Information structure and argument order in Benue-Congo

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

1 Introduction

(a) *mo m à w é w à f ì n ì*  
I take book come give you  
“I brought you a book.” (Stahlke 1970:63)

(b) *mo ì o b ì n ì g ì i g ì*  
I take cleverness cut tree  
“I cut down the tree with cleverness” (Stahlke 1970:62)

Chichewa, a Bantu language

(a) *Chitsirù chi-na-gùl-ù-rà atsikána mphùtso.*  
7.fool 7-PST-buy-APP-FV 2.girl 9.gift  
“The fool bought a gift for the girls.” (Alsina and Mchombo 1993:18)

(b) *Mu-nga-ndí-thùndìz-e.*  
2p-ABL-1s-help-FV  
“You can/may help me.” (Mchombo 2004:30)

Long-term research questions

(a) What can we learn about the interaction of morphology and syntax by an examination of Benue-Congo languages?

(b) How do such diverging types within the same family arise historically?

Some prerequisites

(a) If not a full reconstruction, at least a decent sense of the probable morphosyntactic profile of Proto-Benue–Congo

(b) A better understanding of the synchronic syntax of these languages

Methodological starting point

(a) Examine languages of the Cameroonian-Nigeria borderland

(b) Focus on order of arguments with respect to the verb

Languages of this area seem to represent an intermediate type between between “Bantu” and “Kwa”, which is why they have been chosen.

I’ve chosen argument order because it’s relatively well-studied and the way arguments interact with their verb in “Kwa” and Bantu languages is one of the more striking ways in which the two groups diverge—at least on a superficial level.
Outline of talk

[a] Give basic data on argument order patterns in Benue-Congo
[b] Argue that an information structure “template” plays a role in word order by focusing on illustrative examples
[c] Discuss some of the theoretical implications of this analysis
[d] Discuss what the consequences are of the existence of this template for the long-term research issues given above

Previous relevant work

[a] Hyman (2004), which lays out many of the relevant descriptive issues and develops a model for how the “Kwa” morphological prototype could develop from a “Bantu” starting point
[b] Gültemann (forthcoming b), which surveys uses of OV order in Benue-Congo languages, with a focus on the information-structure properties of that order

My primary aim is more to present a methodological framework for interpreting argument order rather than give a definitive formal or descriptive analysis of a given language or set of languages.

Ultimately, of course, it would be nice to achieve these other goals—but I’m not convinced we’re in a good position to do that yet.

2 Non-SVO word order in Benue-Congo

Most Benue-Congo languages are described as having basic SVO word order (see, for example, Dryer (2005)).

[a] SVO in Chichewa (Bantu)
Chitsiru chi-na-gul-á mphátso.
7.fool 7-PST-buy-FV 9.gift
“The fool bought a gift.” (Alsina and Mchombo 1993:18)

[b] SVO in Igbo (“Kwa”)
igbá to bá ló-wó si [á] [á ra] [kántú kékérél]
time that.he happen have-money to.it he will buy counter small
“When he has more money, he will buy a stall.” (Bambgoše 1966:146)

A number of languages spoken in the Nigeria-Cameroon border are described as also showing other word order patterns (see Gültemann (forthcoming b)). I exemplify some relevant ones below.

Pattern I: OV (see Gensler (1994), Gensler (1997))

[a] Examples from Tunen (Bantoid) (see Dugast (1971), Mous (1997), Mous (2005)); an OVX pattern
[b] Bàjò bèkànà tólàk ò yákō.
2.FUT 8.baskets put LOC chair
“They will put baskets on the chair.” (Mous 1997:125)
[c] mê ná [wò mondo] [bukónà] batolòn
1s PST 1.this 1.man 14.debt claim.PST
“I claimed the debt from this man.” (Dugast 1971:309)

Pattern II: VS

[a] Examples from Aghem (Bantoid) (Watters 1979:144–6)
[i] èná? mò ìyí nò
Inah DPST run FOC
“Inah ran.”
[ii] a mò ìyí ndúghò
DS DPST run who
“Who ran?”
[iii] a mò ìyí èná?
DS DPST run Inah
“Inah ran.” (Answer to above)
[iv] fíl a mò zì këbè
friends.B SM DPST eat fufu.A
“The friends ate fufu.”
[v] a mò zì ndúghò bë’-kò
DS DPST eat who fufu.B
“Who ate the fufu?”
[vi] a mò zì fílìn bë’-kò
DS DPST eat friends.A fufu.B
“The friends ate fufu.” (Answer to above)


3 Previous (synchronic) approaches

OV word order has also been discussed in diachronic/grammaticalization terms by, for example, Claudi (1993) (see Gensler (1997) for critical discussion).

"Basic" SOV order, verb raising blocked by presence of auxiliary—this gets you pattern: OXV (see (Koopman 1984)) Examples from Vata (Koopman 1984:28) (Kru, Niger-Congo but not Benue-Congo)

\[ n \, l \, \text{sákká} \]
\[ \text{I eat} \, \text{PERF} \, \text{rice} \]
"I ate rice."

\[ wå \, lå \, mÔ \, dlà \]
they \, \text{PERF} \, \text{AUX} \, \text{him} \, \text{kill} \]
“They have killed him.”

Kandybowicz and Baker (2003) argue that a somewhat different analysis is needed for Nupe and make use of one where a VO phrase can (among other things) be affected by object movement in the presence of certain auxiliaries. This works well for languages exhibiting OXV patterns.

Nkemnji (1995) proposes a different sort of transformational analysis for Nweh involving so-called “remnant VP movement” (see Kandybowicz and Baker (2003:148–152)). As seen above, Nweh shows pattern OXV.

The details of remnant VP movement can be somewhat complex: For our purposes, it can be understood as a device to allow all the complements of a verb to be moved without taking the verb along with them.
Thus remnant VP movement primarily understands OXV word order as resulting from preposing of the “OX”.

Reasons for rejecting transformational analyses

The devices invoked (that I know of) cannot account for all the data. They run into trouble for Leggbó, discussed below.

They are silent on the issue of VS word order—a clearly interesting case of non-SVO word order.

They treat OV phenomena as resulting from disjoint factors ignoring the fact that the pattern shows clear genetic and areal patterns (see Güldemann (forthcoming a)).

They do not account for observed information-structure patterns.

Not all these reasons may be valid from a Transformationalist perspective—but they would seem to apply to someone (like me) who is interested in a comparative framework for interpreting Benue-Congo structures.

4 Illustrative cases

4.1 Naki

Naki is a Bantoid language spoken in Northwest Cameroon.

Naki gives an example of a seemingly highly grammaticalized postverbal focus position and a weakly grammaticalized preverbal topic position.

Basic sentential word order in Naki is SVO.

\[\text{Kum ákpółó} \text{ fyép yó.} \]
Kum kill.PST 9.rat 9.the
"Kum killed the rat."

For the verb give one available construction involves an unmarked theme followed by a recipient marked with a circumposition.

\[\text{Kum ádê ágwóh à kò} \text{ St li.} \]
Kum give.PST 12.table 12.the for₁ Si for₂
"Kum gave the table to Si."

A curious feature of Naki grammar is a special “focal” form of the verb, which can surface with different tonal patterns from the unmarked form.

When a verb appears in the focal form, patterns of sentential word order change markedly.

A core use of this form is for subject “Wh”-questions—and answers for those questions—where the subject appears immediately postverbally.

\[\text{Kúm ákpółó} \text{ fyép yó.} \]
Kum kill.PST 9.rat 9.the
"Kum killed the rat."

\[\text{Fyép yó} \ \text{ákpółó} \ \text{yé?} \]
9.rat 9.the kill.PST.FOC who
"Who killed the rat?"

\[\text{Fyép yó} \ \text{ákpółó Kúm.} \]
9.rat 9.the kill.PST.FOC Kum
"Kum killed the rat." (Answer to above question.)

While OVS argument order in this constructions seems to be the closest thing to a default, other orders are possible. The phrase \text{St li} for Si’ is in focus in the two examples below.

\[\text{Bá fyép yó} \ \text{ákpółó} \ \text{i} \ \text{St li.} \]
3p 9.rat 9.the kill.PST.FOC for₁ Si for₂
"They killed the rat for Si."

\[\text{Fyép yó} \ \text{b’ ákpółó} \ \text{i} \ \text{St li.} \]
9.rat 9.the 3p kill.PST.FOC for₁ Si for₂
"They killed the rat for Si."

Sentences like the one below indicate that the correct characterization involves immediately postverbal position and not peripheral position (of the sort argued for by Rizzi (1997)—Horvath (1995:38–40) makes a similar argument for Aghem.

\[\text{Ákpółó} \ \text{yé fyép yó} \ \text{i} \ \text{St li?} \]
kill.PST.FOC who 9.rat 9.the for₁ Si for₂
"Who killed the rat for Si?"

The following sentence was described as being appropriate only if there was a rat known to be in Si’s house. I take this as reasonable evidence that the preverbal position is reserved for topical elements.

\[\text{Fyép yó} \ \text{i} \ \text{St li} \ \text{ákpółó} \ \text{yé?} \]
9.rat 9.the for₁ Si for₂ kill.PST.FOC who
"Who killed the rat for Si?"
The construction is not limited to transitive verbs, but can also be used with intransitives.

[a] Kúm ãdãng kót.
   Kum sit.PST down
   “Kum sat down.”

[b] ãdãng yé kót?
   sit.PST.FOC who down
   “Who sat down?”

The fact that this focus structure can be associated with verbal tonal marking distinct from when it is not used indicates that it does not involve a simple shift in word order but is, in fact, a dedicated syntactic construction.

Informal analysis of the construction: An information structure template

\[
[I \text{Focal-toned } V][\text{Focused XP}]
\]

This gets us half of the overall template given above.

The common OVS word order supports the other half of the template above.

4.2 Leggbó

Leggbó is a Cross River language spoken in Southeast Nigeria.

In Leggbó, we have an example of a preverbal “topic” position grammaticalized in a negative construction.

Basic word order in Leggbó affirmative clauses is rigidly SVO.

[a] Wàdam sè e-dzi lìdzil.
   man  the 3s/p-eat food
   “The man ate food.”

   man  the food 3s/p-eat

In negative sentences, the most typical surface word order is SOV. Also, the verb takes on a special negative tone pattern.

\[Wàdam sè lìdzil è-e-dzi.\]
   man  the food 3s/p.NEG-eat
   “The man didn’t eat food.”

Leggbó negative syntax is different from affirmative syntax in a number of ways. As discussed in Good (forthcoming), its oddities make the proposed types of transformational analyses summarized above inapplicable to it.

[a] E-nii bê lìdzil.
   3s/p-give children food
   “He gave children food.”

[b] E-nii lìdzil bê.
   3s/p-give food children

Wàtè nààmì nà-nìi.
   child gift 1s.NEG-give
   “I didn’t give a child gifts.”

Nààmì wàtè nà-nìi.
   gift 1s.NEG-give
   “I didn’t give a child gifts.”

Weird argument repetition

[a] [Bàdam sè], yë bë, yë aè-zee.
   men  the 3s/p.see
   “The men (they) didn’t see it (it).”

[b] [Dzè sè], bë, yë bë, aà-numì b a-nìi ìtòbo.
   crocodiles the 3s/p-take they 3s/p-give monkey
   “The crocodiles, they didn’t give it to the monkey.”

Leggbó is, in some ways, not a good example of a “preverbal position as topic position” language. But, I believe it is an excellent example of how the Benue-Congo information structure template can play out across languages.

At least since Hyman and Watters (1984) work on so-called “auxiliary focus” it has become known that certain features of the predication like polarity, aspect, modality etc. can interact in a systematic way with the information structure of a clause and they propose that these specific predication operators have inherent focus. . .

That negation, in particular of the “metalinguistic” type (cf. Horn (1989)), is an operator with inherent focus has been argued by a number of authors such as Givón (1978), Heine and Reh (1983), Marchese (1983), and Gümlemann (1996, 1999). Thus, that preverbal objects recurrently co-occur with precisely this feature can be taken as a reflex of their less focal status in this context. (Güldemann forthcoming b:15)
4.3 Two other kinds of evidence from Aghem and Nweh

[56] Aghem (contrastive) focus marker as slot-filler? (Data from Watters (1979:144))

[a] énáʔ mò nìy nò
  Inah DPST run FOC
  “Inah ran.”

[b] á mò nìy ndághò
  DS DPST run who
  “Who ran?”

Non-arguments as “slot-fillers” in Nweh?

[a] Njikèm à kè te fiá nkgàp anbò Atem ʃíuà bió
  Njikem AGR RPST NEG give money to Atem yesterday NEG
  “Njikem did not give money to Atem yesterday.” (Nkemnji 1995:112)

[b] Njikèm à kè te nkàp anbò Atem ʃíuà fiá
  Njikem AGR RPST NEG money to Atem yesterday give
  “Njikem did not give money to Atem yesterday.” (Nkemnji 1995:112)

[c] Njikèm à kè te ase ndëë bió
  Njikem AGR RPST NEG ASP N-sleep-FV NEG
  “Njikem was not sleeping (yesterday).” (Nkemnji 1995:133)

[d] Njikèm à kè te ase ndëë
  Njikem AGR RPST NEG ASP N-sleep-FV
  Intended: “Njikem was not sleeping (yesterday).” (Nkemnji 1995:133)

[e] Njikèm à kè te lé ʃíuà bió
  Njikem AGR RPST NEG sleep yesterday NEG
  “Njikem was not sleeping yesterday.” (Nkemnji 1995:133)

[f] Njikèm à kè te ʃíuà lé
  Njikem AGR RPST NEG yesterday sleep
  “Njikem was not sleeping yesterday.” (Nkemnji 1995:133)

We notice that the presence of an (adverbial) adjunct following an intransitive verb makes intransitive verbs pattern like transitive verbs in the sense that the [sic] allow negative alternation. . . the facts here suggest that the analysis of all adverbs as adjuncts that has generally been adopted in the literature, needs some serious rethinking. (Nkemnji 1995:133)

5 Conclusion

5.1 What kind of object is this information structure template?

[61] Above, I gave this informal representation of the patterns being described:

\[
\text{[ [ Topic [ Predicate [ Focus ] ] ] ]}
\]

[62] Or it might be better to decompose it as follows

[a] \[
\text{[ [ Topic [ Predicate ] ] ]}
\]

[b] \[
\text{[ [ Predicate [ Focus ] ] ]}
\]

This structure is a simplification: An “aggregate” over different languages.

“Projection-based” syntactic theories (to borrow Michaelis’s (forthcoming) use of the term) would have difficulty formalizing the descriptive insight encoded above.

On the other hand, such a pattern would seem to mesh quite well with constructional models of syntax—as demonstrated, for example, by Kathol’s (2000) “linear” analysis of German syntax (see, especially, Kathol (2000:141–177); see also Croft (2001:196–197) and Blevins (1990)).

If, say, English represents one sort of syntactic type of form-meaning pairing—a configurational one closely linked to argument structure—Benue-Congo represents a different type—a linear one closely linked to information structure.

This linear pattern would seem to have a prototypical Benue-Congo use that, over time, has played out in diverging ways in particular languages but, nevertheless, still seems discernible.

Such an analysis would seem to be in line with construction-oriented analyses, like the analysis subject-auxiliary verb inversion in English found in Goldberg (2006:166–182), which try to relate similar idiosyncratic surface forms via a common prototype.
5.2 The template and the Benue-Congo problem

What does the information-structure patterning tell us about Benue-Congo?

For Narrow Bantu

- It solidifies the case that the Bantu verbal prefixes should be understood as a recent development, as discussed in Güldemann (2003:184–185). (See Meeussen (1967:108–111) for a general discussion of Proto-Bantu verb structure.)

Mu-nga-ni-thändiz-e (Chichewa)
2p-ABIL-1s-help-FV
“You can/may help me.” (Mchombo 2004:30)

- The preverbal “object marker” would correspond to a Pre-Proto–Bantu object pronoun—in preverbal “topic” position.

- Thus, the entire Proto-Bantu verb should probably not be considered a good model for the Proto–Benue-Congo verb (but, of course, pieces of it might be—for example, the verb stem seems to be a good candidate as a Benue-Congo inheritance; see Güldemann (2003:185), Hyman (2004), and Voeltz (1978)).

- It gives us a historical picture that connects well with synchronic analyses of the Bantu verbal prefix system as templatic (see, for example, Stump (1992, 1993)).

- Probably also relevant: Interactions between object prefixes, definiteness and topicality, of the sort discussed by, for example, Bresnan and Mchombo (1987:741–752) and Creissels (2000:235–236).

For “Kwa” (i.e., western Benue-Congo)

- A great deal of attention has been paid to the analysis of the structural properties of West African serial verb constructions (see Good (2003:402–407) for an overview of some of the relevant literature).

mo mí ìwé wá fún ẹ (Yoruba)
I take book come give you
“|brought you a book.” (Stahlke 1970:63)

- The discussion here would indicate that a valuable area for future work would be to focus on their information structure properties.

- This is not to say the topic has been completely ignored (see Bearth (1999:136) for some discussion)—but it would seem to still be in need of a comprehensive study.

Works cited


Gensler, Orin. 1994. On reconstructing the syntagm S-Aux-O-Other to Proto–Niger-Congo. In K. E. Moore, D. A. Peterson, and C. Wentum (Eds.) Proceedings of the twentieth...


