Reflexive, middle, and the reconstruction
of Pre-Proto-Mande constituent order

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1. Introduction

Given the uniformity and total rigidity of the SOVX constituent order across Mande languages, the classical comparative method does not make it possible to go beyond the default hypothesis that this was already the constituent order in the common ancestor of Mande languages at the stage that immediately preceded the fragmentation process that gave rise to the Mande language family. However, the fact that this constituent order can be viewed as a typological oddity led several scholars to consider the possibility of analyzing it as historically derived from a typologically more common constituent order, either canonical SVO, or canonical SOV (i.e., verb-final). The most elaborated proposals are Claudi's (1994) reconstruction of SVO as the constituent order that preceded SOVX in the history of Mande languages, and Nikitina's (2011) argumentation in favor of the canonical SOV hypothesis.

Both proposals entirely rely on observations of some aspects of Mande morphosyntax that can be viewed as typologically irregular, and on the plausibility of grammaticalization paths likely to explain the development of the irregularities in question. However, it is by now well known that typological regularities, in particular those involving word order patterns, are much less strong than was thought some decades ago. In terms of grammaticalization paths, it is equally possible to propose a variety of possible grammaticalization paths likely to lead either from SVO to SOVX, or from canonical SOV to SOVX, and typological plausibility alone is not a very strong argument to evaluate them.

The question which arises, and which has not been discussed so far, is whether the morphology of Mande languages shows concrete evidence on the basis of which a reconstruction hypothesis could be elaborated according to the principles of the internal reconstruction method.

In this presentation, I argue that the analysis of a detransitivizing voice found in some West Mande languages provides arguments in favor of the SVO hypothesis.

The presentation is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the Soninke detransitivizing marker **-i**, and section 3 is about its probable cognates in Bozo languages and Bobo. In Section 4, I argue that the detransitivization markers in question are probably cognate with a reflexive pronoun found as **í** in several branches of the Mande family. In Section 5, I discuss the implications of this hypothesis for the reconstruction of Pre-Proto-Mande constituent order. Section 6 summarizes the conclusions.

2. The Soninke detransitivization marker *-i*

2.1. Formal properties of the detransitivizing suffix *-i*

Most Soninke verbs that have a transitive stem ending with **a**, **o**, or **u** also have an intransitive stem that can be analyzed as derived from the transitive stem by the addition of a detransitivizing marker whose underlying form is -**i**. However, this detransitivizing marker surfaces as a distinct segment (**-yí** or **-nŋí**) with monosyllabic stems only:

(1) The detransitivized form of monosyllabic transitive verbs in Soninke

    kǎ   'insult' → **kà-yí**   'be insulted'
    tǔ   'know'   → **tù-yí**   'be known'
    ñá   'do'   → **ñá-nŋí** 'be done'

With non-monosyllabic stems, the detransitivizing suffix **-i** fuses with the stem and manifests its presence by a change in the last vowel of the stem that can be explained as the result of the amalgamation of an underlying **i** according to the following rules:

(2) The detransitivized form of polysyllabic transitive verbs in Soninke

    a + i → e   as in **kúppà** 'capsize (tr.)' > '**kúppè** 'capsize (intr.)'
    o + i → e   as in **sòxó** 'cultivate' > **sòxé** 'be cultivated'
    u + i → i   as in **fúutú** 'stretch (tr.)' > **fúutí** 'stretch (intr.)'

It is therefore possible to explain the lack of distinct detransitivized forms for non-monosyllabic verbs ending with **e** or **i** as a consequence of the fact that the morphophonological process manifesting the presence of **-i** would apply vacuously to such stems.

    The detransitivizing suffix **-i** is tonally neutral: stems including this suffix invariably show the same tone pattern as the corresponding underived stems.

2.2. Syntactic and semantic properties of the detransitivizing suffix *-i*

Depending on the individual verbs with which it combines, **-i** may express various detransitivizing operations, but it is not equally productive in all its possible uses.

    Agent demotion is by far the most productive use of the detransitivizing marker **-i**. Two semantic subtypes can be recognized, which however are not always easy to distinguish. In the anticausative subtype, the agent is suppressed from argument structure, and the event is presented as occurring spontaneously, or at least without the involvement of a clearly identified instigator, as in (3b). In the passive subtype, the agent is semantically maintained, but it is not expressed, and the subject role is fulfilled by the patient, as in (4b).

(3)   Soninke (pers.doc.)

(3a) **Yúgò-n   dà   wùllì-tùurìntê-n   ñóolà.**
      man-D   TR   dog-rabid-D   drown
      'The man drowned the rabid dog.'

(3b) **Lémínè-n   ñóolè   hànŋé-n   ŋà.**
      child-D   drown.DETR   river-D   at
      'The child drowned in the river.'

(4)   Soninke (pers.doc.)

(4a) **Yàxàré-n   dà   yìllé-n   gòró.**
      woman-D   TR   millet-D   pound
      'The woman pounded the millet.'

(4b) **Yìllé-n   gòré.**
      millet-D   pound.DETR
      'The millet was pounded.'

The distinction between these two semantic varieties of deagentive (or mediopassive) derivation (agent-backgrounding and agent-suppressing) is not rigid. With many verbs, both readings are equally available, depending on the context. What seems to be crucial is the semantic distinction between processes easily conceived as occurring spontaneously (such as 'drown') and processes that require the intervention of an agent (such as 'become pounded').

   With a few verbs among those that have the ability to combine with the detransitivizing marker **-i** in deagentive function, the same form also has a reflexive or autocausative use: [1]

(5) Transitive Soninke verbs whose detransitivized form has a reflexive or autocausative use

   bóorà   'undress (tr.)'   > **bóorè**   'undress oneself' – Ex. (6)
   kàhú   'gather (tr.)'   > **kàhí**   'gather (intr.)'
   húutú   'stretch (tr.)'   > **húutí**   'stretch (intr.)

(6)   Soninke (pers.doc.)

(6a) **Yúgò-n   dà   í   rèmmê-n   bóorà.**
      man-D   TR   REFL   son/daughter-D   undress
      'The man undressed his son.'

(6b) **Yúgò-n   bóorè.**
      man-D   undress.DETR
      'The man undressed.'

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[1] Soninke has two pronouns used productively to express reflexivity: **í** is a long-distance reflexive used in logophoric contexts, and as a reflexive possessive (as in (6a)), whereas **dú** is a local reflexive used for object or oblique reflexivization. The term 'autocausative' is taken from Geniušienė (1987).

The detransitivizing marker **-i** may also have a depatientive (or antipassive) function, for which it is in competition with the dedicated antipassive suffix **-ndì ~ -ndí**. There is however a clear dissymmetry between the deagentive and depatientive uses of **-i**: many of the intransitive verbs derived by means of **-i** can only be used in deagentive function, but none of them can be used exclusively in depatientive function. As illustrated by **yígé**, intransitive form of **yígá** 'eat' – Ex. (7) – the intransitive verbs derived by means of **-i** that can be used in depatientive function also have a deagentive (anticausative or passive) use.

(7)   Soninke (pers.doc.)

(7a)   **Lémúnù   kú   dà   tíyè-n   ñígá.**[2]
        child.PL   DEM.PL   TR   meat-D   eat
        'The children ate the meat.'

(7b)   **Lémúnù   kú   yígé.**
        child.PL   DEM.PL   eat.DETR
        'The children ate.'

(7c)   **Tíyè-n   ñígé.**
        meat-D   eat.DETR
        'The meat was eaten.'

3. Possible cognates of the Soninke detransitivizing suffix *-i*

Detransitivizing suffixes with a similar form and a similar variety of functions are found in Bozo (Soninke's closest relative) and Bobo (a language belonging to another sub-branch of West Mande.

3.1. The detransitivizng suffix *-i* in Bozo languages

All descriptions of Bozo languages mention the existence of relatively numerous transitive / intransitive verb pairs suggesting that, historically, a suffix **-i** cognate with the Soninke suffix **-i** presented in Section 2 was used productively in the ancestor of Bozo languages to detransitivize transitive verbs. For example, Daget & al. (1953) give a list of more than 60 such pairs.

    The situation in Bozo languages is similar to that observed in Soninke, both formally and functionally, with however an interesting difference: the antipassive function of this detransitivization device is much more prominent in Bozo languages than in Soninke. It is clear from the lists of transitive / intransitive verb pairs provided by grammars and dictionaries of Bozo languages that, contrary to Soninke, antipassivization is by far the most common function of this derivation in Bozo. It is however not its only possible function, and

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[2] In Soninke, **y** in contact with a nasal consonant is automatically converted into **ñ**, hence the **ñígá** variant of the verb **yígá** 'eat'.

examples of intransitives derived by means of the same suffix **-i** but carrying a reflexive or passive meaning can also be found.[3]

3.2. The detransitivizng suffix *-i* in Bobo

In Bobo, the detransitivizing suffix **-i** can only be characterized as vestigial (Le Bris & Prost 1981: 59). However, the range of meanings attested by the few verbs analyzable as derived by means of this suffix is comparable to that observed in Soninke and Bozo. For example, **zɛ̀** 'see (intr.)' is functionally the antipassive form of **zà** 'see (tr.)', whereas **dɔ̀rɛ̀** 'appear, be shown' is functionally the passive or anticausative form of **dɔ̀rɔ̄** 'show'.

This similarity both in form and meaning strongly suggests an ancient detransitivizing derivation involving a suffix cognate with the detransitivizing suffix **-i** found in Soninke and Bozo. The difference is that, in contrast to Soninke and Bozo, Bobo has maintained just a handful of such transitive / intransitive verb pairs.

4. A reconstruction hypothesis

The range of functions fulfilled by the Soninke detransitivizing suffix **-i** and its Bozo and Bobo probable cognates is typical of 'old' middle markers, and a midvoice marker ***-i** could therefore be reconstructed at Proto-West-Mande level. However, what I would like to argue is that the reconstruction of a Proto-West-Mande midvoice marker ***-i** is not necessary, since a more plausible scenario is parallel grammaticalization from a common source, as attested for example by the reflexes of the Indo-European reflexive pronoun ***se** found as midvoice markers in several branches of Indo-European.[4]

In the languages of the world, two possible sources have been identified for markers ambiguous between an antipassive function and other semantic types of detransitivization: reflexive pronouns, as in Indo-European languages, or markers of reciprocity / associativity, as in Bantu languages, Oceanic languages, or Turkic languages (Janic 2013).

As regards the West Mande languages in which a detransitivizing suffix **-i** is attested, a crucial observation is that the Soninke suffix **-i** and its Bozo and Bobo cognates are never found with a reciprocal or associative meaning, but can be found with some verbs in reflexive function, which suggests that the expression of reflexivity (rather than reciprocity) was probably the original function of this suffix.

The possibility that the West-Mande detransitivizing suffix **-i** might result from the grammaticalization of a reflexive pronoun in object role must therefore be considered. In the constructions of Mande languages expressing reflexivity (in particular in Southern Mande languages), it is often difficult (or even impossible) to isolate a segment unambiguously analyzable as the marker of reflexivity, but a reflexive pronoun **í** is attested in several branches of the Mande family, and is consequently a good candidate for reconstruction as a reflexive pronoun at least at Proto-West-Mande level (and perhaps even at Proto-Mande level). In Soninke, **í** is a long-distance reflexive used in logophoric contexts, and as a reflexive possessive – Ex. (8). In Mandinka and other Manding varieties, a reflexive pronoun **í** is found in object function – Ex. (9).

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[3] See Blecke (1996) for a more detailed account of detransitivization in a Bozo language (Tigemaxo).

[4] For example, in Danish, both the reflexive pronoun **sig** and the mediopassive suffix **-s** are reflexes of the Indo-European reflexive pronoun ***se**.

(8)   Soninke (pers.doc.)

(8a)   **Yúgò-n kùné tì   í   má   dèmù   gàarà-ná.**
       man-D   swear that REFL CPL.NEG   have_ever_done lie-GER
       'The man_i swore that he_i never lied.'

(8b)   **Yúgò-n dà   í   rèmmê-n   bóorà.**
       man-D   TR   REFL son/daughter-D undress
       'The man_i undressed his_i son.'

(9)   Mandinka (pers.doc.)

       Kèw-ôo yè   í   kǔu.
       man-D   CPL   REFL wash
       'The man washed (himself).'

A reflexive pronoun **í** is also attested in the Samogo language Seenku (aka Sembla, cf. McPherson 2017), and according to Le Bris & Prost (1981: 44), **yí** is the autonomous form of the reflexive pronoun in Bobo.

5. Implications for the reconstruction of Pre-Proto-Mande constituent order.

There is however a serious problem with the hypothesis that the detransitivizing suffix **-i** attested in Soninke, Bozo and Soninke results from the grammaticalization of the reflexive pronoun *í** in object role.

As already mentioned, all Mande languages invariably show a rigid SOVX constituent order, and there is no obvious reason not to reconstruct the same constituent order at Proto-Mande level. The problem is that, in languages in which objects invariably precede the verb (either SOVX languages or canonical SOV languages), the grammaticalization of a reflexive pronoun in object role is expected to result in the creation of prefix, and it is difficult to imagine an alternative scenario that could result in the creation of a suffix. By contrast, in a consistent SVO language, a reflexive pronoun in object role is expected to grammaticalize as a suffix.

Consequently, the hypothesis that the detransitivizing suffix **-i** found in Soninke, Bozo and Bobo grammaticalized from the reflexive pronoun *í** implies that, at some stage in the evolution of their common ancestor, the constituent order in verbal predication was SVO, and a shift from SVO to SOVX occurred only after the reflexive pronoun *í** in object role had started grammaticalizing as a verbal suffix in some dialects of Pre-Proto-Mande.

6. Conclusion

In this presentation, I do not pretend to have solved the question of the emergence of the typologically unusual SOVX constituent order pattern in the history of Mande languages, but only to have added a new piece to the puzzle. My claim is that, (a) it is highly plausible that the detransitivizing suffix **-i** found in Soninke, Bozo and Bobo is cognate with the reflexive

pronoun **-í** attested in several branches of the Mande family, and (b) the hypothesis that this suffix originates from a reflexive pronoun in object role is hardly compatible with a constituent order other than SVO at the time when the grammaticalization process started.

Abbreviations

CPL = completive, D = definiteness marker or default determiner,[5] DEM = demonstrative, DETR = detransitivization marker, GER = gerundive, NEG = negative, O = object, PL = plural, REFL = reflexive, S = subject, SG = singular, TR = transitivity marker, V = verb, X = oblique.

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[5] A default determiner is a grammatical element that has the syntactic distribution of a determiner, but whose presence has implications for the interpretation of noun phrases in limited contexts only, and can otherwise be analyzed as resulting from a mere syntactic constraint.