

# **The Syntax of African Languages**

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## **1 Introduction**

In this chapter I present an overview of the basic, and what I consider the most intriguing, syntactic properties of the languages spoken on the African continent. I discuss the major syntactic word categories and general aspects of word order typology, but I also address specific topics that have attracted considerable attention in the fields of African linguistics and theoretical syntax, including topic and focus constructions, wh-questions, serial verbs and the passive. In this review, I highlight those syntactic phenomena that are mainly or exclusively found in African languages, such as e.g. logophoricity, or the so-called “verb medial” (S–Aux–O–V–X) constituent order. Occasionally, I also mention prominent generative analyses of the constructions I review.<sup>1</sup>

## **2 The sentence: basic constituent order**

The “basic” order of constituents in a language is typically defined by the position of subject (S), verb (V), and object (O) in declarative, affirmative, active main clauses which are morphologically and pragmatically unmarked.<sup>2</sup> According to Heine (1976, 2008), the proportion of languages with S–V–O constituent order is much higher in Africa than globally; it is the basic order of approximately 71% of African languages (Heine 2008:5). S–V–O languages are common in all four phyla. The majority of the Niger-Congo languages is S–V–O; in fact, this constituent order is almost without exception in the Atlantic and Bantu branches (Heine 1976; Watters 2000). S–V–O languages in the Nilo-Saharan phylum include some Central Sudanic and Western Nilotic languages (Bender 2000; Creider 1989; Heine 1976; Vossen 1983). Most Chadic languages of Afro-Asiatic (Newman 1980; Schuh 2003) and the Northern Khoisan languages (Güldemann and Vossen 2000; Heine and König 2013) are S–V–O:

- (1) Takko wii Demmba mi yiyii 6e.  
 Takko told Demmba I saw them  
 ‘Takko told Demmba that I saw them.’

[Fula; Atlantic; Niger-Congo] (Potsdam 1995:180)

- (2) zân sayá wà mátātā rīgā.  
 FUT:1SG buy IOM wife:1SG dress  
 ‘I’ll buy a dress for my wife.’

[Hausa; Chadic; Afro-Asiatic] (Green 2007:12)

The relative order of multiple objects in S–V–O languages is mostly determined by semantic properties such as animacy or definiteness; indirect objects typically precede direct objects. Note that in African languages with valency-changing morphology, the number of NP-objects is not limited to two. For example, in the Bantu language Chaga, up to five object NPs are licensed when the verb combines with an applicative marker (Moshi 1998).

As noted by Heine (1976), S–O–V constituent order is less common among African languages than worldwide. There are only a few S–O–V languages in Niger-Congo, e.g. the Ijoid and Dogon languages, and the Kordofanian language Tegem (Heine 1976; Williamson 1965; Williamson and Blench 2000). Kanuri, Maba, Kunama and the Nubian languages are prominent examples of S–O–V languages in the Nilo-Saharan phylum (Bender 2000). The Ethio-Semitic, Omotic and Cushitic languages of Afro-Asiatic are verb-final (Comrie 1981; Heine 1976; Tosco 2003; Watters 2000), and among the Khoisan languages, S–O–V is the basic constituent order in Khoe (Central Khoisan), in Kwadi and in Sandawe (Dalgish 1979; den Besten 2002; Güldemann and Vossen 2000; Rust 1965; Vossen 2013 (chapter 7)):<sup>3</sup>

- (3) avá-nzə-yè shí-rò kúḡə̀nà cín.  
 father-POSS-NOM he-DAT money:ACC give:3SG  
 ‘His father gives him money.’

[Kanuri; Saharan; Nilo-Saharan] (Lukas 1967:149; glosses added)

- (4) Johanneb ge ti ||naoba goro gurin ei-!â ge mû.  
 John DECL POSS.1SG uncle five years ago PAST see  
 ‘John saw my uncle five years ago.’

[Khoekhoegowab; Central Khoisan; Khoisan] (den Besten 2002:26)

“Rigid” verb-final languages, in which all types of objects precede the verb, are rare in Africa (Creissels 2000). For example, of the approximately 300 African languages surveyed by Heine (1976), only 8% have the word order S–AP–V, compared to 24% with S–O–V constituent order (Heine 1976:23). In some West African languages, verbs systematically follow their objects (and auxiliaries), but precede oblique arguments and adjuncts, giving rise to S–Aux–O–V–X constituent order (Creissels 2005; Gensler 1994, 1997; Nikitina 2009, 2011). In Niger-Congo, this constituent order is the rule in Mande and in the Senufo languages of the Gur family (Carlson 1994; Creissels 2005), and it is also attested in Songhay, a Nilo-Saharan dialect cluster closely related to Mande (Nicolai 1983):

- (5) sékù jé mādù délí wáríí ʎá kúnún.  
 Sékou PM Madou ask money PO yesterday  
 ‘Sekou asked Madou for money yesterday.’

[Bambara; Mande; Niger-Congo] (Creissels 2005, ex. (1b))

A related phenomenon is the S–V–O ~ S–O–V constituent order alternation that is found in languages from all phyla. In Niger-Congo, the Kwa, Kru, and some Gur languages (Aboh 2004; Fabb 1992; Koopman 1983; Manfredi 1997; Marchese 1986) as well as the Atlantic language Kisi (Childs 1995) are best known to show this variable word order, but the V–O ~ O–V alternation is also found in the Southern Cushitic branch of Afro-Asiatic (Heine 1976; Güldemann 2008), in some Central Sudanic and Western Nilotic languages of the Nilo-Saharan phylum (Heine 1976; Creider 1989), and in Northern Khoisan (Güldemann 2008; König 2009a). The choice between the V–O- and the O–V-variant is conditioned by polarity, finiteness or temporal-aspectual properties of the sentence. Therefore, the O–V-variant is often (but not always) attested

when an auxiliary is present, in which case S–V–O alternates with S–Aux–O–V:

- (6) a.  $\text{ɔ}$      $\text{pī}$              $\text{sāyè}$ .        (S–V–O)  
          3SG cook:FACT meat  
          ‘He cooked meat.’
- b.  $\text{ó}$      $\text{nà}$      $\text{sāyè}$      $\text{pī}$ .        (S–Aux–O–V)  
          3SG PERF meat cook  
          ‘He has cooked meat.’

[Dewoin; Kru; Niger-Congo] (Marchese 1986:68)

In Givón (1975), the O–V-variant of the word order alternation illustrated by (6) is interpreted as a reflex of an earlier stage of proto-Niger-Congo, for which a basic O–V-syntax is postulated. Claudi (1993) argues for a historical development in the opposite direction, suggesting that the O–V-pattern is the result of a grammaticalisation process in which the first transitive verb of a serial verb construction with S–V–O–V order was reanalysed as an auxiliary. Generative theories account for the alternation in terms of movement transformations. While Koopman (1983) argues that the V–O-order is derived from the O–V-order by verb movement to a higher head position to the left of the object, others take the V–O-order as basic and assume that the O–V-order is derived via leftward movement of the direct object (see, e.g., Aboh 2004, Fabb 1992, Kandybowicz and Baker 2003, and Manfredi 1997 for different versions of this idea). Güldemann (2007) analyses the alternation in terms of information structure, proposing that the preverbal position of the object is correlated with a decrease in pragmatic salience.

In some languages with the V–O ~ O–V alternation, oblique arguments may still follow the verb, even when the direct object appears preverbally. This gives rise to the order S–Aux–O–V–X, which was noted to be the only possible order in Mande, Senufo and Songhay. Since most of the languages with this word order are spoken in the same geographic region (in the so-called “Macro-Sudan belt”; Güldemann 2008), they are sometimes grouped together and treated on a par. (For example, they are classified as “verb-medial” languages by Gensler 1994 and 1997, or as “Type B” languages in Heine

1976.) Although it is controversial whether the S–Aux–O–V–X constituent order is actually a uniform phenomenon (see Creissels 2005, Good 2007 for discussion), it is generally accepted that it is a characteristic property of a subset of African languages, which is very rarely (if ever) found outside Africa.

The proportion of African languages with basic V–S–O constituent order seems to correspond roughly to the relative number of V–S–O languages worldwide. The least controversial examples of African V–S–O languages are found in Nilo-Saharan, namely in the Kuliak, Surmic and the Eastern and Southern Nilotic branches of Eastern Sudanic (Bender 2000; Creider 1989; Dimmendaal 1983; König 2009b; Vossen 1983). Verb-initial languages in Afro-Asiatic are Arabic, Ancient Egyptian and (more controversially) Berber as well as a few Chadic languages (Comrie 1981; Creissels 2000; Schuh 2003). Hadza, a Tanzanian language sometimes grouped with the Khoisan languages, has been classified as V–S–O (Heine 1976; Watters 2000), but there seem to be no Niger-Congo languages with basic V–S–O constituent order:

- (7) ε-ítía-ki-tá                      il-páyan-í                      al-ayé-nì                      m-ε-kwéta.  
 3PL-tell-APPL-P.PAST    PL.M-old.men-NOM.PL    SG.M-boy-ACC.SG    SUBJ-3PL-run  
 ‘The men told the boy to run.’

[Maasai; Eastern Nilotic; Nilo-Saharan] (Koopman 2005:281)

Finally, the universally rare basic O–V–S constituent order is found in transitive sentences in the Western Nilotic ergative language Pári (Andersen 1988), and Malagasy, an Austronesian language spoken on the island of Madagascar, has V–O–S constituent order (Keenan 1979; Pearson 2001).

### 3 The noun phrase

In African languages, NPs whose nominal head precedes demonstrative, numeral and adjectival modifiers are more frequent than noun-final NPs, and the noun-initial order is more common in Africa than elsewhere in the world (Creissels 2000; Heine 1976, 2008):

- (8) (Kókú x̀̀) táv̀̀ ðàx̀̀ x̀̀x̀̀ àt̀̀n éh̀̀ ló ĺ̀.  
 (Koku buy:PERF) table big old NUM DEM SPF<sub>[+def]</sub> NR  
 ‘(Koku bought) these specific three big old tables.’  
 [Gungbe; Kwa; Niger-Congo] (Aboh 2004:90)
- (9) hikwa-ʔéé’ ku-dá koo’an lówa hhoo’  
 cattle-POSS.1SG INDEP.M/N-DEM five very nice  
 ‘those five very nice cows of mine’  
 [Iraqw; Cushitic; Afro-Asiatic] (Mous 1993:231)

Globally, the constituent order N–A–Num–Dem illustrated by the Gungbe example in (8) is the most frequent order in noun-initial NPs (Cinque 2005; Greenberg 1963; Hawkins 1983). The Iraqw example in (9), which shows the order N–Dem–Num–A(P), is interesting because Iraqw, despite being noun-initial, is a verb-final language. According to Creissels (2000), the tendency of S–O–V languages to exhibit head-final order inside the NP is actually quite weak in African languages, and one finds many languages with a rigid noun-initial constituent order among the verb-final languages. Most East Cushitic languages are like Iraqw in this respect (e.g. Somali, Gawwada and Boni; see Tosco 1994, 2003), as well as Kanuri, Tubu, Nubian and Fur, which belong to the Nilo-Saharan phylum (Heine 1976).

A noun-initial NP order which is considered to be quite rare universally is the order N–Num–A–Dem (Rijkhoff 2008 calls this constituent order “non-iconic”).

Interestingly, however, according to Heine (1980), this order is attested in various African languages, namely in Gabra (Cushitic; Afro-Asiatic), in Logoli (Bantu; Niger-Congo) and in Luo (Western Nilotic; Nilo-Saharan). According to Cinque (2005), the NP order N–A–Dem–Num is also found in only a few languages worldwide, but it is attested in the Kru language Godié (Marchese 1986:19).

NPs with noun-final constituent order are found in the Ethio-Semitic (Hayward 1998; Kramer 2009) and some Cushitic languages of Afro-Asiatic (Schneider-Blum 2009), in the Central Khoisan languages (Güldemann and Vossen 2000; Hagman 1977; Heine 1976; Vossen 2013 (Chapter 7)), and in the Ijoid languages of Niger-Congo.<sup>4</sup>

(10) innãñña-n sost tillik' bet-otʃtʃ (ayyã-hu).

those-ACC three big house-PL see-1SG

'(I saw) those three big houses.'

[Amharic; Ethio-Semitic; Afro-Asiatic] (Ruth Kramer, p.c.)

(11) nùmà mààmà gògòrì ñgì

those two red axe

'those two red axes'

[Defaka; Ijoid; Niger-Congo] (William Bennett, p.c.)

Notice that the order of the constituents in (10) and (11) is Dem–Num–A–N, which has been argued to be the only possible order in noun-final NPs (cf. Greenberg's 1963 *Universal 20*; see Cinque 2005; Hawkins 1983).

NPs may also be "noun-medial", with N selecting some modifiers to its right and some to its left. Some of the N-medial orders that are uncommon universally do again occur in African languages. For example, according to Cinque (2005:319f.), the orders Dem–N–Num–A and Dem–A–N–Num are found in very few languages worldwide. However, the former word order is attested in Maasai (Koopman 2005), and the latter in Zande (Rijkhoff 2008):

(12) kù-n-dâ mésa-i àré sìdân

PL-F-that table-PL.F:ACC PL.F.two:ACC nice:PL:ACC

'those two nice tables'

[Maasai; Eastern Nilotic; Nilo-Saharan] (Koopman 2005:281)

(13) gi rarai a-mangu biata-re

DEM heavy PL-box three-DEF/here

'these three heavy boxes'

[Zande, Adamawa-Ubangi, Niger-Congo]

(Rijkhoff 2008:802; attributed to Christopher Leone Daffalla, p.c.)

Finally, Creissels (2000:253) notes that in some African languages, adjectives are the only modifiers that precede the noun, contrary to the generalization that cross-

linguistically, adjectives tend to follow the noun. The order A–N–Num–Dem, for example, has been noted to exist in Gude (Afro-Asiatic) and in the Ngbandi-based creole Sango (Niger-Congo) (see Cinque 2005:320, fn 18).

Possessive modifiers commonly appear in post-nominal position in African languages (cf. Heine 1976), although there are some West African languages in which possessors are the only modifiers that precede the noun (see Claudi 1993; Creissel 2000; Marchese 1986). A well-studied type of complex NP that is used to express possession in many African languages is the associative construction (Welmers 1973), in which the possessor and the possessee are linked by means of a grammatical marker. In the Bantu languages, the associative marker *-a-* shows agreement with the noun class of the preceding head noun, the possessee (see Carstens 2000; Güldemann 1999):<sup>5</sup>

- (14) a. kikombe    cha        Mariamu  
          cup:NC7    ASS:NC7    Maria  
          ‘Maria’s cup’
- b. vikombe    vya        Mariamu  
          cup:NC8    ASS:NC8    Maria  
          ‘Maria’s cups’

[Swahili; Bantu; Niger-Congo] (Rainer Vossen, p.c.)

Associative constructions are also found in the Central Khoisan languages. When the possessor precedes its governing noun, as in (15a), a form of the associative marker *dī* appears between the possessor and the possessee which optionally agrees with the following possessee. However, when the possessee is placed before the head noun, as in (15b), agreement is obligatory (Güldemann and Vossen 2000):

- (15) a. h̄àúgù-m    dī(-s)        |’óán-sà  
          dog-SG.M    POSS(-SG.F) bone-SG.F  
          ‘dog’s bone’



- b. |'óán-sà      ḥàúgù-m      dì-sà  
 bone-SG.F      dog-SG.M      POSS-SG.F  
 ‘dog’s bone’

[Naro; Central Khoisan; Khoisan] (Güldemann and Vossen 2000:114)

The associative construction is typically not restricted to possessor relations and can express a much wider range of semantic associations, such as time, function, and quantity (Güldemann 1999; Welmers 1973). Welmers (1973) notes that in this respect, the associative in Niger-Congo is similar to the so-called “construct state” (CS) construction which is used to express similar semantic relations (including possession) in the Semitic languages of Afro-Asiatic (Benmamoun 2000; Borer 1999; Ouhalla 2004):

- (16) (\*l-)kitaab-u      ʔ-ʔaalib-i  
 (the-)book-NOM      the-student-GEN  
 ‘the student’s book’

[Standard Arabic; Semitic; Afro-Asiatic] (Benmamoun 2000:141)

A CS consists of the nominal head and a following possessor NP. The two members of a CS construction must be adjacent and form a prosodic unit. As (16) shows, only the rightmost noun can be marked for definiteness and combine with a determiner.

According to Creissels (2000:243), definite articles are fairly common in African languages. As the examples in (13) and (16) show, they are often realised as clitics or affixes and attach to the first or last word of the NP with which they combine.

#### 4 Pronouns

Pronouns in African languages may occur as independent word forms (so-called strong pronouns), which usually have the same distribution as full NPs (DPs). Weak pronouns, however, which are typically realised as clitics or affixes, are more common. In many languages, the weak pronouns can co-occur with co-referential full NPs/DPs. They are therefore often analysed as subject or object agreement markers, and may indeed be functionally ambiguous in some African languages (see Bresnan and Mchombo 1987

for Bantu).

A peculiar system of pronominal reference that exists in many African languages is logophoricity (see, e.g., Clements 1975; Culy 1994; Curnow 2002; Güldemann 2003; Hagège 1974; Hyman and Comrie 1981, and many others). Logophoric pronouns are used to refer to the person whose speech or thoughts are reported. They therefore typically express obligatory co-reference between the subject or object argument of an embedded clause and the subject of the matrix clause. In (17a), for example, the use of the logophoric pronoun in the embedded subject position indicates that the person whose statement is reported is also the agent of the reported event. The use of a regular, unmarked pronoun in the same context indicates non-coreferentiality, (17b):

- (17) a. wu    sat    nɔ́    dɪ                    nas    an.  
          3SG.M say    that LOG.3SG.M beat    1SG  
          ‘He<sub>1</sub> said that he<sub>1</sub> beat me.’
- b. wu    sat    nɔ́    wu                    nas    an.  
          3SG.M say    that 3SG.M            beat    1SG  
          ‘He<sub>1</sub> said that he<sub>2</sub> beat me.’

[Mupun; Chadic; Afro-Asiatic] (Frajzyngier 1993:108)

Logophoric pronouns are found in Nilo-Saharan, Niger-Congo and Afro-Asiatic languages spoken in the Macro-Sudan belt (Güldemann 2003, 2008). It has been noted that logophoricity is an exclusively African phenomenon and that genuine logophoric pronouns do not exist outside Africa (Heine 2008).

## 5 Adpositions

According to Watters (2000:196), African languages tend to have fewer adpositions than European languages, because semantic relations that are typically expressed by prepositions in the latter are often expressed by other grammatical means in the former. For example, while locatives are PPs in a language such as English, they are realised as NPs with locative morphology in most Bantu languages. Interestingly, however, in some Bantu languages, locative morphology seems to have undergone a process of degrammaticalization, and locative prefixes have become reanalysed synchronically as

prepositions (Marten 2010). In many other African languages, adpositions are derived from nouns referring to body parts or from verbs with locative or existential meanings (Ameka 1995; Heine 1989; Nikitina 2009). Therefore, the synchronic classification of an element as belonging to the word category “adposition” is not always straightforward.

In the Northern Khoisan language Ju|’hoan, a postpositional locative phrase that follows the theme NP in a ditransitive construction is obligatorily preceded by the element *kò* or *kē* (depending on the dialect), giving rise to a construction that resembles a circumpositional phrase, (18a). Interestingly, however, the order of locative and theme can also be inverted in Ju|’hoan, (18b):

(18) a. Uto dchuun-a |Kaece ko n!ama n!ang.

car hit-TRANS |Kaece LK road in

‘A car hit |Kaece in the road.’

b. Uto dchuun-a n!ama n!ang ko |Kaece.

car hit-TRANS road in LK |Kaece

‘A car hit |Kaece in the road.’

[Jul’hoan (!Xun); Northern Khoisan; Khoisan] (Collins 2003:9)

The marker *kò/kē* does not only combine with locatives and themes, but also with instrumentals and benefactives. Therefore, König (2009a) analyses *kò/kē* as a semantically empty preposition. Güldemann and Vossen (2000) label this element a “multipurpose oblique marker”, Dickens (2005) refers to it as a “transitive particle”, Heine and König (2013) propose the term “transitive preposition”, and Baker and Collins (2006) simply call it a “linker”. Baker and Collins show that the linker element is also found in the Benue-Congo languages Yoruba and Kinande (Bantu). In the latter language, the linker agrees in noun class with the preceding NP:

- (19) a. Mo-n-a-hir-ire            okugulu                    k'            omo-kihuna.  
 AFF-1SG-TNS-put-EXT    leg:NC15                    LK:NC15    LOC:NC18-hole:NC7  
 'I put the leg in the hole.'
- b. Mo-n-a-hir-ire            omo-kihuna                    m'            okugulu.  
 AFF-1SG-TNS-put-EXT    LOC:NC18-hole:NC7    LK:NC18    leg:NC15  
 'I put the leg in the hole.'

[Kinande; Bantu; Niger-Congo] (Baker and Collins 2006:311)

Because of its agreement properties, Baker and Collins (2006) and Collins (2003) do not analyse the linker as a preposition, but as the head of a functional projection within the extended VP whose specifier can host different arguments of the verb.

## 6 Adjectives and adverbs

Adjectives are generally rare in African languages, particularly in the Niger-Congo phylum, where many languages only have a very small number of genuine, non-derived adjectives (Creissels 2000:249). This is partly because many predicates which are expressed as adjectives in the European languages are stative verbs in African languages (Watters 2000:195). Attributively used adjectives that modify nouns are often realised as subject relative clauses.

The overwhelming majority (96%) of Heine's sample of ca. 300 African languages exhibits the AP-internal order Adj-Adv (Heine 1976:24). Examples of languages in which adverbs precede adjectives are found in the Afro-Asiatic phylum, e.g. in the Ethio-Semitic language Amharic (Kramer 2009) and in the Cushitic languages Iraqw and Qafar (Hayward 1998; Mous 1993):

- (20) nabám xeera  
 very tall/long  
 'very tall/long'

[Qafar; Cushitic; Afro-Asiatic] (Hayward 1998:625)

In (20), degree modification is expressed by an element belonging to the syntactic

category Adv, but similar adverbial functions may also be encoded by auxiliary verbs in some African languages (Anderson 2011).

## 7 Relative clauses

In most African languages, relative clauses follow their head nouns:

- (21)  $\eta^w$ on ga ma m-ak-iny na  
boy REL 1SG 1SG-see-O.3SG DEF  
'the boy who I saw'

[Bagirmi; Central Sudanic; Nilo-Saharan] (Dryer 2007:192)

The object relative clause in (21) is introduced by a segmental relative marker and includes a resumptive pronominal clitic which is co-referential with the head noun. One also finds African languages in which relative clauses are marked by verbal inflection or tone (e.g. Bantu languages such as Bemba; Kula and Cheng 2007), or in which relative clauses are marked through constituent order (which according to Vossen 1983 is the case in the Eastern Nilotic language Oxoryok).

Pre-nominal relative clauses are found in Amharic (Hudson 1997; Kramer 2009; see Kayne 1994 and Ouhalla 2004 for generative analyses), in Khoe (den Besten 2002) and in Ijo (Givón 1975; Jenewari 1983):

- (22) Bomá wá fe inji me sọ́ári.  
Boma we buy:TNS fish the cook:TNS  
'Boma is cooking the fish that we bought.'

[Ijo; Ijoid, Niger-Congo] (Jenewari 1983:101)

Internally-headed relative clauses have been noted to exist in the Mande language Bambara (see Bird 1968; Comrie 1981; Watters 2000) and in the Gur languages Mooré (Tellier 1989) and Buli (Hiraiwa 2003):

- (23) ɲ dẽ Àtìm lĩ dà mángò-kū:y ðĩ lá.  
 1SG ate Atim COMP bought mango-REL yesterday PART  
 ‘I ate a mango that Atim bought yesterday.’

[Buli; Gur; Niger-Congo] (Hiraiwa 2003:63)

Note that the constituent order in Mooré and Buli is S–V–O. Therefore, the existence of internally-headed relative clauses in these Gur languages contradicts the typological generalization that universally, internally-headed relatives are only found in O–V languages (see Hiraiwa 2003 for discussion).

### 8 Multiclausal constructions, serial verbs and auxiliaries

Although coordination and subordination are often expressed simply via juxtaposition in African languages (Creissels 2000; Watters 2000), the use of complementizers and conjunctions is not uncommon. In many African languages, complementizers are grammaticalized forms of a verb of “saying”:

- (24) Musa kpe gánán etsu du nakàn. (cf. *gàn* ‘say’)  
 Musa know COMP chief cook meat  
 ‘Musa knows that the chief cooked the meat.’

[Nupe; Benue-Congo; Niger-Congo] (Kandybowicz 2008:43)

Many African languages coordinate sentences by means of the so-called consecutive construction, which is used to express a succession of events that chronologically follow each other. The first verb determines the tense, while the following verb (or series of verbs) is formally marked as “sequential”, “subsecutive” or “narrative” (Carlson 1992; Creissels 2000; Hyman 1971; Watters 2000):

- (25) è-à-ìmòj-ì ekàsukow-ùt k-iyar-a-kin-ì.  
 3SG-PAST-eat-ASP old.man-NOM 3SUBSEC-belch-DAT-VOC  
 ‘The old man ate and then belched.’

[Turkana; Eastern Nilotic; Nilo-Saharan] (Dimmendaal 1983:176; Carlson 1992:76)

Consecutive constructions are sometimes compared to the converbial constructions that are characteristic of the Ethio-Semitic and Cushitic languages of Afro-Asiatic, and that also exist in some Nilo-Saharan languages (Amha and Dimmendaal 2006). Converbs are similar to subsecutive verbs in that they may be specified for PNG-agreement and aspect, but not for tense, which is only expressed on the main verb.

Another type of complex clause with multiple verbs which is particularly common in West African Niger-Congo languages is the serial verb construction (SVC). A SVC is a succession of two or more verbs (plus their complements, if they are selected) within the same clause (there is no overt conjunction or complementizer). All verbs share a grammatical subject and have the same tense/aspect specification, and the different actions expressed by the verbs in a SVC are conceptualised as a single event (see, e.g., Aboh 2009; Baker 1989; Bamgboṣe 1974; Carstens 2002; Collins 1997; Ekundayo and Akinnaso 1983; Welmers 1973, among many others):

(26) àhì hù ólo chu.

we take load put.on.head

‘We carried the load.’

[Igede; Benue-Congo; Niger-Congo] (Bamgboṣe 1974:17)

Another characteristic feature of SVCs illustrated by the example in (26) is argument sharing: when the first verb in the sequence is transitive, its internal argument is typically also an argument of the second verb. Baker (1989) argues that the “shared” argument in SVCs is theta-marked by both verbs. Collins (1997) proposes instead that the second verb projects its own VP and selects an unpronounced pronominal argument which is controlled by the internal argument of the first verb. In contrast, Aboh (2009) analyses the first verb in SVCs as a realisation of a functional “light” verb and argues that the object NP is in fact not a shared argument of both verbs, but only theta-marked by the second.

SVCs are also found in Nilo-Saharan (Mekoulnodji *et al.* 2010), in the Chadic languages of Afro-Asiatic (Frajzyngier 1993), and in the Khoisan languages (Collins 2002; Dickens 2005; Kilian-Hatz 2006; König 2009a; Sebba 1995):

(27) Mi m a n|oa 'm !ha.

1SG EMPH FUT cook eat meat

'I will cook and eat meat (repeatedly).'

[Ju]'hoan (!Xun); Northern Khoisan; Khoisan] (Collins 2002:17)

As (27) shows, the two verbs in SVCs in Northern Khoisan must be adjacent; a shared object will always follow the verb complex, which is never interrupted by any grammatical material. Collins (1997, 2002) therefore terms the verb complexes in Northern Khoisan SVCs “verbal compounds”. He suggests that constructions such as (27) have the same underlying syntax as SVCs in Niger-Congo, but that verbal compounds in Northern Khoisan are derived by movement of the lower verb past the object NP to a position adjacent to the higher verb.

According to Anderson (2011), the SVC is one of the three major source constructions from which monoclausal constructions with auxiliary verbs have developed in African languages (the other two being embedded/nominalized and clause-chained structures). This may explain why the “doubled inflection” pattern, in which inflectional features such as subject agreement are morphologically encoded on both the auxiliary and the lexical verb, is relatively common in auxiliary-verb constructions in African languages, particularly in Bantu (see Anderson 2011).

## 9 Topic and focus

African languages use a variety of syntactic means to express aspects of information structure (for more recent overviews and individual analyses, see, e.g., Aboh *et al.* 2007; Bearth 1999; Ermisch 2009; Fiedler and Schwarz 2010, Güldemann *et al.* 2015). The standard way of marking an element as a topic is by means of left or right dislocation. Typically, the fronted or extraposed topic is picked up by a resumptive pronoun or pronominal clitic in the comment clause (see, e.g., Bresnan and Mchombo 1987). As for focus, the most common strategy of marking something as new information, which probably exists in all African languages (Watters 2000:216), is the cleft construction. In clefts, the focused constituent is introduced by a copula and modified by a relative clause:



- (28) nəḥna ina nə-ʔabrəhat zə-rəʔena.  
 we COP OM-Abrahat REL-saw:1PL  
 ‘It is we who saw Abraham.’

[Tigrinya; Semitic; Afro-Asiatic] (Gragg 1974:75)

Focus can also be marked by displacement of the focused constituent (focus movement) in many African languages:

- (29) mààlón ọ́ có cùùcúúwó ní.  
 rice he AUX sow FOC  
 ‘It is rice that he is sowing.’

[Kisi; Southern Atlantic; Niger-Congo] (Childs 2003:134)

In addition, many African languages mark information structure by grammatical elements, such as topic or focus particles or special verbal affixes. For example, Kisi focus constructions such as (29) include the invariant clause-final focus marker *ní* (Childs 2009). In Somali (East Cushitic, Afro-Asiatic), focus markers are obligatory in declarative main clauses and must immediately follow the preverbal focused constituent (Saeed 1984; Svolacchia *et al.* 1995; Lecarme 1999). In !Xun (Northern Khoisan), a suffixal focus marker is attached to the focused constituent in the left periphery, while the rest of the clause is separated from the focus by means of a topic marker (König 2009a, 2009c). In Hausa (Chadic, Afro-Asiatic), focus constructions are marked by an optional focus-marking copula as well as special morphology on the verb (Green 2007; Jaggar 2001; Newman 2000; Tuller 1986; Wolff 1993). In Efik (Benue-Congo), the choice between different tense allomorphs depends on whether or not the verb is included in the focus (Hyman & Watters 1984).

The Central Khoisan SOV-language Khoekhoegowab (Nama) has a sentence-initial position in which both topicalized and focused constituents (including wh-phrases) can occur (den Besten 2002; Haacke 2006; Hagman 1977; Rust 1965; Westphal 1971):

- (30) Tara-s-a                    b    ge            ao-b-a                    ra    mû.  
 woman-3F.SG-OBL    he    DECL    man-3M.SG-OBL    ASP    see  
 ‘The woman, he – the man – is seeing.’  
 [Khoekhoegowab; Central Khoisan; Khoisan] (Haacke 2006:117)

The focused object in (30) is followed by a subject clitic (*b*), which always attaches to the fronted constituent, while the lexical subject NP follows the declarative particle *ge* (Haacke 2006). According to den Besten (2002), the declarative particle signals the second position of the clause, and he suggests that constructions such as (30) are to some extent comparable to verb-second constructions in the Germanic languages. A similar pattern is attested in the Western Nilotic language Dinka, where the verb or auxiliary appears in the second position and is typically preceded by a topic or a wh-phrase. Consequently, Dinka has been classified as a verb-second language (Andersen 1991; Dimmendaal 2006; Richards and van Urk 2015).

In some African languages, focused constituents appear in clause-final position (Watters 2000:216). This is the case, for example, in the Bantu language Rundi (Ndayiragije 1999):

- (31) Yohani    a-á-oógeje                    néezá imiduga.  
 John:NC1    SM:NC1-PAST-wash:PERF    well    cars:NC4  
 ‘John washed cars well (not trucks).’  
 [Rundi; Bantu; Niger-Congo] (Ndayiragije 1999:411)

In many other Bantu languages, focused constituents instead appear in the so-called IAV (“immediately after the verb”) position (Buell 2009; Van der Wal 2009; Watters 1979). For example, in the Grassfield Bantu language Aghem, an SVO-language, contrastive focus on the subject is expressed by V–S–O constituent order:

(32) à mò zí á-ńń bé-<sup>l</sup>kó.

EXPL PAST eat friends fufu

‘The *friends* ate the fufu.’

[Aghem; Bantu; Niger-Congo] (Watters 1979:146)

The IAV-position is also involved in focus phenomena in some verb-initial languages. According to Koopman (2005:291), focused objects can appear between the verb and the subject in the Eastern Nilotic VSO-language Maasai, producing V–O–S constituent order. Dimmendaal (1983:426) notes that the same position is available for certain contrastively focused adverbs in Turkana (another verb-initial Eastern Nilotic language). Sands (2013:266-7) observes that V–O–S order is possible with focused objects in Hadza (Khoisan), and Tuller (1992) shows that the Chadic VSO-language Podoko (Afro-Asiatic) also licenses focused material in the IAV position.

Finally, some African languages use verb copying to mark certain types of focus:

(33) lē à lē sàka.

eat we eat rice

‘We are really *eating* rice.’

[Vata; Kru; Niger-Congo] (Koopman 1983:38)

(34) Musa è gí bise gí.

Musa PRES eat hen eat

‘Musa *is in fact* eating a hen.’

[Nupe; Benue-Congo; Niger-Congo] (Kandybowicz 2008:47)

In (33), verb focus is expressed by means of a predicate cleft construction in which a focused verb in the left periphery of the clause is doubled by a resumptive verbal copy (Childs 2003; Dimmendaal 1983; Koopman 1983). (34) is a so-called “emphatic declarative”, which expresses polarity focus by means of verbal repetition, i.e. the occurrence of two non-distinct verbal copies within the same clause (Kandybowicz 2008; Smith 1970).

## 10 Question formation

In most African languages, the same strategies that are used in focus constructions are also used to form content (constituent, wh-) questions. Wh-clefts are common in many languages (see, e.g., Adesola 2006; Zerbian 2006; Rose *et al.* 2014), and wh-movement constructions and yes/no (polar) questions are often accompanied by interrogative and/or focus markers. Indirect questions in African languages are typically formed by means of a generic noun plus relative clause (“I ask the thing you want”), although some African languages also express indirect questions by means of wh-pronouns (Watters 2000).

The Berber wh-construction in (35) illustrates the so-called “anti-agreement effect”, which is associated with subject questions in various African languages:

- (35) Man tamghart ay yzrin (\*t-zra) Mohand?  
which woman:SG.F COMP saw:AA (3SG.F-see) Mohand  
‘Which woman saw Mohand?’

[Berber; Afro-Asiatic] (Ouhalla 1993:479)

Ouhalla (1993) observes that in Berber, an extracted third-person wh-subject cannot trigger third-person agreement on the verb. Instead of the verb form *tzra*, an invariant, non-agreeing form of the verb is used in (35). A similar deviation from the default third-person agreement form is observed in subject questions and relative clauses in some Niger-Congo languages. In Kinande and Bemba (Bantu), for example, the regular subject agreement marker of noun class 1 (*a-*) is systematically replaced by *u-* in such constructions (Schneider-Zioga 2007; Henderson 2013). Although the anti-agreement effect is usually taken to be a reflex of (local) operator movement, it also shows up in wh-*in situ* constructions in some African languages, for example in the Benue-Congo language Ibibio (Baker 2008).

Another interesting phenomenon that is associated with subject questions in Niger-Congo languages such as Vata (Kru) or Yoruba (Benue-Congo) is illustrated by (36):

(36) ta ni \*(ó) ní ta isu?

who FOC 3SG ASP sell yams

‘Who is selling yams in the market?’

[Yoruba; Benue-Congo; Niger-Congo] (Carstens 1985:39)

As (36) shows, subject questions in Yoruba require a resumptive pronoun in the subject position when the subject has undergone wh-movement. Object wh-phrases, in contrast, do not license resumption (see Carstens 1985; Koopman 1982; Sonaiya 1989).

### 11 Passive and raising

Passive constructions exist in many African languages. The following examples are from Kinyarwanda:

(37) a. Igitabo cy-a-haa-w-e umugóre n’-úmugabo.

book:NC7 SM:NC7-PAST-give-PASS-ASP woman:NC1 by-man:NC1

‘The book was given to the woman by the man.’

b. Umugóre y-a-haa-w-e igitabo n’-úmugabo.

woman:NC1 SM:NC1-PAST-give-PASS-ASP book:NC7 by-man:NC1

‘The woman was given the book by the man.’

(38) Ibíro bíne bi-pim-w-a n’-íki gitabo.

kilos:NC8 four:NC8 SM:NC8-weigh-PASS-ASP by.this:NC7 book:NC7

Lit.: ‘Four kilos are weighed by this book.’

[Kinyarwanda; Bantu; Niger-Congo] (Kimenyi 1976:128f.)

In the examples in (37) and (38), the logical object is realised as the subject of the sentence, a transformation that is analysed in terms of NP-movement in generative theories. The thematic subject argument no longer functions as the grammatical subject, but instead is optionally realised as the complement of a preposition (the so-called “by-

phrase”). As (37) shows, Kinyarwanda is a “symmetrical” language, because either object of a ditransitive verb can be passivized. In contrast, “asymmetrical” Bantu languages such as, e.g., Chew̄a allow only one internal argument (usually the indirect object) of a ditransitive verb to be promoted to subject position (see Bresnan and Moshi 1990). (38) shows that Kinyarwanda also allows for the passivization of “adverbial” objects, with a non-agentive subject in the *by*-phrase (see Kimenyi 1976: 127ff.).

Not all African languages have the type of passive construction illustrated by (37). For example, Heine (1976:41) notes that “genuine” passive constructions do not exist in many West African languages. Instead, some of these languages use the so-called “they”-passive, i.e. an active sentence with a generically used pronominal third-person plural subject.

Khwe (Central Khoisan) has a regular passive in which the theme/patient is realised as the subject and the agent as a *by*-phrase, (39a). However, in an alternative passive construction, no agent subject can occur, and the theme/patient remains grammatically marked as the object, (39b) (Kilian-Hatz 2009):

- (39) a. †'ú            à    †'ú-can-atà            ápa-a            kà.  
           food            FOC eat-PASS-PAST            dog-OBL    by  
           ‘The food was eaten by the dog.’
- b. hèútù-hè    è    tc'áã-i-tà.  
           car-3SG.F    OM    steal-PASS-PAST  
           ‘The car was stolen.’ / ‘One has stolen the car.’

[Khwe; Central Khoisan; Khoisan] (Kilian-Hatz 2009:223, 228)

Passive constructions similar to (39b) are also found elsewhere in Africa. For example, according to Creider (1989), passives are marked morphologically in the Eastern Nilotic languages, but the thematic object does not receive nominative case and is not promoted to subject position. The opposite seems to be the case in Supyire (Gur; Niger-Congo). Carlson (1994) notes that passives are not marked morphologically in Supyire, but that a passive construction is formed by realising the thematic object of a transitive verb as the subject.

Another type of construction that is analysed in terms of NP-movement in

generative syntactic theories is raising. In standard raising constructions, the subject of an embedded infinitive appears as the subject or object of the main clause (e.g. *John<sub>i</sub> seems t<sub>i</sub> to love Mary*). However, many African languages allow for so-called “Hyperraising”-constructions in which the logical subject of an embedded finite clause is realised as the matrix subject or object. In (40), for example, the thematic subject argument of the embedded verb has become the subject of the main clause, where it triggers subject agreement with the verb:

(40) I-nzovu                      z-aa-menyeeekan-ye                      kó    z-iish-e  
 PV-elephant:NC10    SM:NC10-PAST-be.known-PERF    that    SM:NC10-kill-PERF  
 báa-ba-ntu.  
 DEM:NC2-NC2-people

‘Elephants are renowned for having killed those people.’

[Rundi; Bantu; Niger-Congo] (Harford (Perez) 1985:2)

Hyperraising constructions are found in many Bantu languages (see Carstens and Diercks 2013; Halpert 2012; Harford (Perez) 1985; Zeller 2006) and also elsewhere in Niger-Congo (see, e.g., Ura 1998), in Nilo-Saharan (Creider 1989; Jake and Odden 1979) and in Afro-Asiatic (Sadiqi 1986).

## 12 Conclusion

In this article I have discussed various aspects of the syntax of African languages. I have shown which basic constituent orders are attested and how particular grammatical constructions are realised in different languages. I have drawn attention to construction types which are attested in typologically unrelated languages from different families or phyla, and I have highlighted attributes that are characteristic of African languages but that are rarely, or not at all, found outside Africa. The phenomena discussed in this review illustrate the enormous wealth of interesting data from African languages, many of which raise challenging questions, and sometimes pose non-trivial problems, for existing syntactic theories.

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<sup>1</sup> In this review, I mainly provide examples from the literature. I have made no attempt to unify the phonetic notations, and in general have adopted each language example from the source in its original form. By and large, this also applies to the glosses, although here I have tried to some extent to harmonize the abbreviations. I have also on occasion added or modified glosses when I was sufficiently familiar with the language or when I was able to find the necessary information in another source. In a few cases, I have taken the liberty to simplify the glosses when a relevant function or distinction was not crucial for the particular phenomenon I wanted to illustrate by an example.

Examples are glossed as follows: 1, 2, 3 = first, second, third person; AA = anti-agreement; ACC = accusative; ADJ = adjective; ADV = adverb; AFF = affirmative; AP = adverbial phrase; APPL = applicative marker; ASP = aspect; ASS = associative; AUX/Aux = auxiliary; COMP = complementizer; COP = copula; CS = construct state; DAT = dative; DECL = declarative; DEF/def = definiteness marker; DEM/Dem = demonstrative; DP = determiner phrase; EMPH = emphasis; EXPL = expletive; EXT = extension; FACT = factative; F = feminine; FOC = focus marker; FUT = future tense; GEN = genitive; IAV = "immediately after the verb" position; INDEP = independent; IOM = indirect object

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marker; LK = linker; LOC = locative; LOG = logophoric pronoun; M = masculine; N = noun; N = neuter; NC = noun class; NEG = negation; NP = noun phrase; NOM = nominative; NR = number; NUM/Num = numeral; O/O = object; OBL = oblique; OM = object marker; PART = particle; PASS = passive; PAST = past tense; PERF = perfective; PL = plural; PM = predicative marker; PNG = person–number–gender; PO = postposition; POSS = possessive; PP = prepositional phrase; PREF = prefix; PRES = present tense; PV = pre-vowel (= augment); REL = relative marker; S = subject; SG = singular; SM = subject marker; SPF = specificity; SUBJ = subjunctive; SUBSEC = subsecutive marker; SVC = serial verb construction; TNS = tense; TRANS = transitivity; V = verb; VOC = voice; VP = verb phrase; X = constituent of variable category. In some of the Bantu examples, the basic noun class of the nouns and noun class agreement on grammatical elements is marked through numbers, according to Meinhof’s (1906) numbering system of Proto-Bantu.

<sup>2</sup> Notice that the notion of “basic” constituent order must not be confused with that of “underlying” constituent order in generative syntactic theories, which is determined by a (possibly universal) initial syntactic configuration from which surface word orders are derived by movement.

<sup>3</sup> Afrikaans, a West Germanic verb-second language spoken in South Africa and Namibia, also has a basic S–O–V constituent order (den Besten 2002; Robbers 1997). Note incidentally that there are also African languages that have been classified as verb-second languages. I briefly discuss this fact in section 9.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Ruth Kramer and Will Bennett for providing me with the Amharic and Defaka data.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Rainer Vossen for providing me with the Swahili data.