

NIGER-CONGO: SVO OR SOV?

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After reviewing previous discussion as to whether Proto-Niger-Congo was SOV or SVO, this article¹ presents evidence in favour of SOV. A series of stages are traced showing how the original SOV may have changed to SVO within Niger-Congo.

1. TWO HYPOTHESES ON PROTO-NIGER-CONGO WORD ORDER

Hyman (1975) and Givón (1975, 1979) argue that Proto-Niger-Congo was an SOV language; \downarrow jɔ preserves in full and Mande in part the original SOV word-order, while other languages preserve traces of an earlier SOV syntax.

Heine (1976, 1980) and Heine and Reh (1984) argue that Proto-Niger-Congo was an SVO language and that SOV word order was an innovation arising from nominal periphrasis, i.e. the use of an auxiliary (here symbolized M) plus a nominalized verb (Vn) in place of the verb. Most commonly the nominalized verb occurs in a phrase with a preposition or postposition (here P), where P is often later lost, as in English in (1)(b):

	S	M	P	Vn
			(Article)	
(1) (a) Dutch	Ik	ben	aan het	kom-en
(b) English	I	am	on	com-ing
	I	am	a-	com-ing
	I	am		com-ing
(c) Ekpeye	Mé	zhɪ	l'	ú-já (Clark 1971:13)
(d) Igbo (Ngwa)	M	dɪ	l'	ɪ-bɪ́á (Emenanjó 1985:179)
	I	be	at	to-come

Heine and Reh further argue that in a language which has G N word order (John's head) and not N G (head (of) John) the original O of the V is re-interpreted as G to the nominalized V and thus placed before it, as in Ewe:

(2)	<u>Aorist</u>	<u>Progressive</u>	
(a) v.i.	s-V	s-M V-V	M
	Mè-vá	Mè-lè vâ-vá	ń
	I-come	I-be come-come	prog.
	'I come/came'	'I am coming'	
			(Anke Nutsukpo, p.c.)
(b) v.t.	s-V O	s-M G=O Vn M	
	Mè-wò dó	Mè-lè dó wò ń	
	I-do work	I-be work do prog.	
	'I work(ed)'	'I am working'	

(Heine and Reh 1984:188-90)

In the Mande languages, they argue that a similar development took place, but that the O V order thus introduced was later generalized by analogy to other constructions, such as the imperative:

- (3) (a) S M Vn P
 v.i. Maninka: à yé nà lá (Spears 1972:15-16)
 Kpelle: ` káa pã -i (Welmers 1973:315)
 s/he be come at
 'S/he is coming'
- (b) S M G=O Vn P
 v.t. Vai: ànu bɛ nyíé lón -ná (Welmers 1976:76-77)
 they be fish eat - prog.
 'They are eating fish'
- (c) O V
 Vai nyíé mɛé saŋ (Welmers 1976:93)
 fish this buy
 'Buy this fish!'

2. DISCUSSION OF THE HEINE-REH HYPOTHESIS

The Heine-Reh hypothesis draws attention to two important tendencies:

- (4) (a) Introduction of M in second position leads to nominalization of a later V.
 (b) The O of a nominalized V tends to be re-analysed as G.

But it is unlikely that these two tendencies result in the O changing its position, as in (5), which summarizes the Heine-Reh hypothesis:

- (5) S V O
 S M V O
 S M Vn O
 S M O=G Vn

Evidence against the hypothesis is that there are many languages which have SVO word order combined with N G word order, and which yet have an object preceding a nominalized verb, as in (6).

- (6) (a) S V O
 Yoruba: ó mu ɔtí
 s/he drank liquor
 Işekiri: o' ma úşá
 s/he makes pots
 Gade: N gwù ikù (Sterk 1977:190)
 I received money
 Igbo: ó rí-rí jí
 s/he eat-past yam
 'She ate yam'

(b)	N	G		
Yoruba:	orf	igi		(Rowlands 1969:44)
	head	tree		
	'the top of the tree'			
Işekiri:	otón	mi		(Omamor 1978:279)
	child	my		
	'my child'			
Gade:	ùbí	gwómọ		(Sterk 1977:98)
	son	chief		
	'son of the chief'			
Igbo:	jí	!yá		
	yam	his/her		
	'his/her yam'			
(c)	O	precedes	Vn:	
			G=O	n-V
Yoruba:		otí	mí-mu	(Rowlands 1969:190)
		liquor	drinking	
Işekiri:		ùşà	mí-ma	
		pot-	making	
	S	V	O	n-V
Gade:	Nya	gẹ	abí	gà-kyé (Sterk 1977:243)
	you	go	grass	to-cut
	'You go to cut grass'			
	S	M	O	n-V
Igbo:	ọ	gà	yá	ń-rí (Emananjọ 1985:197)
	s/he	go	it	eating
	'S/he must/will certainly eat it'			

In languages such as these, the O Vn word order cannot be modelled on the G N word order, since G N word order does not occur in these languages.

3. THE PRESENT HYPOTHESIS

The present hypothesis is as follows:

3.1 Proto-Niger-Congo was a strict SOV language with verb serialization; thus M developed from V and -m from M in final position:

(7)	S	(V)	O	V	(V)	V
	S	(V)	O	V	(V)	M
	S	(V)	O	V	(V)	-m
	S	(V)	O	V	(M)	-m

3.2 A new M also developed in some cases from a V in second position:

(8)	S	V	O	V	(M)	-m
	S	M	O	V	(M)	-m

3.3 V became nominalized after M; this could result in the loss of -m or its transfer to the second-position M:

(9)	S	M	O	V ⁿ -m
	S	M	O	V ⁿ
or	S	M-m	O	V _n ⁿ

3.4 V was copied after second-position M(-m), which in some cases then became redundant and was lost:

(10)	S	M(-m)	O	Vn	
	S	M(-m)	V	O	Vn
or	S		V(-m)	O	Vn

3.5 Vn became redundant; it was either lost totally or was re-interpreted, for example as an emphasizer or focus marker of the verb.

(11)	S	(M)	V	O	
or	S	(M)	V	O	(Vn)

3.6 Once the Vn had been re-interpreted as an emphasizer or focus marker, it could move from its original position and, for example, take part in clefting.

4. EVIDENCE IN SUPPORT OF THE PRESENT HYPOTHESIS

Evidence in support of the hypothesis cannot be provided all from a single language, but the various steps can be attested from different languages. (Numbering corresponds to that in the previous section.)

4.1 ɪjɔ: a) Tense/aspect/negation markers follow the last V:

	S	O	V-m
(12) ɪzɔn (Kolokuma):	Erí	bìdè	dèrì-mí
	he	cloth	weave-past
			'He wove cloth'
(13)	Erí	bìdè	dèrì-ghá
	he	cloth	weave-not
			'He did/does not weave cloth'

b) The V kùmá 'abstain from' develops into a negative imperative marker replacing older má (Westermann 1927:254-5, Kropp-Dakuku fc.):

	V	M
(14) Kalabarɪ:	bó	má
Nembe:	bò	kùmá (cf. kùmá as V)
Kolokuma:	bó	kùmó (no Kùmó as V)
	come	not
		'Don't come!'

(21)	S	M(-m)	n-V(-m)	O
	ǔzò	jí	è-kwú-nááná	ǔkà
	Ūzò	jí-nàànà	è-kwú	ǔkà (1985:126)
	Ūzọ	hab.(-past)		n-talk (-past) conversation
	'Ūzọ used to talk a lot'			

It appears that the suffixes are gradually moving to the auxiliary from the nominalized verb (the participle), which is thus becoming less verbal.

4.4 In the Igboŭzọ dialect of Igbo, the past auxiliary *tè* is followed by an unprefixes (i.e. non-nominalized) verb form. The object may (as in other Igbo dialects) be followed by an emphasizer or bound verb complement which emphasizes the verb; it is here interpreted as the old nominalized V, while the unprefixes complement of the auxiliary is interpreted as a recently copied and not yet nominalized verb:

(22)	S	M	V	O	n-V	
	ó	tè	zà	ǔ ¹ nọ	à	à-zàá (Emenanjọ, p.c.)
	s/he	past	sweep	house	this	sweeping
	'S/he really did sweep this house'					

A less emphatic past form is obtained by dropping *tè*:

(23)	S	V	O	n-V	
	ọ	zà	ǔ ¹ nọ	à	à-zàá (Emenanjọ, p.c.)
	'S/he really swept this house'				

The verb was also copied in intransitive sentences, as shown by Igbo:

(24)	S	V-m	n-V
	ọ	bịà-rà	à-bịá
	s/he	come-past	coming
	'S/he really came.'		

Thus there can be no special relationship between the copying of the verb and the position or presence of an object. Attraction of the verb to the position of the second-position M is likely to have been the motivation for the change.

4.5 (i) In Igala, the Ankpa dialect retains an infinitive (a type of nominalized verb) after the object in the progressive forms, while the Anyigba dialect does not:

(25)	S-m	V	O	n-V
(a) Ankpa:	Yàá	t(a)	ídó	é-ta
	s/he-prog	dance	dance	to-dance
(b) Anyigba:	Yàá	t(a)	ídó	(Fatima Musa, p.c.)
	'S/he	is	dancing/dances'	

Thus in Anyigba the old nominalized verb has been judged redundant and has been discarded, leaving a simple SVO structure.

- (ii) In Igbo, the old n-V has been re-interpreted as an **emphasizer or focus marker of the verb**, and is therefore dropped when the verb is not emphasized or focused. Cf. (26) with (23):

(26)	S	V	O	
	ɔ̃	zà	ɔ̃'nõ	à (Emenanjọ, p.c.)
	'She swept this house'.			

Note that we have now arrived at a simple SVO structure without having ever needed to move the object.

- (iii) In Gade: 'Often a verb is reduplicated, either at the position it normally occupies in the sentence, or as an addition to an already formed sentence. The general purpose of these constructions...seems to be one of emphasis on the verb...' (Sterk 1977:244).

(27)	S	V	O	V-V	
(a)	ɔ̃	rɪ	gɪya	rɪ-rɪ	(1977:245)
	s/he	ate	food	eating	
	'S/he <u>ate</u> food'				
(b)	ɔ̃	gwù	lkù	gwù-gwù	(1977:244)
	s/he	received	money	receiving	
	'S/he <u>received</u> money'				
(c)	Gùbwo	aa bá	-m	bá-bá	(1977:244)
	hand	my hurt	me	hurt-hurt	
	'My hand is <u>hurting</u> me'.				

(In (c) the reduplication is obligatory, whereas in (a) and (b) it adds emphasis).

The use of the reduplicated verb in Gade thus appears closely similar to that of the **emphasizer** in Igbo, the difference being only in the formation of the Vn.

- 4.6 (i) In Yoruba: 'The reduplicated verb noun, followed either by a relative clause or by ní, has the effect of intensifying the meaning of the verb' (Rowlands 1969:209).

(28)	(a)	With relative marker tí:				
		Dí-dúdú	t'ó	dúdú	l' ó	wù mí (1969:210)
		blackness	which-it	blacks	be-it	please me
		'It is its blackness which attracts me'.				
	(b)	n-V	Copula	S	V	O (1969:210)
		Pí-pa	ni	nwón	pa	á
		killing	be	they	killed	him
		'They actually killed him'.				

The use of the reduplicated verbal noun for focus (cf. Awobuluyi 1978) in Yoruba is closely parallel to the uses in Igbo and Gade above. The difference is that the old nominalized verb has shifted to initial position, with clefting.

(ii) In Èdo, Akhionbare and Chumbow (1982:15) cite a clefted verb focus construction parallel to the Yoruba one:

(29) (a) S V V A(djunct)
 Olú já gbína vbè èsùkú
 Olu go fight at school
 'Olu went to fight at school'

(b) n-V Copula S V V A
 Igbìnà èré Olú já gbína vbè èsùkú
 fighting be Olu go fight at school
 'It's fighting that Olu went to fight at school'.

(c) In Nigerian Pidgin, Akhionbare and Chumbow (1982) demonstrate that the clefted verb focus construction occurs as in Yoruba and Èdo, and that the focused verb is shown to be nominalized by the fact that it can take a copy pronoun:

S V V O
 (30) (a) Ade ròn fòlò m̀tò.
 'Ade ran after a car'

(b) Cop Vn S V V O
 Na ròn Ade ròn fòlò m̀tò
 'Ade ran after a car'

(c) Topic Cop Vn S V V O
 Ròn na im Ade ròn fòlò m̀tò (1982:17)
 'Running, it's what Ade did after the car'

5. CONCLUSION

The development sketched above accounts for the change from SOV to SVO within Niger-Congo in a natural way, through a series of stages which can be attested from modern languages. Ìjò preserves the oldest SOV stage, with only the development of M attested; Mande has nominalized its verbs after auxiliaries (Heine and Reh 1984:198ff.) but has not yet copied the verb earlier in the sentence;² Ewe and the various (New) Benue-Congo³ languages cited have copied the verb after the second-position M and have thereby created SVO structures. At the same time they have freed the old Vn to take on new functions of emphasis or focus. If this development has taken place more than once, it will help to account for the plethora of nominalized verb forms which exist in (New) Benue-Congo languages. It is noteworthy that reduplicated and affixed verbal nouns are unattested in SOV Ìjò; it would be worth investigating if this is also the case in SOV Dogon and Senufo.

NOTES

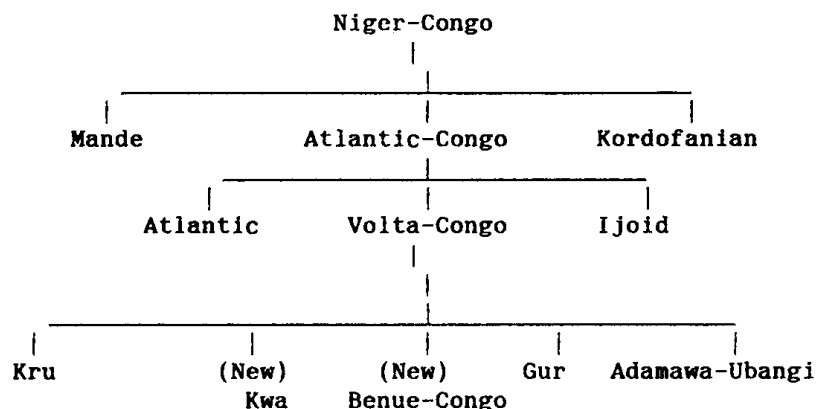
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² Heine and Reh (1984) cite two constructions in Mande which they consider to be remnants of the earlier SVO order. For both, parallel constructions occur in Eastern Ijọ, where they are interpreted as first steps towards SVO order.

(a) Mande has the order S Copula Complement (1984:203). Most Ijọ lects have a zero copula in most cases, but in the past tense the locative verb acts as a copula, in the usual V-final position. In Kalabari, however, Jenewari (1977:550) demonstrates that new copulas have arisen between the S, treated as a Topic, and the Complement, yielding S Copula Complement as an innovation.

(b) Mande has SVA order in the intransitive perfect aspect in some northern languages. The Eastern Ijọ dialect Iḅani has variation between SAV (more common) and SVA (less common), and between SAOV (less common) and SOVA (more common), suggesting a gradual shift of A to final position as an early stage of change to SVO.

³ The classification followed in this paper is that to be presented in Bendor-Samuel (fc.) and is summarized in the following tree:



(New) Kwa = former Western Kwa

(New) Benue-Congo = former Eastern Kwa plus Greenberg's Benue-Congo

fc. = forthcoming

p.c. = personal communication

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