

28.08.25, SLE58, UNIVERSITÉ BORDEAUX MONTAIGNE

# MBAM WORDHOOD AND NIGER-CONGO

# MORPHOSYNTACTIC RECONSTRUCTION

Elisabeth J. Kerr

## OUTLINE

- 1 Investigate analytic-synthetic macro-cyclic change in Niger-Congo with respect to the size of the verbal word
- 2 Motivate the development of wordhood diagnostics that can situate West/Central African Benue-Congo languages within this cycle
- 3 Apply wordhood diagnostics to Mbam Bantu case study to test hypothesis that phonological change feeds morphosyntactic change

## MORPHOSYNTACTIC DIVERSITY IN NIGER-CONGO VERB FORMS

- Niger-Congo languages show a wide degree of variation in the morphological complexity of verb forms, from radically **analytic** Kwa verb forms (1) to highly **synthetic** Narrow Bantu ones (2)

(1) Mo **mú** ìwé **wá** **fún** ẹ.  
I take book come give you  
'I brought you a book.'

(Yoruba (Kwa); Stahlke 1970:63, via Hyman 2004:73)

(2) Kató **a-ka-bi-ga-mú-siig-is-a**.  
1.Kato SM.1-PST-them-it-him-smear-CAUS-FV  
'Kato smeared it on him with them.'

(Haya (Eastern Bantu), Hyman 2004:72, adapted)

## MORPHOSYNTACTIC CHANGE WITHIN NIGER-CONGO

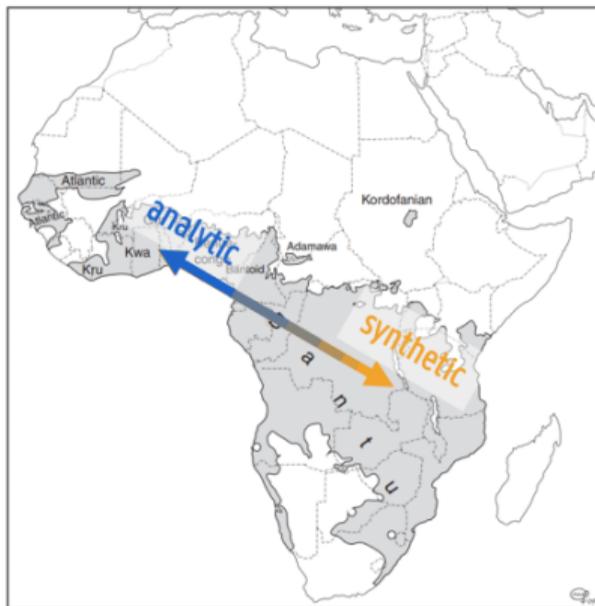


Figure: Map of Niger-Congo languages according to Good (2017:472), adapted.

- Bantu as sub-group of Niger-Congo
  - Niger-Congo > ... > Benue-Congo > Bantoid > Bantu
- Proto-Bantu homeland in Cameroon/Nigeria (Pakendorf et al. 2011; Grollemund et al. 2015; Bostoen 2018, 2020; Idiatov and Van de Velde 2021; Koile et al. 2022)
- Idea of '**drift**' between Eastern Bantu-type syntheticity and Kwa-type analyticity (Hyman 2004:72, Hyman 2017:88)

## ANALYTIC-SYNTHETIC CHANGE

- Across language families, variation is found in the **degree of synthesis** (i.e., amount of morphological material bound to root; vs *analyticity*; von Schlegel 1808; von Schlegel 1818 *et seq.*) visible in their verbal domain
- The changes instantiate a **macro-cycle** (or ‘spiral’; Hodge 1970; Van Gelderen 2016; von der Gabelentz 1901; Hodge 1970; Schwegler 1990; Van Gelderen 2016; Haspelmath 2018, i.a.):
  - (i) analytic → synthetic verb forms
  - (ii) reduction of synthetic verb forms
  - (iii) emergence of new analytic constructions
- In absence of written records, synchronic variation between genealogically-related languages shows that there has been change in degree of verbal synthesis over time

## RECONSTRUCTING VERBAL PREDICATES IN NIGER-CONGO

- Meeussen (1967) reconstructs synthetic verbal predicate to Proto-Bantu; Hyman (2004, 2017) takes West African analytic forms to arise after breakdown of earlier synthetic forms
  - Highly synthetic Eastern Bantu verb forms seen in (2) preserve an older strategy; Northwestern Bantu/other Benue-Congo verb more analytic forms result from breakdown from this synthetic construction (Hyman 2004, 2011, 2017), i.e.:
    - (i) analytic → synthetic verb forms
    - (ii) reduction of synthetic verb form
    - (iii) emergence of new analytic constructions

## RECONSTRUCTING VERBAL PREDICATES IN NIGER-CONGO

- Meeussen (1967) reconstructs synthetic verbal predicate to Proto-Bantu; Hyman (2004, 2017) takes West African analytic forms to arise after breakdown of earlier synthetic forms
- Güldemann (2022) instead reconstructs split predication to Proto-Bantu
  - Highly synthetic E. Bantu verb forms seen in (2) are a more recent innovation; more analytic verb forms in other Benue-Congo preserve earlier analytic structure
    - (i) analytic → synthetic verb forms
    - (ii) reduction of synthetic verb form
    - (iii) emergence of new analytic constructions

## RECONSTRUCTING CHANGE IN NIGER-CONGO

- Large amount of debate in literature regarding the directionality of change in NC (Hyman 2004, 2011, 2017; Güldemann 2008, 2022, etc.)
- e.g. Van de Velde and Idiatov (2025) recent discussion of three issues with the univerbation account for prefixal object markers (OMs):
  - (i) rarity of  $O_{\text{PRON}}V$  and presence of  $O_{\text{DP}}V$  in certain information-structural contexts in NWB/Bantoid;
  - (ii) mutual ordering of multiple objects;
  - (iii) order of object markers vs infinitive markers
- Hyman (2004, 2011, 2017) argues that the development of analyticity relates to **areal phonological changes** affecting verb length, with increasing prosodification of the stem (see also Lionnet 2017; Lionnet and Hyman 2018; Van de Velde and Idiatov 2016 on stem-initial prominence as an areal phonological feature)

## INTERPRETING SYNTHETICITY

- Hyman (2004, 2017) focusses on the degree of syntheticity of the verb in terms of the amount of material added **after the verb root** (maximality constraints, interacting with stem-initial prominence)

- Aux-V-SFX

- Güldemann (2022) focusses on the degree of syntheticity of the verb in terms of the unboundedness of the inflectional elements **before the verb root** (split predication)

- Aux-V-SFX

⇒ Different domains may require different tests, and results may differ due to **asymmetries in boundedness of prefixes vs suffixes** (Hyman 2008) (see e.g. Myers 1987, 1990, 1995 re: the 'macro-stem' as a sub-word constituent in Shona (Eastern Bantu))

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ‘WORDHOOD’

- Güldemann (2022) **relies on orthographic wordhood** for judging presence of split predication (i.e., Aux#V word boundary) - an “important caveat” (Güldemann 2022:389)
- cf. use of orthographic wordhood as proxy to phonological/syntactic word in typological databases e.g. Grambank (Lesage and Hübler 2017) and other language families (Michaelis, this conf.)

## ORTHOGRAPHIC WORDHOOD VARIATION IN SOURCES

- Orthographic wordhood in Benue-Congo is known to be affected by arbitrary factors, e.g. French/Anglophone research orientation (Nurse 2008:169-170; Anderson 2016:524-5 fn4):

*“The phrase ‘have a tendency to [express inflection analytically] is used advisedly, partly because [North-western Bantu/non-Bantu NC languages] don’t all behave in the same way, partly because **it is necessary to distinguish morphological analysis from writing conventions**. Francophone countries in West Africa have a strong **francographic convention to write as separate words** what would be **written as one word in the anglographic tradition**. [...]”* (Nurse 2008:169, emphasis added)

## ORTHOGRAPHIC WORDHOOD VARIATION IN SOURCES

- Variation in writing of inflectional elements as separate vs bound forms in West/Central African Benue-Congo, **even for the same language**

- (3) a. a nákan ebàk ombel.  
SM.1 PST.leave 7.lizard 3.house  
'He went to the lizards house. (Tunen [tvu]; Dugast 1975:61, glosses and trans. added)
- b. Yowánεεε a nó akána u nioní.  
1.Jean SM.1 PST leave PREP 5.market  
'Jean went to the market. (Tunen [tvu]; Satre et al. 2008:11, glosses and trans. added)

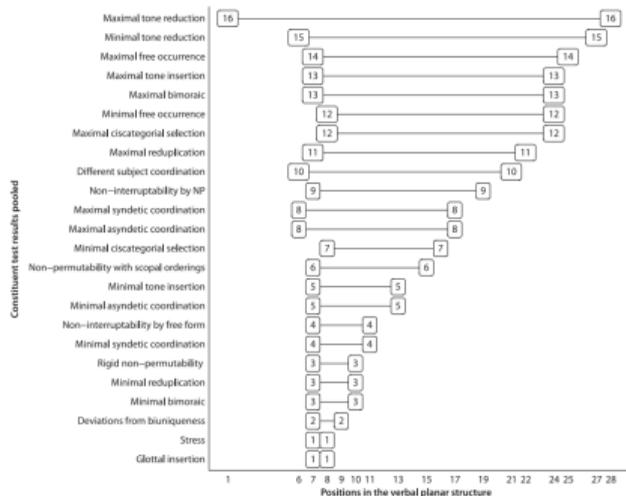
## MOVING AWAY FROM ORTHOGRAPHIC WORDHOOD

- The notions of *analyticity* and *syntheticity* are dependent on the notion of *word*
- Different notions of 'word' exist (Schiering et al. 2010; Haspelmath 2011, 2015; Good 2016, 2024; Zingler 2020; Tallman 2020, 2021; Tallman et al. 2024; Tallman and Auderset 2023, i.a.):
  - **orthographic word**
  - **phonological word** (or 'P-word', 'prosodic word')
  - **syntactic word** (or 'grammatical word', 'morpho-syntactic word', 'morphological word')
- 'Words' may be emergent; phonological and syntactic words (and the criteria for each) do not necessarily align and tests may be inconclusive (ibid), in contrast to approaches assuming syntax/phonology matching (see e.g. Selkirk 2011)

# WORDHOOD/CONSTITUENCY TESTS

- **Planar-fractal approach** (Tallman 2021; Tallman et al. 2024): method for comparing (mis)alignment of different phonological, syntactic, and indeterminate constituency tests

- Applied recently to case studies from South American languages (Tallman et al. 2024)



## Constituency and convergence in the Americas

Edited by

Adam J. R. Tallman

Sandra Auderset

Hiroto Uchihara

Topics in Phonological Diversity 1



# TYPES OF CONSTITUENCY TESTS

- Types of constituency tests (Auderset et al. 2024: 17):
  - CISCATEGORIAL SELECTION
  - DEVIATIONS
  - FREE OCCURRENCE
  - NON-INTERRUPTABILITY
  - NON-PERMUTABILITY
  - SEGMENTAL
  - SUPRASEGMENTAL
  - REPAIR
  - PAUSING
  - PROFORM
  - PLAY LANGUAGE
  - IDIOM
  
- Applicability of tests is language-dependent

## CONSTITUENCY TESTS FOR BENUE-CONGO

- Proof-of-concept of planar-fractal method for Chichewa (E. Bantu) in unpublished work by Jeff Good (Jeff Good, p.c.)
- Various wordhood tests applied in works on different Benue-Congo languages (e.g. this workshop)
- My project: development of tests applicable to Northwestern Bantu/non-Bantu Benue-Congo of West/Central Africa, working bottom-up from Mbam Bantu subgroup
  - *Modelling Bantu Analytic Morphosyntax (MBAM): The Mbam languages as a case study in morphosyntactic change (2024-2027, FWO)*

## TESTING HYPOTHESES ON DIACHRONY

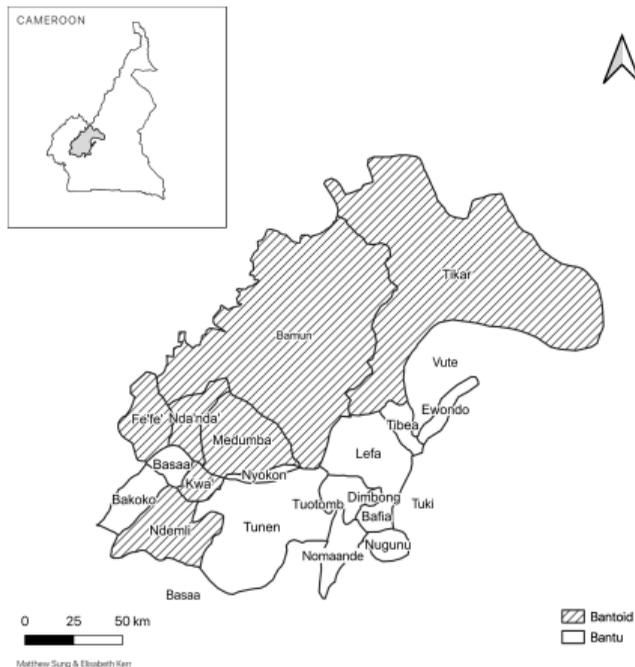
- For languages in intermediate stages of cycle, expect **mismatches in phonological and syntactic wordhood diagnostics**
- Test **drift hypothesis** (West/Central African Benue-Congo as in intermediate stage of change) by applying phonological and syntactic wordhood diagnostics
- Falsifiable hypothesis: Restriction in size of phonological word fed development of restriction in size of syntactic word

## OUTLINE

- 1 Investigate analytic-synthetic macro-cyclic change in Niger-Congo with respect to the size of the verbal word
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- 3 Apply wordhood diagnostics to Mbam Bantu case study to test hypothesis that phonological change feeds morphosyntactic change

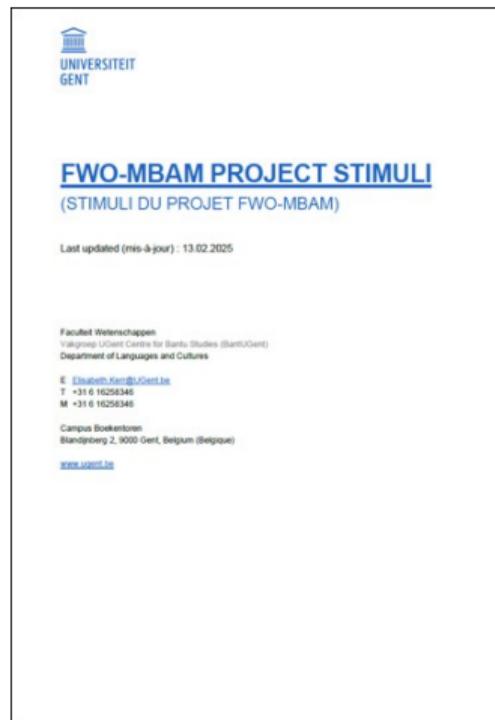
# MBAM LANGUAGES

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



# METHODOLOGY

- In-situ fieldwork for targeted data collection using own wordhood stimuli for 4 Western Mbam languages
  - Tunen (A44) [tvu]
  - Nyokon (A45) [nvo]
  - Nomaandé (A46) [lem]
  - Atomb (Tuotomb/Boneck) (A461) [tff]



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**FWO-MBAM PROJECT STIMULI**  
(STIMULI DU PROJET FWO-MBAM)

Last updated (mis-à-jour) : 13.02.2025

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# METHODOLOGY

- 2 fieldwork periods:
  - Feb-Apr 2025 (2.5 months)
  - Jul-Aug 2025 (1.5 months)
- 7 fieldsites; 28 consultants (M and F, 30-70)
- + data from 2019-2024 Tunen fieldwork corpus (Kerr 2024a) and secondary sources



## SYNTACTIC NON-INTERRUPTABILITY IN MBAM BANTU

- Narrow Bantu languages are typically described as agglutinative and SVO (with IS-based word order variation; see Kerr et al. 2023 for discussion)
- But Mbam Bantu languages are atypical in allowing preverbal objects (SOV) (Mous 1997, 2014; Kerr 2024c,b):
  - Tunen S-Aux-O-V-X
  - Nomaandé S-Aux-O<sub>PRN</sub>-V-O<sub>DP</sub>-X
  - Nyokon S-Aux-O-V-X / S-Aux-V-O-X dependent on TAM
  - Atomb S-Aux-O-V-X / S-Aux-V-O-X dependent on TAM
- TAM-dependent SOV/SVO also found in non-Bantu Benue-Congo languages; SO<sub>PRN</sub>V/SVO also found in other Northwestern Bantu languages (Kerr 2024c)

## AUX-O-V IN MBAM BANTU

- Aux-V fails syntactic constituency test of NON-INTERRUPTABILITY, due to this intervention of O

(4) tám    ɔŋgan wó    boŋ    tʃɔmb.

PST.1SG 3.root 3.ASSOC 14.tree cut

'I cut the root of the tree.'

(Atomb [tff], fieldnotes)

(5) Context: 'Did you find these three chickens?'

éɛ, í mə mí tʃííʃí bɔŋ.

/éɛ é        ma mé                tʃííʃí        bɔŋɔ/

yes SM.1SG TAM PRN.SBJ.1SG PRN.OBJ.10 find

'Yes, I found them.'

(Nomaandé [lem], fieldnotes)

## INTERVENING O IS NOT NOUN INCORPORATION

- ? What if the intervening O is incorporated into the V, meaning that these NWB examples are cases of high polysynthesis with a single verbal word?

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- ? What if the intervening O is incorporated into the V, meaning that these NWB examples are cases of high polysynthesis with a single verbal word?
  
- NI analysis is not at all supported by Mbam OV data (Kerr 2024c:225-226)
  - intervening O can be proper name, definite or indefinite, and found across predicate types, in contrast to properties of NI (Mithun 1984)
  - no morphosyntactic evidence for detransitivisation of the verb (as found for example with incorporated objects in the Mande language Soninke; Creissels 2018:750)
  - preverbal O can be definite, referential, or specific; incorporated objects cannot (Mithun 1984)
  - proper names can appear in this slot; proper names cannot be incorporated (Mithun 1984:864)
  - NI results in set lexical meanings; Mbam OV is productive
  - Consultants pronounce O and V separately when asked to work *mot-à-mot* (word by word)
  - NI is primarily used to background arguments (Mithun 1984:863), while preverbal objects in Mbam languages may be focal, i.e., non-backgrounded
  - NI is found crosslinguistically more frequently with certain predicates (e.g. 'to make', 'to eat' are preferred over 'to look at', 'to hear'; Mithun 1984:863), while in Mbam Bantu, OV is consistent across predicates

## INTERVENING O IS NOT NOUN INCORPORATION

(6) Context: Your friend asks what happened at church.

mɔtat [a ná] *imbénu ye fəkin ne Yésəs ɔ Yerusalem* [nɔŋɔnak].

/mɔ-táta a ná ε-*mbénu ye fəkinə ne Yésəs* ɔ *Yerúsalems*  
1-pastor SM.1 PST2 7-news 7.ASSOC 5.entrance 5.ASSOC Jesus PREP Jerusalem

nɔŋɔn-aka/

tell-DUR

‘The pastor told the news of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem.’ (Tunen; Kerr 2024c:225)

- ⇒ Instead of NI/bound form, the preverbal O position is filled by an **independent syntactic phrase**, as evidenced by syntactic constituency tests (e.g. pronoun replacement test, fragment answer test, fronting test, clefting test)

## OTHER SYNTACTIC WORDHOOD TESTS

- Other syntactic wordhood tests are **less conclusive** for testing Aux-V word boundary
- e.g. ellipsis accepted for TP (i.e. T') (Aux-O-V) but not for VP (O-V); no VP replacement test equivalent to 'do so' replacement test in English

(7) ε ηα μέ κωνα buhúnyi, tə Məəmḗ ~~u ηα ḗ κḗνα buhúnyi~~ tón.

/ε ηα μέ κωνα buhúnyi tə məəmḗ  
SM.1SG PRS PRN.SUBJ.1SG say 14.word and 1.mama

~~u ηα ḗ κḗνα buhúnyi~~ tóna/

SM.1-PRS-PRN.SUBJ.1-say-14.word also

'I say the word, and mama does too.'

(Nomaandé [lem], fieldnotes)

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  - e.g. ellipsis accepted for TP (i.e. T') (Aux-O-V) but not for VP (O-V); no VP replacement test equivalent to 'do so' replacement test in English
  - Aux-O-V span can occur as fragment (FREE FORM) while O-V without Aux cannot
- ⇒ INTERRUPTABILITY is primary cue for Aux-V syntactic wordhood boundary
- NB: Aux-V interruptability also possible with certain adverbials (also in intransitive clauses), especially in Nomaandé

## TESTING FOR PHONOLOGICAL WORDHOOD BOUNDARY

? Concluding there is a syntactic wordhood boundary between Aux and V, was this driven by a phonological wordhood boundary?

⇒ Test for phonological domains identifying Aux-V together vs in separate domains

## tone spread and downstep

- Tone spread is always **rightwards** (Hyman and Schuh 1974; Hyman 2007; tone workshop, Akumbu & Vydrin, this conf.); discussion of High Tone Spread (HTS) in Mbam Bantu (e.g. Mous 2003; Kerr 2024c) of **limited applicability** due to limited domain (1 TBU) and focus on phrasing of V with following material (vs preceding Aux)
- Downstep of H tones (to M height) can be triggered by TAM marker within Aux and is reset only after V (domain = Aux-V)

## AUX-V DOWNSTEP

- Downstep of H tones (to M height) can be triggered by TAM marker within Aux and is reset only after V (domain = Aux-V)

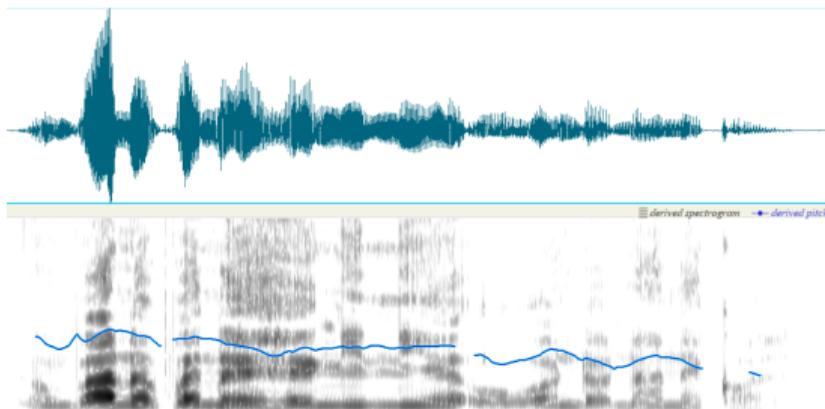
(8) ɔmbána é bé <sup>L</sup>ná hǎǎǎííǎ ɔwǎndo naáneɔla.

/ɔ-mbána á bá <sup>L</sup>ná hǎǎǎííǎ ɔ-wǎndo naáneɔla/

3-knife COP SM.2 PST3.REL decide INF-buy yesterday

'It was [a knife]<sub>FOC</sub> that they decided to buy yesterday.'

(Tunen [tvu], fieldnotes)



## TESTING FOR PHONOLOGICAL WORDHOOD BOUNDARY

- Most applicable phonological wordhood test is **vowel harmony**, in being **bidirectional** and **unbounded** within its domain (Boyd 2015; Bébiné 2019)
- Many Mbam Bantu languages have ATR vowel harmony systems (Boyd 2015), including Tunen and Nomaandé (but not Nyokon (Lovstrand 2011; Rolle and Faytak 2020, fieldnotes) or Atomb (fieldnotes))

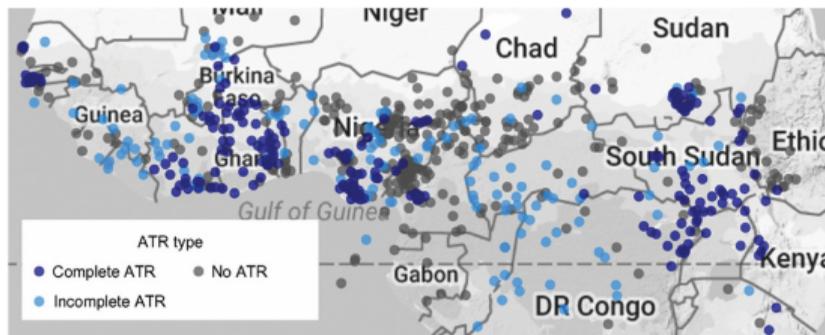


Figure: Areal distribution of ATR harmony based on AFLA sample (Rolle and Faytak 2020).

## VOWEL HARMONY

- Vowel harmony often taken to indicate the domain of the **phonological word**, although ‘cross-word’ harmony processes also attested (Vago 1980; Downing and Krämer 2024; Kiparsky 2024, i.a.)
- Tunen and Nomaandé show ATR harmony spanning Aux-V:

(9) *tu ŋə su súété.*

/tɔ        ŋa    sɔ                    súété/

SM.1PL FUT PRN.SUBJ.1PL leave

‘We will leave.’

(Nomaandé [lem], fieldnotes)

## WORD-INTERNAL VS CROSS-WORD VOWEL HARMONY

- Bancel (1991:7-8) argues that Tunen Aux-V harmony is 'cross-word', differentiating two processes of vowel harmony on the basis of **domain of application** (cross-word vs word-internal) and **optionality** (optional vs obligatory)
- Fieldwork results show that 'optional' harmony in Tunen is considered optional by speakers when asked directly, but harmony is almost always found in natural speech (e.g. 85% of possibly harmonising Aux in study of 116 Tunen predicates from natural speech text harmonise)
- Nomaandé speakers judge Aux-V harmony obligatory in elicitation sessions
- Differences in strength of judgements could reflect **influence of orthographic wordhood**: Tunen community orthography does not mark harmony; Nomaandé orthography does

## VOWEL HARMONY DOMAIN

- Vowel harmony applies within the span of the first element of the Aux cluster - the final vowel of the verb
- **Partial harmony** within the Aux cluster is possible but dispreferred over full or no harmony
  - Contradictory to idea of harmony as purely phonetic effect (cf. Kiparsky 2024)

- (10) a. *mi nó ndə húlá.*  
b. *mε nó nda húlá.*  
c. %*mε nó ndə húlá.*  
d. %*mε nó ndə húlá.*  
e. \**mi nó ndə húlá.*

/mε nó nda húlá/  
SM.1SG PST1 VEN return  
'I returned here.' (Tunen [tvu], fieldnotes)

- (11) a. *tu ηə su súétá.*  
b. \**ʔ ηə su súétá.*  
c. \**ʔ ηa su súétá.*  
d. \**ʔ ηə su súétá.*

/ʔ ηa só súétá/  
SM.1PL FUT PRN.SUBJ.1PL leave  
'We will leave.' (Nomaandé [lem],  
fieldnotes)

## VOWEL HARMONY DOMAIN

- Any immediately following element can trigger ATR harmony on Aux, regardless of syntactic status

⇒ ATR harmony on Aux mismatches with syntactic constituency

(12) a. Context: 'Did you find these three chickens?'

έε, í mə mí tʃiíʃi bóŋ.

/έε é ma mé tʃiíʃi bóŋ/

yes SM.1SG TAM PRN.SBJ.1SG PRN.OBJ.10 find

'Yes, I found them.'

(Nomaandé [lem], fieldnotes)

b. Context: The family dog died.

to ná yəsú(ə) ɛmóá nyə.

/tə ná yəsú(ə) ɛmóá nyə/

SM.1PL PST2 9.PRN.POSS.1PL 9-dog bury

'We buried our dog.'

(Tunen [tvu], fieldnotes) 32/37

## VOWEL HARMONY DOMAIN

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⇒ ATR harmony on Aux mismatches with syntactic constituency

(13) Context: The family dog died.

[TP to ná [vP[DP yəsú(ə) emóá] nyə]].

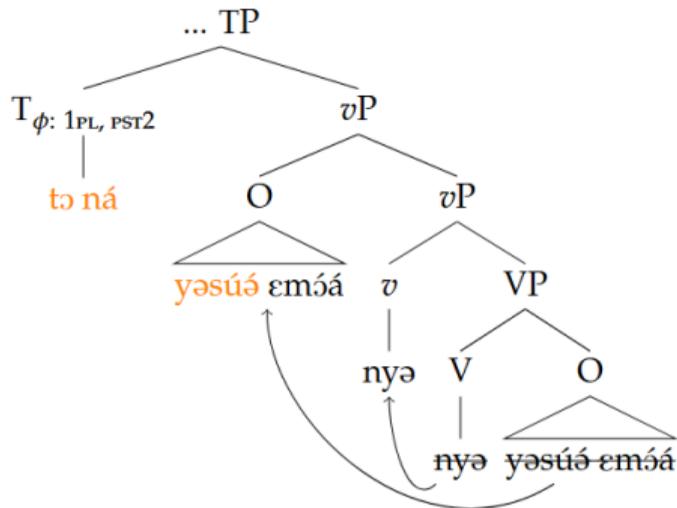
/to ná yəsú(ə) emóá  
SM.1PL PST2 9.PRN.POSS.1PL 9-dog

nyə/

bury

'We buried our dog.'

(Tunen [tvu], fieldnotes)



## DISCUSSION

- Mbam Bantu languages show clear syntactic wordhood boundary between Aux and V, but phonological constituency tests show Aux and V as part of same domain → **mismatches between syntactic and phonological constituency**
- Initial testing for maximality constraints and stem-initial prominence for Tunen and Nomaandé show **weaker evidence** than reported for non-Bantu Bantoid languages to North (e.g. Hyman 2017) and Bantu languages to South (e.g. Ellington 1977; Hyman and Inkelas 1997; Idiatov and Van de Velde 2016; Lionnet 2017)
- ✗ Hypothesis that restriction on span of phonological word feeds restriction on span of syntactic word is **not supported**
- ✓ Results still compatible with general idea of Mbam Bantu in **intermediate stages of change**, as evidenced by mismatches

## DISCUSSION

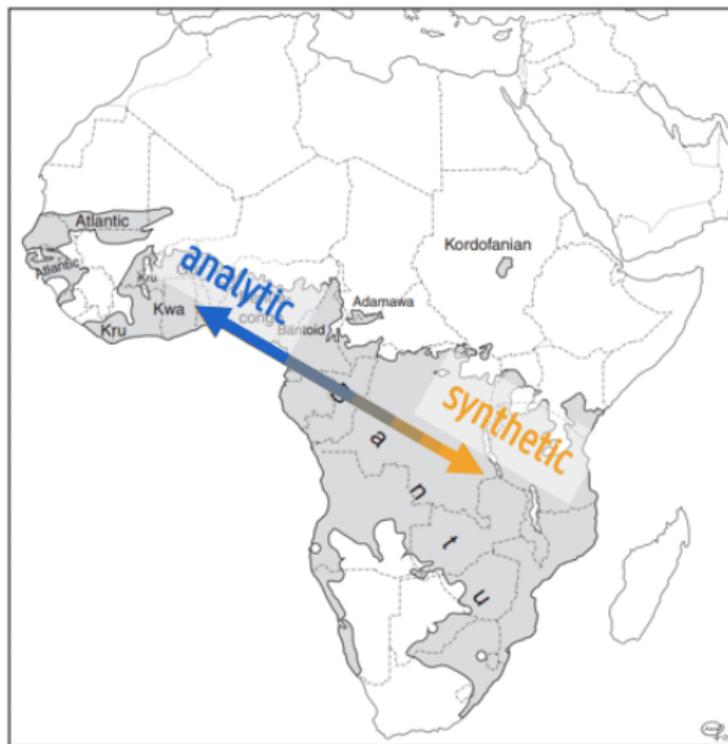


Figure: Map of Niger-Congo languages according to Good (2017:472), adapted.

## CONCLUSION

- Synchronic variation in Niger-Congo languages' verb forms shows **analytic-synthetic macro-cyclic change**
- Situating languages within this continuum of change in syntheticity **relies on identification of 'word'**
- **Orthographic wordhood** can vary for non-linguistic reasons, e.g. research traditions
- Applicable tests for **phonological and syntactic wordhood/constituency** need to be developed
- Given diachronic instability in degree of synthesis, we can **hypothesise mismatches** between phonological wordhood and syntactic wordhood

## CONCLUSION

- Mbam Bantu languages show clear **syntactic wordhood boundary** between Aux and V, as evidenced by syntactic interruptability, but many phonological processes contain both Aux and V in their domain
- Moreover, Mbam Bantu languages show **weak evidence for stem-initial prominence** (SIP) and show possibility for multiple verbal suffixes, in contrast to stronger evidence reported for Bantoid and other Bantu languages (Ellington 1977; Hyman and Inkelas 1997; Idiatov and Van de Velde 2016; Lionnet 2017)
- Mismatches in wordhood tests support idea of West/Central African Benue-Congo languages being at an **intermediate stage of the macro-cyclic change**, but the preliminary Mbam Bantu results do not fit a simple story of a **smooth cline in syntheticity** between Kwa and Bantu, arrived at diachronically through a process of **drift** from a synthetic proto-stage

# THANK YOU!



## Acknowledgements:

### Financial support:

Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO) project FWO-MBAM (1274225N; PI Elisabeth J. Kerr, Ghent University); Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL); Endangered Language Fund (ELF)

### All Mbam consultants:

**Tunen:** Patient BATAL BATANGKEN, Paul BEYACK, Edmond BILOUNGLOUNG BIKOK, Emmanuel ENGANAYAT, Georges ESSOMO ALAIN, Angel Blandine ENGANDINE, Pierre MOLEL, Emmanuel MONNOLENA, Jean Bertrand MOUIKI, Augustine ONGBABOULE, Jeanne ONGMOLALEBA;

**Nyokon:** Samuel APOUA AMBANG, René ATCHOM, Emmanuel BIASSI, Samuel EWANE, Luc INGUEA, André Jules KIARI, Joseph MOUATANG, Pierre NYAMSI;

**Nomaandé:** Marc BALAN, Roger EBOUM ENOCKA, Roger ENOME, Miriam ENGENGUELE OKOBALEMB;

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