

# Reconstructing Bantu and Niger-Congo syntax: Questions for Doug

Paul Kiparsky

Dear Doug,

Over the years you have elucidated the phonology of Yorùbá, Tiv, Wolof, Igbo, Okpe, Dágáárè, Kimatuumbi, Nata, Nkore-Kiga, Kinande, and Setswana, among others — particularly their remarkable tone and vowel harmony systems. In your survey article (Pulleyblank 2009) you sorted out some of the issues of genetic classification and comparative historical reconstruction raised by Greenberg’s proposed great Niger-Congo family, to which all these languages are thought to belong. With this squib I would like to contribute to the celebration of your scholarly career, but also to lure you for just a moment from phonology to the thinner ice of historical syntax, specifically to solicit your opinion on the controversial question whether proto-Niger-Congo, or at least its Bantu branch, was an SVO language or an SOV language.

Let me frame the question with a thought experiment. Imagine that we knew the Germanic languages only in their current state, and applied the standard procedures of the comparative method to their clausal syntax. We might then well reconstruct a head-initial (SVO) proto-language, because that requires the fewest and simplest change events, which the comparative method advises us to prefer, other things being equal. Since the Scandinavian and English branches are completely head-initial, and German, Dutch and their close relatives are head-initial except for their head-final finite subordinate clauses and some postpositions, those guidelines favor a fully head-initial proto-syntax, surviving intact in Scandinavian and English, and merely a reversal of VP and PP in the others. The alternative reconstruction of a head-final proto-syntax with an across-the-board reversal to head-initiality in English and Scandinavian as well as a partial reversal in West Germanic in all categories except VP and PP would be rejected because it has to posit changes that are more complicated, more drastic, and more numerous. But although the rise of a disharmonic order from a consistent left-headed order is easy to state, it is hard to explain. In the light of naturalness considerations, the head-final reconstruction would gain some plausibility. And the actual evidence of older Germanic and its Indo-European sister branches confirms that this would have been the right hypothesis.

This thought experiment comes up for real in the reconstruction of Bantu and the larger Niger-Congo family to which Bantu belongs. For these we have at best only the shallowest horizon of a few hundred years. The great majority of Bantu languages are consistently head-initial, with Prepositions, Verb-Object, Aux-Verb, C-Comp, Verb-Oblique, and Verb-Adverb order. Most Bantuists naturally reconstruct this clause structure for Proto-Bantu. But a few of the languages step out of line. Tunen (a.k.a. Nen) is mostly head-initial, but it has a head-final VP, viz. Subj-Tense-IO-DO-V (Gensler 1994: 6, Mous 2014, Kerr 2024). If we follow the comparative method’s majority rule precept and reconstruct a consistent head-initial Subj-Aux-V-Obj constituent structure, it is not clear why some languages would have reversed the VP’s headedness to get a disharmonic

structure (Kerr 2024, section 4.3). On the opposite assumption, Bantu would have traversed the familiar pathway from head-final to head-initial languages, and Tunen would then be, like German, a language whose mixed headedness preserves a pre-final stage of the historical shift. The oldest Indo-European languages were consistently S-O-V, and Germanic, Romance, and Greek each independently passed through a trajectory in which they first acquired high left-headed functional categories (complementizers, auxiliaries), which then led to consistent harmonic VO. Dis this happen also in Bantu and perhaps in other branches of Niger-Congo?

Internal reconstruction seems to offer some support for this second scenario in Bantu. The typical Bantu prefix-root stem constellation of the form Subject-Tense/Aspect-Object-V-... looks like an S-Aux-O-V clause in miniature (Hyman 1975, Givón 1976, Williamson 1986, Nurse 2007).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. á- cha- ri- téng- és- a  
3Sg.Subj- FUT- 3Sg.Obj buy- CAUS- FV  
'He/she will sell it.' Shona (Myers 1990:27)
- b. k'i-tl'a-kw'ál-él-él-a ḡwana bats'álí lūkw'áló  
1s-FUT-write-APP-APP-FV child parents letter  
'I'll write a letter to the parents for the child.' Tswana (Nurse et al. 2016: 63)

The idea that the morphological structure of the Bantu stem is a fossilized residue of original S-Aux-O-V received support by the discovery of related languages with actual S-Aux-O-V syntax. S-Aux-O-V and even completely head-final syntax is found in other branches of the larger Niger-Congo family – the major branch of Greenberg's putative Niger-Kordofanian phylum.<sup>2</sup> In a pattern reminiscent of West Germanic, Kisi (in the Mel subfamily) has Subj-Aux-IO-DO-Verb-X alternating with Subj-Verb-IO-DO-X, presumably with the verb fronted to the Aux (Tense) position if there is no overt auxiliary to fill it (Creissels 2018: 781).

- (2) a. À wá ndú kòówáj kìóó  
3PL PAST.PROG 3SG medicine.give  
'They were giving him medicine.' Kisi
- b. Ò ké yá tòòlúlán  
3Sg give 1Sg support  
'She gave me support.' Kisi

In the Kru subfamily and in Senúfo, the fronting of the main verb to a vacant auxiliary slot is paired with another notable feature, the restriction of the VP to a single direct object preceding the verb, with all other arguments and adjuncts following it. The verb is placed after the direct object when there is an auxiliary, and before the direct object when there is no auxiliary (S-Aux-O-V-X but S-V-O-X). In Koopman's Germanic-style synchronic analysis of this type of variable verb positioning in Vata (1984: 28), the main verb moves from its basic VP-final position to an empty IP (TP, AuxP) head unless it is filled by an auxiliary.

<sup>1</sup>In the same way, the new perfect and future tenses in Romance, and the weak preterite in Germanic, all derived from periphrastic forms, are *Leitfossils* of former V-Aux word order.

<sup>2</sup>There is some disagreement among specialists on the nomenclature and on the subclassification; the phylum itself has been adopted as a working hypothesis but has not been definitively established by the comparative method (Pulleyblank 2009, Güldemann 2018: 107-234).

- (3) a.  $\acute{n}$  **ká** ná gòlì mÍ pùtù sà  
I FUT-A my mounds in grass remove  
'I will clear the weed from my mounds.' Vata
- b. á **lé** bì sáká  
I eat now rice  
'I am eating rice right now.' Vata

Koopman's synchronic analysis of the Kru system offers a simple diachronic derivation of it from a reconstructed OV base order, analogous to the one which is well established for the development of Germanic from Indo-European. According to it, the original order would have been S-O-V, and after the rise of auxiliaries, S-Aux-O-V, with subsequent fronting of V to Aux, resulting in S-V-O. The rigid verb-final syntax of Ijò is then explained by the fact that it lacks auxiliary verbs, and therefore has no Aux projection to host a fronted V. If Ijò once had auxiliaries, they must have been lost (perhaps by merging morphologically with the main verb) before V-to-Aux fronting entered the language.<sup>3</sup>

The Dogon languages are consistently head-final, with S-O-V and predicate-copula word order, postpositions, and final complementizers (Heath 2008, Chs. 2 and 17). There is no clear indication of an auxiliary, though the suffixed negation and aspect morphology might reflect former postverbal auxiliaries. Possessors (including subjects and objects of nominalizations) precede their nominal heads.<sup>4</sup>

- (4) a. [[mì dè:] lè] bú:dù ó:-sà-m  
[[1SgP.L father.HL Dat] money give-Reslt-1SgS  
'I gave the money to my father' (Heath 2008:18)
- b. ñǎ: ñè:-lí-∅ má wá  
meal eat-PerfNeg-3Sg Q Quot  
'[it was asked,] "did he/she not eat?"' (Heath 2008:119)

Another SOV group of Niger-Congo languages is Ijò (Williamson 1986).

- (5) 1. Akpoebi fún tuḡo-ni Laye piri-ma  
Akpoebi book buy-for Laye give-PST  
'Akpoebi bought a book for Laye' Biseni Ijò (Worufah & Obikudo 2023).
2. Wá Laye ari-má  
We Laye see-PST  
'We saw Laye'

If the conjecture that Bantu verb morphology reveals original S-O-V syntax is correct, the development would have followed an IE-type trajectory in which left-headed functional categories are added – first functional heads (complementizers and then auxiliaries), resulting in German-type mixed headedness, culminating in a fully harmonic syntax, but left-headed this time: S-O-V > Comp-S-O-V > Comp-Aux-S-O-V > Comp-Aux-S-V-O.

---

<sup>3</sup>The post-root part has undergone especially heavy attrition in parts of the Bantu family, and has even been lost completely in some distant relatives, notably Yorúbá.

<sup>4</sup>The other well-described Dogon language Tommo So, works the same way (McPherson 2013: 13-16), except that its noun phrase order is much freer, though the domains of tone spread indicate a highly articulated nominal constituent structure.

Another typologically notable word-order feature is found in Niger-Congo. Mande languages restrict the core VP to a verb with no more than a single direct object before it; everything else is placed after the verb, including all oblique objects and adverbials/prepositional phrases. (Creissels 2005, Nikitina 2008).

- (6) 1. Mǎo-lù yè báa t̀̀yì.  
person.D-PL CPL.TR river.D cross  
'The people crossed the river' (Mandinka, Creissels 2018: 277)
2. Móo-lù t̀̀yí-tà báa lá.  
person.D-PL cross-CPL.INTR river.D POSTP  
'The people crossed the river' (Mandinka, Creissels 2018: 277)

Many researchers, however, reject both the derivation of S-V-O from O-V and the internal reconstruction of earlier syntax from verb structure. They hold Niger-Congo to have been originally S-V-O or S-V-O-X (Heine 1976, Claudi 1993, Güldemann 2018: 149).<sup>5</sup> Claudi (1993) argues for Kru that deverbal nominals with preceding objects were reanalyzed as verbs, resulting in two verbs, of which the first V then became an auxiliary (S-V-O-N<sub>V</sub> → S-V-O-V → S-Aux-O-V). It is hard to make sense of the intermediate stage resulting from the first step in this development, and objections to the second stage have been raised by Bearth (1995) and by Kastenholz (2003). Nikitina attributes Mande S-O-V-X word order to reanalysis of noun phrases containing nominalized verbs as verb phrases, or complements of auxiliaries.

So what do you think, Doug?

## References

- ABOH, ENOCH. 2004. *The Morphosyntax of Complement-Head Sequences*. Oxford: OUP.
- BEARTH, THOMAS. 1995. Nominal periphrases and the origin of the predicative marker in Mande languages – an alternative view. *Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere* 41: 89–117.
- CLAUDI, ULRIKE 1993. *Die Stellung von Verb und Objekt in Niger-Kongo Sprachen: Ein Beitrag zur Rekonstruktion historischer Syntax*. Köln: Institut für Afrikanistik.
- CLAUDI, ULRIKE 1994. Word order change as category change: the Mande case. In W. Pagliuca (ed.) *Perspectives on Grammaticalization*, 191–232 Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- CREISSELS, D. 2005. SOVX constituent order and constituent order alternations in West African languages. *Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* 37-52.
- CREISSELS, D. 2018. Current issues in African morphosyntactic typology. In Tom Güldemann (ed.) *The languages and linguistics of Africa*, 714-821. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
- GENSLER, ORIN D. 1994. On Reconstructing the Syntagm S-Aux-O-V-Other to Proto-Niger-Congo. *Proceedings of the 20th Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, Special Session on Historical Issues in African Linguistics*, 1-20. Berkeley, CA.
- GÜLDEMANN, TOM. 2018. Historical linguistics and genealogical language classification in Africa. In Tom Güldemann (ed.) *The languages and linguistics of Africa*, 58-444. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
- HEATH, JEFFREY. 2008. *Jamsay grammar*.  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20160304002022/http://www-personal.umich.edu>

---

<sup>5</sup>Gensler (1994, 1997), Gensler & Güldemann (2003), Güldemann (2008:159-62), Creissels et al. (2008:127) are non-committal or seem to lean towards this view as well.

- KANDYBOWICZ, JASON. 2008. *The Grammar of Repetition*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- KASTENHOLZ, RAIMUND. 2003. Auxiliaries, grammaticalization, and word order in Mande. *Journal of African Languages and Linguistics* 24: 31–53.
- KERR, ELIZABETH J. 2024. On OV and VO at the Bantu /Bantoid borderlands. In Yaqian Hong et al. (eds.) *ACAL in SoCAL: Selected papers from the 53rd Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, 297–345. Berlin: Language Science Press.  
DOI:10.5281/zenodo.11210464
- KOOPMAN, HILDA. 1984. The syntax of verbs: From verb movement rules in the Kru languages to Universal Grammar. Dordrecht: Foris.
- MOUS, MAARTEN. 2014. Full Object-Verb Order in the Mbam languages of Cameroon. *ZAS Papers in Linguistics* 57: 72-94.
- NIKITINA, TATIANA. 2008. *The mixing of syntactic properties and language change*. Stanford: Stanford University dissertation.
- NURSE, DEREK, SARAH ROSE AND JOHN HEWSON. 2016. *Tense and Aspect in Niger-Congo*. Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa.
- WILLIAMSON, KAY. 1986. Niger-Congo: SVO or SOV? *Journal of West African Languages* 16: 5–14.
- WORUFAH, EBINI-IPIRI RAPHAEL & EBITARE FABIAWARI OBIKUDO. 2023. A grammatical analysis of Biseni clause structure. *Periodica. Journal of Modern Philosophy, Social Sciences and Humanities* 22: 1-21.