

Synthesis before the Proto-Niger-Congo inflectional verb: Evidence from the peripheral South Atlantic languages

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the understanding of Proto-Niger-Congo (PNC) verb structure. It supports the contention in Nurse 2007 that PNC verbs were likely more analytical than synthetic in nature. It does so by illustrating several paths of grammaticalization (and cliticization), in a set of several far-west Atlantic languages, geographically distant from the Niger-Congo core.

Data is presented from what is now known as “South Atlantic”, a designation used in Blench 2006 and elsewhere for what was formerly the Southern Branch of the (West) Atlantic Group of Niger Congo (Wilson 1989). The group is seen as an early branching off the Niger-Congo stock, distinct from the other languages of erstwhile (West) Atlantic, now analyzed as North Atlantic and the isolate Bijogo. The South Atlantic grouping is shown below in Figure 1. Common names and ISO codes are given after each language in parentheses, and extinct languages are not shown. Languages in bold form the main focus of the paper, although others are discussed.

South Atlantic

A. Mel languages

1. Temne (tem); Pukur (Baga Binari; bcg), Baga Manduri (bmd), Baga Tchitem (Sitemu, bsp), Lɔŋiɲ (Baga Fore, Mbulungish; mbv), Landoma (Kogoli; ldm)
2. Bulom languages: **Kisi** (Northern Kisi (kqs); Southern Kisi (kss); **Mani** (Bulom So, buy), Sherbro (bun), **Bom** (bmf), and **Kim** (Krim, krm)
3. Gola (gol)

B. Limba (East Limba (lma) and West-Central Limba (lia))

C. Mansoanka (Sua, msw)

Figure 1 South Atlantic classification (Childs 2004, Voeltz 1996)

As can be seen by the ISO codes, a number of South Atlantic varieties have been overly differentiated (Lewis 2009), not only Limba and Kisi but also perhaps Bom and Kim, which are treated as a single language in Childs To appear. Nonetheless, Bom and Kim have some significant structural differences in verbal structures that are relevant to the arguments advanced here, and will therefore be discussed as separate languages.

The data on which the paper will focus come from four Bulom languages within the Mel subgroup: the moribund languages Bom and Kim, the highly endangered language Mani, and the relatively secure language Kisi. These languages have lost physical territory (and speakers) and have drifted geographically apart in known historical times due primarily to the Mande

Expansion, particularly the more militant second phase in the fifteenth century (Childs 2010). Bom and Kim are spoken in isolated pockets in the swampy regions of southern coastal Sierra Leone; Mani speakers live in several villages straddling the Sierra Leone-Guinea border on the coast; and the Kisi are found well inland in the forest region of Guinea and spill over slightly into Sierra Leone and Liberia where the three borders come together.

PNC verbal structure is treated as consisting of two parts. Derek Nurse finds what is called the inflectional stem, consisting of root-extension-final vowel, to be “older”, and the material found before the root to be both distinct and younger, having undergone more changes in more recent times (Nurse 2007:247). South Atlantic languages follow the general inflectional stem pattern, although there has been some erosion of the final vowel, much as has been found within Niger-Congo as a whole. Similarly, these languages show some variation in the material that comes before “v”, as characterized below.

Proto-Niger-Congo and early Niger-Congo had a syntagm SP AUX OP V OTHER, where SP stands for subject pronoun, AUX for “a string of morphemes (words, particles, auxiliaries, adverbs) representing mood, aspect, negation, and other categories, OP for object pronoun and V for ... the ‘inflectional stem’, consisting of a root and two bound suffixes: ROOT-EXTENSION-FINAL.VOWEL. All five components of the syntagm were discrete (Nurse 2008:62)

It is this string of elements SP AUX OP before “v” that this paper will examine. What is interesting about South Atlantic is that this syntagm co-exists with another syntagm, SP V. AUX OP OTHER, in which all of the elements represented by form part of the lexical verb, in many cases as inflections.

Thus what happens before the inflectional stem is more active and both disparately and independently innovative. An examination of these elements provides comparative material for the grammaticalization processes that have taken place in Bantu, the focus of Nurse’s study, and elsewhere. Indeed the processes are complex but show a general trend towards synthesis, the chosen scenario in his analysis.

The evidence from the languages considered shows strong evidence of the move from analytic to a more synthetic verb with some renewal processes as well. In all cases the developments follow general patterns in grammaticalization scenarios. For example, tone marks aspectual contrasts which presumably once were marked analytically. These marks appear on both the lexical verb and the subject pronoun, which is itself inflected for aspect in several languages. Tense contrasts are “newer”, generally speaking, and marked periphrastically.

Between subject and verb one finds independent items that perform tense-aspect-mood (TAM) functions and negation, much as has been found in other languages such as Supyire and Ewe. These languages allow long strings of quasi-independent items between subject and verb. Moreover, in Supyire and Ewe negation is marked twice, once pre-verbally and once clause-finally (Nurse 2007:251-53), just as in Kisi, the one fully S-AUX-O-V language (Childs 1995a), which constructions suggest a double verb origin for the constructions. These innovations support further the pre-verbal slot as the site of much innovation and what Nurse calls “replacement”.

The S-AUX-O-V-Other syntagm is found only in Kisi among these closely related languages, allowing the language to resist the trend toward pre-verbal synthesis. This syntagm is part of a

wider pattern (Gensler 1994, Gensler and Güldemann 2003) of what has been construed as contact-induced innovation (Güldemann 2008a), since it appears in genetically unrelated but geographically close languages. In the other languages discussed here, the only material that is found between AUX and V are object pronouns, as is generally the case in both South Atlantic and North Atlantic (Childs 2005). These pronouns are highly reduced and often cliticize, as part of the general pattern sketched above. The lexical material found between AUX and V in Kisi, of course, bucks the trend of reduction and synthesis found in this position and represents an exception to the general tendency.

Thus the findings within South Atlantic leads us to agree with Nurse 2007 that the (pre-inflectional) PNC verb was analytic, and that the more synthetic outliers such as the isolate Bijogo are innovative rather than retentive, and may in fact be just further advanced in the grammaticalization process.

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