

**West African Word Order Workshop (WAWOW):
TAM-conditioned OV/VO alternations in West African languages**

This workshop seeks to bring together researchers working on OV/VO alternations in West African languages, with a particular focus on diachronic questions and TAM-conditioned variation.

West African languages are recognized for having tense–aspect–mood (TAM) conditioned word order alternations (for overviews see Creissels 2005, 2010; Gensler and Güldemann 2003; Güldemann 2007, 2018; Heine 1975a, 1975b; Nurse et al. 2016, Sande et al. 2019; as well as discussion in Heath 2024, in prep). These alternations involve contrasts between SVO and SOV orders, sometimes mediated by the presence of an auxiliary (e.g. SVO/SAuxOV). The alternations may be synchronically productive or only residually attested. Examples in (1)–(2) are drawn from Dyachkov and Hantgan (forthcoming) to illustrate the phenomenon in language isolate Bangime, wherein SVO is found in Perfective contexts and SAuxOV occurs in Imperfectives:

| (1) Perfective aspect | | | (2) Imperfective aspect | | | |
|-----------------------|------------|------------|-------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------------------|
| S | V | O | S | AUX | O | V |
| <i>ǰí=</i> | <i>ɥàà</i> | <i>bǎ̃</i> | <i>ń=</i> | <i>dà</i> | <i>bǎ̃</i> | <i>ǰ̃=</i> <i>ɥáá</i> |
| 3S | buy | goat | 3S | IPFV | goat | LINK buy |
| ‘He bought a goat.’ | | | ‘He is buying a goat.’ | | | |

While TAM-conditioned SOV-SVO patterns have been described for some linguistic groups and individual languages (see e.g. Marchese 1986 for Kru; Aboh 2000, 2009 for the Kwa language Gungbe; Heath and Hantgan 2018 for Bangime; Mous 2022, Kerr 2024 for the Bantu language Nyokon), their broader interpretation remains unclear. Several competing (and not mutually exclusive) perspectives have been proposed:

- that they arise from **grammaticalization pathways** affecting auxiliaries and verbal morphology,
- that they reflect **information structure-conditioned variation** which is linked to TAM context,
- that they reflect **contact-induced convergence** across languages in a shared areal space,
- or that they represent **diachronically layered systems**, in which older structures persist alongside newer ones.

A central question is how to interpret these alternations in historical terms. That is:

- How can **earlier constituent order be reconstructed** in a language with OV/VO alternations?
- Are the alternations primarily the result of **grammaticalization** or more recent **areal diffusion** from languages with different constituent order?

These patterns also raise methodological questions about how we approach word order variation. In particular:

- To what extent can variable word order be used as evidence for historical reconstruction?
- How do we distinguish between inherited structure and contact-induced patterns?
- What role do TAM systems play in conditioning syntactic change?
- Are there shared pathways across language families, or are these developments language-specific?

The goal of the workshop is to bring together detailed empirical case studies and perspectives in order to clarify the range of phenomena involved, identify commonalities and differences, and outline directions for future research.

We welcome abstracts of up to one page for presentations of 30 minutes with 15 minutes for discussion.

The workshop will take place on July 6th with hybrid format online and at the LLACAN laboratory within the CNRS campus in Villejuif, a suburb just to the south of Paris.

Convenor

Abbie Hantgan-Sonko

Committee

Denis Creissels

Vadim Dyachkov

Tom Güldemann

Jeffrey Heath

Elisabeth Kerr

LLACAN, CNRS, Villejuif (Paris region) / hybrid

References

Aboh, Enoch O. 2000. Object shift and verb movement in Gbe. *Generative Grammar in Geneva* 2. 1–13.

Aboh, Enoch O. 2009. Clause structure and verb series. *Linguistic Inquiry* 40 (1). 1–33.

Creissels, Denis. 2005. S-O-V-X constituent order and constituent order alternations in West African languages. *BLS* 31(2): 37-57. <https://doi.org/10.3765/bls.v31i2.3189>

Creissels, Denis. 2010. Transitive predication typology, alignment typology, word order typology. Leipzig, Germany. Paper presented at DGfS-CNRS Summer School on Linguistic Typology, Leipzig, August 15 – September 3.

Dyachkov, Vadim, and Abbie Hantgan. Forthcoming. Decrypting the Affiliation of a Language Isolate through the Presence of a Typological Rarum: Decomposing TAM-Driven SVO/SOV Alternations in Bangime. *Zeitschrift Für Sprachwissenschaft*.

Gensler, Orin D. and Tom Güldemann. 2003. S-Aux-O-V-Other in Africa: typological and areal perspective. Paper presented at the 4th World Congress of African Linguistics, Workshop “Distributed predicative syntax (S P O V X)”, Rutgers University, June 21, 2003. <https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/de/region/afrika/afrika/linguistik/mitarbeiter/prof-dr-phil-tom-gueldemann/dokumente-unpublished/01-gensler-orin-d-und-gueldemann-tom-2003-s-aux-o-v-other-in-africa-typological-and-areal-perspective.pdf>

Güldemann, Tom. 2007. Preverbal objects and information structure in Benue-Congo. In Aboh, Enoch O., Katharina Hartmann and Malte Zimmermann (eds.), *Focus strategies in African languages: the interaction of focus and grammar in Niger-Congo and Afro-Asiatic*. Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs 191. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 83-111.

Güldemann, Tom. 2018. Language contact and areal linguistics in Africa. In Tom Güldemann (ed.), *The Languages and Linguistics of Africa*, 445–545. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.

Heine, Bernd. 1975a. Language typology and convergence areas in Africa. *Linguistics* 13 (144). 27–48.

Heine, Bernd. 1975b. The study of word order in African languages. *Proceedings of the Sixth Conference on African Linguistics* 20. 161–183.

Heath, Jeffrey & Abbie Hantgan. 2018. *A grammar of Bangime*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.

Heath, Jeffrey. 2024. *West African Progressives and the Journey from SVO to SOVX and Beyond*. Presentation at the 1st Eurasian Congress of Linguists, December 9-13.

Heath, Jeffrey. n.d. *West African Progressives and the Transition from SVO to SOV*. Unpublished.

Kerr, Elisabeth J. 2024. On OV and VO at the Bantu/Bantoid Borderlands. *ACAL in SoCAL* (Berlin), May 17, 297–345. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11210464>

Marchese, Lynell. 1986. *Tense/aspect and the development of auxiliaries in Kru languages*. Dallas and Arlington: Summer Institute of Linguistics, University of Texas at Arlington.

Mous, Maarten. 2022. Tone and the Verbal Systems of Nyokon. *Journal of West African Languages* 49:2, 1–33.

Nurse, Derek, Sarah Rose & John Hewson. 2016. *Tense and aspect in Niger-Congo*. Tervuren: Royal Museum for Central Africa.

Sande, Hannah, Nico Baier, and Peter Jenks. 2019. The Syntactic Diversity of SAuxOV in West Africa. *Theory and Description in African Linguistics* (Berlin), August 13, 667–701. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3367195>

