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Towards a Syntactic Reconstruction of Proto-Mande

The question of the historical relation between the Mande languages and the Niger-Congo family has been at the center of a long-standing debate. This paper discusses some typologically unusual syntactic features that are characteristic of Mande languages. The features in question include the rigid SOVX word order, the reduced structure of the verb phrase (Nikitina 2009), the formal identity of the transitive and the possessive construction (Innes 1967), and the absence of a double object construction (Creissels 2005). In addition, some branches of the Mande family are characterized by additional unusual syntactic properties, such as a clause-internal topic/focus position and clause-internal correlative clauses (Nikitina 2012). Assuming that the same proto-language (in our case, Proto-Mande) is unlikely to innovate several unusual features during a short period of time, such typological rara – for which there is no evidence in the established branches of the Niger-Congo family – present a challenge to the hypothesis of Niger-Congo affiliation of Mande languages, and could be taken as support for the isolated status of Mande.

This paper questions the view of syntactic differences as unambiguous indications of genetic distance. I suggest, in particular, that combinations of typologically unusual features of the sort attested in Mande need not represent independent innovations. Instead, the development of an individual unusual construction may trigger the development of other syntactic rara, to the point that the language can no longer be recognized as a member of its genetic stock. With that theoretical background in mind, I discuss a possible mechanism of change that could result in the particular combination of features attested in Mande.

I suggest, following Claudi (1993, 1994), that Proto-Mande underwent a reorganization of its verbal syntax due to a massive reanalysis of nominal periphrastic constructions as verb phrases (Nikitina 2011). This particular development triggered a whole set of subsequent changes resulting in otherwise unexplained conspicuous clusters of typological rara. In particular, the remodelling of the verbal syntax based on the nominal possessive construction explains: (i) the formal identity of the transitive and the possessive construction, as well as the use of the same set of pronouns as objects and as possessors, (ii) the absence of a double object construction (since nominal possessive constructions cannot include more than one inalienable possessor), and (iii) the SOVX word order and the reduced structure of the verb phrase (given that data from some modern Mande languages attests to a preference against encoding oblique arguments of nominalizations as possessors).

The same account can be extended to such unusual properties as the clause-internal topic/focus position and clause-internal correlative clauses. The fact that both types of extraclausal constituent first appear in constructions with postpositional phrases, in the position preceding the postpositional phrase, suggests that the construction developed as a result of the loose syntactic connection between postpositional phrases and the rest of the clause (which is ultimately responsible for the SOVX word order).

The data and hypothesis discussed in the paper have a number of implications for the reconstruction of Proto-Niger-Congo. First, the peculiar syntax of Mande languages does not have to be taken as evidence for the family's isolated status. The individual syntactic properties may be in fact historically related and could be traced back to a single innovation affecting Proto-Mande.

Second, reconstruction of the actual changes that could result in the unusual properties of Mande languages implies a distinction between two stages in the development of Proto-Mande. While the changes described in this paper are responsible for the peculiar syntax of Late Proto-Mande, an Early Proto-Mande stage can be reconstructed which preceded the reorganization of the verbal syntax. Early Proto-Mande may not have been radically different in its syntax from the languages of individual

branches of Niger-Congo. Most likely, it was a regular SOV language with a Genitive-Noun order and some possibilities of postponing heavy constituents to the end of the clause (cf. Hyman 1975).

Third, the development of particular relativization strategies, such as correlative clause constructions, was most likely a relatively late innovation affecting individual branches of Mande. In all probability, Proto-Mande made use of a paratactic relativization strategy, possibly along with some other strategies that we currently cannot reconstruct.

More generally, the discussion aims at highlighting the importance of shifting the methodological focus from reconstructing individual constructions and language types to reconstructing specific diachronic developments that could result in the innovation of particular syntactic features. While it cannot provide a definite answer to the question of genetic relationship between Mande languages and the Niger-Congo family, the study of mechanisms of syntactic change may potentially shed light on the ways languages develop clusters of syntactic features not attested in their related languages. This study is particularly relevant to the task of reconstructing such large and poorly documented macrofamilies as Niger-Congo.

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