

Split subjects in Mbam Bantu

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Niger-Congo > ... Benue-Congo > Bantoid > Bantu

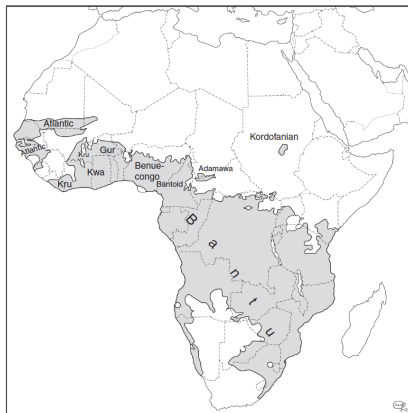


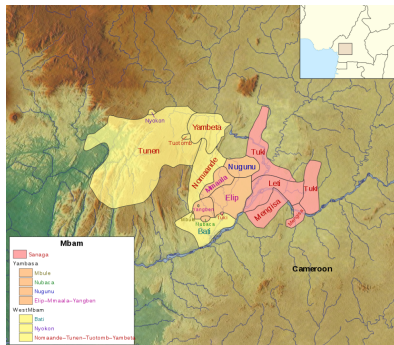
Figure: Map showing Niger-Congo languages (Good 2017:473)

The Mbam languages

- Mbam languages of Cameroon = (some of) Guthrie Zone A40/A60 (Dieu and Renaud 1983; Maho 2003; Philippson 2022)

! ≠ Mbam-Nkam

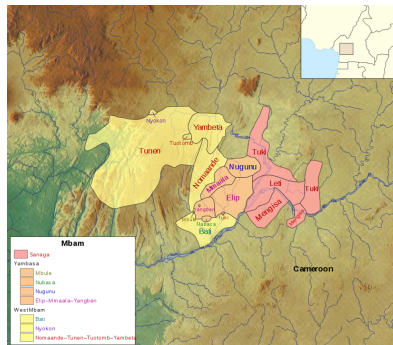
- Under node 1 of Grollemund et al. (2015)
- Generally classified as **Narrow Bantu**, but at classificatory borderline; considered **non-Bantu Bantoid** by some authors



Map of Mbam languages. (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mbam_languages#/media/File:Map_of_the_Mbam_languages.svg, 06-2024)

The Mbam languages

- Mbam > **Western Mbam**
 - Tunen A44 [tvu],
Nɔmaándé A46 [lem],
Nyokon A55 [nvo],
Tuotomb A461 [ttf]
- Mbam > **Sanaga Mbam**¹
 - Tentative subclassification in Philippon (2022:243)
- Today's focus =
construction found in
Western Mbam



Map of Mbam languages. (Source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mbam_languages#/media/File:Map_of_the_Mbam_languages.svg, 06-2024)

¹See Philippon (2022) for mention of two-way split of Western and Sanaga Mbam in the context of Guthrie (1953)'s original separation of the Mbam languages into two groups.

Classifying the Mbam subgroup

- Classification of Mbam languages as a subgroup is supported by lexical similarity and shared phonological innovations (see e.g. Philippson 2022)
- Today: Consideration of morphosyntactic variation - **case study of split subject construction**
- Implications:
 - understanding morphosyntactic variation and change in Bantoid



The Mbam split subject construction

(1) **The Mbam split subject construction**

Subject marker (SM) [...] co-referential subject pronoun (PRN)



The Mbam split subject construction

(2) The Mbam split subject construction

Subject marker (SM) [...] co-referential subject pronoun (PRN)

(3) a. **tu** ηe **sú** súéte.

SM.1PL P3 PRN.1PL left

‘We left.’

b. **nɔ** ηa **nó** aamba.

SM.2PL PRS PRN.2PL want

‘You want.’ (Nɔmaándé; Taylor 1999:§1.0, glosses adapted)



Split subjects in Nɔmaándé

“The basic verb complex/phrase consists of the following elements: a pronoun, a tense-aspect marker followed by a second subject pronoun, then a verb root. When there is a nominal subject PRO 1 is optionally absent.”

+ PRO 1 (T/A) (ADV) (PRO 2) (DO Pro) + V

(Taylor 1999:§1.0)



Split subjects in Nɔmaándé

“The basic verb complex/phrase consists of the following elements: a pronoun, a tense-aspect marker followed by a second subject pronoun, then a verb root. When there is a nominal subject PRO 1 is optionally absent.”

+ *PRO 1* (T/A) (ADV) (*PRO 2*) (*DO Pro*) + *V*

(Taylor 1999:§1.0)

- (4) a. *nu* *ɲe* *nú* *beébe* *aamba*.
SM.2PL PRS PRN.2PL PRN.OBJ.2 want
‘You (pl.) want them.’

- b. *to* *ɲa* *cáɲa* *esú* *súéte*.
SM.1PL P3 first PRN.1PL left

‘We left first.’ (Nɔmaándé; Taylor 1999:§1.0, glosses adapted)



The Mbam split subject construction

- Split subject construction considered by Philippson (2022:255); Mous (2005:412) to be unique to Nomaándé
- but also found in Tunen (own data; Kerr to appear, Kerr in prep.; Dugast 1971:334-5)...



Split subjects in Tunen

(5) Context: EO: “- He wrote ‘*God hates the wicked*.’”

PM: “I also saw it.”

EO: “‘*God hates the wicked*.’”

mɛ ka **ámɛ** siəkinə na má¹méá mə́əsə máfandé máam !

/**mɛ** ka **ámɛ** siəkinə na má^Lméá

SM.1SG PST3 PRN.1SG see.DUR with 6.POSS.PRN.1SG.6

ma-əsə má-fandé máama/

6-eye 6-two DEM.PROX.6

‘Moi j’ai vu avec mes propres yeux !’

‘I saw (it) with my own two eyes!’

(Tunen; [PM 1050])



Research questions

- ? How does the split subject construction compare in Tunen vs Nɔmaándé?
- ? What is the origin of the construction?



Empirical study

Sources consulted

Language	Sources
Nɔmaándé	Online SIL manuscripts (Taylor 1984, 1999; Wilkendorf 2001, 2004) + publications (Wilkendorf 1988; Boyd 2015) + unpublished SIL materials [ongoing/WIP]
Tunen	Own field data (Kerr in prep.) + secondary sources (Dugast 1971, 1975; Mous 1997, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2014; Kongne Welaze 2010)



Empirical investigation

- ① TAM contexts
- ② Obligatoriness vs optionality
- ③ Discourse contexts
- ④ Form and syntactic position of subject pronoun (SP2/PRN)



1. TAM contexts

- Found in many TAM contexts in Nɔmaánde; presented as basic construction (Wilkendorf 1984, 2001)

(4) Pronominal Complex Segments

<u>Person</u> (open)	<u>Initial S.P.</u>	<u>Tense Marker</u>	<u>Final S.P.</u>
1sg.	ε-	x	-mε
2sg.	ɔ-	x	-ɔ
3sg.	u-	x	-a
1pl.	tu-	x	-sɔ
2pl.	nu-	x	-nɔ
3pl.	bã-	x	-bɔ
(closed)			
1sg.	i-	x	-mɪ
2sg.	o-	x	-o
3sg.	u-	x	-e
1pl.	tu-	x	-su
2pl.	nu-	x	-nu
3pl.	bẽ-	x	-bu

(Wilkendorf 1984:5)



1. TAM contexts

- Found across TAM contexts in Nɔmaándé; presented as basic construction (Wilkendorf 1984, 1985, 2001)

Comparison of a High Tone Verb and a Low Tone Verb

The following chart shows a comparison between the tenses for a high tone verb, *obúme* 'to hunt', and a low tone verb, *oketi* 'to measure'. The forms given are for the first person plural pronouns.

Tense	<i>obúme</i> 'to hunt' (H tone)	<i>oketi</i> 'to measure' (L tone)
P3	tugesú búmé(k)	tugesú kėti(k)
P2	túnesu búmé(k)	túnesu keti(k)
P1	tugésu búmé(k)	tugésu keti(k)
P0	túmesu búme(k)	túmesu keti(k)
Pres.	tugesú bume	tugesú kėti
F1	tugesú búmēk	tugesú kětík
F2	tukésu búmé(k)	tukésu keti(k)
F3	tukesú búmé(k)	tukesú kėti(k)

(Wilkendorf 1984:16)



1. TAM contexts

- Not necessary for any TAM context in Tunen; not mentioned in basic descriptions of TAM system (Dugast 1971; Mous 2003; Kongne Welaze 2010; Kerr to appear)



2. Obligatoriness vs optionality

- Found consistently in Nɔmaándé; presented as basic construction (Taylor 1984; Wilkendorf 1984, 1985, 2001)

(6) **nu** ɲe **nú** beébe aamba.

SM.2PL PRS PRN.2PL PRN.OBJ.2 want

‘You (pl.) want them.’

(Nɔmaándé; Taylor 1999:§1.0, glosses adapted)



2. Obligatoriness vs optionality

- Not obligatory in Tunen; optional

(7) okay. héníá **ó** ndo **añóá** tuəṇə née, ɔ Bafəa? **ó** ndo tuəṇə ɔ
Bafəa ?

/okay héníá ɔ ^Hndo **añóá** tuəṇə née ɔ
okay.EN where SM.2SG PRS PRN.2SG live then PREP
Bafəa ɔ ^Hndo tuəṇə ɔ Bafəa/
Bafia SM.2SG PRS live PREP Bafia

‘Okay. Où resides-tu alors - à Bafia ? Résides-tu à Bafia ?’

‘Okay. So where do you live - Bafia? Do you live in Bafia?’

(Tunen; [PM 956])



3. Discourse contexts

- Found in basic Nɔmaándé data; found consistently in natural speech
- No clear restriction in discourse context



3. Discourse contexts

- Not found in basic Tunen data

- (8) Context: You go to visit Pascal, but he is not there. His brother is home, and tells you:

Pasakále a n(á) ákan. [...]

/Basakále a ná ákána/

1.Pascal SM.1 PST2 leave

‘Pascal left. [...]

(Tunen; [JO 833])

- (9) mé ndɔ siə ɔ tunəni ɔwɔkón(a).

/mɛ ^Hndɔ siə ɔ tɔ-nəni ɔ-wkóna/

SM.1SG PRS want PREP 13-Nen INF-learn

‘I want to learn Tunen.’

(Tunen; [PM 74])



3. Discourse contexts

- Found only in natural speech in Tunen field data (Kerr in prep.)

(10) Context: EO describes how he ended up at the town square; PM says:

ɔ ná ndá aŋɔ́á bényánánéna ɔban-

/ɔ ná nda aŋɔ́á bé-nyánánéna ɔbánɔ/

SM.2SG PST2 VEN PRN.2SG MID-find.REP only

‘Tu es revenu te retrouver comme ça.’

‘You found yourself like that.’

(Tunen; [PM 1009])



3. Discourse contexts

- Found only in natural speech in Tunen field data (Kerr in prep.)

- (11) Context: “Because I knew it was his funeral today, I passed by.”
- μέ νό ka άμέ βελεηα βέ- bí- bíύύνήνί, μέ νό βésuala [...]
- /μέ νό ka άμέ βε-λεηα βέ-ύύνήνίθ μέ
- SM.1SG PST2 AND PRN.1SG 8-clothes MID-change SM.1SG
- νό βέ-σo-ala/
- PST1 MID-wash-DIM
- ‘Je suis allé me changer, je me suis débarbouillé,’
 ‘I went and got changed, I had a quick wash,’ (Tunen; [PM 1014])



3. Discourse contexts

- Tunen construction analysed by Dugast (1971:334-5) as division of emphatic subject pronoun (“pronomes emphatiques forts”), used for ‘emphatic’ purposes

(12) **mε** n' **ámí** ↓ákán.
 SM.1SG PST2 PRN.1SG leave
 ‘Moi, je pars.’ (lit. ‘je moi suis allé(e).’)
 ‘I’m leaving.’ (Tunen; Dugast 1971:335, adapted)

→ apparent restriction in discourse context



4. Form of subject pronoun

- Form of PRN in Nɔmaándé: monosyllabic²
- Form of PRN in Tunen: bisyllabic

	Nɔmaándé ³		Tunen	
	SM	PRN	SM	PRN
1SG	i/ɛ	mi/me	mɛ	ámɛ
2SG	o/ɔ	o/ɔ	ɔ	aɲɔ́á
1	u/ɔ	e/a	a	áyɛ
1PL	tu/tɔ	su/sɔ	tɔ	ésu
2PL	nu/nɔ	nu/nó, nú	nɔ	énu
2	bé/bá	bé/bá/bó	bá	ébu

²Exception: ésu for PRN.1PL in Taylor (1999:§1.0) example.

³Variation in vowel quality is conditioned by ATR harmony (Taylor 1999:§1.2)



4. Syntactic position of subject pronoun

- Strict order: **SM TAM PRN.SUBJ PRN.OBJ/O V**

(13) **nu ne nú beébe aamba.**

SM.2PL PRS PRN.2PL PRN.OBJ.2 want

‘You (pl.) want them.’

(Nɔmaándé; Taylor 1999:§1.0, glosses adapted)

(14) Context: “Because I knew it was his funeral today, I passed by.”

me nó ka áme beɬeɬa bé- bí- bíúhúnéni, [...]

/me nó ka áme be-ɬeɬa bé-úhúnéniə/

SM.1SG PST2 AND PRN.1SG 8-clothes MID-change

‘Je suis allé me changer, [...]’

‘I went and got changed, [...]’

(Tunen; [PM 1014])



4. Syntactic position of subject pronoun

- Strict order: **SM TAM PRN.SUBJ PRN.OBJ/O V**

→ cf. reconstructions of [SB]=TAMP] [SB]=STEM] / bound vs free pronouns / split predicate structure for Proto-Bantu/Bantoid/Benue-Kwa (Güldemann 2022 and references therein)



Empirical summary

Nɔmaándé	Tunen
Common in most TAM contexts	Marginal, optional
Common across data	Found in restricted discourse contexts
SP2/PRN monosyllabic	SP2/PRN disyllabic
SM TAM (ADV) PRN PRN.OBJ V	SM TAM PRN PRN.OBJ/O V

- SP1/SM in Nɔmaándé cognate to SP1/SM in Tunen
- SP2/PRN in Nɔmaándé cognate to SP2/PRN in Tunen



Discussion

Origins?

- Where did the split subject construction originate from?
- What scenario links the empirical variation between the construction in Nɔmaándé and Tunen (vs surrounding languages)?



Proposal I

Stage I. Original pragmatic function, used in turn-taking;
bisyllabic, optional



Stage II. Grammaticalised into pragmatically-neutral
construction as part of regular TAM system, monosyllabic,
obligatory



Proposal II

Stage II. Original doubled expression, maintained for Tunen only in turn-taking; bisyllabic, optional



Stage II. Loss of redundant second element in Tunen; monosyllabic, obligatory



Topics for testing

- Main clause versus embedded clause contexts
- Traces of the construction in other Bantu/Bantoid languages?
 - Need for discourse data!



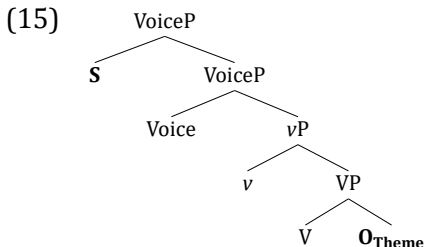
Formal analysis: Argument structure

- Syntactic position of SP2/PRN diagnoses position of object in OV contexts: not as high as base-generation position of subject (Kerr to appear)



Formal analysis (Kerr to appear)

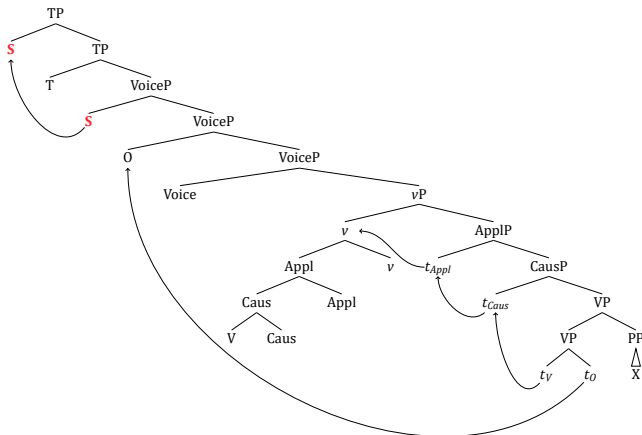
- Generative formal analysis: SP2 = spell-out of in-situ subject
- Step 1. Base structure: external argument generated in SpecVoiceP:



Formal analysis (Kerr to appear)

- Generative formal analysis: SP2 = spell-out of in-situ subject
- Step 2. Derived structure: spell-out of SM in TP domain:

(16)



Morphosyntactic variation

- How similar are the Mbam languages in morphosyntax?
- To what extent does morphosyntactic similarity reflect linguistic relatedness?



Morphosyntactic classification

*“Verb TAM systems are not helpful [for classification - EK] since they vary very widely even between closely related languages [...]. **The structure of the VP in Nen has drawn attention since it has the basic order SOV; however this is completely isolated not only in Mbam but in the rest of Narrow Bantu where SVO is robustly attested. In the same vein, Maande has a very original combination of two SP affixed to the TAM marker, thus: SP1-TAM-SP2 where SP1 has the shape generally found with SP in Bantu (e.g. 1pl. tU-), whereas SP2 is reminiscent of independent pronouns (e.g. 1pl. -(A)sU). Whatever the origin of this formation it is restricted to Maande and not found in the rest of Mbam, so not diagnostic for the status of Western [Mbam].**”*

(Philippson 2022:255, emphasis added)



Exceptionalism

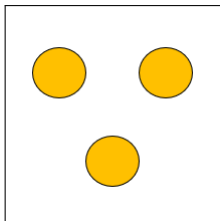
- Philippon (2022) presentation:⁴ (1) Tunen SOV is unique;
(2) Nɔmaándé split subject is unique

→ argument of morphosyntactic **exceptionalism**

⁴see also Dugast (1971); Bearth (2003); Downing and Marten (2019) a.o. for Tunen SOV; Mous (2005) for split subject.

Visualising exceptionalism

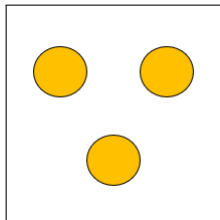
- Visualising the exceptionalism argument:



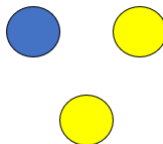
Western Mbam

Visualising exceptionalism

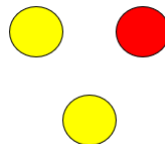
- Visualising the exceptionalism argument:



Western Mbam

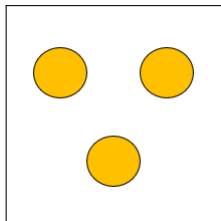


SOV

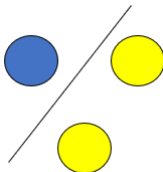


Split subject

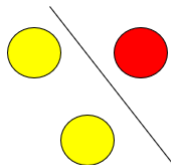
Visualising exceptionalism



Western Mbam



SOV



Split subject

- Considering each construction as unique leads to clear division
- Philippson (2022): these divisions not reflective of linguistic grouping of Mbam languages



Counterpoints to exceptionalism



Counterpoints to Tunen SOV exceptionalism:

- partial SOV clausal word order in surrounding languages (Mous 2005, 2014; Güldemann 2007; Kerr 2024, Kerr to appear, a.o.)
 - Nɔmaándé (+ Eton/Ewondo, etc.): OV with pronouns
 - Nyokon (+ Tikar etc.): OV in some TAM contexts
- consideration of OV at word level in surrounding languages (e.g. Narrow Bantu pre-stem object markers)

Counterpoints to exceptionalism

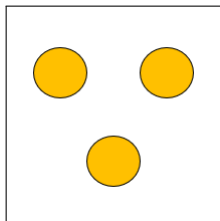


Counterpoints to Nɔmaándé split subject exceptionalism:

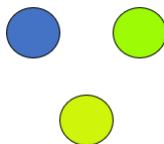
- Partial presence of split subject construction in Tunen (this talk)
- variation in argument indexation in languages of region
 - e.g. status of SM as pronoun/agreement
 - development of OMs
 - pronominal vs zero expression of (theme) objects

Exceptionalism?

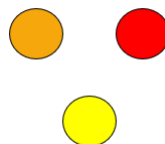
- Reflecting these counterpoints visually:



Western Mbam



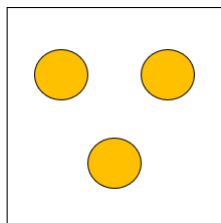
SOV



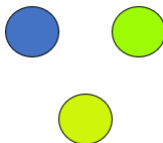
Split subject

Exceptionalism?

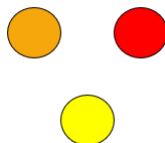
- Reflecting these counterpoints visually:



Western Mbam



SOV



Split subject

- no longer clear-cut classificatory line
- study of more features could lead to more accurate 'colour profile' to reflect relatedness; possible emergent subgrouping



Future directions

- i. To what extent do we find traces of these constructions in surrounding languages?
 - Need for comparative work in Bantoid/NW Bantu region + more detailed study of different discourse types



Future directions

- ii. What do these data tell us about (i) morphosyntactic change and (ii) the validity of morphosyntactic criteria for linguistic classification?
 - Validate/falsify grammaticalisation scenario by data from intermediary stages of change
 - Research diachronic (in)stability of morphosyntactic features; possible differences in applicability of e.g. morphological form of pronoun vs syntactic status of the construction



Future directions

- i. To what extent do we find traces of these constructions in surrounding languages?
 - ii. What do these data tell us about (i) morphosyntactic change and (ii) the validity of morphosyntactic criteria for linguistic classification?
- 3-year FWO project beginning Oct 2024, University of Ghent:
Modelling Bantu Analytic Morphosyntax (MBAM): The Mbam languages as a case study in morphosyntactic change



Conclusion

Conclusion

- There is a split subject construction found in some Mbam languages, where a SM and co-referential pronominal element co-occur, split by TAM material
- The split subject construction was previously considered unique to Nɔmaándé (A46) but is also found in Tunen (A44), albeit to a lesser degree
- Empirical overview shows variation in form of second component (SP2/PRN) and contexts of use



Conclusion

- Diachrony: pragmatic function for emphasis/turn-taking (Tunen stage) \leftrightarrow pragmatically-neutral construction (Nɔmaándé stage)
- Analysed formally with PRN as spell-out of in-situ subject
- Detailed comparison of closely-related languages challenges portrayal of exceptionalism
 - potential for use of morphosyntactic criteria in classification?
 - illustrative for study of morphosyntactic variation and change



I PRS I you thank!



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Glosses

á = high-toned *a*; a = low-toned *a*; ^H = floating high tone; ^L = floating low tone; 1, 2, 3... = Bantu noun class; 1S(G), 1PL = 1st person singular, plural; 2S(G) = 2nd person singular; AND = anditive (thither); DEM = demonstrative; DIM = diminutive; EN = English; F1 = Nǎmaándé first-degree future tense; F2 = Nǎmaándé second-degree future tense; F3 = Nǎmaándé third-degree future tense; FUT = Tunen future tense; INF = infinitive; MID = middle; OBJ = object; P0 = Nǎmaándé first-degree past tense; P1 = Nǎmaándé second-degree past tense; P2 = Nǎmaándé third-degree past tense; P3 = Nǎmaándé fourth-degree past tense; PST1 = Tunen first-degree past tense (just now); PST2 = Tunen second-degree past tense (hodiernal); PST3 = Tunen third-degree past tense (yesterday); POSS = possessive; PREP = preposition; PRN = pronoun; PRO2 = second subject pronoun; PROX = proximal; PRS = present; RECIP = reciprocal; REP = repetitive; SM = subject marker; SP = subject pronoun; TAM = tense/aspect(/mood) marker; VEN = venitive (hither)

