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

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1 Introduction


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(PREINITIAL)</th>
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<th>(POSTINITIAL)</th>
<th>(PRERADICAL)</th>
<th>STEM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TAM Subject</td>
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<td>Clause type</td>
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[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


[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 *-id-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

[9] 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)

[4] \[\text{wù šê } mùn, mùn kɛnɛɛ kən} \]
  \[2s \text{say.IRR} \ 1s \ \text{leave.IRR NEG}\]
  “If you had said it, I wouldn’t have left.” (Stanley 1991:71)

[8] \[\text{à yɛn-ɛnà mùn} \]
  \[1.\text{SBJ see-PFV} \ 1s \]
  “He saw me.” (Stanley 1991:247)

[4] \[\text{mùn kɛn-me wù nun} \ \text{təw-li} \]
  \[1s \ \text{go-PFV} \ 2s \ \text{OBJ bring-SF}\]
  “I’m going to bring you it from over there.” (Stanley 1991:136)

[8] \[\text{à tə nɪshe she} \]
  \[1.\text{SBJ IPFV luggage carry}\]
  “He’s carrying the baggage.” (Stanley 1991:103)

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


[12] As discussed by Gültemann (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)

[4] \[\text{Ọkọn á dɛp ëbọ́t} \]
  \[Okon 3s \text{buy goat}\]
  “Okon is buying a goat.” (Urua 1997:201)

[8] \[\text{Ubóká tí biák} \]
  \[hand 3s 1s \text{be.painful}\]
  “My hand hurts.” (Urua 1997:204)

[14] Empathic pronoun doubling in Ibibio

\[\text{Ubóká tí biák mùn} \]
  \[hand 3s 1s \text{be.painful} 1s\]
  “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).

[4] \[\text{weè mɛ-ɿɛɛɾá pmozilla} \]
  \[3s.PST \text{1s-run meet}\]
  “He ran to me.” (Ikoro 1996:212)

[8] \[\text{weè tɛɛɾá plí ndá} \]
  \[3s.PST \text{run meet 1s.EMPH}\]
  “He ran to ME.” (Ikoro 1996:212)
1. \text{wèè sú bá zím-á lékà}  
3s.PST take hand hit-INST Leka  
“He hit Leka with a hand.” (Ikoro 1996:212)

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

[19] Object pronouns in Ewondo (Bantu)

[a] \text{Avó \textit{ma} džɔ.}  
1.give.PST 1s 9  
“He gave it to me.” (Redden 1979:55)

[b] \text{Akad \textit{ma} sòób bìyé.}  
1.HAB 1s wash 8.cloth  
“He washes clothes for me.” (Redden 1979:56)

[c] \text{Akad \textit{ma džɔ vá.}}  
1.HAB 1s 9  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 \textit{ma}.)

2.4 Information structure

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

[a] \text{éná? mò \textit{nììg nò}}  
Inah DPST run FOC  
“Inah ran.” (Watters 1979:144)

[b] \text{á mò \textit{nììg ndúghɔ}}  
DS DPST run who  
“Who ran?” (Watters 1979:144)

[c] \text{á mò \textit{nììg éná?}}  
DS DPST run Inah  
“Inah ran.” (Answer to above) (Watters 1979:144)

[23] Transitive sentences from Aghem

[a] \text{fúl \ á mò zí kíbè}  
friends.B SM DPST eat fufu.A  
“The friends ate fufu.” (Watters 1979:146)

[b] \text{á mò zí ndúghɔ bè-\textit{kɔ}}  
DS DPST eat who fufu.B  
“Who ate the fufu?” (Watters 1979:146)

[c] \text{á mò zí á-fìn bè-\textit{kɔ}}  
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] \text{Kum dàkpɔlɔ fỳɛp ɣɔ.}  
Kum kill.PST 9.rat 9.the  
“Kum killed the rat.”
Informal characterization of the pattern:


Preverbal objects in Tunen (Mbam, Bantoid)

Preverbal objects in Mambila (Mambiloid, Bantoid)
2.5 Conclusion

General pattern: Preverbal objects tend to be less salient and postverbal objects tend to be more salient.

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.

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

Labiovelar consonants in Africa (see Maddieson (1984:215–216), Maddieson (2005))
Logophoricity in Africa (see Güldemann (2003b))

[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))

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[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

[44] 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.

[44] 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.
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).

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)).

In looking at this issue, it would be helpful to know something about the languages and linguistic areas of Subsaharan Africa before the Bantu expansion.

Relevant parallel

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).

We can imagine similar variation within a (pre–)Proto-Bantu dialect cluster.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<td>1,2,3,4</td>
<td>noun class prefixes</td>
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<td>1,2,3s/p</td>
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<td>s,p</td>
<td>singular, plural</td>
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<td>SBJ</td>
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<td>logophoric pronoun</td>
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<td>“in focus” noun form</td>
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<td>“dummy” subject marker</td>
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Works cited


