

Variation in the degree of maximality constraints and stem-initial prominence effects: Evidence from the Mbam

Elisabeth J. Kerr
Ghent University

Maximality constraints on verb stems have been reported for Northwestern Bantu (NWB) and non-Bantu Bantoid language and are hypothesised to be linked to the prosodic phenomenon of stem-initial prominence (SIP) (Hyman et al. 2019; Lionnet and Hyman 2018, i.a.). In this talk I investigate the variation within NWB in terms of the degree of the strength of maximality constraints and SIP effects, highlighting that not all languages in Bantu zone A show strong evidence for them. I use first-hand field data from the Mbam subgroup (A40b/A60) of central Cameroon to show that the geographical distribution moreover varies beyond a simple cline between stronger effects in the North and weaker effects in the South (cf. Hyman 2017).

Firstly, I show that Tunen (A44) and Nomaandé (A46) do not have strict maximality constraints, as verb stems can reach 4-5 syllables with some suffix stacking, as in (1).

(1) Context: A young child is excited.

məná	ə	ná	hóməlólóká	té ^l té.
/mɔ-ná	a	ná	hóm-VI-VI-ak	té ^l té/
1-child	SM.1	PST2	jump-DIM-DIM-DUR	little
‘The child did lots of tiny jumps.’				(Tunen, own data)

This stands in contrast to the shorter verb forms found in nearby Bantoid languages (see e.g. Hyman 2017). There is also variation between Tunen and Nomaandé and the two other languages of the Western Mbam subgroup (as defined following Philippson 2022, 5): while Tunen and Nomaandé allow long verbs with open syllables in non-final position, Nyokon (A45) and Atomb (A461) have final vowel loss in all positions, shorter verbs, reduced suffixal forms (e.g. *-s* CAUS; cf. Nomaandé *-isi*), and periphrasis (e.g. ‘make’ + V for causation).

I then show that Tunen and Nomaandé also lack evidence for strong SIP effects. Firstly, their phoneme distributions do not show the kind of strong position-based restrictions characteristic of languages with strong SIP effects, e.g. Teke (B77; Paulian 1975). Secondly, I report on an acoustic study as a test for phonetic correlates of SIP. Idiatov and Van de Velde (2016) (cf. Idiatov and Van de Velde 2021) found increased consonant length in stem-initial (C₁) position with respect to prefixal and later (e.g. C₂) positions for nearby NWB/Bantoid languages to the North (e.g. Bafut (Bantoid)) and the South (e.g. Eton (A71), Bagyeli (A81)). In contrast, results of a replication experiment using the same experimental design for speakers of Tunen (N=4) and Nomaandé (N=4) do not show a significant length increase of C₁ material.

The Mbam case studies therefore show that not all NWB languages have strong maximality constraints and SIP effects. A final observation is that Mbam languages have been described as analytic, in the sense of separation between the verb stem and pre-stem material, with Tunen in particular known for split predication (so-called S-Aux-O-V-X word order; Kerr 2024; cf. Güldemann 2011). The link between maximality constraints and analytic verb forms (see e.g.

Güldemann 2011; Hyman 2011; 2017) therefore appears to be restricted to analyticity in the post-root domain (i.e., suffixal expansion), with pre-stem analyticity (i.e., unbound inflection) a separate phenomenon that can exist independently of such phonological constraints on stems.

References

- Güldemann, Tom. 2011. 'Proto-Bantu and Proto-Niger-Congo: Macro-Areal Typology and Linguistic Reconstruction'. In *Geographical Typology and Linguistic Areas, with Special Reference to Africa*, edited by O Hieda, C. König, and H. Nakagawa, pp. 109-141. John Benjamins.
- Hyman, Larry. 2011. 'The Macro-Sudan Belt and Niger-Congo Reconstruction'. *Language Dynamics and Change* 1: 3–49. DOI: 10.1163/221058211X570330.
- Hyman, Larry M. 2017. 'Multiple Argument Marking in Bantoid: From Syntheticity to Analyticity'. In *Unity and Diversity in Grammaticalization Scenarios*, edited by Andrej Malchukov and Walter Bisang, pp. 67-95. Language Science Press. DOI:10.5281/zenodo.823230.
- Hyman, Larry M., Nicholas Rolle, Hannah Sande, Emily Clem, Peter Jenks, Florian Lionet, John Merrill, and Nico Baier. 2019. 'Niger-Congo Linguistic Features and Typology'. In *The Cambridge Handbook of African Linguistics*, edited by Ekkehard Wolff, pp. 191-245. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108283991.009>.
- Idiatov, Dmitry, and Mark L. O. Van de Velde. 2016. 'Stem-Initial Accent and C-Emphasis Prosody in North-Western Bantu'. Paper presented at Bantu6, University of Helsinki. https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01481547/file/2016_Bantu6_C-emphasis_Idiatov_Van%20de%20Velde_SLIDES.pdf.
- Idiatov, Dmitry, and Mark L. O. Van de Velde. 2021. 'The Lexical Distribution of Labial-Velar Stops Is a Window into the Linguistic Prehistory of Northern Sub-Saharan Africa'. *Language* 97 (1): 72–107. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lan.2021.0002>.
- Kerr, Elisabeth Jane. 2024. 'Tunen Syntax and Information Structure'. PhD Thesis, Leiden University. DOI:10.48273/LOT0676.
- Lionnet, Florian, and Larry Hyman. 2018. 'Current Issues in African Phonology'. In *The Languages and Linguistics of Africa*, edited by Tom Güldemann, pp. 602-708. De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110421668-006>.
- Paulian, Christiane. 1975. *Le Kukuya, Langue Teke Du Congo: Phonologie, Classes Nominales*. Vols 49–50. Société d'Études Linguistiques et Anthropologiques de France (SELAFA).
- Philippson, Gérard. 2022. 'Double Reflexes in North-Western Bantu and Their Implications for the Proto-Bantu Consonant System'. In *On Reconstructing Proto-Bantu Grammar*, edited by Koen Bostoen, Gilles-Maurice de Schryver, Rozenn Guérois, and Sara Pacchiarotti, pp. 3-58. Language Science Press. DOI:10.5281/zenodo.7575815.