

On OV and VO at the Bantu/Bantoid borderlands

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While most Niger-Congo languages have SVO word order (Good 2017), a few outliers display SOV patterns, either in restricted TAM combinations or across the board. These OV languages include a handful of Northwestern Bantu languages of Cameroon (Tunen, Nyokon), Bantoid languages (e.g. Tikar), and broader Niger-Congo (e.g. Mande, Gur, and Kru languages) (Mous 2005, Hyman 2011, a.o.). For example, Nyokon has VO order in most tenses (e.g. (1)) but has OV order in the past tense (2), while Tunen has OV consistently (3), (4):¹

(1) mù nə́é: yíl wóó nítān
SM.1SG COP take small stone
'I take a small stone.'

(2) ù kífá ús yíl
SM.1 stick short take
'He took a short stick.'

(Nyokon, Mous 2005:5)

(3) ná-na bε-kana tala ɔ yəkɔ
SM.2-PAST2 8-basket put PREP 7.chair
'They put baskets on the chair.'

(4) ná-ndɔ bε-kana tala ɔ yəkɔ
SM.2-PRES 8-basket put PREP 7.chair
'They are putting baskets on the chair.' (Tunen, adapted from Mous 1997:125)

Given the VO syntax found in neighbouring languages, a core question is whether OV word order is innovative or conservative. There has been a long debate on this, although much less is said about Bantoid reconstruction than about (Proto-)Bantu or Proto-Niger-Congo. One hypothesis proposes SOV as the original word order in Niger-Congo (Givón 1975; Hyman 1975), another SVO (Heine & Reh 1984), and another an intermediary S-AUX-O-V syntagm (Gensler 1994; Gensler & Güldemann 2003). Work specific to Proto-Bantu has proposed that the SOV patterns are innovative (e.g. Mous 2005), but such proposals do not rule out SOV at an earlier stage and have also been critiqued (Hyman 2011). Furthermore, existing literature typically provides examples in isolation from their discourse context, as in (1)-(4) above, raising the question of the possible influence of information structure on these OV/VO patterns (cf Güldemann 2008). There is therefore much room for new insights through more detailed work in the Bantu/Bantoid borderlands.

In this talk I will first present an overview of OV patterns in Tunen and Nyokon based on new field data that considers the discourse context of the utterance in addition to the TAM pattern. I show that SOV order has no marked information structural interpretation on the object in Tunen, supporting Mous (1997), while in Nyokon the position of the object in a neutral context is conditioned by the TAM marking. Secondly, I will explain the relevance of these Cameroonian Bantu languages for understanding the relationship between Bantu and Bantoid and for understanding syntactic change mechanisms. Specifically, I show how study of the S-TAM complex is significant for linking these patterns to S-AUX-O-V grammaticalisation theories, and I discuss the significance of information structure on object expression.

¹ **Abbreviations:** 1, 2, ... = Bantu noun class number, 1SG = 1st person singular, COP = copula, PAST2 = second-degree past tense (hodiernal), PREP = preposition, PRES = present, SM = subject marker.

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