

2 *Error! Style not defined.*

(a.k.a. “Northern Khoisan”) families. However, looking at the phenomenon only from this perspective runs into problems in many other cases; see Gensler (1997) for a detailed assessment of Claudi (1993).

From a methodological point of view, it often requires one to invoke the ad-hoc idea that processes of structural generalization and/or analogical leveling targeting the new O-V pattern have erased all or most traces of earlier grammaticalization.⁴ Moreover, the validity of a grammaticalization scenario does not exclude other explanations, even within one and the same language. That is, the word order alternation in Africa might well be the result of “multiple causation” and there is no a priori reason why it should be an entirely unitary phenomenon with a single evolutionary explanation for all its attested cases.

The factual problems of the two grammaticalization scenarios have mostly to do with the assumed input features making a change possible in the first place. As these will be illustrated in Section 2 by examples from Benue-Congo languages, I will just list them at this point. First, the word order alternation may not be coupled, in a given language, with Genitive-Noun order and/or verb serialization. There are even cases where Genitive-Noun order actually holds, but the object shift still occurs, according to the language-specific source, without the involvement of a genitive; rather, the marked O-V structure represents a true preverbal object complement controlled by a nominalized verb (cf. in this respect German non-finite structures like *Schuhe putzen* ‘polishing, to polish shoes’, *Fahrkarten kaufen* ‘buying, to buy tickets’, etc.). These languages suggest the existence of at least one additional grammaticalization scenario, in which, however, the preverbal object position would remain an unexplained phenomenon:

- (c) **Verb_x - [Object - Verbal noun_y] - Other**
 > **Auxiliary_x - Object - Verb_y - Other**

A second empirical problem with the grammaticalization hypothesis is that the relevant word order alternation sometimes applies without the involvement of an auxiliary, or can fail to apply despite the presence of an auxiliary; here, auxiliatiion cannot, without additional assumptions, be the triggering factor.

Finally, the available grammaticalization scenarios have not properly addressed the fact that the word order alternations can concern constituents other than direct objects, including adverbial adjuncts, and/or multiple participants.

This paper is an attempt to remedy some of the shortcomings of the currently dominant explanation for the alternating word order in African languages. It will look more closely at the phenomenon in a single language group, Benue-Congo⁵, where (a) the above problems associated with the exclusive grammaticalization approach are particularly salient and (b) the relevant word order changes are recurrently associated with a specific functional effect, namely that the marked preverbal position for objects (and other participants) is typical for information units that are less salient in the pragmatic context.

2. Object order alternation in Benue-Congo

2.1. Family overview

Benue-Congo languages have a fairly consistent head-initial word order (cf., e.g., Williamson and Blench (2000: 30-36) and the relevant chapters in Bendor-Samuel (ed., 1989) for overviews of the basic word order in these languages): (a) they show a basic V-O clause while O-V order is a marked alternative in specific grammatical contexts and (b) the noun phrase displays a Head-Modifier pattern which, except for Nupoid, also includes genitive constructions. This situation is in line with the currently prevailing reconstruction of Benue-Congo and Niger-Congo as S-V-O (Heine 1980, Claudi 1993, Manfredi 1997). Nevertheless, as will be shown below, a possible alternation between post- and preverbal objects is widespread in the group.

While a generally head-initial noun phrase would exclude the grammaticalization scenario under (a) in Section 1 for almost all of Benue-Congo, the development under (b) is also not viable for many languages, especially in the eastern part of the group, because they lack verb serialization of the type found in Kwa and western Benue-Congo. Another salient feature of several Benue-Congo languages is the partial irrelevance of auxiliaries for the occurrence of certain O-V structures. This property in particular has led me to pursue a slightly different approach to the general problem. That is, instead of looking only for the pattern S-Auxiliary-O-V-Other, I have undertaken a general survey of O-V and related structures, irrespective of whether an auxiliary is involved.

The result of this still-preliminary investigation is given in Table 1. This list is not exhaustive, because it omits several languages which are genealogically close to those given in the table and show similar behavior.

4 *Error! Style not defined.*

Table 1: Attested cases of preverbal objects in Benue-Congo

Language	Group	Sub-branch(es)	Source
Nupe	Nupoid		George 1971, Kandybowicz and Baker 2003
Idoma	Idomoid		Abraham 1951
Yoruba	Defoid		Manfredi 1997
Igbo	Igboid		Manfredi 1997
Ibibio	Cross River	Lower Cross	Urua 1997
Leggbo	Cross River	Upper Cross	Good 2004
Kana	Cross River	Kegboid	Ikoro 1996
Kaje	Platoid	Central Plateau	Wolff and Gerhardt 1977
Mambila	Bantoid	Northern, Mambiloid	Perrin 1994
Vute	Bantoid	Northern, Mambiloid	Thwing and Watters 1987
Tikar	Bantoid	Southern	Stanley 1991
Naki	Bantoid	Southern, Beboid	Good 2005
Aghem	Bantoid	Southern, Grassfields	Watters 1979
Bafut	Bantoid	Southern, Grassfields	Chumbow and Tamanji 1994, Tamanji 2002
Nen	Bantoid	Southern, Mbam	Mous 1997, 2005
Ewondo	Bantoid	Southern, Narrow Bantu	Redden 1979
Proto-Bantu*	Bantoid	Southern, Narrow Bantu	Meeussen 1967

Note: * except Northwest

In the following, I will present data from individual languages grouped according to certain recurrent factors that trigger the shift of an object, and partly of other participants, to the marked preverbal clause position.

2.2. Pronominal objects

A first group of cases is characterized by the shift of PRONOMINAL objects. For example, this is reported in *Ibibio* (Cross River) for an apparently isolated context, namely reflexive experiencer pronouns. Compare (2) with a nominal object canonically following the verb with (3), where the 1st-person singular object *mí* precedes the experiencer predicate *biák* ‘hurt, be painful’; note that no auxiliary is involved in the construction.

- (2) *Òkôn á dèp ébót*
 PROP 3S buy goat
 ‘Okon is buying a goat’ (Urua 1997: 201)
- (3) *úbók á m̄ biák*
 hand 3S 1S be.painful
 ‘my hand hurts’ [lit.: the hand hurts me] (Urua 1997: 204)

In Vute (Bantoid), the marked preverbal position of pronoun objects is more frequent in that it applies to human referents in all clauses with imperfective aspect. This is shown by the difference between (4) with a nominal object and (5) with a pronominal object; both of these involve an auxiliary.

- (4) *yáyá taá sè-nà n̄ tú ñgée júk*
 PROP PST:IPFV wash-IO ? father 3S.POSS clothes
 ‘Yaya was washing clothes for his father’ (Thwing and Watters 1987: 100)
- (5) *ñgáb á ñgé j̄m n̄*
 3P IPFV 3S beat ?
 ‘they are beating him’ (Thwing and Watters 1987: 100)

Preverbal pronoun objects are even more salient in Kana (Cross River), since here the word order change is possible or obligatory with a wider range of preverbal auxiliaries and predicate inflections (Ikoro 1996: 206-13). One marker which generally triggers the change encodes past tense; compare (6) where the 1st-person singular pronoun *mē* precedes a serial verb structure.

- (6) *wēè mē-tēērā pīī*
 3S:PST 1S-run meet
 ‘he ran to me’ (Ikoro 1996: 212)

However, example (7), which is semantically identical to (6), illustrates an important fact about the general phenomenon in Kana: as soon as the pronominal object is pragmatically salient, even a past tense clause no longer has the object in the marked preverbal position.

6 *Error! Style not defined.*

- (7) *wēè tēērā píi n̄dā*
3S:PST run meet 1S.EMPH
'he ran to ME' (Ikoro 1996: 212)

An even stronger correlation between the presence of an auxiliary and the preverbal position of a pronoun object is found in certain Plateau languages such as Kaje and Afusare (Wolff and Gerhardt 1977: 1527-8). Another example is Ewondo (Bantoid, Bantu A70) as described by Redden (1979: 126, 166-7). Compare (8), with a postverbal object pronoun in a clause without an auxiliary, and (9), with a preverbal object pronoun in a clause with an auxiliary (here habitual *kad*); the latter example also shows that Ewondo is a language where preverbal position can apply to multiple objects.

- (8) *ma-vá j̄ā j̄á*
1S-give 3S.H 3S
'I am giving it to him' (Redden 1979: 166)
- (9) *a-kad m̄ə dzɔ vá*
3S-HAB 1S 3S give
'he usually gives it to me' (Redden 1979: 167)

2.3. Negation

Another recurrent context for the preverbal occurrence of, often multiple, objects is negation. In Vute (Bantoid) this applies to perfective clauses, as shown in (10).

- (10)a. *mvèìn yi ðwáb-na t̄́ ɣgé cene*
chief REM.PST buy-IO ? 3S chicken
'the chief bought him a chicken'
- b. *mvèìn yi n̄́ ɣgé cene ðwáb-na wá*
chief REM.PST NEG 3S chicken buy-IO PFV.NEG
'the chief did not buy him a chicken'
(Thwing and Watters 1987: 101)

In other languages, negative clauses cause the object to precede the verb in a more generalized fashion. Compare in this respect (11a) vs. (11b) from Leggbo (Cross River, Upper Cross), or (12a) vs. (12b) from Bafut (Bantoid, Grassfields). Similar cases are reported in other closely related lan-

guages, for example, Lokaa (Iwara 1982) from Upper Cross, and Nweh (Nkemnji 1995: 112-47) and Mbili (Ayuninjam 1998: 338-53) from Grassfields Bantu.

- (11)a. *wàdum sé e-nii wàé sé ntààmi*
 man DEF 3S-give child DEF gift
 ‘the man gave the child a gift’
- b. *wàdum sé wàé sé ntààmi eè-nii*
 man DEF child DEF gift 3S:NEG-give
 ‘the man didn’t give the child a gift’ (Good 2004)
- (12)a. *Sùù kì kó mbà*
 PROP TA catch animal
 ‘Suh killed an animal’
- b. *kāā Sùù kì wā’à mbà kō*
 NEG PROP TA NEG animal catch
 ‘Suh did not kill an animal’ (Chumbow and Tamanji 1994: 224)

2.4. Non-finite verb phrases

A third typical context for preverbal objects in Benue-Congo is non-finite verb phrases, which may or may not be controlled by an auxiliary. This occurs recurrently *inter alia* in western groups of Benue-Congo; it is reported for Nupoid (cf. Hyman and Magaji (1971: 28-33) for Gwari and Kandybowicz and Baker (2003: 131-145) for Nupe), Idomoid (cf. Abraham (1951: 71-7) for Idoma), Defoid, and Igboïd. A representative example is given here from Standard Igbo (Igboïd).

- (13) *ó mára-na bùbú a-kwá*
 3S know-PFV blouse NOM-sew
 ‘s/he knows how to sew blouses’ (Manfredi 1997: 98)

Several facts should be noted in connection with the construction in (13). First, this particular combination of verbal noun and object cannot be used outside the present context after the controlling verb *mára* ‘know’ for example, it cannot appear as a sentence subject. Second, this is the only pattern possible as long as the object is semantically specific. As soon as the object is generic and similar to a cognate object notionally contained in the verb, an interesting variability can be observed: one can either use the structure given in (13), as shown in (14a), or have recourse to a nomi-

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nalization type with a different nominalizer, where the object FOLLOWS the verb, as in (14b).⁶

- (14)a. *ó mára-na akwà a-kwá*
 3S know-PFV cloth NOM-sew
- b. *ó mára-na i-kwá akwà*
 3S know-PFV INF-sew cloth
 ‘s/he knows how to sew’ (Manfredi 1997: 98)

The following example of a non-finite verb phrase with a preverbal object is from Standard Yoruba (Defoid); according to the author, this particular nominalization type need not be preceded by a complement-taking verb as ‘learn’ in (15).

- (15) *ó kọ iwé kí-kà*
 3S learn book NOM-read
 ‘s/he learned the art of reading’ (Manfredi 1997: 96)

While the O-V order in this Yoruba construction is fixed with verbs implying a lower object that is generic, like ‘know’ and ‘learn’, the quite similar structure after the verb ‘want’ allows for both marked O-V as in (16a) and normal V-O as in (16b) (note again the different nominalizers).

- (16)a. *mo fẹ aṣọ ó-hun*
 1S want cloth NOM-weave
- b. *mo fẹ é-hun aṣọ*
 1S want NOM-weave cloth
 ‘I want to weave (some) cloth’ (Manfredi 1997: 96)

The Upper Cross languages Leggbo and Lokaa, already mentioned in Section 2.3, are also cases where preverbal objects are typical for nominalizations in general. As the following examples from Leggbo show, the feature is not only characteristic of verbal nouns controlled by another verb, like phasal ‘begin’ in (17); it also occurs when the nominalized verb phrase functions as the subject, as in (18). This last example also demonstrates that the alternation in object position not only can be independent of an auxiliary but also that it can apply to more than one participant.

- (17) *b a-ttɔŋɔ lidzil gèdziè*
 3P 3P-begin food eat:NOM
 ‘they began eating food’ (Good 2004)
- (18) *ntàami bɛ́ gèniè nɛ̀-dàa m*
 gift children give:NOM 3S:HAB-please 1S
 ‘I like giving gifts to children’ (Good 2004)

2.5. Preverbal inflections and auxiliaries

As is well known from the literature on the topic, the shift between a post- and a preverbal object is often tied to the absence or presence of an auxiliary or some other preverbal inflection. While in the cases discussed in the previous sections certain additional conditions pertain (pronominal object, negation, nominalization, etc.), the phenomenon can be more general as, for example, in Tikar (Stanley 1991: 102-28, 132-58). This Bantoid language has S-V-O order in perfective and modal clause types without a preverbal auxiliary; this pattern is shown in (19).

- (19) *wù sh-é m̀n*
 2S say-IRR 1S
 ‘si tu me l’avais dit, ...’ (Stanley 1991: 71)

With preverbal inflections and auxiliaries, however, the object occurs before the verb, as with the imperfective marker *tã* in (20) and the phasal auxiliary *dunmi* ‘begin’ in (21).

- (20) *à tã n̄she shɛ*
 3S IPFV luggage carry
 ‘il porte le bagage’ (Stanley 1991: 103)
- (21) *à dunmi nun ji fɛ*
 3S begin:PFV 3S food give
 ‘il a commencé à lui donner de la nourriture’ (Stanley 1991: 133)

However, such a situation does not seem to be typical for Benue-Congo as a whole; more often O-V patterns are restricted to a smaller set of inflections/auxiliaries (see Manfredi’s (1997) discussion of “aspectual licensing and object shift”). Important for the following discussion is the observation that several of these cases seem to be sensitive to the pragmatic aspect of information structure.

One such structure, fairly wide-spread in the westernmost subgroups of Benue-Congo, is the likely result of the grammaticalization scenario mentioned in Section 1 under (b) involving an earlier verb ‘take, have, hold, get’ (cf. Lord 1982). Nupe (Nupoid) is a case in point. Past clauses display a distinction between a plain V-O phrase as in (22a) and an O-V structure as in (22b); the latter involves an element *á* which derives etymologically from a verb ‘take’.

- (22)a. *Musa zũ tsùkũ*
 PROP break stick
 ‘Musa broke the stick’
 b. *Musa á tsùkũ zũ*
 PROP PERF stick break
 ‘Musa got the stick broken/ has broken the stick’
 (George 1971: 90, 93)

While both sentences convey a perfective event, they differ in another respect: the first pattern with unmarked V-O would be a response to a question like “What did Musa do?” or “What did Musa break?” while the second structure with marked O-V answers “What did Musa do with (or to) the stick?”, where the object noun is given (cf. also Lord (1982) for other cases where the preverbal object correlates with definiteness). Since the *á*-construction in Nupe is characterized by a focus on the predicate, including its aspectual operator of perfectivity, it has often been interpreted in terms of aspect, namely as a resultative~perfect.

The example pair in (23) shows the *á*-construction with a verb and a cognate-like object; here the object can either precede the verb or follow it. This suggests that the structure involves more than aspect and that the object position itself is more directly related to information structure. That is, it can be argued that the preverbal object itself characterizes sentences where the focus is on the predicate as the carrier of the assertion.

- (23) *Musa á eci bi* or *á bi (eci)*
 PROP PERF race run PERF run race
 ‘Musa (really) ran (well)’ ‘ran off’ (Manfredi 1997: 100)

Verb serialization with ‘take’ is also at the base of the constructions with preverbal objects reported by Adivé (1989: 80-1, 130-1) for Epira, by Hyman and Magaji (1971: 56-8, 63) for Gwari (both Nupoid), by Manfredi

(1997: 97) for Ọwọ̀ Yoruba (Defoid), and by Abraham (1951: 18) for Idoma (Idomoid, cf. (1) above). While not all authors mention a functional difference vis-à-vis the unmarked clause with a postverbal object, it is likely that the situation is at least from a diachronic perspective similar to that in Nupe, where the marked O-V pattern can be characterized as a combination of perfectivity and focus on the predication instead of the object.

Another case where a preverbal object seems to be associated with a tense-aspect form that involves a specific information structure can be identified in southern Igbo varieties (Igboid). For example, in Avụ Igbo the future auxiliary *gà* can be followed by two phrase types involving different verbal nouns; in one the object follows the nominalization, as in (24a), and in the other the object precedes it, as in (24b).

- (24)a. *ó gà e-ri rin ahụ*
 3S FUT NOM-eat food that
 ‘s/he is going to eat that food’
- b. *ó gà rín ahụ n-ri*
 3S FUT food that NOM-eat
 ‘s/he must (certainly) eat that food’ [?< ... WILL eat ...]
 (Manfredi 1997: 99)

The two structures are associated with a subtle meaning distinction which can be interpreted in terms of a difference in information structure: while the form with a postverbal object is a plain future, the one with a preverbal object renders an “(epistemic or deontic) obligative future.” Like the previous case of auxiliary perfects, this can arguably be analyzed as a combination of tense-aspect and information structure, namely as a future with focus on the truth value of the proposition; from this configuration the modal reading of obligation can be derived.

2.6. Information structure

A final set of structures displaying variable object position in Benue-Congo languages are overtly and explicitly associated with an alternating information structure. To date, these have been reported exclusively from Bantoid languages which are spoken in a fairly restricted area along the southern stretch of the border between Nigeria and Cameroon, that is, Mambila from Mambiloid (Perrin 1994), Naki from Beoid (Good 2005),

Aghem from Grassfields (Watters 1979), and Nen from Mbam (Mous 1997, 2005).

I will start with Aghem, because it is the case first reported in the literature and has been researched fairly extensively. While the overall focus system is morphologically and syntactically far more complex than can be discussed here, the basic relevant facts, according to Watters (1979), can be summarized as follows. The linear position immediately after the verb is the site for focused constituents, while the position before the verb can be used for pragmatically less salient participants; this mechanism is largely insensitive to different semantic relations. Thus, the sentence in (25a) is used when the exclusive focus is on the direct object, and the time adverb is given information. This pragmatic relation between the two non-subject participants is reversed in (25b); here the time adverb is the new information and the object is defocused. If both participants are extrafocal, both occur before the verb, which then ends up being clause-final, as in (25c).

- (25)a. *fil á mð á'zɔɔ zí kí-bé*
 friends 3P PST yesterday eat CL-fufu
 'the friends ate FUFU (not yams) yesterday'
- b. *fil á mð bé-'kí zí á'zɔɔ*
 friends 3P PST fufu-CL eat yesterday
 'the friends ate fufu YESTERDAY (not two days ago)'
- c. *fil á máà bé-'kɔ́ á'zɔɔ zí*
 friends 3P PST.PF fufu-CL yesterday eat
 'the friends DID TOO eat fufu yesterday'
 (Watters 1979: 149, 148, 150)

A largely comparable situation has been described by Perrin (1994) for Mambila. A postverbal object is associated with focus, as shown in (26a). Extrafocal constituents are placed before the verb, as happens with the time adverb in (26b). It is also possible that both these constituents are focused, as in (26c); in such cases the last one would be more salient. An overt defocalization of the object is illustrated in (26d) with exclusive focus on the time adverb, and in (26e) with focus on the verb.

- (26)a. *mè ŋgeé naâ cɔ́gɔ́*
 1S buy PST cloth
 'I bought cloth *or* it was cloth that I bought'

- b. *mè léilé ηgeé naá cògò*
 1S yesterday buy PST cloth
 ‘it was cloth that I bought yesterday’
- c. *mè ηgeé naá cògò léilé*
 1S buy PST cloth yesterday
 ‘I bought cloth yesterday’
- d. *mè cògò ηgeé naá léilé*
 1S cloth buy PST yesterday
 ‘it was yesterday that I bought cloth’
- e. *mè naá cògò ηge*
 1S PST cloth buy
 ‘I bought cloth’ [assertive verb focus] (Perrin 1994: 233)

The situation in Nen appears at first glance to be quite different, but turns out to be comparable to the two previous cases. According to Mous (1997, 2005), the preverbal position for an object is unmarked and conveys assertive focus on this participant as in (27a). The postverbal object, which must be preceded by a particle such as *á*, as in (27b), is associated with contrastive focus.

- (27)a. *àná mòné índì*
 3S:PST money give
 ‘s/he gave money’
- b. *àná índì á mòné*
 3S:PST give ? money
 ‘s/he gave MONEY’ (Mous 1997: 126)

As opposed to Aghem and Mambila, the preverbal object in Nen is not extrafocal. However, on a more abstract level there is still a common denominator across the three languages in that the preverbal object is pragmatically less salient vis-à-vis its postverbal counterpart.

2.7. Summary

Table 2 gives a summary of the grammatical profile of O-V structures in the Benue-Congo languages treated above, as far as the information is available in the source. If a language has multiple O-V constructions which

differ according to the features surveyed here, they are treated in separate lines.

Table 2: Contexts of preverbal objects in Benue-Congo

Language (Section number)	Specific object feature	Mul- tiple objects	Non- object	Nega- tion	Spe- cific TAM phrase	Non- finite verb	Pre- verbal aux./ infl.
Nupe	(2.4)	YES	YES			?	YES
	(2.5) Non-focal	NO	?		PERF		YES
Idoma	(2.4) ?	?	NO			(YES)	
	(2.5)	NO	YES		PST		YES
Stand. Yoruba	(2.4) (Generic)	?	NO			(YES)	
Ọwọ̀rọ̀ Yoruba	(2.5)	NO	?		PERF		YES
Stand. Igbo	(2.4)	NO	NO			(YES)	YES
Avù Igbo	(2.5) ?Non-focal	NO	NO		(FUT)	YES	YES
Ibibio	(2.2) (Pronoun)	NO	NO				
Leggbo	(2.4)	YES	YES			YES	
	(2.3)	YES	YES	YES			
Kana	(2.2) Pronoun	?	NO				YES
Kaje	(2.2) Pronoun	?	?				YES
Mambila	(2.6) Non-focal	YES	YES				
Vute	(2.2) (Pronoun)	NO	NO		(IPFV)		YES
	(2.3)	YES	?	(YES)	(PFV)		YES
Tikar	(2.5)	?	NO		IPFV		YES
	(2.5)	YES	NO				YES
Naki	(2.6) Non-focal	YES	YES				
	(2.3)	YES	?	(YES)			YES
Aghem	(2.6) Non-focal	YES	YES				
Bafut	(2.3)	YES	YES	YES			YES
Nen	(2.6) Less focal	YES	NO				
Ewondo	(2.2) Pronoun	YES	YES				YES
Proto-Bantu	(3) Pronoun	(YES)	(YES)				YES

Note: Blank = feature not relevant, (...) = restricted relevance, ? = no information

Two major observations can be made. First, many cases are characterized by the irrelevance of preverbal auxiliaries/inflections, and by the possibility of subjecting more than one object or a non-object participant to

the word order shift. These cannot, without further assumptions, be claimed to be instances of the grammaticalization scenarios mentioned in Section 1 and thus call for another explanation.

Second, O-V order in Benue-Congo is in general conditioned by RECURRENT grammatical factors. Some relate to a property of the affected object, in that it must be a pronoun, or refer to a generic concept, or have an extrafocal status. Others relate to the type of predicate in a wider sense: it is negated, has a certain tense-aspect feature, or is characterized by an auxiliary in general. A look at other languages with object order alternations reveals that such factors are not restricted to Benue-Congo, but can be identified elsewhere – in particular, in languages which are genealogically and areally unrelated.

One context of preverbal objects (noted above) is progressive and imperfective clauses, for example, in some languages of Moru-Mangbetu (Central Sudanic, Andersen 1984, Watson 1997) and Gbe (Kwa, Lefebvre and Brousseau 2002); it is also found in Kaansa and Cefo (Gur, Elders p.c.). Negation triggers a different object position in some Gurunsi languages (Gur, Elders p.c.) as well as in parts of Surmic (Unseth 1986) like Moru-Mangbetu, a family which is unrelated to Benue-Congo. To have a different position for pronominal vis-à-vis nominal objects is cross-linguistically quite common (cf. object clitics in Romance); it is also attested in other West African languages, like some of the Oti-Volta group (Gur, Elders p.c.) and most of the Atlantic family (Childs forth.). In some Potou-Tano (Kwa) languages and in Mandarin Chinese the preverbal object is associated with the status of definiteness and discourse-givenness (Stewart 1963, Lord 1982). This has not been described explicitly for Benue-Congo; it is, however, noteworthy that the verbal object prefixes in Savannah Bantu, which arose from an earlier S-(Auxiliary)-O-V pattern, correlate with a definite postverbal object (cf., e.g., Creissels 2000: 235). Finally, information structure plays a role in shifting object position in Doyayo (Adamawa, Elders 2004) and in the unrelated Southern Cushitic group (Mous 1993, Kießling 1994).

3. Information structure as a potential common denominator of O-V

At first glance these multiple factors seem fairly heterogeneous. I will, however, propose in the following that a common denominator does exist. I will start out from cases where O-V has the most straightforward function, namely where it correlates with some specific information structure. In

languages like Aghem, Mambila, and Naki the preverbal object is explicitly extrafocal and the focus is on another constituent or on a clause feature. As mentioned, the situation in Nen is similar on a more abstract level: the preverbal object is not extrafocal, but it is still less focal than its postverbal counterpart. I will now argue that a decrease in pragmatic salience of the object can also be identified for other, more grammaticalized contexts of O-V structures.

A good case for this assumption can be made as regards preverbal object pronouns. The use of a pronoun is largely correlated with discourse anaphora and implies the status of its referent as given/ presupposed. This means that a pronoun object is not part of the new asserted information. A similar argument can be made for preverbal definite objects; definiteness also implies a discourse-given status, hence such an object is extrafocal or less focal.

The situation for preverbal generic objects is slightly different. Here, the object is not necessarily given information; it is, however, also not asserted independently but instead demoted so as to become a semantic subpart of a complex information unit. This analysis also applies in part to objects that occur within non-finite verb phrases. The non-asserted status in a kind of “incorporation” structure can correlate with a lesser discourse saliency (see, e.g., Mithun 1984).

At least since Hyman and Watters’ (1984) work on so-called “auxiliary focus” it has been known that certain features of the predication such as polarity, aspect, modality etc. can interact in a systematic way with the information structure of a clause. The authors propose that these specific predication operators have inherent focus. I follow this position and assume that some of the factors that trigger or favor O-V are related to this phenomenon.

That negation, in particular of the “metalinguistic” type (cf. Horn 1989), is an operator with inherent focus has been argued by a number of authors such as Givón (1978), Heine and Reh (1983), Marchese (1983), and Güldemann (1996, 1999). Thus, the fact that preverbal objects recurrently co-occur with negation can be taken as a reflex of their less focal status in this context.

Other inherently focused features, according to Hyman and Watters (1984), are the progressive and the perfect. For the progressive, this has been discussed in more detail by Güldemann (2003) for Bantu languages and some other geographically and genealogically unrelated cases. Preverbal objects tied specifically to the progressive have not yet been found in Benue-Congo. However, certain phenomena which come close to this do

exist. Recall from Section 2.5 that clauses in Tikar with imperfective *tǎ* generally have O-V order. However, the situation is slightly more complex with “semi-intransitive verbs”, which are characterized by optional locative complements. The position of such complements is variable and this is associated with a semantic distinction that implies a direct correlation between O-V and progressive. If the complement follows the verb the clause has a habitual reading, as in (28a); if it occurs in the marked preverbal position the clause renders a progressive state of affairs, as in (28b).

- (28)a. *à tǎ kèn fumban*
 3S IPFV leave PROP
 ‘il a l’habitude de partir à Foumban’
 b. *à tǎ fumban kènni*
 3S IPFV PROP leave
 ‘il est en train de partir à Foumban’ (Stanley 1991: 114)

Within the present framework, the cases of the perfect in Nupe, Qwɔrɔ Yoruba, and possibly other languages of the area as well as the “obligative” future in southern Igbo treated in Section 2.5 are more straightforward. They can be analyzed as configurations of information structure where a predication operator is in focus; this causes the object to be pragmatically less salient and to occur outside its canonical postverbal position.

I will conclude the discussion with those cases where preverbal object position is relevant for auxiliary periphrasis more generally and an exclusive explanation in terms of information structure is problematic. One could, of course, first investigate the question of whether periphrasis has a general tendency to focus on the auxiliary category and thereby defocus participants. There are, however, other possible scenarios for how a language can come to apply an O-V order to many or even all periphrastic clause types, irrespective of whether the object has a decreased information value or not. For one thing, it is conceivable that the grammatical pattern O-V with preverbal predication operators becomes the target of analogical generalization and gradually expands in the language. Another possibility is that an inherently focused verb category develops into another category which is less sensitive to a particular information structure. In view of the results of grammaticalization research this hypothesis is particularly attractive for an imperfective with general O-V, because this category frequently originates, according to, e.g., Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca (1994: 140-9), in a progressive, which I argue is inherently focused. In both scenarios,

analogy and grammaticalization, the marked word order would be retained, but the original explanation in terms of less focal objects would no longer need to apply.

The general argument for the V-O > O-V alternation in the relevant languages is tied to an important point which should be stated in a more explicit fashion. I have repeatedly pointed out that preverbal position of the object or, more generally, of a non-subject participant is the marked pattern and that this is associated with a less salient information status of this element. Conversely, then, the position after the verb is the unmarked position for focus on a term like an object, adjunct, or adverb in the sense of Dik (1997); the focus is mostly assertive but in a few cases (also) contrastive, as in Mambila and Nen. Consequently, in the cases treated in Section 2.6, where information structure is synchronically the factor transparently controlling the word order shift, the alternation not only applies to a single direct object, but to multiple objects as well as to non-objects. This syntactically expressed pragmatic opposition lies at the heart of my hypothesis for the object order alternation: in a V-O clause the object is (part of) the assertive focus, while in an O-V clause the object is defocused or at least less salient vis-à-vis a postverbal object.

The present account of the relevant word order alternations in terms of information structure does not contradict in principle the explanation of O-V structure in terms of grammaticalization given in Section 1, that is, an origin of some language-specific structures in a concrete syntactic configuration of auxiliary + nominalized complement or verb serialization. Rather, it is compatible with and/or entails these historical scenarios insofar as they ultimately cause the object to occur early in the clause and hence to iconically precede other, informationally more salient elements.

The present proposal is also not meant to exclude the existence of other factors that may contribute to the existence of O-V structures. To mention only one other promising line of research for the future: the relatively frequent occurrence of pronominal items before the verb is likely to be related to their overall phonetic weight: as light elements they may tend to precede heavier ones like lexical verbs.

While the order alternation regularly affects a wide range of constituents in some languages (see, e.g., Section 2.6), the predominant situation in Benue-Congo is that it has a clear bias towards the object. Why should that be so, given that an object is generally viewed as a grammatical relation that refers primarily to a semantic role implied by the verb? What is the special connection between the syntactic concept of object and the prag-

matic notion of assertive clause focus that would cause pragmatically sensitive word order manipulations to target the object in particular?

My basic idea is that all clause types are inherently associated with some type of information structure. This also applies to so-called “unmarked” clauses in fixed-word-order languages, which are often neglected in the discussion of focus phenomena. My more specific claim is that these clauses are unmarked not just in terms of basic syntactic configuration but also as regards information structure. That is, they are “in-situ” focus constructions with a default configuration of assertive focus (= Dik’s (1997) “completive” focus). In V-O languages with a grammaticalized subject relation that conflates the semantic agent-role complex and the pragmatic function of topic, this makes it possible to assume an even more specific situation for basic clauses. All other things being equal, the default in an intransitive S-V sentence is assertive focus on the predicate, and in a transitive S-V-O sentence assertive focus on the object, possibly including the predicate. In the latter case, even if the verb is also new, the object can still be granted a higher information value in that the iconic linear progression is from less to more salient information. Moreover, and, given that in true O-V languages the preverbal object still seems to be more prominent than the final verb, possibly more importantly, nominal referents may be more central to the encoding of information structure than predicates.

To the extent that the basic transitive clause of a language is a salient construction type, it can be argued that the grammatical relation between object and verb is inherently tied not only to certain semantic roles, but also to a pragmatic function. The default position of an object is closely associated with its status as newly asserted information. This correlation can be exploited by a language: it can place the object in an unusual position in contexts where it has a non-canonical information status, i.e. where it is pragmatically given or less salient vis-à-vis a more marked focus on another constituent or a predication operator. This option can be seen as a direct function of at least two language-specific factors: (a) the degree to which a language allows for word order flexibility and (b) the degree to which it highlights in the grammatical object relation pragmatic function in addition to semantic role.

In proposing this fairly abstract common denominator for the relevant word-order alternations in general and for preverbal objects in particular, I do not want to claim that synchronically the explanation accounts for all cases in a straightforward way. Clearly, the preverbal position of an object recurrently does not directly reflect its extrafocal information status, but results in the first instance from a particular grammatical construction.

Moreover, these conditioning constructions are quite heterogeneous, even in one and the same language (cf., e.g., Nupe and similar languages where the ‘take’-serializations and phrases involving a verbal noun generate two quite different types of preverbal object). Thus, while O-V under negation in the relevant languages comes fairly close to overt defocalization, auxiliary periphrases are overall different in that they often trigger O-V for purely grammatical reasons. Thus, control auxiliaries such as ‘know’, ‘want’, ‘start’, ‘be at’, etc. may simply require a non-finite verb phrase, which in the language may happen to require a preceding object complement. Also, the patient object of ‘take, get, hold’ automatically ends up in a core serialization before the second verb and any additional participant. In both cases, the information status of the object vis-à-vis other elements is only indirectly reflected and may be effect rather than immediate cause.

However, information status sometimes seems to be relevant even in these problematic cases. The Standard Yoruba examples (15) and (16) showed that the semantics of control verbs can bear on whether an object appears before or after the controlled content verb. The phrase ‘learn to VERB X’ often implies an activity that, once learned, is carried out routinely and then is associated preferably with a non-individuated, non-specific, and thus pragmatically less salient object. The phrase ‘want to VERB X’ does not seem to have this habitual connotation and thus is more open with respect to the pragmatic status of the lower object. While the former requires O-V order in the non-finite verb phrase, the latter allows for both O-V and V-O.

A different situation can hold in the case of objects which are semantically entailed by the content verb: these are least likely to attract the clause focus, and hence are the maximal opposite of a specific and/or referential object. In the case of ‘know to VERB X’ in Standard Igbo, this would seem to make a defocusing manipulation “superfluous” as in (14), where V-O is possible besides normal O-V, in contrast to (13), where the semantically more specific object must precede the verb.

The non-focus status of cognate-like objects might also be at the basis of the alternation in (23) from Nupe: here the V-O pattern simply asserts a complex predicate while the O-V pattern arguably focuses on the truth of the predicate which demotes the object even further in terms of salience.

Since O-V patterns of some sort can pervade entire language groups, the present proposal has potential historical implications for earlier language states, and the question emerges as to what situation merits reconstruction for what chronolect. Gensler (1994, 1997) has gone some way in this direction in proposing to reconstruct the syntagm S-Auxiliary-O-V-Other, be-

sides S-V-O-Other, back to Proto-Niger-Congo. The fuller range of data and their discussion in this paper throw new light on this issue. I would agree with Gensler in general that O-V is, alongside V-O, a historically older pattern in Niger-Congo and not just the ever-recurring outcome of a set of grammaticalization paths that just start out from V-O and its concomitant structures. At the same time, a reconstruction which entails such a morphosyntactic alternation should also address and answer questions regarding the distribution of and the ultimate motivation for this variability, and this on the basis of the particular syntactic profile of each modern group considered.

Following from the above discussion, I would like to propose the following refinements to Gensler's hypothesis. A reconstruction of a generalized S-(Auxiliary)-O-V-Other syntagm is likely to overstate the case for most sub-groups of Niger-Congo. A case in point is Proto-Bantu. The Northwest Bantu languages with preverbal pronouns like Ewondo and the modern morphotactic pattern in Savannah Bantu languages, where object affixes in a complex agglutinative verb usually precede the verb stem (cf. Meeussen 1967: 96-9), do not warrant such a far-reaching hypothesis. Instead, it would be more faithful to the available evidence to assume for the relevant proto-language a situation similar to that in Kana, Kaje, and Ewondo where all or at least many auxiliaries triggered the positional shift of pronominal objects only.

Such a situation with a clear grammatical restriction on O-V would plausibly have evolved from an earlier ancestor language with a similar, yet different profile. This can be modeled in a preliminary fashion on the empirical data presented here from Benue-Congo (irrespective of whether this group turns out after more research to be a valid genealogical subgroup within Niger-Congo). In order to account for the variation across Benue-Congo I posit that an earlier language state displayed a basic V-O syntax which, however, was different from that of "canonical" S-V-O languages in a few important respects. Sentence positions in this early language state, including the position after the verb, had besides their association with a typical semantic profile a greater pragmatic load than is usually recognized by standard syntactic analyses. This feature would have accorded to the postverbal object a stronger association with the role of assertive focus of the clause. This could well have gone hand in hand with a weaker syntactic bond between the verb and its object. Apart from possible external factors (e.g., contact with languages of a different word-order type), these properties would have facilitated the development of an optional O-V pattern which was associated with defocusing the object.

Other groups in Greenberg's Niger-Congo like Adamawa-Ubangi, Kwa, Gur, and Kru display an overall similar situation regarding a flexible object position (cf. Gensler and Güldemann 2003). These, together with Benue-Congo, form what could be viewed as the more secure core of a genealogical unit (cf. Stewart 1976 and Bennett and Sterk 1977 regarding such concepts as "Volta-Congo" and "Central Niger-Congo", respectively). Thus, the situation briefly outlined above may possibly have already obtained in a far older chronolect. Clearly, more research on this domain is necessary. I would venture, however, that a realistic and tangible morphosyntactic reconstruction of a proto-language is only possible if the whole range of synchronic variation in the daughter languages is taken into account and an attempt is made to relate the different patterns by means of observable functional correlations.

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- ¹ This paper was presented previously at the following occasions: at the conference “Topic and Focus: Information Structure and Grammar in African Languages”, University of Amsterdam (03/12/2004); at the “Work in Progress” series, MPI-EVAN Leipzig (14/12/2005); and at the “Jour fixe - Afrikalinguistisches Kolloquium” series, Universität Leipzig (15/12/2004). Thanks are due to the respective audiences for interesting discussions and to Orin Gensler and two reviewers for comments on a previous draft. The following abbreviations are used in the paper: CL noun class, DEF definite, EMPH emphatic, FUT future, H human, HAB habitual, INF infinitive, IO indirect object, IPFV imperfective, IRR irrealis, NEG negative, NOM nominalization, O object, P plural, PERF perfect, PF predication focus, PFV perfective, POSS possessive, PROP proper name, PST past, REM remote, S singular or subject, TA(M) tense-aspect-(modality), V verb. Elements in examples which are focused on in the discussion are bold-faced; question marks in the glossing indicate elements whose function is unclear to me. My comments within quoted material are given in square brackets.
- ² Accounts within the generative framework generally assume some form of constituent movement which I don't follow here (see Koopman (1984) on the phenomenon in Kru languages as one representative example).
- ³ The elements which differ in their category status but are related to each other historically are co-indexed by sub-script letters. The term “Other” refers to postverbal participants other than direct objects.
- ⁴ Cf., for example, Heine and Claudi's (2001: 64-8) discussion of the Mande case. Following Kastenholz (2003) and pace Claudi (1994), this family shows very little internal evidence for a transition from an earlier V-O to a modern O-V stage; rather the S-Auxiliary-O-V-Other pattern can be reconstructed to the proto-language. A major reason for entertaining an original V-O order and its

later change to O-V by means of grammaticalization seems to be Mande's assumed genealogical affiliation with Niger-Congo - a hypothesis that still awaits the presentation of convincing evidence.

- ⁵ Benue-Congo is used in the modern sense of "New Benue-Congo" (see, e.g., Bender-Samuel (ed.) 1989) without, however, any commitment to the hypothesis that this is a genealogical entity.
- ⁶ Green and Igwe (1963: 167-71) distinguish these two non-finite verb forms by means of the terms "participle" (with prefixal *a-/e-*) and "infinitive" (with prefixal *i-/i-*).