

THE DETRANSITIVIZING SUFFIX *-I* AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF PRE-PROTO-MANDE CONSTITUENT ORDER

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Abstract: The uniformity and total rigidity of the SOVX constituent order across Mande languages constitutes a typological oddity, which led several scholars to discuss the possibility of analyzing it as historically derived from a typologically more common constituent order. In this article, I show that the hypothesis of a historical link between a detransitivizing suffix *-i* found in some West Mande languages and a reflexive pronoun reconstructable as *í* has implications for the reconstruction of Pre-Proto-Mande constituent order.

Key words: Mande, constituent order, reflexive, middle voice

1. Introduction

Given the uniformity and total rigidity of the SOVX constituent order across Mande languages (in which the preverbal position of core syntactic terms contrasts with the postverbal position of obliques), 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 discuss possible explanations, in particular by considering the possibility of analyzing the Mande pattern of constituent order as historically derived from a typologically

more common constituent order, either canonical SVO, or canonical SOV (i.e., verb-final).

Givón (1975: 52; 1979: 206–207) treated the SOVX constituent order of Mande as an intermediary stage in the transition from canonical SOV (verb-final) to SVO, whereas Claudi (1994) reconstructed SVO as the constituent order that preceded SOVX in the history of Mande languages. Gensler (1994; 1997) argued that the SOVX constituent order of Mande is best analyzed as inherited from Proto-Niger-Congo. Nikitina (2011) discusses particularities of Mande syntax she analyzes as responsible for the development and stability of the SOVX pattern across Mande languages, without, however, taking a particular stance on the possibility of considering the SOVX pattern as resulting from the evolution of a more common pattern, be it SVO or canonical SOV.

Claudi's (1994) proposal is particularly elaborated. However, as shown by Gensler (1997) and Kastenholz (2003), her conclusions are basically flawed by the fact that the only mechanisms of word order change she really considers are those involving the grammaticalization of TAM periphrases. Moreover, the grammaticalization scenario she puts forward does not necessarily imply that the object occupies the postverbal position in the source construction. In fact, it is not difficult to imagine a variety of other types of scenarios likely to lead either from SVO to SOVX, or from canonical SOV to SOVX (for example, markedness reversal in constituent order alternations expressing variation in information structure).

Another important aspect of all previous discussions of the Mande pattern of constituent order is that they take the Niger-Congo affiliation of Mande for granted, and consequently, implicitly admit that the SOVX pattern of Mande can only be analyzed as deriving from a constituent order pattern reconstructable to Proto-Niger-Congo.

The question which arises, and which has not really been discussed so far, is whether the morphology of Mande languages shows concrete evidence on the basis of which a constituent order different from SOVX could be reconstructed in Pre-Proto-Mande according to the

principles of the internal reconstruction method, without necessarily trying to link this question with that of constituent order in Proto-Niger-Congo.

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

The article is organized as follows. §2 presents the Soninke detransitivizing marker *-i*, and §3 is about its probable cognates in Bozo languages and Bobo. In §4, I discuss the possibility that the detransitivization markers in question are cognate with a reflexive pronoun found as *í* in several branches of the Mande family. In §5, I discuss the implications of this hypothesis for the reconstruction of Pre-Proto-Mande constituent order. §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* (Creissels 1992; Creissels & Diagne 2013).

Morphologically, the detransitivizing marker *-i* surfaces as a distinct segment (*-yí* or *-nɲí*) with monosyllabic stems only:

- (1) The detransitivized form of monosyllabic transitive verbs in Soninke
- | | | | | |
|-----------|----------|---|---------------|---------------|
| <i>kǎ</i> | ‘insult’ | → | <i>kà-yí</i> | ‘be insulted’ |
| <i>tǔ</i> | ‘know’ | → | <i>tù-yí</i> | ‘be known’ |
| <i>ñá</i> | ‘do’ | → | <i>ñá-nɲí</i> | ‘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
- | | |
|-----------------------|---|
| $a + i \rightarrow e$ | as in <i>kúppà</i> ‘capsize (tr.)’ > <i>kúppè</i> ‘capsize (intr.)’ |
| $o + i \rightarrow e$ | as in <i>sòxó</i> ‘cultivate’ > <i>sòxé</i> ‘be cultivated’ |
| $u + i \rightarrow i$ | as in <i>fíutú</i> ‘stretch (tr.)’ > <i>fíutí</i> ‘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 (Creissels To appear).

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 mark various detransitivizing operations. However, 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 decausative 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.)

a. *Yúgò-n dà wùllì-tùurintê-n ñóolà.*
 man-D CPL.TR dog-rabid-D drown
 ‘The man drowned the rabid dog.’

b. *Lémínè-n ñóolè hànǵé-n ǵà.*
 child-D drown.DETR river-D at
 ‘The child drowned in the river.’

(4) Soninke (pers.doc.)

- a. *Yàxàré-n dà yillé-n gòró.*
 woman-D CPL.TR millet-D pound
 ‘The woman pounded the millet.’
- b. *Yillé-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’ – example (6)
kàhú ‘gather (tr.)’ > *kàhí* ‘gather (intr.)’
húutú ‘stretch (tr.)’ > *húutí* ‘stretch (intr.)’

(6) Soninke (pers.doc.)

- a. *Yúgò-n dà í rèmmê-n bóorà.*
 man-D CPL.TR REFL son/daughter-D undress
 ‘The man undressed his son.’

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

- b. *Yúgò-n bóorè.*
 man-D undress.DETR
 ‘The man undressed.’

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 asymmetry 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 in example (7) by *yígé*, intransitive form of *yíǵá* ‘eat’, the intransitive verbs derived by means of *-i* that can be used in depatientive function also have a deagentive (decausative or passive) use.

(7) Soninke (pers.doc.)

- a. *Lémúnù kú dà tíyè-n ñíǵá.*²
 child.PL DEM.PL CPL.TR meat-D eat
 ‘The children ate the meat.’
- b. *Lémúnù kú yígé.*
 child.PL DEM.PL eat.DETR
 ‘The children ate.’
- c. *Tíyè-n ñíǵé.*
 meat-D eat.DETR
 ‘The meat was eaten.’

² In Soninke, *y* in contact with a nasal consonant is automatically converted into *ñ*, hence the *ñíǵá* variant of the verb *yíǵá* ‘eat’.

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 languages (Soninke's closest relatives) and Bobo (a language belonging to another sub-branch of West Mande).

3.1. The detransitivizing 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 §2 was used productively in the ancestor of Bozo languages to detransitivize transitive verbs. For example, Daget et al. (1953) give a list of more than 60 such pairs.

(8) Some illustrations of the detransitivizing derivation in Bozo (Daget & al. 1953)

<i>bo</i>	'burn (tr.)'	>	<i>boi</i>	'burn (intr.)'	(decausative)
<i>kaa</i>	'break (tr.)'	>	<i>kyεε</i>	'break (intr.)'	(decausative)
<i>dya</i>	'eat (tr.)'	>	<i>dye</i>	'eat (intr.)'	(antipassive)
<i>saba</i>	'write (tr.)'	>	<i>sebe</i>	'write (intr.)'	(antipassive)

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

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

3.2. The detransitivizing 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.

(9) Vestiges of the detransitivizing suffix *-i* in Bobo (Le Bris & Prost 1981)

<i>zà</i>	‘see (tr.)’	>	<i>zè</i>	‘see (intr.)’	(antipassive)
<i>d̄r̄</i>	‘show’	>	<i>d̄rè</i>	‘appear, be shown’	(decausative/passive)

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 the reconstruction of a middle voice marker **-i* at Proto-West-Mande level can therefore be considered. However, the reconstruction of a Proto-West-Mande middle voice marker **-i* is not necessary, since parallel grammaticalization from a common source is also quite plausible, as suggested for example by the observation of the reflexes of the Indo-European reflexive pronoun **se* that grammaticalized as middle voice markers in several branches of Indo-European.⁴

In the languages of the world, two main sources have been identified for markers ambiguous between an antipassive function and other semantic types of detransitivization: reflexive pronouns, as in Indo-

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

European languages, or markers of reciprocity / associativity, as in Bantu languages, Oceanic languages, or Turkic languages (Janic 2016). Other possible sources of detransitivizing markers have been discussed in the literature, but in the case of the West-Mande detransitivizing suffix *-i*, the only scenario supported by formal resemblance between this suffix and a possible etymon is the grammaticalization of a former reflexive pronoun (i.e., a scenario of the type attested in various branches of the Indo-European family).

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 (Valentin Vydrin, pers.com.). In Soninke, *í* is a reflexive used in logophoric contexts, and as a reflexive possessive – example (10). In Mandinka and other Manding varieties, a reflexive pronoun *í* is found in object function – example (11).

(10) Soninke (pers.doc.)

- a. *Yúgò-n kùné tì í má dè̀mù gàarà-ná.*
 man-D swear that REFL CPL.NEG have_ever_done lie-GER
 ‘The man_i swore that he_i never lied.’
- b. *Yúgò-n dà í rèmmê-n bóorà.*
 man-D CPL.TR REFL son/daughter-D undress
 ‘The man_i undressed his_i son.’

(11) Mandinka (pers.doc.)

- Kèê yè í kũ.*
 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.

The reflexive pronoun **í* can be viewed as a plausible source of the detransitivizing suffix *-i* attested in Soninke, Bozo, and Bobo, since on the one hand, the grammaticalization path REFLEXIVE PRONOUN > MIDDLE VOICE MARKER is widely attested cross-linguistically, and on the other hand, there seems to be no other possible etymon showing such a formal similarity with the detransitivizing suffix *-i*.

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

However plausible it may be, the hypothesis that the detransitivizing suffix *-i* attested in Soninke, Bozo and Bobo results from the grammaticalization of the reflexive pronoun **í* in object role raises an interesting problem, since it has implications for the reconstruction of Pre-Proto-Mande constituent order.

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 a verbal PREFIX, and it is difficult to imagine an alternative scenario that could result in the creation of a verbal SUFFIX. By contrast, in a consistent SVO language, a reflexive pronoun in object role is expected to grammaticalize as a suffix (as in Russian, where the reflex of the Indo-European reflexive pronoun is the verbal suffix *-sja*, or in Scandinavian languages, where the reflex of the Indo-European reflexive pronoun is the verbal suffix *-s*).

Consequently, the hypothesis that the ancestor of the detransitivizing suffix *-i* found in Soninke, Bozo and Bobo is the reflexive pronoun **í* implies accepting the idea that, at some stage in the evolution of their common ancestor, the constituent order in verbal predication was SVO, and when the shift from SVO to SOVX occurred, the grammaticalization

of the reflexive pronoun **i* in object role as a verbal suffix had already started in some dialects of Pre-Proto-Mande.

6. Conclusion

In this article, 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.

Of course, the possibility that the resemblance between the detransitivizing suffix *-i* and the reflexive pronoun *-í* is due to mere chance cannot be excluded. By itself, this resemblance cannot be viewed as a decisive proof that the SOVX constituent order pattern developed from a former SVO pattern. My claim is simply that, (a) it is very 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) if this hypothesis is correct, the constituent order in the ancestors of the Mande languages that have the detransitivizing suffix *-i* was necessarily SVO at the time when the grammaticalization process started.

Abbreviations

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

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.

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