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# THE TUNEN LANGUAGE: CLASSIFICATION AND KEY CHARACTERISTICS

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# OUTLINE

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Classifying Tunen
  - ISO 639-3 classification
  - Glottocodes
  - ALCAM classification
  - Guthrie classification
  - Phylogenetic/lexicostatic classifications
- 3 Key characteristics of Tunen
  - Sound system and lexicon
  - Vowel system
  - Basic word order
- 4 Conclusion

# INTRODUCTION

## WHY CLASSIFY LANGUAGES?

- Refer concisely to languages
- Group languages that share certain features (linguistic similarity, geographical proximity, cultural identity, etc.)

## ISSUES IN LANGUAGE CLASSIFICATION

- Classification can be arbitrary and mislead us about linguistic relatedness
- What belongs in one group versus another?
- What should be counted as a language versus a dialect?

*“A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”*

## SOCIOLINGUISTICS

- Linguistic classification is often linked to sociolinguistic factors such as cultural identity / prestige of the speakers
- Linguistic classification can in turn affect people's perceptions of a particular language
- Multilingualism and diglossia complicate classifications
- Other factors that can be used for classifications include mutual intelligibility and percentage of lexical overlap

## CURRENT APPROACHES TO CLASSIFICATION

- International standards exist for linguistic classification in linguistics
- More specialised classifications have been developed for Cameroonian languages and for the Bantu family
- These classifications vary in aim and do not always overlap
- Classifications change over time, based on differences in opinion and availability of better-quality data

# CLASSIFYING TUNEN

## ISO 639-3 CLASSIFICATION

- International system of 3-letter classification codes for all living languages, with SIL International the registration authority, introduced in 2007
- <https://iso639-3.sil.org/>

# ISO 639-3 CLASSIFICATION

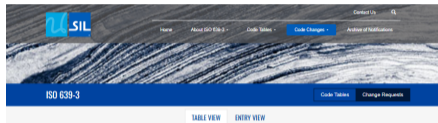
- Tunen = code [tvu] (since 2012)

tk			Southeast Ambrym	Individual	Living
tl	tl		Tuvalu	Individual	Living
tm			Tela-Masbuar	Individual	Living
tn			Tavoyan	Individual	Living
to			Tidore	Individual	Living
ts			Taveta	Individual	Living
tt			Tutse Niaga	Individual	Living
tvu			Tunen	Individual	Living
tw			Sedoa	Individual	Living
tx			Taiwoan	Individual	Extinct
ty			Timor Pidgin	Individual	Extinct
twa			Twana	Individual	Extinct
twb			Western Tawbuid	Individual	Living
twc			Teshenawa	Individual	Extinct
twd			Twents	Individual	Living
twe			Tewa (Indonesia)	Individual	Living
twf			Northern Tewa	Individual	Living
twg			Tereweng	Individual	Living
twh			Tai Dón	Individual	Living
twi	twi	tw	Twi	Individual	Living

Figure: List of ISO 639-3 codes, with Tunen highlighted.

# ISO 639-3 CLASSIFICATION

- Tunen = code [tvu] (since 2012) - previously grouped together with Nyokon (now [nvo]) under [baz]; see ISO 639-3 change request number 2011-080; Kerr 2024b:33-34 fn9



## Change Request Index

This page is an index of all Change Requests for the current review period and past review periods. Click the link on the change request number to see all the details of the change request and access documentation submitted by the requester.

For the Current review period, all requests that have been received since the last review cycle are included and you are invited to submit a comment on any change request, either in support of or in opposition to its proposed changes (as a whole or for individual changes). The link to do this will appear at the bottom of the change request detail page.

Browse Change Requests by review period or use the search fields to search for any matching change request.

[← Back to Change Request Index](#)

All [Current](#) [2025](#) [2024](#) [2023](#) [2022](#) [2021](#) [2020](#) [2019](#) [2018](#) [2017](#) [2016](#) [2015](#) [2014](#) [2013](#) [2012](#) **2011** [2010](#) [2009](#) [2008](#) [2007](#) [2006](#)

Change Request Number  Affected Identifier  Affected Name

Region Group  Language Family Group  Change Type  Status  Items per page

2011

Change Request Number	Language Family Group	Region Group	Affected Identifier	Reference Name	Change Type	Status	Effective Date
2011-081	Tupa-New Guinea	Pacific	ja	Sarikewa	Create	Adopted	2012-02-03
2011-081	Tupa-New Guinea	Pacific	jen	Mowese	Create	Adopted	2012-02-03
2011-080	Bantu-Congo	Africa, West	tvu	Tunen	Create	Adopted	2012-02-03
2011-080	Bantu-Congo	Africa, West	nvo	Nyokon	Create	Adopted	2012-02-03
2011-080	Bantu-Congo	Africa, West	baz	Tunen	Split	Adopted	2012-02-03
2011-479	Philippine	Asia, Southeast	lml	Tanutan, Kalinga	Update	Adopted	2012-02-03
2011-479	Philippine	Asia, Southeast	lgh	Upper Tanutan Kalinga	Merge	Adopted	2012-02-03
2011-479	Philippine	Asia, Southeast	lml	Tanutan, Kalinga	Update	Adopted	2012-02-03
2011-478	Tibeto-Burman	Asia, Southeast	kw	S'gaw Karen	Update	Rejected	2012-02-03

## GLOTTOCODE

- Glottolog (?) developed as alternative to Ethnologue
- Glottocodes = 4 letters + 4 numbers, introduced in 2010 (Forkel and Hammarström 2022)
- Unlike ISO 639-3 codes, glottocodes are applied to all levels (*languoids*): language, dialect, and family
- Glottolog provides language classification information + links to all known resources on the language (stored in Zenodo, indexed in OLAC)

# GLOTTOCODE

- Tunen = glottocode tune1261 (<https://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/tune1261>)

The screenshot displays the Glottolog website interface. At the top, the navigation bar includes 'Glottolog', 'Languages', 'Families', 'Language Search', 'References', 'Reference Search', 'Outfolds', and 'About'. A search bar on the right contains the text 'gr: Name / glottol / iso'. Below the navigation bar, the page title is 'Spoken L1 Language: Tunen'. The main content area is titled 'Classification' and shows a hierarchical tree of language families. The tree is rooted at 'o' and branches into several major groups: 'Atlantic-Congo (1499)', 'Marswaka', 'North-Central Atlantic (46)', 'Nilo-Saharan (134)', 'Berber-Congo (100)', 'Bantoid (729)', 'Northern Bantoid (24)', 'Southern Bantoid (704)', 'Bantu (61)', 'Bantu A-019-020-030 (75)', 'Central-Western Bantu (217)', 'East Bantu (257)', 'Mbam-Baka (15)', 'Baka', 'Nilo-Saharan (14)', 'Nubian', 'Nackal Mbari (13)', 'Sud Mbari-Yambassa (6)', 'Sudanic (117)', 'Sahaja (A, 93) (2)', 'West Mbari (A, 45) (2)', 'Nilo-Saharan (13)', 'Nilo-Saharan', 'Nyokon', 'Tunen (1)', 'Ging', 'Nabukina', 'Nguspen (Mbari)', 'Tubonye', 'Tubomo', 'Tudonib', and 'Tardite'. The 'Tunen' entry is highlighted with a green dot. To the right of the classification tree is a map showing the location of Tunen in West Africa, with a green dot indicating its position. Below the map is a 'show big map' button. Further down, there is a 'Links' section with a list of external resources: 'DVI at ISO 639-3', 'DVI at OLAC', 'DVI at ATYVault', 'Tunen at Grambank', 'Tunen at WALS', 'Wikipedia', 'PHOENIX', and 'Wikidata'. At the bottom of the page, there is a 'Countries' section.

Figure: Glottolog Tunen page

- Tunen = glottocode tune1261 (<https://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/tune1261>)

Unclassified Volta-Congo (5)

Comments on subclassification  
Mouz, Maarten and Bresswilt, Annika 1996

Endangerment

AES status: not endangered  
Source: David M. Eberhard and Gary F. Simons and Charles D. Fennig 2025  
Comment: Tunen (by-frm) = 5 (Developing)

References 8

Showing 1 to 51 of 51 entries

Details	Name	Title	Any field	ca	Year	Pages	Doctype	ca	Provider	ds
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Dupont, Isabelle 1971	Grammaire du Tunen	✓		1971	388	grammar		cit, etalno2006, gallemars, fh, largoci, rpeira, webat	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Dupont, R. 1946	Etude grammaticale d'une tribu du Cameroun Français	✓		1946	19	grammar	▲	etalno2009	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Elizabeth Jane Kerr 2024	Tunen syntax and information structure	✓		2024	487	specific_feature, grammar_sketch		fh	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Mouz, Maarten 2003	Nen (A44)	✓		2003	24	grammar_sketch		cit, etalno2006, fh, largoci, webat, zurich	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Charma, Donald G. 1988	In defence of morpheme structure rules: evidence from vowel harmony	✓		1988	12	grammar_sketch	▲	etalno2009, webat	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Isaac, Kenedal 2007	Participant reference in Tunen narrative discourse	✓		2007		grammar_sketch	▲	sd16	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Leyssens, Hélène van 1977	Essai d'analyse historique des voyelles et consonnes du tunen (Bantu A.44)	✓		1977		grammar_sketch	▲	etalno2009	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Dupont, Isabelle 1967	Lexique de la langue tunen	✓		1967	257	dictionary		etalno2009, fh, webat	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Maarten Mouz 2005	The Innovative Character of Object Verb Word Order in Nen (Bantu A44, Cameroon)	✓		2005	14	specific_feature		etalno2009, gallemars, fh, webat	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Manga, Blaise 1986	Les divers visages phonologiques du tunen, parler des Bamendu — Cameroun	✓		1986	93	phonology		fh	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Stewart, John and Leyssens, Hélène 1979	Underlying Craso-Hight Vowel Harmony in Nen (Bantu A.44)	✓		1979	24	phonology	▲	dygnofac, etalno2009, webat	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Bolte, R. 1992	Phonemic Split in Nen (A44) - A Case of Tonal Conditioning of Obstruent-Proto-Bantu Consonants	✓		1992	19	phonology	▲	cit, etalno2006, webat, zurich	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Huët, Harry van der and Maarten Mouz and Norval Smith 1986	The autosegmental analysis of reduced vowel harmony systems: the case of Tunen	✓		1986	18	phonology	▲	etalno2009, webat	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Mouz, Maarten 1985	Vowel harmony in Tunen	✓		1985	15	phonology	▲	etalno2009, webat	
<a href="#">clutch</a>	Wilkinson, Robert W. 1975	Tunen tone changes and derived phonological contrast	✓		1975	15	phonology	▲	etalno2009, webat	

Figure: Glottolog Tunen page (contd.)

## GLOTTOCODE

- Like with ISO 639-3 codes, Glottocodes can be changed on request
- Glottolog aims to provide more comprehensive metadata than available for ISO 639-3 codes
- See e.g. Forkel and Hammarström (2022) for description of the process

# ALCAM

- Atlas Linguistique du Cameroun (ALCAM), published 1983 and revised in 2012 by the Centre international de recherche et de documentation sur les traditions et les langues africaines (CERDOTOLA)

! Has not been revised for some time

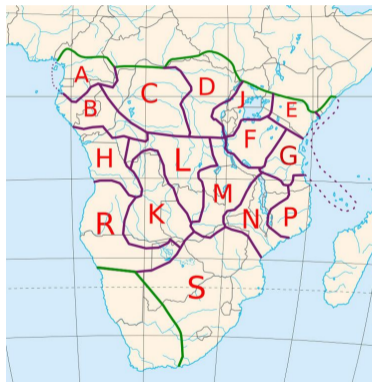
- Used primarily by researchers working on Cameroonian languages
- Tunen = Number 511





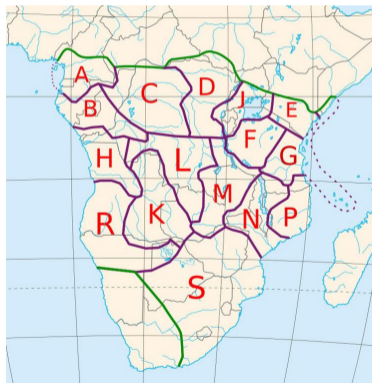
## GUTHRIE CLASSIFICATION

- Classification system pre-dating the ISO 639-3 system, developed by the British linguist Malcolm Guthrie (1903 - 1972) (Guthrie 1948, 1971)
- Updated in 2003 and 2009 (Maho 2009)
- Remains frequently used by Bantuists to this day
- Alphanumeric classification system based mainly on geographical location (! not linguistic relatedness)



## GUTHRIE CLASSIFICATION

- Useful and commonly used
- ! but can mislead people into thinking languages are more closely-related than they are
- This **applies to Tunen**: Guthrie codes for A40 languages cover what linguistic classifications take to be two different groups: Mbam Bantu (A44+, incl. Tunen) and Basaá group (<A44), where Mbam Bantu additionally includes some A60 languages (see e.g. Mous and Breedveld 1986)

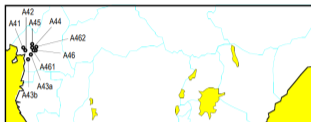


# GUTHRIE CODES VS MBAM BANTU

A REFERENTIAL CLASSIFICATION OF BANTU

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## A40 : Basaa Group

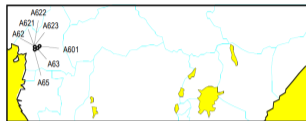


A41/42 .....	Lombi-Bankon
A41 .....	– Barombi <sup>bb</sup> , Rombi
A42 .....	– Abo <sup>abb</sup> , Bankon
A43a .....	Basaa <sup>bas</sup> , Mbene, Mvele
A43b .....	Bakoko <sup>bbk</sup> , (North Kogo)
A43c * .....	– South Kogo
A44 .....	Nen <sup>bn</sup> , Tunen, Banen
A441 .....	– Aling'a, Eling
A45 .....	Nyo'o, Nyokon
A46 .....	Mandi <sup>mt</sup> , Lemande, Numaand
A461 .....	Bonek <sup>bf</sup> , Ponék, Otomb, Tuotomb
A462 .....	Yambeta <sup>yt</sup>

(\* = not in map)

Figure: NUGL online list: A40 group

## A60 : Sanaga Group



A601 .....	Ki <sup>ba</sup> , Tuki
A601A (=A61) * ...	– Ngoro, Tungoro
A601B * .....	– Cangu, Tucangu
A601C * .....	– Kombe, Tukombe
A601D * .....	– Tsingo, Tsinga, Tutsingo
A601E * .....	– Tonjo
A601F (=A64) * ...	– Cenga, Bacenga, Tocenga
A601G * .....	– Mbele, Mbere, Tumble
A61 .....	see Tuki A601
A62 .....	Central Yambasa
A62A * .....	– Yangben <sup>yb</sup>
A62B * .....	– Mmala <sup>mm</sup>
A62C * .....	– Elip <sup>el</sup> , Libie, Nulibie
A621 .....	Baca <sup>bc</sup> , Nubaca
A622 .....	Gunu <sup>gn</sup> , Nugunu
A623 .....	Mbule <sup>mb</sup> , Dumbule
A63 .....	Mangisa <sup>mg</sup> , Mengisa
A64 .....	see Tuki A601
A65 .....	Bati <sup>bt</sup>

(\* = not in map)

Figure: NUGL online list: A60 group

## PHYLOGENETIC/LEXICOSTATIC CLASSIFICATIONS

- Classifications based on computation of linguistic similarity
- Usually based on lexicon, often using 100-word lists of basic vocabulary (e.g. Swadesh list)
  - ! Affected by number of words used, number of missing words for a given language, and inconsistencies between transcriptions across sources
- More recently being expanded to morphosyntactic features

## PHYLOGENETIC/LEXICOSTATIC CLASSIFICATIONS

- Bantu-wide phylogenies: Grollemund et al. (2015); Koile et al. (2022)
- Classification of Mbam languages: Mous and Breedveld (1986)
- New classification ongoing by Grollemund & Philippson (CAMOID project)

# LEXICOSTATIC CLASSIFICATIONS

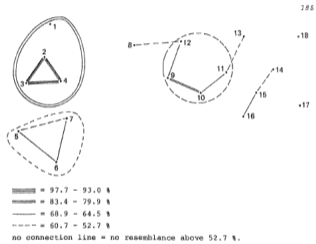


Figure: (Mous and Breedveld 1986:185)

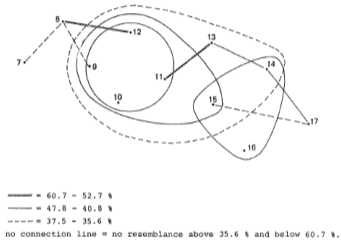


Figure: (Mous and Breedveld 1986:185)

# LEXICOSTATIC CLASSIFICATIONS

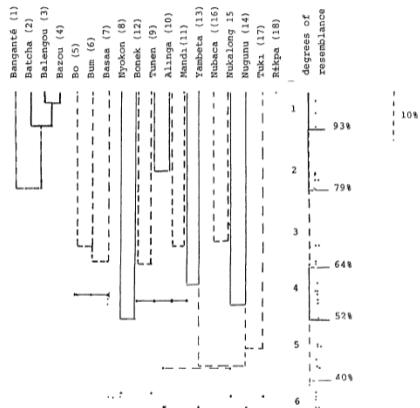


Figure: Classification of Mbam languages from Mous and Breedveld (1986)

## LEXICOSTATIC CLASSIFICATIONS

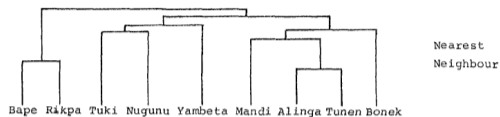


Figure: Earlier classifications cited in Mous and Breedveld (1986)

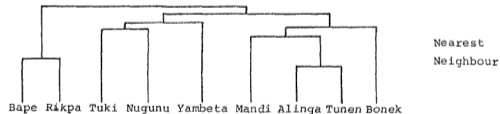


Figure: Earlier classifications cited in Mous and Breedveld (1986)



# KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF TUNEN

## SOUND CHANGES

- Key to **comparative method** for historical reconstruction: identification of regular **sound changes**
- e.g. Grimm's law motivates a split within Indo-European between Germanic and other languages

## SOUND CHANGES

- The Mbam languages can be identified as a linguistic group on the basis of particular sound changes (Philippson 2022a,b)
- One key characteristic of Tunen is having **ɪ** where neighbouring languages have **t** as a reflex of historic **\*t**
- e.g. the numeral 'five'; the verbal diminutive suffix *-Vɪ* (cf *-Vt* in Nomaandé)

## SOUND CHANGES

- Tunen has \*t → /l/ where other Mbam languages have /t/, e.g. in word for ‘five’:

	1	37
1	Words	W41
2	français	cinq
3	anglais	five
4	PB	*-táanò (1662)
5	PG	*(-)tàn [*táánù]
6	A44_Tunen_Dug	-lán
7	A44_Tunen_EK	-lánò
8	A45_Nyokon	-tâ
9	A46_Nomaande	-táánò
10	A461_Atomb	-tán
11	A462_Yambeta	-tan
12	A601_Tuki	motáánó
13	A62A_Nuasue	?
14	A62A_Nukalonge	pútân
15	A62B_Mmala	-tán(ò)
16	A62C_Libie	-tá:n
17	A621_Nubaca	-táàn
18	A622_Nugunu	gá-tánò

Figure: Comparison of the word for ‘five’ across Mbam varieties (Rebecca Grollemund & Gérard Philippson, p.c. (adapted))

## SOUND CHANGES

- Tunen has \*t → /l/ where other Mbam languages have /t/, e.g. in word for 'five':

	1	46
1	Words	W52
2	français	cœur
3	anglais	heart
4	PB	*-témà (1738)
5	PG	*tím` [*tímà]
6	A44_Tunen_Dug	mòlem
7	A44_Tunen_EK	mò-lémá
8	A45_Nyokon	ù-tjém
9	A46_Nomaande	ò-témá
10	A461_Atomb	ò-tjém
11	A462_Yambeta	?
12	A601_Tuki	otémá
13	A62A_Nuasue	ɔ-tem
14	A62A_Nukalonge	òtém
15	A62B_Mmala	ɔ-deme
16	A62C_Libie	?
17	A621_Nubaca	?
18	A622_Nugunu	o-démá

## SOUND CHANGES

- Colour coding for cognates (words of same origin)

	1	103	104	105	106
1	Words	W119	W123	W124	W125
2	français	eau	vent	aille	femme
3	anglais	water	wind	wing	woman
4	PB	*-díbá (605),	*-pépò (1492),	*pàpá (1450),	*yántò, *kádi (986), *kéntò, *yíntò
5	PG	*Ljɔ́ [ *dʒbá ],	*kífúfúad [ *pùùp	*bàb'-li [ *bàbá	*g(w)é' [ *ké]
6	A44_Tunen_Dug	mʷənif	ùmbwínyi	ibʷák, èhɔ́ɛ.	müənd
7	A44_Tunen_EK	mà-nífá	ù-mbùinyi	ì-bákú	mü-əndú
8	A45_Nyokon	mà-ní / mà-ní	kí-hún	kimbàr	ù-níís, yàár
9	A46_Nomaande	mà-nífá	à-húnà	à-pákú	óó!ndzú (òònyí = épouse)
10	A461_Atomb	mà-nif	ù-húny	àmjàmbàt	ù-nindz
11	A462_Yambeta	mà-ní	ò-féfém	ò#fààn	ò-kéét
12	A601_Tuki	matéyá	pépá	ombavé	okótó
13	A62A_Nuasue	mimbi	emfun	gebabɔ, kipapɔ	akand
14	A62A_Nukalonge	móm(ò)	kífuf	kipápɔ/pipápɔ	a-káandɔ
15	A62B_Mmala	mà-tiká	ò-fú.fún	?	à-kánd
16	A62C_Libie	mì:mb	kí-sín	?	ù-gánd
17	A621_Nubaca	mimb	à-pfún	kí#pàbá	à-kánd
18	A622_Nugunu	-milimpo	ù-fufu	ge-baga	o-kòdɔ

Figure: Preliminary comparison of several words across Mbam varieties (Rebecca Grollemund & Gérard Philippson, p.c. (adapted))

## VOWEL INVENTORY

- Tunen has 7 phonemic vowels (with an 8th vowel /ʊ/ of marginal status)

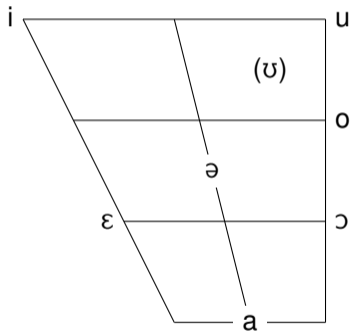


Figure: Tunen vowel phonemes (Kerr 2024b)

## VOWEL HARMONY

- There is an active vowel harmony system based on the position of the tongue root (ATR harmony)
- The 7 vowels are divided into 2 sets: +ATR and -ATR

<b>Dominant (+ATR)</b>	i	ə	o	u
<b>Recessive (-ATR)</b>	ɛ	a	ɔ	ɔ/ʊ

Table: Tunen ATR sets

- Within a word, vowels have to be from the same set
- e.g. hi-noní 'bird' (not \*hɛ-noní) vs hɛ-nyɔɔ 'banana' (not \*hi-nyɔɔ)

## VOWEL HARMONY

- Similar vowel harmony is also found in the neighbouring language Nomaandé [lem] (A46), as well as other Mbam languages to the East, e.g. Nugunu (Boyd 2015)
- But vowel harmony is not found in many other languages of Cameroon

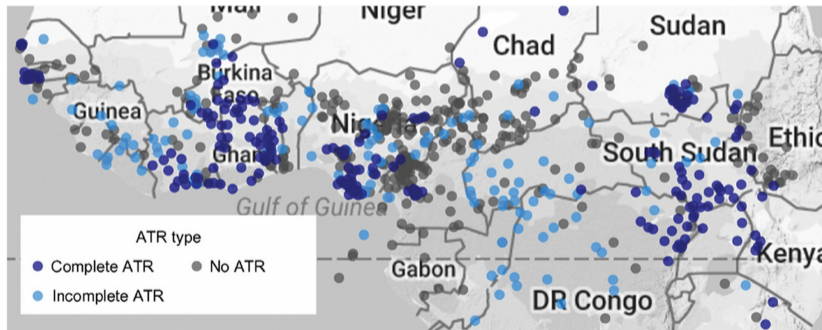


Figure: Distribution of ATR systems in West/Central Africa (Rolle et al. 2020)

## BASIC WORD ORDER

- Basic word order = the order of elements in neutral discourse contexts
- e.g. French and English S-Aux-V-O-X

(1) Je    veux tuer l'insecte avant que je me couche.

Subj Aux  V    Obj       Other

'I want to kill the insect before I go to bed.'

## TUNEN BASIC WORD ORDER

- Most Bantu languages are described as having S-Aux-**V-O**-X basic word order, with variations depending on information structure (Kerr et al. 2023)
- Tunen is different: non-locative nominal objects precede the verb, i.e. S-Aux-**O-V**-X (Dugast 1971; Mous 1997, 2003, 2005, 2014; Kerr 2024a, 2025, 2024b)

(2) Context: 'What did Maria do?'

Malia a na **biléliə fɔfókíə**.

/Malia a na **bɛ-léliə fɔfókíə**/

1.Maria SM.1 PST2 8-varnish anoint.DUR

Subj SM PRS **Obj V**

'Maria [a oint le vernis]<sub>FOC</sub>.'

'Maria [applied the varnish]<sub>FOC</sub>.' (Kerr 2024b)

## TUNEN WORD ORDER

- Tunen stands out in traditional classifications and attracted attention in the linguistics literature as having basic **OV** word order

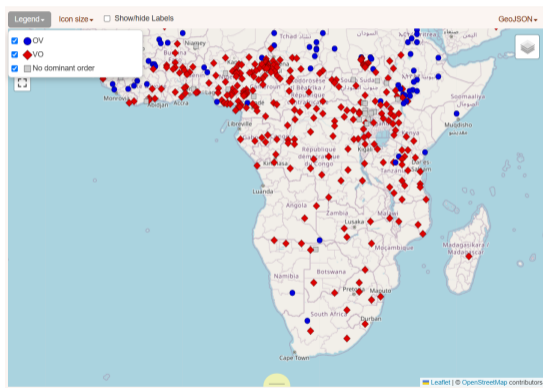


Figure: WALS feature 83A (order of Object and Verb) (Dryer 2013).

## TUNEN WORD ORDER

- But some degree of OV is not unique to Tunen: OV order is found in some tense/aspect contexts in Nyokon (A45), Atomb (A461), and some Grassfields languages e.g. Tikar
- OV order is found for pronouns in Nomaandé (A46) and other Cameroonian Bantu languages e.g. Ewondo (A72), Eton (A73)

(3) a-kad            mə dzo **vó**  
he-do.usually me it give

'He usually gives it to me.'

(Ewondo (Benue-Congo); Redden 1980, cited in ? :6)

→ What is unique to Tunen is the *degree* of OV order

## IMPLICATIONS

- Linguistic similarities between Tunen and surrounding languages motivate the Mbam languages as a linguistic subgroup
- Tunen is more similar to languages like Nomaandé than to languages like Basaá (despite impression provided by Guthrie classification), Ewondo, or Eton

# CONCLUSION

## CONCLUSION

- Tunen is a Bantu language from the Niger-Congo family, classified as Guthrie code A44 / ISO 639-3 [tvu] / Glottocode [tune1261]
- Tunen is characterised by features such as S-Aux-O-V-X basic clausal word order, ATR vowel harmony, \*t → l
- Tunen therefore shares more linguistic similarity with Nomaandé [lem] (A46) than with Basaá [bas] (A43) or Ewondo [ewo] (A72)

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