
**Displaced arguments:
S-O-V-X word order in Mande**

Tatiana Nikitina

Proceedings of Conference on
Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

Edited by Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond, Monik Charette,
David Nathan & Peter Sells

13-14 November 2009 School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project
Department of Linguistics
School of Oriental and African Studies
Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square
London WC1H 0XG
United Kingdom

Department of Linguistics:
Tel: +44-20-7898-4640
Fax: +44-20-7898-4679
linguistics@soas.ac.uk
<http://www.soas.ac.uk/academics/departments/linguistics>

Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project:
Tel: +44-20-7898-4578
Fax: +44-20-7898-4349
elap@soas.ac.uk
<http://www.hrelp.org>

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ISBN: 978-0-7286-0392-9

This publication can be cited as:

Tatiana Nikitina. 2009. Displaced arguments: S-O-V-X word order in Mande. In Peter K. Austin, Oliver Bond, Monik Charette, David Nathan & Peter Sells (eds) *Proceedings of Conference on Language Documentation and Linguistic Theory 2*. London: SOAS.

or:

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Displaced arguments: S-O-V-X word order in Mande

TATIANA NIKITINA
Freie Universität, Berlin

1. INTRODUCTION

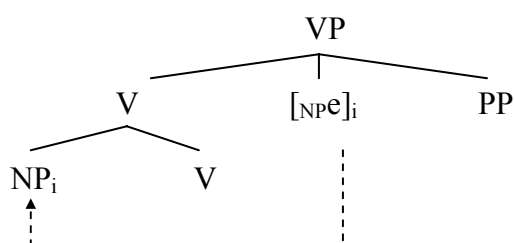
Mande languages are characterized by a typologically unusual rigid S-O-V-X word order pattern: while objects precede the verb, all other arguments and adjuncts follow it (Creissels et al. 2008: 129, *inter alia*). This pattern, which is surprisingly uniform across the family, is illustrated in (1) by an example from Susu (Creissels 2005), where the verb selects for an object and an oblique argument, and the latter is expressed as a postpositional phrase; the two arguments appear on the opposite sides of the verb.¹

- (1) S O V [PP]
 n̄ *n̄ngéé* *fíí-mà* *í* *má*
 1SG cow give-FUT 2SG to
 ‘I will give you a cow’

In generative syntax, the S-O-V-X word order of Mande is usually derived from an underlying SVO structure. In an account of the sentence structure of Mahou (Central Mande), Koopman (1984: 126-8) suggests that verbs in Mahou assign their theta-roles to the right but Case to the left, hence the difference in the position of arguments marked by postpositions (postverbal) and noun phrase objects (preverbal): while both object noun phrases and postpositional arguments are generated in the post-verbal position (in an SVO structure), object noun phrases move into the preverbal position in order to be assigned Case. The structure in (2), based on Koopman (1984: 128), summarizes the transformational account of the S-O-V-X word order; the arrow represents the movement of object noun phrases within a verbal constituent from their original (hypothesized) position after the verb to the preverbal position. The same derivation is intended to account for the word order of Mande languages in general (Koopman 1984: 127); in particular, it is adopted for Bamana in Koopman (1992) and for Kpelle in Travis (1989).

¹ The abbreviations used in this paper are 1 = first person, 2 = second person, 3 = third person, ALN = alienable possessive pronoun, COP = copula, DEF = definite marker, FUT = future, NMLZ = nominalizer, PL = plural marker, PPS = postposition introducing non-finite complements, PROG = progressive marker, REFL = reflexive pronoun.

(2) Movement-based analysis of the S-O-V-X word order



In this paper, I discuss the sentence structure of Wan, a Southeastern Mande language spoken in Côte d'Ivoire, and present evidence that the movement-based account is inconsistent with certain syntactic properties of embedded clauses and nominalizations. In particular, I argue that the word order of Wan, and possibly of other Mande languages, is best explained not in terms of an underlying SVO structure but rather in terms of unusual syntactic position of postpositional arguments, which appear outside of the verb phrase. This structure presents a challenge both for Koopman's analysis of Mande and, more generally, for the major versions of transformation-based syntactic theory.

2. DISPLACED ARGUMENTS OF EMBEDDED VERBS

One type of evidence that is problematic for the transformational account of the S-O-V-X word order in Mande is supplied by sentences with embedded clauses where the embedded verb selects for a postpositional argument. On Koopman's analysis, such postpositional arguments are generated in a head-initial structure, after the verbs that select for them within the same verb phrase (cf. 2). Their position is not affected by the movement of object noun phrases to the preverbal position, hence postpositional arguments are predicted to appear after the verb within the same embedded clause. This prediction, however, is not borne out by the data. As discussed in Nikitina (2009), all embedded verbs in Wan are obligatorily separated from their postpositional arguments, suggesting that oblique arguments do not form a syntactic constituent with their verb at any level of syntactic analysis.

This pattern can be illustrated with two types of construction with embedded clause. In one, the embedded verb appears in the position before the matrix verb; this preverbal position of the non-finite complement is shared with objects of transitive verbs. Relatively few verbs in Wan select for this type of non-finite complement; the two most frequent ones are *ságlà* 'start' and *gògbò* 'try,

attempt'.² Whenever the embedded verb is transitive, the object appears before the verb, within the same non-finite clause, as in (3a, b).

- (3) (a) è [yrē é ló]_{VP} ságlā
 3SG work DEF do started
 'He began to do the work.'
- (b) è [wì é tɛ́]_{VP} gògbō
 3SG animal DEF kill attempted
 'He tried to kill the animal.'

The crucial evidence comes from examples where the embedded verb selects for an oblique argument. Contrary to the prediction of the transformational account that the postpositional argument should appear immediately after the embedded verb, within the same embedded clause, all postpositional phrases follow the matrix verb, as illustrated in (4a, b)–(5a, b).

- (4) (a) è [kúnâ]_{VP} ságlā [yrē é gó]_{PP}
 3SG climb started tree DEF in
 'She began to climb onto the tree.'
- (b) *è kúnâ [yrē é gó]_{PP} ságlā
 3SG climb tree DEF in started
- (5) (a) è [klénê tálà]_{VP} gògbō [bòlè é klā]_{PP}
 3SG stone throw tried bird DEF after
 'He tried to throw a stone at the bird.'
- (b) *è klénê tálà [bòlè é klā]_{PP} gògbō
 3SG stone throw bird DEF after tried

The non-adjacency of embedded verbs and their postpositional arguments is problematic for Koopman's analysis, as it shows that postpositional phrases do not form a syntactic constituent with the verb that selects for them, and hence do not appear within the same verb phrase where they are assumed to be generated (cf. 2).

In the other type of construction with embedded clause, the matrix verb selects for a postposition-marked non-finite complement. The verbs selecting for a postposition-marked embedded clause are rather numerous; some widely used verbs of this kind are *pa* 'be capable of', *bò* 'finish', *dàgà* 'stop', *kúnâ* 'start', among others. With matrix verbs of this type, the embedded verb (as well as its

² Preverbal non-finite complements are also selected by the verbs *dìnâ* 'teach, learn (how to)' and *lá* 'show (how to)'; the special semantic and syntactic properties of complements of these verbs are discussed in Nikitina (2008: Ch. 6).

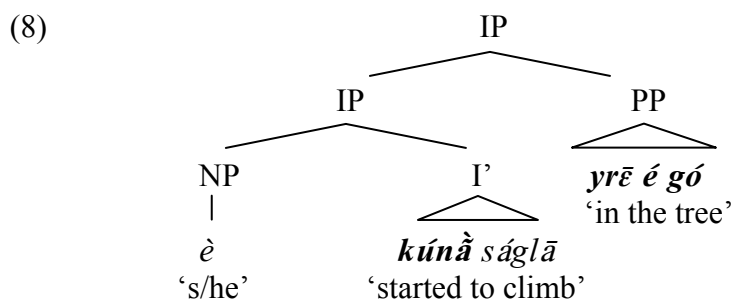
object, if the verb is transitive) is introduced by a postposition (typically, one of the three postpositions: *yā*, *mì*, or *lé*), and the postpositional phrase appears after the matrix verb, consistent with the S-O-V-X word order pattern.

- (6) (a) *è dāgā [yrē ló]_{VP} mì*
 3SG stopped work do PPS
 ‘She stopped working.’
- (b) *è sī ñ lèñ [nāā kú é dī]_{VP} yā*
 3SG helped 1SG to 1SG.ALN house DEF build PPS
 ‘He helped me build my house.’

As in the case of embedded clauses in the preverbal position, postpositional arguments cannot appear next to their verb. Instead of constituting part of the same verb phrase with the embedded verb, they must follow the postposition that introduces the embedded clause.

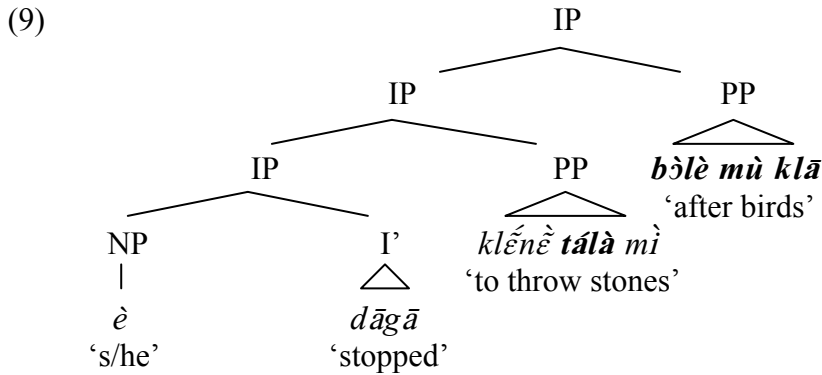
- (7) (a) *è dāgā [klēñ tálà]_{VP} mì [bòlè mù klā]_{PP}*
 3SG stopped stone throw PPS bird PL after
 ‘He stopped throwing stones at birds.’
- (b) *è sī ñ lèñ [kúnā]_{VP} yā [yrē é gó]_{PP}*
 3SG helped 1SG to climb PPS tree DEF in
 ‘He helped me climb the tree.’

This evidence, too, supports the conclusion that postpositional phrases are not part of a verb phrase but instead are adjoined to the entire finite clause in which the verb is embedded, as represented in (8).³



In (8), the postpositional argument of the verb embedded in the non-finite complement (*yrē é gó* ‘in the tree’) is adjoined to the entire finite clause and therefore follows the matrix verb. In (9), I represent the structure of the other type of sentence with embedding, where the verb selecting for a postpositional argument is embedded in a postpositional phrase.

³ For a complete syntactic analysis and additional evidence, see Nikitina (2009).



In this type of sentence, too, the postpositional argument is separated from the embedded verb, this time by the postposition introducing the embedded clause. Neither the structure in (8) nor the one in (9) is consistent with the derivation of the S-O-V-X word order described in the Introduction.

3. DISPLACED ARGUMENTS OF NOMINALIZATIONS

‘Displaced’ postpositional phrases are not restricted to sentences with embedded verbs; they are also found regularly in sentences with nominalizations, where the postpositional argument is selected by a deverbal noun.⁴ As in the case of embedded verbs, such postpositional arguments must follow the main verb and often appear at a considerable distance from the deverbal noun, as in (10a, b).

- (10) (a) *wiá-ŋ yē é bō làklù gó*
 enter-NMLZ time DEF arrived school in
 ‘The time to enroll in school arrived.’

- (b) *yāá wìté-ŋ gbè lá lé gbānē mū yā*
 3SG+COP hunt-NMLZ manner show PROG dog PL with

é gbè lēŋ
 REFL son to

‘He is showing to his son the way of hunting with dogs.’

In (10a), the postpositional phrase (*làklù gó* ‘in school’) is selected by the deverbal noun *wiáŋ* ‘entering’, which appears in a typical nominal position within a possessive construction (*wiáŋ yē* ‘time of entering’) but at the same time inherits from the corresponding verb the selection of a postpositional argument. Similarly, in (10b) the deverbal noun *wìtéŋ* ‘hunting’ is associated with a postpositional phrase (*gbānē mū yā* ‘with dogs’). In both sentences, the

⁴ On formation and use of deverbal nouns in Wan, see Nikitina (2008).

postpositional argument follows the main verb, consistent with the sentence structure represented in (8) and contrary to what the transformational account of the S-O-V-X word order predicts. In this way, evidence from arguments of nominalized verbs complements the evidence from arguments of embedded verbs presented in the previous section.

4. CONCLUSION

The pattern of obligatory non-local realization of oblique arguments challenges the movement-based accounts that have been advanced to explain the unusual S-O-V-X word order of Mande languages. More generally, it is problematic for the Projection Principle of transformational grammar, or the assumption that arguments originate next to the verb that subcategorizes for them. In this sense, the case study of the syntax of postpositional phrases in Wan once again illustrates the importance of carefully considering various types of evidence for the development of an empirically adequate syntactic account both of one particular language and an entire language type (in our case, of languages with S-O-V-X word order).

This is especially important in the case of endangered and lesser-studied languages spoken in remote regions. The absence of good descriptions or large amounts of easily accessible data is but one reason why such languages are in danger of being improperly analyzed. Well-known and well-established types of analysis are often based on assumptions that are rarely questioned in the study of the familiar Indo-European languages but which may need to be revised when data from newly described languages is taken into account. The case study discussed in this paper suggests that the word order properties of Wan, and possibly other Mande languages, cannot be accounted for in terms of movement. I hope that it also demonstrates the need for a more in-depth study of the syntax of Mande languages, which may provide a rich source of data for the testing of alternative theories of syntax.

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