

4

Bantu (Narrow)

(Bantoid, E. Benue-Congo)

Derek Nurse

4.1 General

This chapter differs from the others by providing, not an analysis of one language, but an overview of all (Narrow) Bantu languages. Some 500 Bantu languages are spoken by some 250 million people, a third of all Africans, in the whole sub-Saharan region south of a line from western Cameroon to southern Somalia. Communities range in size from several million down to a mere handful (Gordon 2005, van der Veen 2003). At least forty-five communities have a million speakers, and of those at least sixteen have five to ten million, Swahili being the largest with over seventy million, many of whom are bilinguals or second language speakers.

Most Bantu languages have five or seven contrastive vowels. Some have contrastive length, some not. Consonant inventories vary enormously, from large (e.g. Ilwana E701, with over forty contrastive units, including the prenasalized, to small (some northwestern languages in zones A, B, and C have just over a dozen)¹. Many contrast voiceless stops with voiced continuants. Many contrast labial, coronal, and velar, although some also have palatal, and nasals and prenasalized units occur at most places of articulation. 95% are tonal, usually with a H:L (or H:toneless) contrast.

Quantity and quality of documentation also varies widely. At one end of the scale, a reasonable description or analysis of the verb system exists for perhaps fifty languages, in the form of a book, article, or thesis. At the other end are many dozens of undescribed languages. Between the two are hundreds of languages for which the documentation ranges from a word list to an incomplete description. So for perhaps a tenth of the languages there is a description on which a reasonable analysis can be based, while for the rest we had to rely on the available data, own notes, email communication, or other less-than-perfect sources.

What follows rests on examination of 100 geographically and typologically representative languages, as are all statistical statements, except where a different database set is specified. Northern and northwestern languages (Zones A, B, C, D10-20-30, and part of H) are sometimes exceptions to the generalizations below. (See Makaa, Chapter 17).

4.2 Word Order

Bantu languages belong to Heine's (1976) Type A, having: S (AUX) V O X², where there may be two (or more) noun phrase objects (double object marking, rather than direct and indirect), and X represents adverbials, prepositions, and noun phrase constituents, including relative clauses and the genitive construction, typically following the head noun.

¹ The Bantu area is conventionally divided into fifteen geographic zones (A, B, C ... S), following Guthrie (1971), but see Maho (2003).

² The Cameroonian language Nen, with SOV, is the only known exception (Mous 2003).

- (1) Herero **má-vé-tjáŋg-ér-e ovanǎtjé ombapíra m-ondjúwó**
 PRS-3p-write-APP-FV children letter in-house
 ‘They are writing a letter to the children in the house.’

Although the canonical word order is SVO, considerable word order variation is possible for pragmatic purposes. Favoured positions for focus are sentence-initial and post-verbal, as in Tumbuka where the normal order is S V O (BEN) O (goal) ADV:

- (2) Tumbuka a **ngô:ma ti-zamu-limilira namachê:ro**
 maize 1p-FUT-weed tomorrow
 ‘Maize we will weed tomorrow.’
- b **wa-ka-wa-pása mabû:ku wâ:na**
 3p-past-3p-give books children
 ‘They gave books to the children.’

Bearth (2003:127) claims: “The widespread tendency in Bantu languages is to assign ... the positions next to the verb on account of a hierarchy of parameters defined..in terms of (i) animacy of the referent (human > animate > inanimate), (ii) semantic role relationship (beneficiary > goal > patient > locative), (iii) participant category (first > second > third person), iv) number (plural > singular)”³. This is true of noun phrases following the verb, and their mirror image, object prefixes preceding it (see Beaudoin-Lietz et al. (2004)).

- (3) Tswana a **k’i-tl’a-kw’ál-él-él-a gwana bats’álí lō kw’áló**
 1s-FUT-write-APP-APP-FV child parents letter
 ‘I’ll write a letter to the parents for the child.’
- b **k’i-tl’a-lō-ba-mō-kw’ál-él-él-a**
 1s-FUT-it-them-him-write-APP-APP-FV
 ‘I’ll write it to them for him.’

Neither yes/no nor *wh*-questions tend to deviate from SVO order. Yes/no questions are indicated either by a question marker at the start or end of the sentence, and/or by tone. The *wh*-word typically retains the position of the element replaced, at least for non-subjects: subjects tend to be questioned by cleft structures.

- (4) Tumbuka a **Walí:mi w-a-luta ku-mû:nda**
 farmers 3p-past-go to-field
 ‘The farmers went to the field.’
- b **Walí:mi w-a-lutâ:-nkhu?**
 farmers 3p-past-go-where
 ‘Where have farmers gone?’

³ We have reason to think that, while these tendencies are ‘widespread’, they are not necessarily universal in Bantu.

- c **Ni njâ:ni w-a-luta ku-mû:nda**
is who (that) 3p-past-go to..?
'Who went to-field?' or:
- d **Ku-mû:nda kw-a-luta njâ:ni**
to-field there-past-go who?
'Who went ?'

The Tumbuka statement and question differ by the tone on the last syllable and the *q*-word, **kási**.

- e **Mbû:zi zi-ka-duka pa-chiphû:pha**
goats 3p-past-jump at-wall
'The goats jumped over the wall.'
- f **Kási, mbû:zi zi-ka-duka pa-chiphû:phá**
'Did goats jump over-wall?'

4.3 Verb structure

It is impossible to deal with all the structures of 500 languages, so this section treats what is typical. Two all-inflectional structures are very common, and they differ by the position of the negative markers. The first is exemplified in (5), the second in (10):

- (5) PreSM - SM - formative - OM - root - EXT - F - PostF
PreSM - SM - NEG₂ - formative - OM - root - EXT - F - PostF

Lucazi **mikanda i-ka-tw-a-ká-ci-va-sónek-il-ile-ho**
letters PreSM-PreSM-SM-form₁-form₂-form₃-OM-root-EXT-F-PostF
letters REL-NEG-we-past-itive-mood-them-write-APP-F-then
'The letters which we had not just gone to write to them then'

The only two obligatory constituents are root and final (F), which co-occur in the imperative (together with a H on the FV). Several morphemes may co-occur at each of PreSM, formative, object, extension, and PostF, typically in a canonical order. Always or nearly always encoded in the inflected verb are: subject, tense, aspect, mood, valency, and negation. Less often, rarely, or not encoded in the verb are: relative markers, focus, pronominal objects, and other categories.

PreSM: Here are often included the markers for non-subject relative ('person whom we have seen') and NEG₁, the latter encoded by **-ka-** (60)⁴, **-ta-** (20), **-ti-** (17), **-ki-** (16), numbers being figures out of 160 sample languages. Meeussen (1967:108) says these are low toned, with the vowel of the next syllable (SM) being high. All other morphemes at PreSM are local and of much lower distribution, the commonest being **ni-** (from the copula, most often marking focus), and **na-/ne-** (various, from 'and, with').

⁴ The numbers refer to the 160 languages used as a data base. Thus, of the 160 languages looked at, 60 had this morpheme in this position.

SM: Subject concord is usually obligatory and encoded at SM in the verb structure, whether the subject noun is present or not. Person markers are typically: 1s **n(i)-**, 2s **u-**, 3s (subjunctive and others) **á-**, 3s (indicative) **ú-**, 1p **tu-**, 2p **mu-**, 3p **bá-**. Participants are L, others have H, (except after PreSM L, when all will be H). Class concords, not shown here, are also H.

NEG₂: **-tí-** (50), **-tá-** (47), **-ca-** (30), **-ka-** (27). Again, numbers are figures out of the 160 sample languages.

Formative: some languages allow only one morpheme here, some allow two, the second typically marking consecutive, itive or ventive in some languages. A very few languages allow more than two. Common morphemes are: **-a-** (86%) (**-á-** H ‘near past’, **-a-** L ‘non-near past’); **-ka-** (70%) L ‘itive, narrative, past’, L/H ‘future’); \emptyset (50%) ‘general present, conjunctive, narrative, participial’; **-ki-** (48%) ‘persistive’ (H), ‘participial’; **-la(a)-** mainly ‘future’. **Ka** and **kí** typically come last in languages which allow two or more morphemes.

OM: OMs are as SMs in shape, except 2s **-ku-**, 3s **-mu-**. 1-2-3s are L, plural persons and class OMs are H. Some languages (e.g. Lingala) allow no OMs, some allow one (e.g. Swahili), some (e.g. Haya) allow two, some (e.g. Chaga) allow three, and up to five, even six, may be allowed, though not common, in a few languages (Beaudoin-Lietz et al. (2004)). Pronominal objects occur at PostFV, or post verbally, in some languages. Some languages allow pre-stem OMs and PostFV OMs, others allow only one or the other. (Languages allowing multiple OMs are all in the northeast of the Bantu area.)

(6) Mboshi **pé wa bu** ‘Give him it.’ (both OMs are post-verbal)

Swahili (1) **ndiyo, ni-li-m-pa** ‘Yes, I gave (it) him.’ (‘it’ implicit, not explicit)

Haya (2) **kat’ á-ka-ki-mú-ha** ‘Kato gave him it.’ (it-him)

Chaga (3) **n-á-lé-í-kú-m-zrúm-a** ‘He sent him there with it.’ (it-there-him)

Rwanda (6)

a-ra-na-ha-ki-zi-ba-ku-n-som-eesh-eesh-er-er-eza

3s-FOC-also-there-it-them-3p-2s-1s-read-CAU-CAU-APP-APP-IPFV

‘The woman is also making them read it (book) with them (glasses) to you for me there (in the house).’

EXT: Extensions change and typically increase valency. The most widespread extensions are: causative (***-i-**, **-ici-**), applicative (encompassing various functions) **-il-**, impositive **-ik-**, neuter/decausative **-ik-**, positional **-am-**, reciprocal **-an-**, repetitive/pluractional **-a(n)g-**, extensive **-al-**, tentative **-at-**, reversive **-ul-**, **-uk-**, passive **-u-/ibu-** (shapes from Schadeberg 2003). Causative, applicative, reciprocal, passive usually occur in that order.

F(V): Certain finals and final vowels are widespread: **-a** (tonally various) ‘neutral’, **-é** ‘subjunctive’, **-ile** (tonally various) probably originally ‘perfect’, today ‘perfect’ and various

pasts, **-a(n)g-a** IPFV (in origin this is the same **-ang-** as the extension). Two others are more restricted: **-i** (26%) various, including perfect and near past, and a vowel copy suffix (11%) ‘perfect, near past’. Percentages are of the 160 sample languages.

PostF(V): Only one morpheme is common here, **-ni** or a similar form, which occurs widely in the plural imperative, and less widely in other first and second plural forms. Others are local: OMs (of uncertain status – suffix, clitic, independent), locatives, negatives, and a few scattered others.

- (7) Lunda a **tal-enu-ku**
 look-plural-there
 stem-FV-PostFV
 ‘Look there!’
- b **bayi mu-tal-i-ku-ku**
 NEG 2p-look-SBJ-there-NEG
 ‘Don’t look there!’
- c **n-a-mw-inká-wu**
 1s-past-3s-give-it
 ‘I gave him/her it.’
- Mituku **tu-Ø-bund-íye-bí**
 1p-Ø-catch-past-yesterday
 ‘We caught yesterday.’

4.4 Tense, aspect (Nurse 2008)

Tense is most often encoded at formative, less often at F or before the SM. Bantu languages typically have multiple past and future reference: 83% of the database languages have between two and five discrete past tenses (40% have two, 32% have three, 17% have one, 10% have four, 1% have five), and 87% have one to three futures (46% have just one, 25% have two, 16% have three, 10% have none (i.e. future and present were neutralized as non-past), 3% have four or five. In a language with two pasts, the nearest refers to hodiernal situations and the other to beyond today, in a language with three pasts, the distinction is today versus yesterday (or a few days before) versus remote, and languages with a four way distinction add a ‘just past’ to what three way languages have. Futures are usually the mirror image of pasts, except they sometimes add a modal dimension of uncertainty. Tense reference is predominantly relative, not absolute. Past and future reference is not necessarily symmetrical, that is, there are not necessarily equal numbers of past and future tenses in a language.

Aspect seems to have been originally marked at F, but today also appears at formative: perfective, imperfective, progressive, habitual, perfect, and persistive are the commonest aspects.

Some of these notions are illustrated via Bukusu (E31c), spoken by some 600,000 people in Kenya’s Western Province (a variety of Luyia, with a total of over four million speakers). The analysis summarized in Table 4.1 is based on data from several, mostly unpublished, sources.

Most sources for Bukusu agreed on four pasts (the only disagreement was whether or not P₁ **aaxa** was in fact a tense) and three futures. In a neutral situation, P₁, P₂, P₃, P₄ refer to ‘very

recently/just, today, a short time before today, remote’, respectively, F₁, F₂, F₃ to ‘today, beyond today, remote’, respectively. P₁/P₂/F₁ are fixed in meaning, the last two being hodiernal, including last night and tomorrow morning, but the others are flexible in reference, depending on the circumstances and the speaker’s attitude to the circumstances. Thus, for example, **xwaalímile** ‘We bought’ is P₃ but can be used of a few days ago, or last month, or last year. A person discussing events of twenty years ago could use that form if the events were still vivid in the memory.

Morphologically, Bukusu illustrates nicely some features found widely across Bantu. Past Perfectives involve various combinations of **-a-** (short and long) and **-ile**. As other Lacustrine languages, two futures are distinguished by **-la-** (nearer) versus **-li-**. At least two futures involve FV **-e**, the subjunctive marker, both referring to non-factuality. Pre-stem **-Ø-** refers to the vast present.

Grammaticalised aspects are PFV, IPFV, PRG, PER, and PFT, there being no discrete HAB. Bukusu, as other Lacustrine languages, has two perfects – both translate as ‘have/had verbed’ but one refers to situations nearer the moment of reference, the other to more remote situations. Bukusu also exemplifies nicely possible aspectual contrasts in the present: ‘we verb (in general), we verb (regularly), we are verbing’.

Again, Bukusu illustrates some common Bantu strategies for encoding aspects. PFV is relatively unmarked; IPFV has **-ang** at F; Present Progressive consists of ‘be’ (**li**), locative, and verbal noun (‘we are at verbing’), while tensed Progressives mark tense on another form of ‘be’ (**ba**), plus verbal noun; Persistent has a reflex of ***ki**, preceded by tensed forms of ‘be’ in the non-present; segmentally, the two Perfects involve combinations of pre-stem **-a-** and F **-ile**.

Finally, it can be seen that tone plays an important role in tense-aspect distinctions in Bukusu. Tone varies according to context, so Remote PFT ‘We have cultivated’, **xw-áa-lima** (pre-pause declarative), **xw-áa-líma** (before a complement), **xw-áá-límá** (pre-pause question). It varies according to category: **xw-á-lima** P₄, **xw-áa-lima** PFT, **xw-aa-lim-a** NAR. It also has a syntactic role: the contrast between declarative and question above, and **a-lá-ca** ‘She will definitely go’ versus **a-la-ca** ‘She may go’ (L. Kitembe, p.c.). Tones shown in the matrix which follows are those in pre-pausal declarative phonetic forms.

Table 4.1 E31c Lu-bukusu

	Perfective	Imperfective -ang-	Progressive (‘be’+) xu-	Persistent (‘be’+)- sii-	Perfect
P ₄ -à-	xw- a -kul-á ‘we bought’	xw-á-kul- aang-a ‘we used to buy, were buying’		xw- á -b-áxu- sii -kul-a ‘we were still buying, still used to buy’	xw- á -b-áxw-áa-kúl-a ‘we had bought’ or P ₃ and P ₂ below
P ₃ -áá-... -ilé	xw- aa -kúl- ile ‘we bought’	xw- aa -kúl- il-aang-e ‘we were buying’	xw- aa-b-ééle xu-kúl-a ‘we were buying’	xw- aa-b-ééle xu- sii -kul-a ‘we were still buying, still used to buy’	xw- aa-b-ééle xw-aa-kul-ile ‘we had bought’
P ₂ -ilé	xu-kúl- ile ‘we bought’	xu-kúl- il-aang-e ‘we were buying’	xu- b-eelé xu-kúl-a ‘we were buying’	xu- b-eelé xu- sii -kul-a ‘we were still buying, still used to buy’	xu- b-eele xw-aa-kul-ile ‘we had bought’
P ₁ -aaxa-	xw- aaxa -kul-a ‘we just bought’	xw- aaxa -kul- aang-a ‘we just stopped buying’	xw- ááxá-b-á xu-kúl-a ‘we were just buying’	xw- ááxá-b-á xu- sii -kul-a ‘we were still buying, just now bought’	xw- aaxa-b-a xw-aa-kul-ile ‘we have/had just bought’
-Ø-	xu- Ø -kúl-a ‘we buy’ (in general)	xu- Ø -kúl- aang-a ‘we buy regularly’ xu- la -kul- aang-a ‘we have been buying’	xu- lí-xó xu-kúl-a ‘we are buying’	xu- sii -kul-a ‘we still buy, are still buying’	xw-aa-kul-ile ‘we have bought (recently)’ xw-áa-kul-a ‘we have bought (remoter)’
F ₁ -la- káne + SBJ	xu- la -kul-a ‘we will buy’ káne xú-kúl-e ‘we will buy’ (less definite for some)	xu- lá-b-á xu- la -kul- aang-a ‘we will have been buying’ káne xú-b-é xu- la -kul- aang-a ‘we will have been buying’	xu- lá-b-á xu-kúl-a ‘we will be in the process of buying’ káne xú- b-é xu-kúl-a ‘we will be in the process of buying’	xu- lá-b-á xu- sii -kul-a ‘we will still be buying’ káne xú- b-é xu- sii -kul-a ‘we will still be buying’	xu- la-b-a xw-aa-kul-ile ‘we will have bought’ káne xú- b-é xw-aa-kul-ile ‘we will have bought’
F ₂ -xa- ...-e	xu- xa -kul- e ‘we will buy’	xu- xa -kul- aang-e ‘we will have been buying’	xu- xá-b-é xu-kúl-a ‘we will be in the process of buying’	xu- xá-b-é xu- sii -kul-a ‘we will still be buying’	xu- xá-b-é xw-aa-kul-ile ‘we will have bought (recently)’ xu- xá-b-é xw-áa-kúl-a ‘we will have bought (remoter)’
F ₃ -lí-	xu- li -kúl-a ‘we will buy’	xu- li -kúl- aang-a ‘we will be buying, we will buy’ (HABITUAL)	xu- li-b-á xu-kúl-a ‘we will be in the process of buying’	xu- li-b-á xu- sii -kul-a ‘we will still be buying’	xu- li-b-á xw-áa-kúl-a ‘we will have bought’

- (10) Ha a. **nti-tw-aá-koz-e**
 NEG₁-1p-past-work-PFV
 ‘We didn’t work’ but
- b. **abantu ba-ta-á-koz-e**
 3p-NEG₂-past-work-PFV
 ‘People who didn’t work’
- Langi a. **si-tw-á-boká**
 NEG-1p-past-dig
 ‘We didn’t dig’
- b. **m̩:nt̩ mwene si-a-seka**
 ...who NEG-past-laugh
 ‘Person who didn’t laugh’
- Punu a. **tu-sá-ma-díbiga**
 1p-NEG-past-close
 ‘We didn’t close’
- b. **tu-gó-dibíga**
 1p-NEG-close
 ‘We won’t close’
- Kituba a. **yánda ké kwikíka ngé vé**
 he HAB believe you NEG
 ‘He doesn’t believe you.’
- b. **ku-dia dimpa ve**
 INF-eat bread NEG
 ‘Don’t eat bread!’
- Congo a. **ka-tu-tond-i-ko**
 NEG-1p-like-FV-NEG
 ‘We don’t like.’
- b. **ka-lu-tond-i-ko**
 NEG-2p-like-FV-NEG
 ‘Don’t like!’
- c. **ka-lu-a-tond-a-ko**
 NEG-2p-a-like-FV-NEG
 ‘That you shouldn’t like’ (plural subjunctive)

Venda	a	a-ri-rém-i NEG-1p-cut-NEG 'We don't cut'
	b	u-si-rém-e 2s-NEG-cut-SBJ 'Don't cut'
	c	rí-sa-rém-i 1p-NEG-cut-NEG 'if we don't cut'

The examples here are included for the sake of completeness. It should be emphasized that the Ha and Venda cases are more typical of the general picture (see PreSM and NEG₂, above, for morphemes widely involved).

4.7 Auxiliaries

It is impossible to list all the active auxiliaries or the formatives deriving from auxiliaries that occur in 100, or 500 languages. Considering both current auxiliaries and formatives definitely or reasonably derivable from auxiliaries, certain are widespread, with their proto-typical shape, they are: 'be' (-**li** 'be (at)' or -**ba** 'be, become, live', less often -**ikala** 'be, live, sit, etc' and others), 'have' (often = 'be with', typically involving -**na**), 'come' (often -**ija**), 'go', 'want' (-**caka**, -**penda**), 'finish' (-**mala**, -**sila**). Much less widespread are 'do' and 'say'. Their typical functions are:

'be (at) verbal noun', -**li** (-LOC) -**ku-** = PRG (Bastin 1989a, 1989b)

'(be) with' = non-past, future, PRG, past, 'not yet' = 'be still', NAR

'be' appears very widely as the (first) auxiliary verb in two-word compounds, where it is typically inflected for tense.

'come', most often future, less often past

'go' and 'want', future

'finish', perfect, completive, 'have just'

Also common are derivatives of the particle **nga** 'as, like', predominantly as conditionals, and of **na**, with various meanings. As Heine and Kuteva (2002) point out, it is sometimes hard to distinguish the conjunction **na** 'and, with' from 'have = be with'.

References

- Bastin, Y. 1989a. El prefijo locativo de la clase 18 y la expresión del progresivo presente en Bantu (1), *Estudios Africanos* 4, 6: 35-55.
- 1989b. El prefijo locativo de la clase 18 y la expresión del progresivo presente en Bantu (2), *Estudios Africanos* 4, 7: 61-86.
- Bearth, T. 2003. Syntax. In Nurse & Philippson (eds.), 121-42.
- Beaudoin-Lietz, Christa, Derek Nurse, & Sarah Rose. 2004. Pronominal object marking in Bantu, in Akinlabi & Adesola (eds.). *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on African Linguistics*. Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 175-88.
- Gordon, R. 2005. Ethnologue. 15th edition. Dallas: SIL International.
- Heine, B. 1976. *A Typology of African Languages based on the order of meaningful elements*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.
- & T. Kuteva. 2002. *World Lexicon of Grammaticalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Meeussen, A.E. 1967. Bantu grammatical reconstructions, *Africana Linguistics* 61, 3:79-121.
- Mous, M. 2003. Nen (A44). In Nurse & Philippson (eds.), 283-306.
- Nurse, D. 2006. Focus in Bantu: verbal morphology and function. In Owing et al (eds.). *Papers in Bantu Grammar and Description*. Berlin: ZAS, 189-208.
- 2008. *Tense and Aspect in Bantu*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nurse, Derek & Gerard Philippson (eds.). 2003. *The Bantu languages*. London: Routledge.
- Schadeberg, T.C. 2003. Derivation. In Nurse & Philippson (eds.), 71-89.
- Van der Veen, Lolke J. 2003. The B30 language group. In Nurse & Philippson (eds.), 371-91.