀n kɛ̀nɛ̀ kan*
 2s say.IRR 1s 1s leave.IRR NEG
 “If you had said it, I wouldn’t have left.” (Stanley 1991:71)
- [b] *à yɛn-nâ m̀̀n*
 1.SBJ see-PFV 1s
 “He saw me.” (Stanley 1991:247)
- [c] *à tǎ nun fỳ̀-a*
 1.SBJ IPFV 1.OBJ mock-SF
 “He made fun of him.” (Stanley 1991:105)
- [d] *m̀̀n kɛ̀n-mɛ wù nun twɛ-li*
 1s go-PFV 2s 1.OBJ bring-SF
 “I’m going to bring you it from over there.” (Stanley 1991:136)
- [e] *à tǎ n̄she she*
 1.SBJ IPFV luggage carry
 “He’s carrying the baggage.” (Stanley 1991:103)

[10] In Tikar, some auxiliaries are associated with preverbal objects.

[11] Both nominal and pronominal objects are affected.

[12] As discussed by Güldemann (2003a:184–5), Tikar has most of the ingredients necessary to become “Bantu”.

2.3 Pronominal objects

[13] Preverbal and postverbal objects in Ibibio (Cross River)

- [a] *Òkôn á dèp ébót*
 Okon 3s buy goat
 “Okon is buying a goat.” (Urua 1997:201)
- [b] *Úbók á n̄ biák*
 hand 3s 1s be.painful
 “My hand hurts.” (Urua 1997:204)

[14] Emphatic pronoun doubling in Ibibio

- Úbók á n̄ biák m̀̀n*
 hand 3s 1s be.painful 1s
 “My hand hurts.” (Urua 1997:204)

[15] Non-emphatic reflexive-experiencer pronouns are preverbal.

[16] Postverbal position for pronouns in such constructions is reserved for emphatic pronouns.

[17] Non-emphatic and emphatic pronouns and nominal objects in Kana (Cross River).

- [a] *wɛ̀̀ m̄-tɛ̀̀rā p̄*
 3s.PST 1s-run meet
 “He ran to me.” (Ikoro 1996:212)
- [b] *wɛ̀̀ tɛ̀̀rā p̄ n̄dā*
 3s.PST run meet 1s.EMPH
 “He ran to ME.” (Ikoro 1996:212)

- [c] *wēè sú bá zìm-ā lékà*
 3s.PST take hand hit-INST Leka
 “He hit Leka with a hand.” (Ikoro 1996:212)

[18] Pronominal objects are generally preverbal in Kana, except when emphatic.

[19] Object pronouns in Ewondo (Bantu)

- [a] *Avó mə dzɔ.*
 1.give.PST 1s 9
 “He gave it to me.” (Redden 1979:55)
- [b] *Akad mə soób bīyé.*
 1.HAB 1s wash 8.cloth
 “He washes clothes for me.” (Redden 1979:56)
- [c] *Akad mə dzɔ vó.*
 1.HAB 1s 9 give
 “He usually gives it to me.” (Redden 1979:167)

[20] Pronominal objects are preverbal in Ewondo when there is an auxiliary verb.

[21] “When another word follows, the first- and second-person pronouns often have reduced forms (Redden 1979:55).” (The unreduced form of the first person pronoun is *ma*.)

2.4 Information structure

[22] Intransitive sentences from Aghem (Grassfields, Bantoid)

- [a] *éná? mɔ ñíŋ nò*
 Inah DPST run FOC
 “Inah ran.” (Watters 1979:144)
- [b] *á mɔ ñíŋ ndúghò*
 DS DPST run who
 “Who ran?” (Watters 1979:144)
- [c] *á mɔ ñíŋ éná?*
 DS DPST run Inah
 “Inah ran.” (Answer to above) (Watters 1979:144)

[23] Transitive sentences from Aghem

- [a] *fíl á mɔ zí kɛbé*
 friends.B SM DPST eat fufu.A
 “The friends ate fufu.” (Watters 1979:146)
- [b] *á mɔ zí ndúghò bé-'kó*
 DS DPST eat who fufu.B
 “Who ate the fufu?” (Watters 1979:146)
- [c] *á mɔ zí á-fín bé-'kó*
 DS DPST eat friends.A fufu.B
 “The friends ate fufu.” (Answer to above) (Watters 1979:146)

[24] OVS order in Naki (Beboid, Bantoid)

- [a] *Kúm ákpəl̄ə fyèp yə.*
 Kum kill.PST 9.rat 9.the
 “Kum killed the rat.”

[b] *Fyèp yə̀ ākpólō yé?*
 9.rat 9.the kill.PST.FOC who
 “Who killed the rat?”

[c] *Fyèp yə̀ ākpólō Kúm.*
 9.rat 9.the kill.PST.FOC Kum
 “Kum killed the rat.” (Answer to above question.)

[25] Informal characterization of the pattern:

[[]Topic []Predicate []Focus]

[26] Preverbal objects in Tunen (Mbam, Bantoid)

[a] *Báŋò bèkàná tálák ò yòkò.*
 2.FUT 8.baskets put LOC chair
 “They will put baskets on the chair.” (Mous 1997:125)

[b] *mè ná [wò mondo] [buhínə] batolòn*
 1s PST 1.this 1.man 14.debt claim.PST
 “I claimed the debt from this man.” (Dugast 1971:309)

[27] Postverbal objects in Tunen

[a] *Àná mòné índì.*
 1.PST money give
 “S/he gave money.” (Mous 1997:126)

[b] *Àná índì á mòné.*
 1.PST give EMPH money
 “S/he gave MONEY.” (Mous 1997:126)

[c] *Méndò bònìàkà né.*
 1s.PRS yams eat
 “I am eating yams.” (Mous 1997:127)

[d] *Méndò ní á bònìàk.*
 1s.PRS eat EMPH yams
 “What I eat is yams.” (Mous 1997:127)

[e] *Mèná nyá há mwóníf.*
 1s.PST drink only water
 “I drank only water.” (Mous 1997:127)

[28] “In general, VO order is possibly only when making a statement about the relation of a particular object against other possible objects (Mous 1997:127).”

[29] Postverbal objects in Mambila (Mambiloid, Bantoid)

[a] *mè ŋgeé naâ cògò*
 1s buy PST cloth
 “I bought cloth.” or “It was cloth that I bought.” (Perrin 1994:233)

[b] *mè ŋgeé naâ cògò léilé*
 1s buy PST cloth yesterday
 “I bought cloth yesterday.” (Perrin 1994:233)

[c] *mè léilé ŋgeé naâ cògò*
 1s yesterday buy PST cloth
 “It was cloth that I bought yesterday.” (Perrin 1994:233)

^[30] Preverbal objects in Mambila[a] *mè naâ cògò ñgeé*

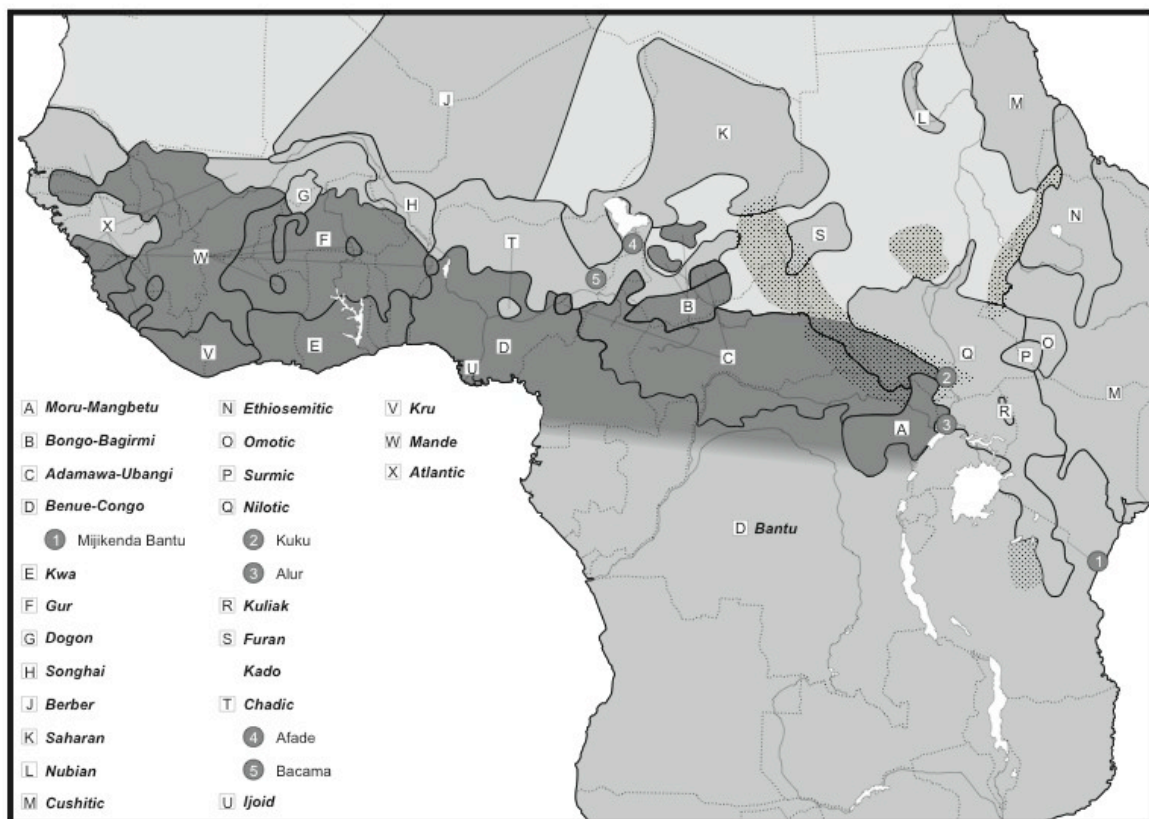
1s PST cloth buy

“I bought cloth.” (Perrin 1994:233)

[b] *mè cògò ñgeé naâ léilé*

1s cloth buy PST yesterday

“It was yesterday that I bought cloth.” (Perrin 1994:233)

2.5 Conclusion^[31] **General pattern:** Preverbal objects tend to be less salient and postverbal objects tend to be more salient.^[32] Since pronouns tend to be less salient than full noun phrases, pronominal objects would be expected to be less salient than nominal objects. Therefore, preverbal pronominal object prefixes and postverbal nominal objects in Bantu are not surprising when looking at the wider Benue-Congo context.^[33] Parallel argument order alternations appear to be attested elsewhere, for example in Nama (Khoe) SOV word order is associated with focused nominal objects and SVO order with topical nominal objects and pronominal object clitics (see Hagman (1977)). And, perhaps Romance is similar.**3 The Macro-Sudan belt**^[34] **Labiovelar consonants in Africa** (see Maddieson (1984:215–216), Maddieson (2005))^[35] Logophoricity examples from Kera (Chadic)*wə_i mɪntí tó_i kóoré*

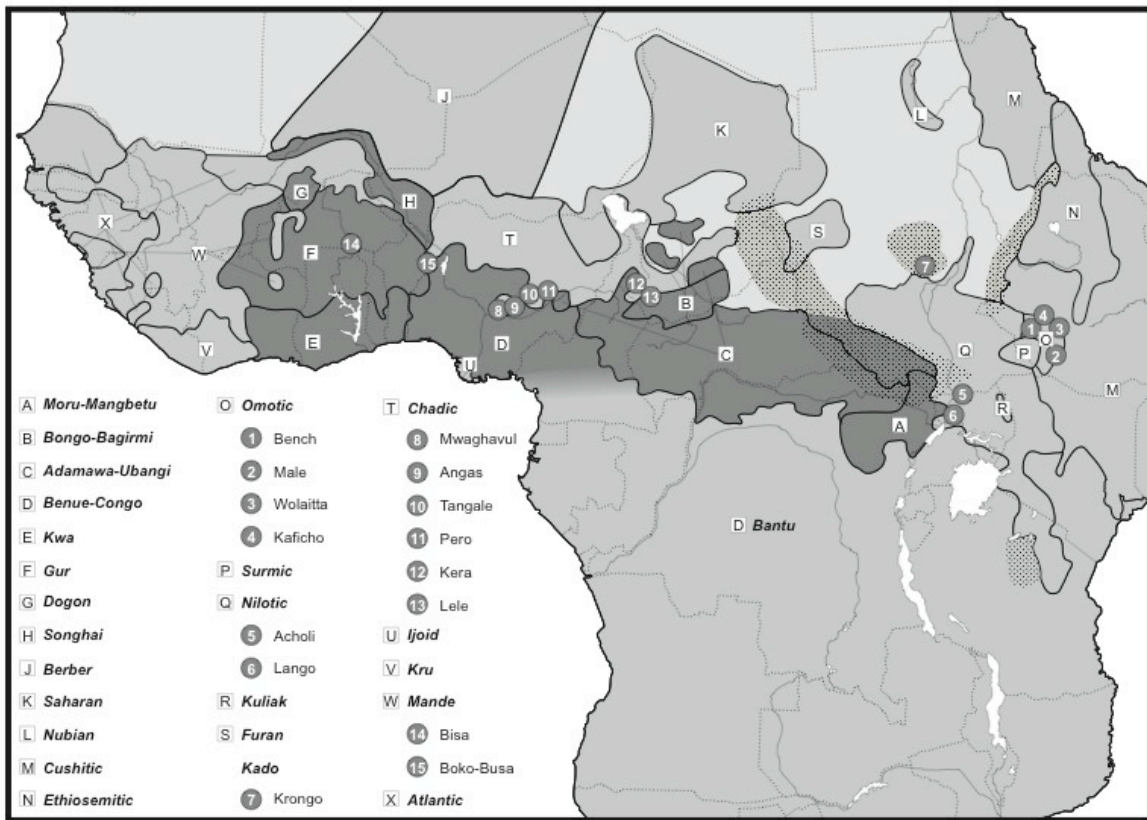
3M.S QUOT 3s.M.LOG go.away

wə_i mɪntí wə_j kóoré

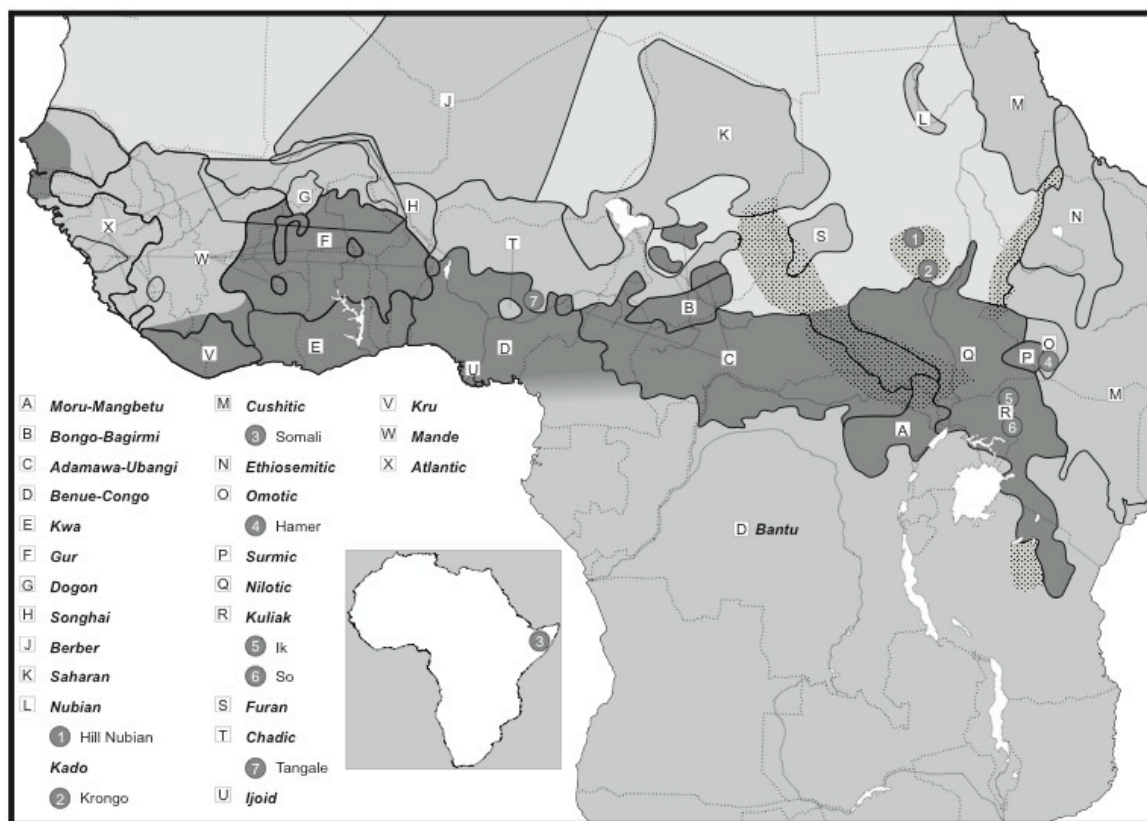
3M.S QUOT 3s.M go.away

“Er sagte, daß er weggehe [he said he would go].” (Ebert 1979:260)

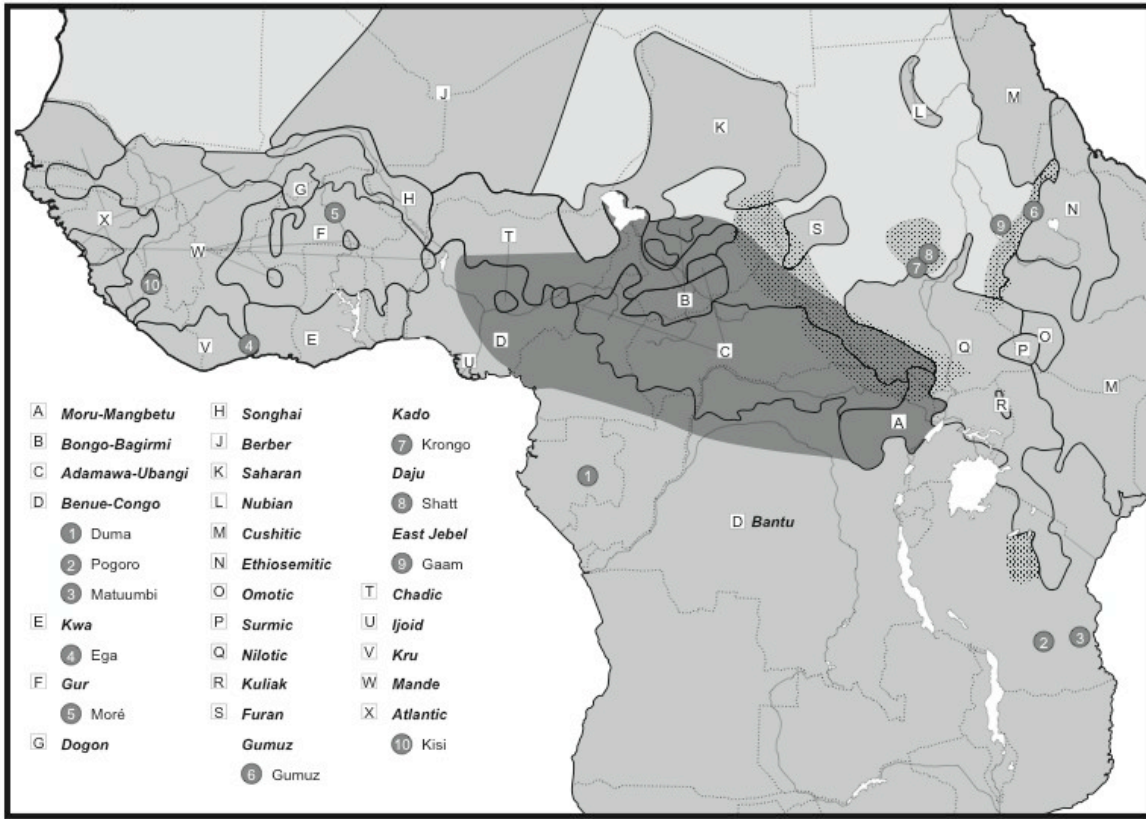
[36] **Logophoricity in Africa** (see Güldemann (2003b))



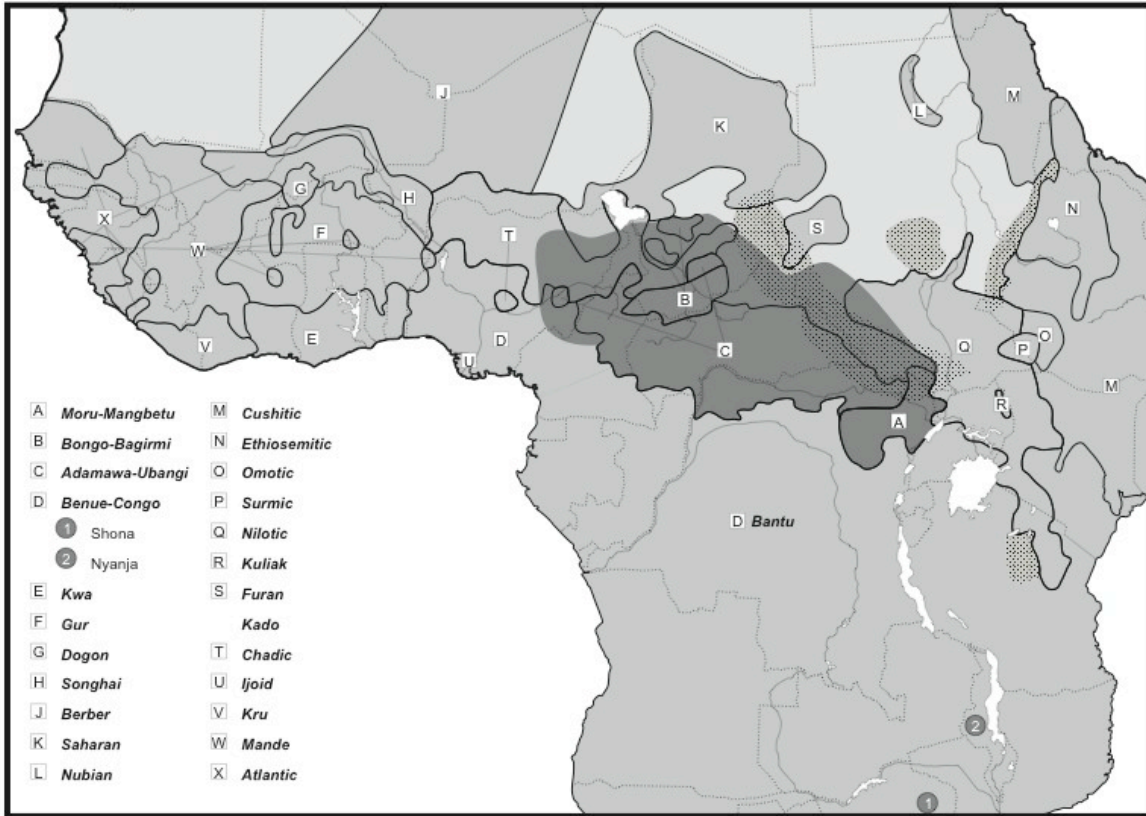
[37] **ATR harmony in Africa** (see Hall et al. (1974), Blench (1995:89–91), Dimmendaal (2001:368–373), Casali (2003))



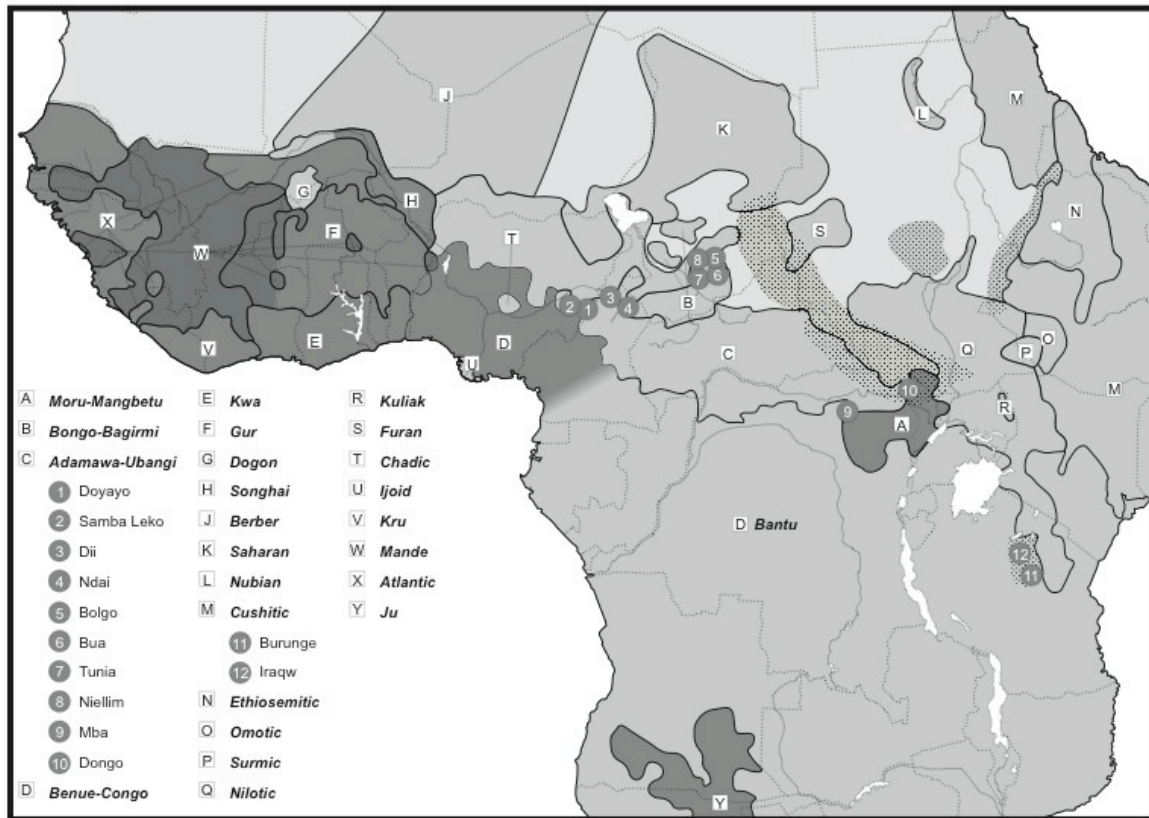
[38] VONeg word order in Africa (see Dryer (forthcoming))



[39] Labial flap in Africa (see Olsen and Hajek (2003))



[40] **S-(Aux)-OVX word order** (see Gensler (1994), Gensler (1997))



[41] Nowhere in the Macro-Sudan area does one find the Bantu subject/object cross-referencing pattern.

[42] For detailed discussion of the Macro-Sudan area see Güldemann (forthcoming a).

4 Conclusion

[43] Treating Bantu verb prefixes as grammaticalized variants of the S-Aux-OVX pattern seems appealing from a grammaticalization perspective.

[44] However, it is merely speculative without a more thoroughly worked out scenario.

[45] The discussion here supports the scenario in two important ways

- [a] The proposed functional distinction between OV and VO word in pre-Proto-Bantu is consistent with a grammaticalizing preverbal object pronoun in a language with postverbal full noun phrases.
- [b] By arguing that S-Aux-OVX was an areal pattern, we have part of an explanation as to why Bantu morphologized the construction: When it left the Macro-Sudan belt, areal pressure to maintain the pattern as a syntactic construction was lost.

[46] The Bantu prefixes would seem, therefore, to be a good example of today's morphology being yesterday's syntax (Givón 1971:413)—once you've worked out yesterday's syntax.

[47] This analysis gives us a historical picture that connects well with observed interactions between object prefixes, definiteness, and topicality, of the sort discussed by, for example, Bresnan and Mchombo (1987:743–752) and Creissels (2000:235–236).

[48] The proposals here would be compatible with the idea that the prefixal system typically associated with Bantu is only partially inherited, with the prefixal slots themselves being parallel innovations as Bantu speakers spread out of the Macro-Sudan belt.

- [49] Such a scenario would be consistent with the fact that Meeussen could only give tentative reconstructions for his post-initial, formative, and limitative verbal positions (Meeussen 1967:108–9).
- [50] It is also consistent with the fact that this part of the prefix system is the most productive position for new verb morphology (as summarized in Güldemann (2003a:185) with reference to Nsuka Nkutsi (1986), Botne (1989), Botne (1990), Emanation (1992), Nurse and Hinnebusch (1993:361–460), and Güldemann (1996)).
- [51] In looking at this issue, it would be helpful to know something about the languages and linguistic areas of Sub-Saharan Africa before the Bantu expansion.
- [52] Relevant parallel
- [a] In Ma'di (Central Sudanic) two different *dialects* have different patterns with respect to VO~OV word order, one dialect is consistently VO and another alternates between VO and OV (Blackings and Fabb 2003:15).
- [b] We can imagine similar variation within a (pre-)Proto-Bantu dialect cluster.
- [53] This approach offers a middle ground for Proto-Benue-Congo between the agglutinative Bantu prototype and the isolating “Kwa” prototype. This seems a more reasonable starting point for Benue-Congo than choosing either of the Bantu or the Kwa extremes.

Glossing abbreviations

1,2,3,4	noun class prefixes	PST	past
1,2,3s/p	person	DPST	distant past
s,p	singular, plural	PRS	present
M	masculine	FUT	future
SBJ	subject pronoun	PFV	perfective
OBJ	object pronoun	IPFV	imperfective
LOG	logophoric pronoun	HAB	habitual
A	“in focus” noun form	IRR	irrealis
B	“out of focus” noun form	NEG	negative marker/negative form
DS	“dummy” subject marker	APP	applicative
EMPH	emphatic marker	INST	instrumental
QUOT	quotative marker	FOC	focus marker/focal form
FV	inflectional final vowel	LOC	locative
SF	verbal suffix		

Works cited

- Blackings, Mairi and Nigel Fabb. 2003. *A grammar of Ma'di*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Blench, Roger M. 1995. Is Niger-Congo simply a branch of Nilo-Saharan? In R. Nicolai and F. Rottland (Eds.) *Proceedings of the Fifth Nilo-Saharan Linguistics Colloquium, Nice, 24–29 August, 1992*, 83–130. Köln: Köppe.
- Botne, Richard. 1989. Reconstruction of a grammaticalized auxiliary in Bantu. *Studies in the Linguistic Sciences* 19:169–186.
- Botne, Richard. 1990. The origins of the remote future formatives in Kinyarwanda, Kirundi, Giha (J61). *Studies in African Linguistics* 21:189–210.
- Bresnan, Joan and Sam A. Mchombo. 1987. Topic, pronoun, and agreement in Chicheŵa. *Language* 63:741–782.
- Casali, Roderic F. 2003. [ATR] value asymmetries and underlying vowel inventory structure in Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan. *Linguistic Typology* 7:307–382.
- Creissels, Denis. 2000. Typology. In B. Heine and D. Nurse (Eds.) *African languages: An introduction*, 231–258. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Dimmendaal, Gerrit J. 2001. Areal diffusion versus genetic inheritance: An African perspective. In A. Y. Aikhenvald and R. M. W. Dixon (Eds.) *Areal diffusion and genetic inheritance: Problems in comparative linguistics*, 359–392. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Dryer, Matthew S. forthcoming. Negation in West Africa. In N. Cyffer (Ed.) *Verb-object-negative order in Central Africa*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Dugast, Idelette. 1971. *Grammaire du tûnen*. Paris: Klincksieck.

- Ebert, Karen H. 1979. *Sprache und Tradition der Kera (Tschad) Teil III: Grammatik*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.
- Emanation, Michele. 1992. Chaga 'come' and 'go': Metaphor and the development of tense-aspect. *Studies in Language* 16:1–33.
- Gensler, Orin. 1994. On reconstructing the syntagm S-Aux-O-V-Other to Proto-Niger-Congo. In K. E. Moore, D. A. Peterson, and C. Wentum (Eds.) *Proceedings of the twentieth annual meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, special session on historical issues in African linguistics*, 1–20. Berkeley: Berkeley Linguistics Society.
- Gensler, Orin. 1997. Grammaticalization, typology, and Niger-Congo word order: Progress on a still-unsolved problem. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 57–93.
- Givón, Talmy. 1971. Historical syntax and synchronic morphology: An archaeologist's fieldtrip. In *papers from the seventh regional meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*, 394–415. Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Güldemann, Tom. 1996. *Verbalmorphologie und Nebenprädikationen im Bantu: Eine Studie zur funktional motivierten Genese eines konjugationalen Subsystems*. Bochum: Universitätsverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer.
- Güldemann, Tom. 2003a. Grammaticalization. In D. Nurse and G. Phillipson (Eds.) *The Bantu languages*, 182–194. London: Routledge.
- Güldemann, Tom. 2003b. Logophoricity in Africa: An attempt to explain and evaluate the significance of its modern distribution. *Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung* 56:366–387.
- Güldemann, Tom. forthcoming a. The Macro-Sudan belt: Towards identifying a linguistic area in northern Sub-Saharan Africa. In B. Heine and D. Nurse (Eds.) *Africa as a linguistic area*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Güldemann, Tom. forthcoming b. Preverbal objects and information structure in Benue-Congo. In E. Aboh, K. Harman, and M. Zimmerman (Eds.) *Focus strategies: Evidence from African languages (Niger-Congo, Afro-Asiatic, West-Atlantic)*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Hagman, Roy S. 1977. *Nama Hottentot grammar*. Bloomington: Indiana University.
- Hall, Beatrice L., R.M.R. Hall, Martin D. Pam, Amy Myers, Stephen A. Antell and Godfrey K. Cheron. 1974. African vowel harmony systems from the vantage point of Kalenjin. *Africa und Übersee* 57:241–267.
- Ikoro, Suanu. 1996. *The Kana language*. Leiden: Research School CNWS.
- Maddieson, Ian M. 1984. *Patterns of sounds*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Maddieson, Ian M. 2005. Presence of uncommon consonants. In M. Haspelmath, M. S. Dryer, D. Gil, and B. Comrie (Eds.) *World atlas of language structures*, 82–85. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Meeussen, A.E. 1967. *Bantu grammatical reconstructions*. Tervuren: Tervuren.
- Mous, Maarten. 1997. The position of the object in Tunen. In R.-M. Déchaine and V. Manfredi (Eds.) *Object positions in Benue-Kwa*, 123–137. The Hague: Holland Academic Graphics.
- Nsuka Nkutsi, François. 1986. Formatifs et auxiliaires dans les langues bantoues: Quelques critères de détermination. *Africana Linguistica* 10:339–364.
- Nurse, Derek and Thomas J. Hinnebusch. 1993. *Swahili and Sabaki: A linguistic history*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Olsen, Kenneth S. and John Hajek. 2003. Cross-linguistic insights on the labial flap. *Linguistic Typology* 7:157–186.
- Perrin, Mona J. 1994. Rheme and focus in Mambila. In S. H. Levinsohn (Ed.) *Discourse feature of ten languages of West-Central Africa*, 231–241. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics and the University of Texas at Arlington.
- Redden, James E. 1979. *A descriptive grammar of Ewondo*. Carbondale, Illinois: Department of Linguistics, Southern Illinois University.
- Stanley, Carol. 1991. *Description morpho-syntaxique de la langue tikar (parlée au Cameroun)*. Paris: Société Internationale de Linguistique.
- Urua, Eno E. 1997. Object movement in Eastern Lower-Cross. In R.-M. Déchaine and V. Manfredi (Eds.) *Object positions in Benue-Kwa*, 189–206. The Hague: Holland Academic Graphics.
- Watters, John Robert. 1979. Focus in Aghem: A study of its formal correlates and typology. In L. M. Hyman (Ed.) *Aghem grammatical structure*, Southern California Occasional Papers in Linguistics 7, 137–197. Los Angeles: USC, Department of Linguistics.