

Bantu word order between discourse and syntactic relations¹

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1. Introduction

Background of the research questions:

- Discourse function as a strong factor in conditioning Bantu word order (Downing & Hyman 2015, Downing & Marten 2019)
- Examples of discourse function in determining the word order of Bantu languages: locative inversion (1), and dedicated focus positions – immediately before the verb (IBV) in (2):

(1) (What has happened on the bridge?)

A-ha-ru-tindó ha-a-rabá=hó e-mótóka ny-îngi.

AUG-16-11-bridge 16SM-N.PST-pass=16 AUG-9.car 9-many

‘On the bridge have passed many cars.’

[Rukiga]

(2) (Who attacked the hunter?)

Mu-bhii ki-mbuli ki-siim-i.

1-hunter 7-lion 7SM-attack-PST

‘[The lion]_{FOC} attacked the hunter.’

[Teke-Kukuya]

- Bantu word order has been argued to be best captured by reference to **discourse roles**, e.g. Topic-Verb-Nontopic (see e.g. Good 2010 for Naki, Yoneda 2011 for Matengo, and Morimoto 2000, 2006 for Bantu discourse configurationality in general).
- ...But traditional **grammatical roles** of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ continue to shape descriptions and analyses; “The default order of sentence constituents across Bantu is S (Aux) VO (Adjuncts)” (Nurse & Philippson, 2003:9)

Debate in the literature:

- Larger debate about word order and types of languages:
 - Li & Thompson (1976): Topic-prominent vs. Subject-prominent languages;
 - Hale (1983): languages can be non-configurational;
 - Mithun (1987): pragmatically based word order, later termed ‘discourse configurational’ (see É.Kiss 1995);
- Over the years the debate has shifted from ‘Which type does language L belong to?’ to ‘**To what extent** is word order in language L determined by discourse roles and **to what extent** by grammatical roles?’:

¹ The video to this talk can be found on OSF at: <https://osf.io/vybhz/>.

² The main analysis in this paper was developed by Allen, Elisabeth, Patrick, Zhen, and Jenneke; all authors supplied the data on which the generalisations are built.

- Öhl (2010: 251): discourse-configurationality vs. ‘relation-configurationality’;
- Morimoto (2006): many Bantu languages are in a **transitional stage** between topic-based and subject-based agreement systems, being neither fully topic-based nor subject-based;

Purpose of the talk:

- We want to determine where the Bantu languages are on this **continuum** between discourse roles and grammatical roles in their effect on word order, taking seriously the significance of **information structure**;
- We switch to a discourse-configurational approach, asking **How far can we get in describing Bantu word order without reference to syntactic roles?** This question helps us pinpoint precisely where we *do* need syntactic relations;
- The results show Bantu-internal **microvariation**, with some languages heavily discourse-based and others more affected by grammatical roles, arguing against a one-size-fits-all account of word order.

2. Methodology

- Detailed data on information structure is often not available in existing descriptions.
- The BaSIS project therefore gathered **new fieldwork data** focusing on syntax and information structure, using our own project methodology³ alongside the Questionnaire on Information Structure (Skopeteas et al., 2006) and the elicitation of natural speech.
- This talk presents results from our studies on 8 of the languages in the project: **Tunen** (A44, Cameroon), **Teke-Kukuya** (B77, Republic of Congo), **Kiïtharaka** (E54, Kenya), **Kirundi** (JD62, Burundi), **Rukiga** (JE14, Uganda), **Kinyakyusa** (M31, Tanzania), **Makhuwa** (P31, Mozambique), and **Copi** (S61, Mozambique).⁴ Geographical distribution of these languages is shown in the map in Figure 1:

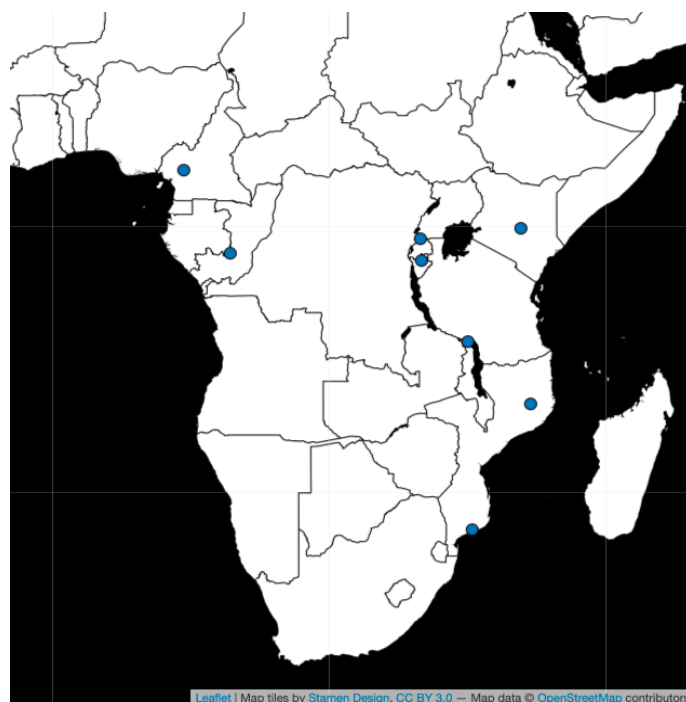


Figure 1. Map of languages in the BaSIS sample (co-ordinates from Glottolog).

³ Available for download at <https://bantusyntaxinformationstructure.com/methodology/>.

⁴ Guthrie classifications are given alongside language names and locations, from Maho (2009).

- We checked three factors of discourse-configurationality in word order, with subquestions that serve as checkpoints to set the parameter.
- For focus, we considered three diagnostics: wh-words (which are inherently focused), answers to wh-questions (simple/information focus), and modification by the focus-sensitive particle ‘only’ (exhaustive focus)

BaSIS word order parameters:

1. Is there a dedicated focus position?

Checkpoints:

- Can the recipient and the theme be questioned in their canonical position?
- Can the recipient and the theme be an answer to a wh-question in their canonical positions?
- Can the recipient and the theme be modified by ‘only’ in their canonical positions?
- Can adverbs be questioned in their canonical position?

2. Is the preverbal domain reserved for topics?

Checkpoints (for otherwise unmarked clauses, i.e. no cleft):

- Can preverbal arguments be questioned?
- Can preverbal arguments be the answer to a wh-question?
- Can preverbal arguments be modified by ‘only’?
- Canthetic sentences be expressed as SV(O)? (where S is not an always-available referent)?
- Are topical arguments typically or preferably expressed preverbally?

3. Is there symmetry between grammatical roles relating to word order?

Checkpoints:

- Can the subject be questioned in the same position as the object?
- Can the subject as the answer to a subject wh-question occupy the same position as the object in the answer to an object wh-question?
- Can the subject be modified by ‘only’ in the same position(s) as the object?

Results:

- The colour coding indicates whether the answer provides evidence for the influence of grammatical roles (yellow) or discourse roles (blue) on word order;
- A column is added to show what the parameters would be for a language that entirely relies on grammatical roles (GR) or discourse roles (DR).

Parameter	Checkpoint	DR	GR		Tunen	Kukuya	Tharaka	Kirundi	Rukiga	Kinyakyusa	Makhuwa	Copi
1	a	N	Y		-	N	Y	N	N	Y	N	Y
	b	N	Y		-	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y
	c	N	Y		Y/-	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	Y
	d	N	Y		Y	Y/N	Y	Y/N	Y/N	Y	N	Y
2	a	N	Y		Y	Y*	N	N	N	Y?	N	N
	b	N	Y		Y	Y*	N	N	N	Y?	N	N
	c	N	Y		Y	Y*	N	N	N	Y	N	Y/N?
	d	N	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	-
	e	Y	N		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
3	a	Y	N		N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
	b	Y	N		N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y
	c	Y	N		N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y

Table 1. Parameter settings for word order in the BaSIS languages.

Key: blue shading = evidence for discourse roles (DR) conditioning word order, yellow shading = evidence for grammatical role (GR) conditioning word order (a column for DR and GR is giving to make clear what the parameter settings would be for a purely DR-conditioned or a purely GR-conditioned language).

*Yes, but only in IBV position, and therefore still evidence for IS-conditioned word order.

3. Observations

3.1. Cross-linguistic variation

- There is a lot of variation between the languages in the sample → **cross-Bantu variation**.
- Better to stop making claims about word order in ‘the Bantu languages’ as if they were a monolithic entity; further research on more languages is needed in order to make reliable generalisations.

3.2. Universal tendency for preverbal topics

- Answers to parameter 2e were all Y - all languages show a preference for topics in the preverbal domain;
- supports Gundel (1988)’s generalization “*Every language has syntactic topic constructions in which an expression which refers to the topic of the sentence is adjoined to the left of a full sentence comment.*”

c. Purésidenti óbutúmwa bukamuhika búta?

Puresidenti o-bu-tumwa bu-ka-mu-hik-a **bu-ta**

1.Puresidenti AUG-4-message 14-F.PST-1OM-reach-FV 14-how

‘As for the president, how did the message reach him?’ [Rukiga]

- 2d for Kĩĩtharaka, Kirundi and Rukiga shows that non-topical transitive subjects are allowed preverbally, while focused arguments are banned—the preverbal domain in these languages is not restricted to topics, but can be characterised as ‘non-focal’.
- Kinyakyusa is exceptional for an eastern Bantu language in allowing preverbal focus, which appears to be an **areal innovation**, see Figure 2:

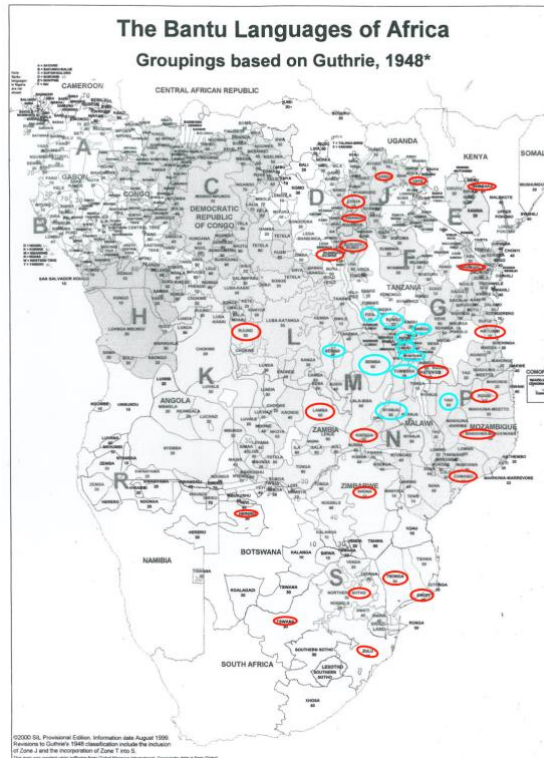


Figure 2 – Preverbal focus: blue = allowed, red = ban

3.5. Tunen as grammatical role-oriented

- Tunen is exceptional in showing **hardly any influence of information structure on word order**—only parameter 2e shows evidence for the influence of discourse role, all other parameter values showing evidence for grammatical role:⁵
- The results for parameter 3 indicate that Tunen has word order asymmetries conditioned by grammatical role. For example, when using a cleft to express focus, the focus marker/copula *á* must **precede** focussed subjects, but it **follows** non-subjects.

(6) Context: Which politician died?

***(á)** Píèlè ànawè

/á Píèlè á-na-wə/

FOC Pierre FOC -die

‘Pierre died.’, ‘It was Pierre who died.’

⁵ Parameter 1a/1b/1c are not filled in due to insufficient data; COVID-19 has delayed follow-up research here.

only be an assumption to suggest our current parameters should be evenly weighted – and the current project only investigated word order, not considering other potential variables;

4.3. Innovation

- The variation within Bantu also elucidates language contact and language change, potentially under the influence of contact.
- The presence/absence of preverbal focus we discovered is an innovation, overlapping in its centre with two waves of innovation for object marking (changing from non-doubling to doubling, and from multiple to single object markers, Van der Wal to appear), see also Marten et al. (2007) on Bemba and Chichewa as the centre.
- Our study confirms the absence of inversion constructions in the north west (Hamlaoui 2018, Hamlaoui & Makasso 2015), which may be an areal feature too, possibly correlating with other features such as object marking (as Hamlaoui 2018 proposes).

5. Conclusion and further questions

- A very obvious conclusion is that our systematic overview confirms the interesting **microvariation** within the Bantu languages: no two of our languages show the same profile.
- It is not enough to describe the word order of Bantu languages in terms of information structural classifications such as “topic-nontopic”, and the classical treatment of languages in terms of “SVO”, “SOV” similarly fails to capture the full picture of word order. We therefore advocate a language-specific classification of the word order of each language.
- This means that **Theoretical models** need to capture the variation and the influence of both information structure and grammatical role in the grammar; there are two necessary questions that need to be answered on an individual basis:
 - A. Which precise **notions** are active in a given language?—Makhuwa both ‘topic’ and ‘focus’; Rukiga perhaps only ‘focus’; or different notions are needed (contrast, unexpectedness, ...);
 - B. What type of **features** correspond to these notions? Semantic or syntactic features? A or A-bar features?
- Future work should involve at least:
 - The discourse-configurationality of agreement—for example whether the subject marker is perhaps better captured as a topic marker (Morimoto 2006);
 - Other morphological marking of information structure in determining the discourse-configurationality of a language (Gibson et al. 2017);
 - What can explain the different focus positions as found in Kukuya (IBV), Makhuwa (IAV) and Kirundi (final)?

Abbreviations

Bare numerals (1, 2, 3, etc.) refer to Bantu noun class; when followed by SG/PL they indicate person.

ASSOC	associative marker
AUG	augment (pre-prefix)
FOC	focus marker/copula
N.PST	near-past tense
PST	past tense
SM	subject marker

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Appendix

You can download the raw data on which the parameters were coded at the following link:

<https://bantusyntaxinformationstructure.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/appendix-basis-word-order-overview.pdf>.

The video of the talk can be downloaded from OSF: <https://osf.io/vybhz/>.

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