The (non-)influence of information structure on Tunen syntax

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The Bantu Syntax and Information Structure (BaSIS) VIDI project proposal included a PhD position on "The odd case of Tunen".[1] Tunen (A44/[tvu], Cameroon) was chosen on account of its unusual status within the Bantu family - as well as being a Northwestern language, showing a less agglutinative nature than Eastern and Southern Bantu, Tunen is widely known to be an outlier in the Bantu family in having OV rather than VO word order (1); Dugast (1971); Bearth (2003); Mous (1997, 2003, 2005). Previous treatment by Mous (1997, 2003, 2005) argued that this OV order was in opposition to a VO strategy used in exclusive focus contexts, with a prenominal *á* contrast marker (2), thus showing evidence for information structural factors conditioning Tunen morphosyntax. The BaSIS project called for a full analysis of Tunen's syntax and information structure to serve as a comparison point to other Bantu.

(1) Baka **bekana** talak o yɔkɔ.
ba-ka **be-kana** tala-aka o yɔkɔ
SM.2-PST3 8-basket put-DUR PREP 7.chair
'They put baskets on the chair.'
(Mous 1997:125, adapted)

(2) Ana indi **a monɛ**.
/a-na indiə **a monɛa**/
SM.1-PST2 give PRT money
'S/he gave MONEY.'
(Mous 1997:126, adapted)

In this talk I present the results of this PhD project, which show that information structure plays a much lesser role synchronically in determining Tunen syntax than it does in the other BaSIS languages (Kerr et al. to appear; this conf.). I present data from fieldwork conducted in Mar-Jun 2019 and Oct 2021-Jan 2022 which provides discourse context and is available via audio/video recordings. I tested Mous' hypotheses using the BaSIS methodology (Van der Wal 2021), in addition to the analysis of the Dugast (1975) text corpus (building on prior work by Isaac 2007). By controlling for IS context, I confirm that SOV (specifically S-Aux-O-V-X) should be taken as the pragmatically neutral word order in Tunen, being found across TAM and IS contexts (thetic, VP focus, narrow object focus, etc.). Considering Tunen's general head-initiality, SOV base word order is argued to be derived through formally-conditioned (i.e. non-IS-driven) object movement to a position within the *v*P.

In contrast to Mous' work, my results show that VO strategies are uncommon in Tunen. While contrastive object focus need not be expressed, the most typical means of marking it is by a reverse pseudocleft. I propose that the VáO strategy in (2), besides being low frequency, is synchronically a biclausal pseudocleft strategy rather than an in-situ VO focus strategy. While Tunen clefts contain reduced relatives and can therefore be argued to be in the process of grammaticalising into monoclausal focus constructions (viz. Harris and Campbell 1995), synchronic evidence for biclausality is provided through H-toned subject markers, dependent-clause TAM forms in the 3rd-degree past tense, and lack of evidence for *á* as a general focus marker. The *á* marker is therefore better understood as an identificational copula rather than a contrast or focus marker. Furthermore, asymmetry between subjects and non-subjects in focus expression show the importance of grammatical role in determining Tunen syntax and provides evidence against a general immediate-after-verb (IAV) focus position in Tunen. Data from discontinuous DPs likewise show that IS is not the main factor for determining Tunen word order.

On the basis of these findings, I present an updated overview of Tunen syntax: SOV is the unmarked word order, with ex-situ strategies available for contrastive focus but no in-situ IAV focus position. Grammatical role is more significant than discourse role in determining word order (Kerr et al. to appear), OV syntax is derived through formally-conditioned object movement, and discontinuous noun phrases are not limited to the IS context of contrastive focus on nominal modifiers.

[1] https://bantusyntaxinformationstructure.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/vidi-project-van-der-wal.pdf [accessed 02/2023].

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Glosses and abbreviations

1, 2... = Bantu noun class,
Aux = auxiliary,
DP = determiner phrase/noun phrase,
DUR = durative,
IAV = immediate-after-verb focus position,
IS = information structure,
O = object,
PREP = preposition,
PRT = particle (gloss from Mous 1997),
PST2 = 2nd-degree past tense (hodiernal),
PST3 = 3rd-degree past tense (hestiernal),
S = subject,
SM = subject marker,
TAM = tense/aspect/mood,
V = verb,
*v*P = highest verbal projection,
VP = verb phrase,
X = other (non-argument)