FACULTY OF ARTS AND PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

CENTRE FOR BANTU STUDIES

RECONSTRUCTING INTERMEDIATE STAGES OF CHANGE IN VERBAL SYNTHESIS IN NIGER-CONGO

ELISABETH J. KERR / COMPARATIVE NIGER-CONGO WORKSHOP, CNRS-LLACAN, VILLEJUIF / 23RD MAY 2025

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fwo

Vlaanderen
is wetenschap

BantUGent

COMPARATIVE NIGER-CONGO
VILLEJUIF, MAY 22-23, 2025

RQ

How should Niger-Congo verb forms be reconstructed?

SYNCHRONIC VARIATION IN NIGER-CONGO

(1)　　Mo　　**mú**　　ìwé　　**wá**　　**fún**　　ẹ.

I　　take　　book　　come　　give　　you

'I brought you a book.'　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(Yoruba (Kwa); Hyman 2004:73)

(2)　　**Ke-tla-lo-ba-mo-kwal-êl-êl-a.**

SM.1SG-FUT-OM.11-OM.2-OM.1-write-APPL-APPL-FV

'I will write it to them for him.'　　　　　　　　　　　(Tswana (Bantu); Cole, 1955:432, adapted)

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SYNCHRONIC VARIATION IN NIGER-CONGO

- Synchronic variation is indicative of change in the history of NC languages

- Debate regarding the **directionality of change**:
  - synthetic → analytic? (e.g. Hyman 2004, 2011a, 2017; Meeussen 1967 for Proto-Bantu as synthetic; Van de Velde & Idiatov 2025)
  - analytic → synthetic? (e.g. Güldemann 2011, 2022; Nurse 2007)
  - (cyclic processes of change; e.g. Schwegler 1990; Haspelmath 2018)

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SYNCHRONIC VARIATION IN NIGER-CONGO

- Debate regarding the **directionality of change**:

(3)   Synthetic predicate structure reconstructed for Proto-Bantu by Meeussen (1967)

Pre-initial+Subject+TAMP+Object+Verb root+Derivation/TAMP+TAMP+Post-final

(Meeussen, 1967:108-111, adapted)

(4)   (Split) predicate structures reconstructed for Proto-Bantu by Güldemann (2022)

a.   i. [SBJ-STEM]   ii. [OBJ-STEM]   iii. [INF-STEM]

b.   i. [SBJ-AUX] [∅ STEM]   ii. [SBJ-AUX] [SBJ- STEM]   iii. [SBJ-AUX] [OBJ- STEM]

iv. [SBJ-AUX] [INF- STEM]

(Güldemann 2022:392)
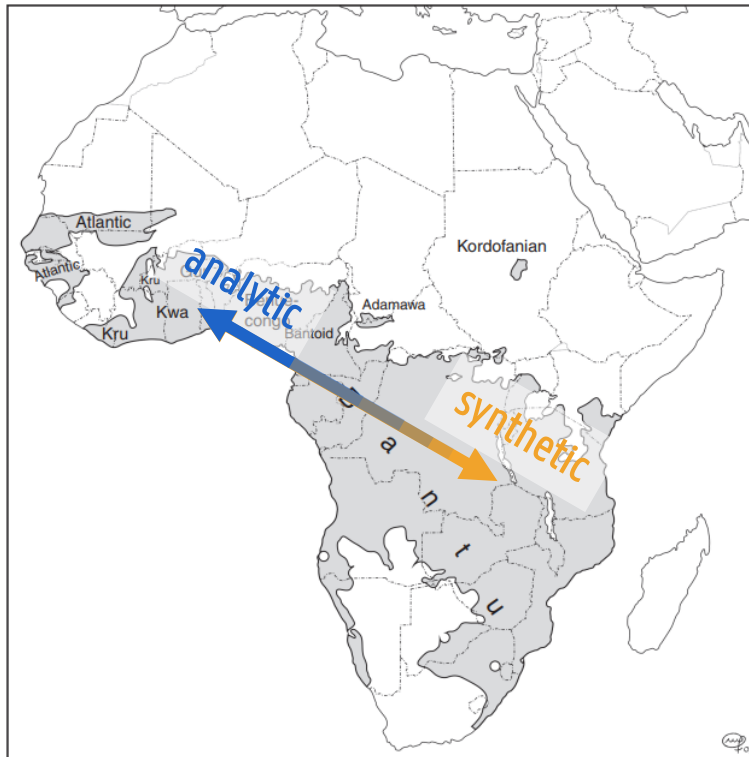
SYNCHRONIC VARIATION IN NIGER-CONGO

- Basic idea of a **geographical cline** between Kwa and Bantu with **drift** between the two
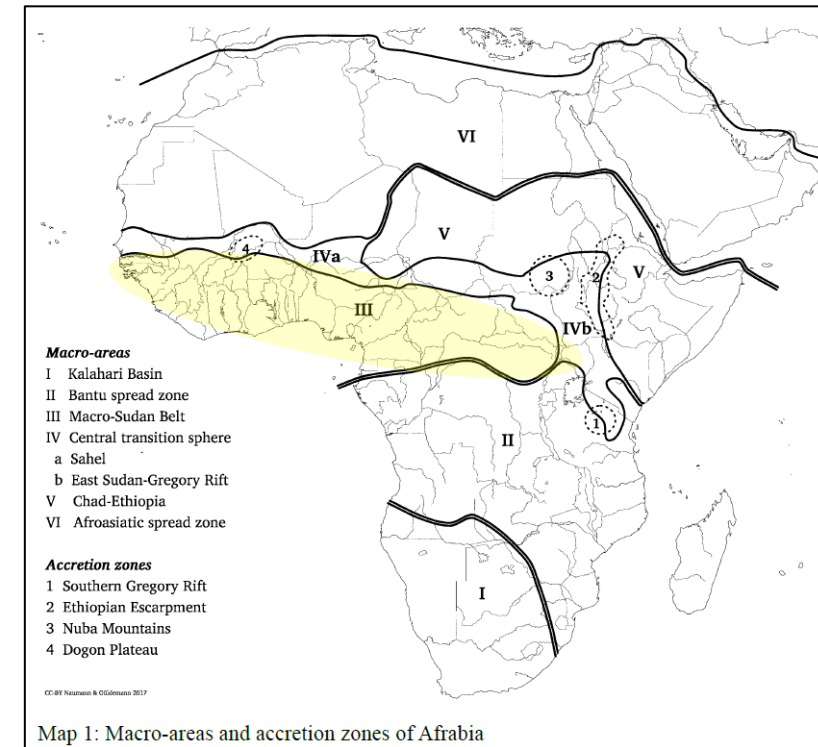 (e.g. Hyman 2017; cf Schwegler 1990:174-178)

(Good 2017: 473)

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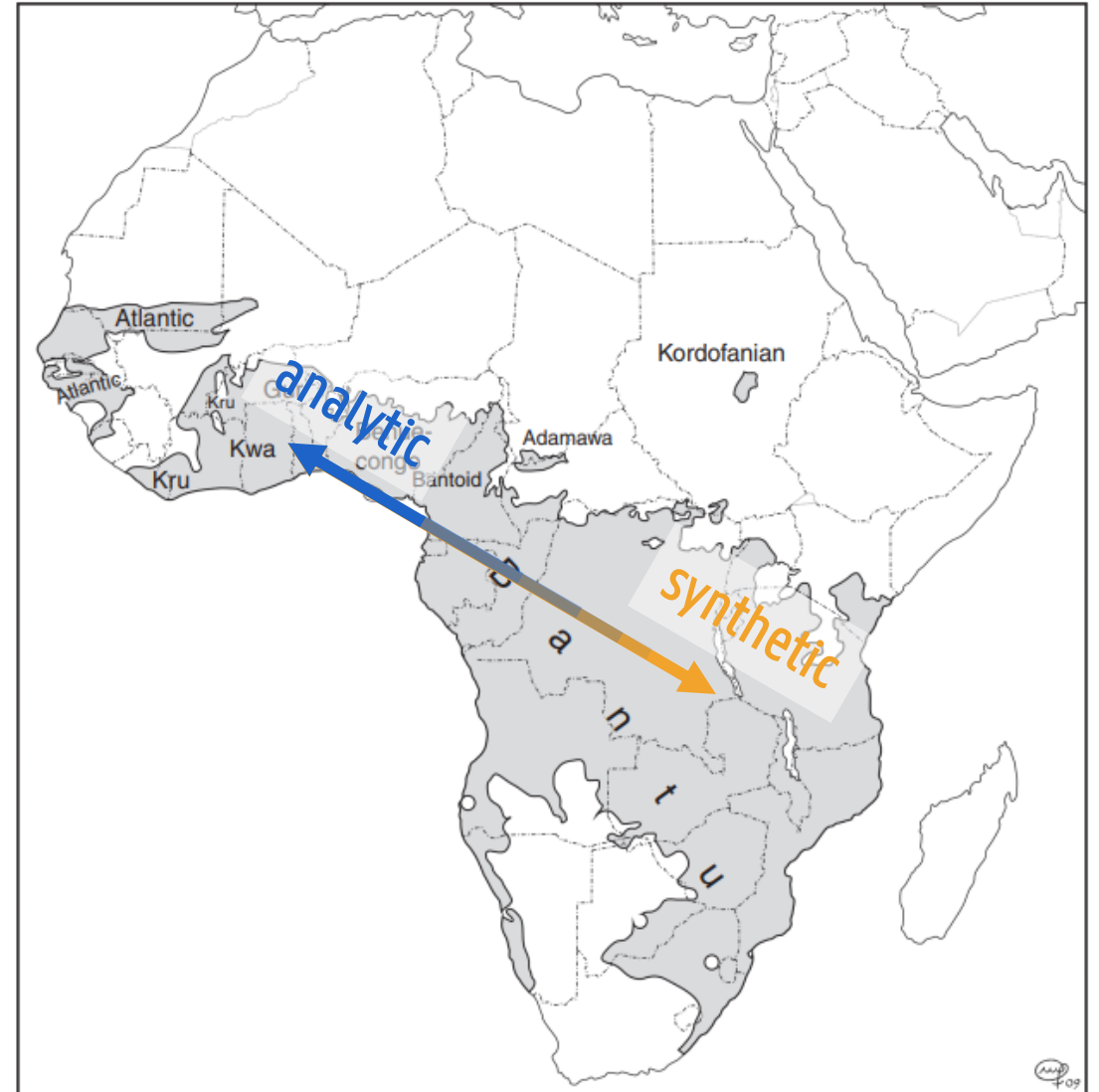
SYNCHRONIC VARIATION IN NIGER-CONGO

- (Possible) interaction between **genealogical relatedness** and **areal effects**

(Good 2017: 473, adapted)

(Güldemann 2018: 473, highlight added)

TODAY

- **Background** to the study of morphosyntactic change

- **Definitional issues** affecting data format and interpretation

- **Case studies** of synchronically intermediate morphosyntactic profiles as potential snapshots into the past
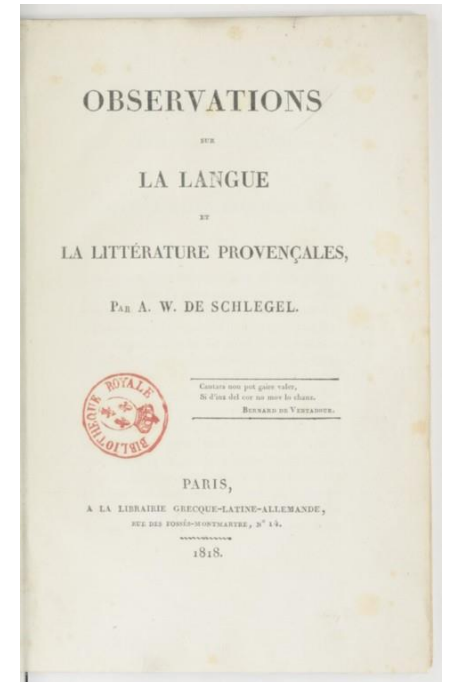
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

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MORPHOLOGICAL TYPOLOGY

- German philologist classification of languages into discrete types (von Schlegel 1808, von Schlegel 1818, von Humboldt 1822, 1836; Schwegler 1990):
  - Isolating/analytic
  - Agglutinating
  - Flexive
  - Incorporating/polysynthetic

OBSERVATIONS
SUR
LA LANGUE
ET
LA LITTÉRATURE PROVENÇALES,
PAR A. W. DE SCHLEGEL.

PARIS,
A LA LIBRAIRIE GRECQUE-LATINE-ALLEMANDE,
RUE DES FOSSÉS-MONTMARTRE, N° 14.
1818.

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MORPHOLOGICAL TYPOLOGY

- The four types conflate 2 dimensions of variation (see e.g. Arkadiev 2020):
  - Number of grammatical morphemes per word

analytic/ isolating	(poly)synthetic

  - Manner of exponence

flexive/ fusional	agglutinative

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MORPHOLOGICAL TYPOLOGY

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  - Manner of exponence

flexive/
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MORPHOLOGICAL TYPOLOGY

- The four types conflate 2 dimensions of variation (see e.g. Arkadiev 2020)

- We need to talk about degree of syntheticity of *constructions*, not of *languages* (Ledgeway 2012:12-15, 2017)

MORPHOLOGICAL TYPOLOGY

- Can we quantify degree of verbal synthesis?

**Table 3.** Greenberg's Indices for Selected Languages

	Sanskrit	Old English	Persian	English	Yakut	Swahili	Vietnamese	Eskimo
Synthesis	2.59	2.12	1.52	1.68	2.17	2.55	1.06	3.72
Agglutination	0.09	0.11	0.34	0.30	0.51	0.67	n/a	0.03
Compounding	1.13	1.00	1.03	1.00	1.02	1.00	1.07	1.00
Derivation	0.62	0.20	0.10	0.15	0.35	0.07	0.00	1.25
Inflection	0.84	0.90	0.39	0.53	0.82	0.80	0.00	1.75
Prefixing	0.16	0.06	0.01	0.04	0.00	1.16	0.00	0.00
Suffixing	1.18	1.03	0.49	0.64	1.15	0.41	0.00	2.72

Table 1. Greenberg (1960)'s quantificational indices for verbal synthesis (Arkadiev 2020:1807).

SOME NUANCES

root

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

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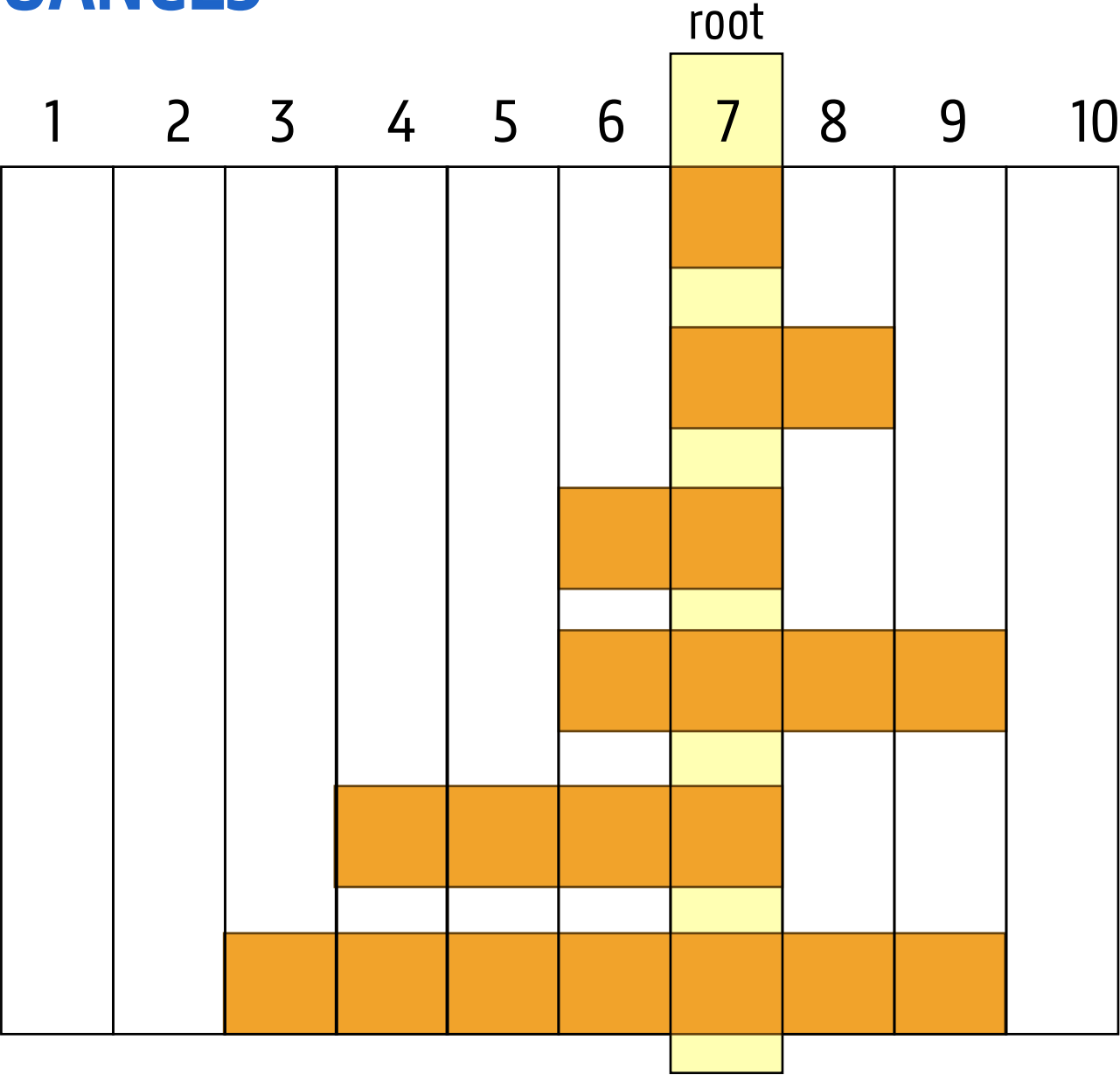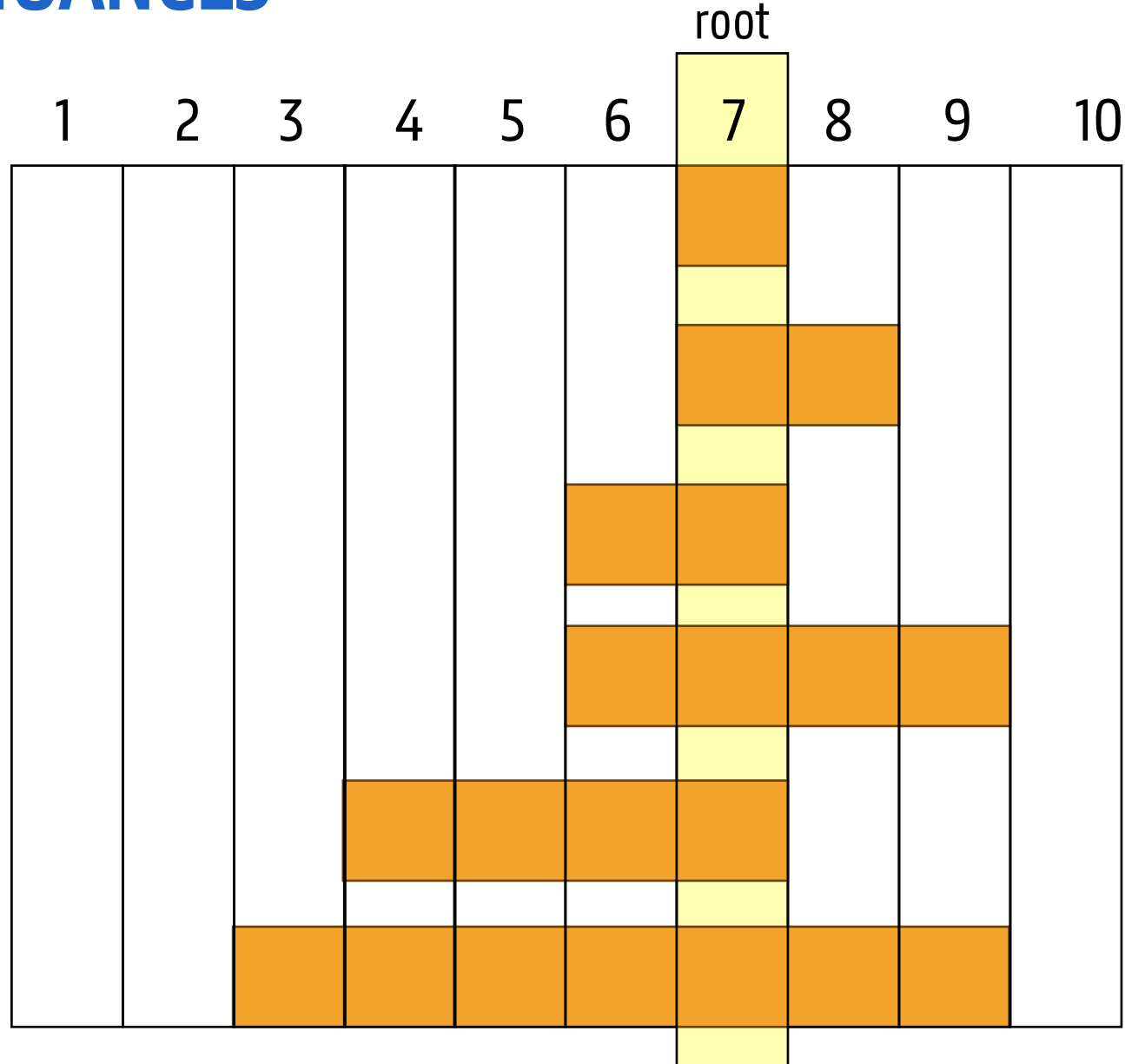
SOME NUANCES

- Quantifying span of verb as measure of degree of synthesis does not capture differences in prefixal vs suffixal direction of expansion from the root

SOME NUANCES

- Verbs show **asymmetries** in the relationship between the root and prefixal vs suffixal material (Hyman 2008; cf Bantu **macrostem** (e.g. Myers 1987, 1995), **prosodic trough** (Hyman 1998))

→ Narrowing the RQ: specific focus on the existence/absence of a wordhood boundary between inflection (INFL) and the verb stem (V)

   (vs e.g. constraints on number of verbal extensions; boundedness of inflectional elements to each other)

DEFINITIONAL ISSUES

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SOME BACKGROUND ASSUMPTIONS

1. Language is **hierarchical**

2. **Words** exist

3. We **can identify words** through linguistic analysis

Cf Good (2016, 2024); Haspelmath (2011, 2015); Schiering et al. (2010); Tallman & Auderset (2023); Tallman et al. (2024), i.a.

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ORTHOGRAPHIC WORDHOOD

ORTHOGRAPHIC WORDHOOD

- The notion of syntheticity relies on the notion of 'word'

- **Phonological word**/P-word   vs   (morpho)**syntactic word**/grammatical word

- =/= **orthographic word**

ORTHOGRAPHIC WORDHOOD

- Our interpretation of wordhood often relies on **orthographic wordhood** demarcations

- These are known to be affected by arbitrary factors e.g. French/Anglophone research orientation (Nurse 2008:169-170; Anderson 2016:524-5 fn4)

> "The phrase 'have a tendency to [express inflection analytically]' is used advisedly, partly because [North-western Bantu/non-Bantu NC languages] don't all behave in the same way, partly because **it is necessary to distinguish morphological analysis from writing conventions. Francophone countries in West Africa have a strong francographic convention to write as separate words what would be written as one word in the anglographic tradition.** […]".

(Nurse 2008:169)

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ORTHOGRAPHIC WORDHOOD

(5)   **Ke-tla-lo-ba-mo-kwal-êl-êl-a.**
        SM.1SG-FUT-OM.11-OM.2-OM.1-write-APPL-APPL-FV
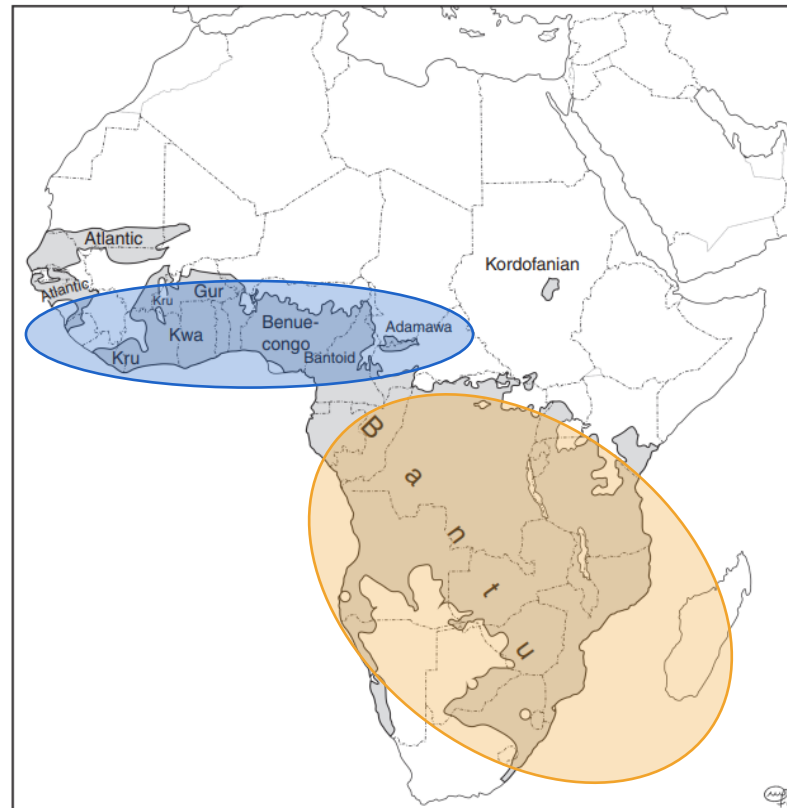   'I will write it to them for him.'   (Tswana (Bantu); Cole, 1955:432, adapted)

(5')   **Ke**   **tla**   **lo**   **ba**   **mo**   **kwal**   **êl**   **êl**   **a.**
        SM.1SG   FUT   OM.11   OM.2   OM.1   write   APPL   APPL   FV
        'I will write it to them for him.'

                                                                                            (pseudo-Tswana)

ORTHOGRAPHIC WORDHOOD

- Orthographic wordhood often used as proxy to linguistic wordhood:
  - comparative work (e.g. Güldemann 2022:389: "important caveat")

ORTHOGRAPHIC WORDHOOD

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    - typological work (e.g. **Grambank**; Lesage & Hübler 2017)

ORTHOGRAPHIC WORDHOOD

- Orthographic wordhood often used as proxy to linguistic wordhood:
    - comparative work (e.g. Güldemann 2022:389)
    - typological work (e.g. Grambank; Lesage & Hübler 2017)

→ These can bias picture of the degree of synthesis and interpretation of the role of genealogical vs areal relations
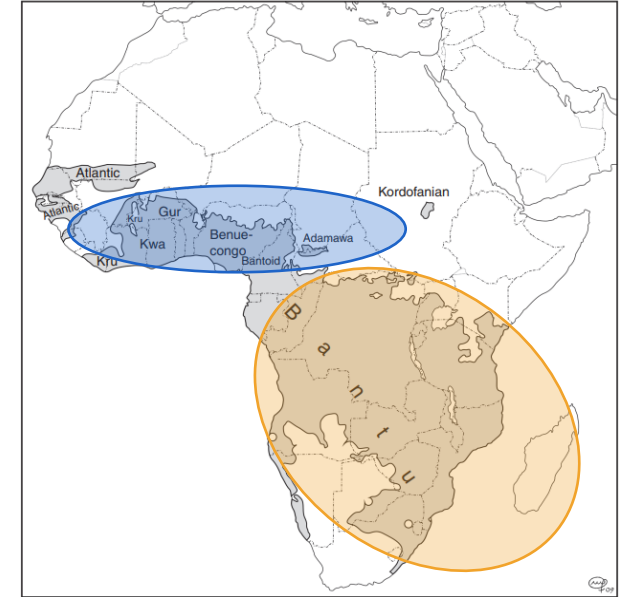
'STAMP MORPH'

'STAMP MORPH'

- Term coined by Anderson (2012, 2015, 2016)

(6)   **STAMP morph**
        "portmanteau subject-tense-aspect-mood-polarity morphs exhibiting functional
        and formal properties of both pronominals and auxiliary verbs" (Anderson 2016:513)

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        "portmanteau subject-tense-aspect-mood-polarity morphs exhibiting functional and formal properties of both pronominals and auxiliary verbs" (Anderson 2016:513)

→ Bipartite definition:
      (i)   Fusional morphology
      (ii) Separation from the verb

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'STAMP MORPH'

(7)　　a.　　ẽ^2　　gyi^{32}.

1.PST　　come

'I have come.'

　　　　b.　　ma^2　　gyi^{32}.

1.NPST　　come

'I am coming.'　　(Wobé (Kru); Hofer & Link 1973/1980, via Anderson 2016:26)

'STAMP MORPH'

- Differences in operationalisation of the term 'STAMP morph'
  - Anderson (2012, 2015, 2016)
  - Garvin et al. (2021)
  - Rolle (2022)

- Variation in part due to conflation of analytic/synthetic and flexive/agglutinative dimensions in original definition

'STAMP MORPH'

- Definition used affects interpretation of areal patterning

"This refined proposal for assessing areality of STAMP marking, of course, has **the potential to show a lack of areal clustering within the Macro-Sudan Belt**, which would warrant **rejecting STAMPs as a defining feature of this macro-area**"

(Rolle 2022:174, emphasis added)

'STAMP MORPH'

- Definition used affects interpretation of areal patterning

    "Güldemann (2022: 395) points out that subject indexes hardly ever attach directly to the stem in Benue-Congo languages outside of Bantu, where they are often integrated into a so-called STAMP cluster (or "morph"). This, however, is not a difference between Bantu and the rest of Benue-Congo, as subject indexes typically precede a TAM marker or auxiliary in the Bantu languages, rather than directly the stem of the main verb. **The main difference is that STAMP clusters show a greater degree of fusion**, generally suggestive of older morphology (i.e. older combinations of specific forms)."

    (Van de Velde & Idiatov 2025:190-191, emph. added)

'STAMP MORPH'

- Definition used affects interpretation of areal patterning

- My proposal: retain conservative definition of 'STAMP morph' as involving fusional morphology (single morph); use agnostic term e.g. 'auxiliary cluster', 'auxiliary complex', 'STAMP complex' otherwise

NWB/BANTOID CASE STUDIES
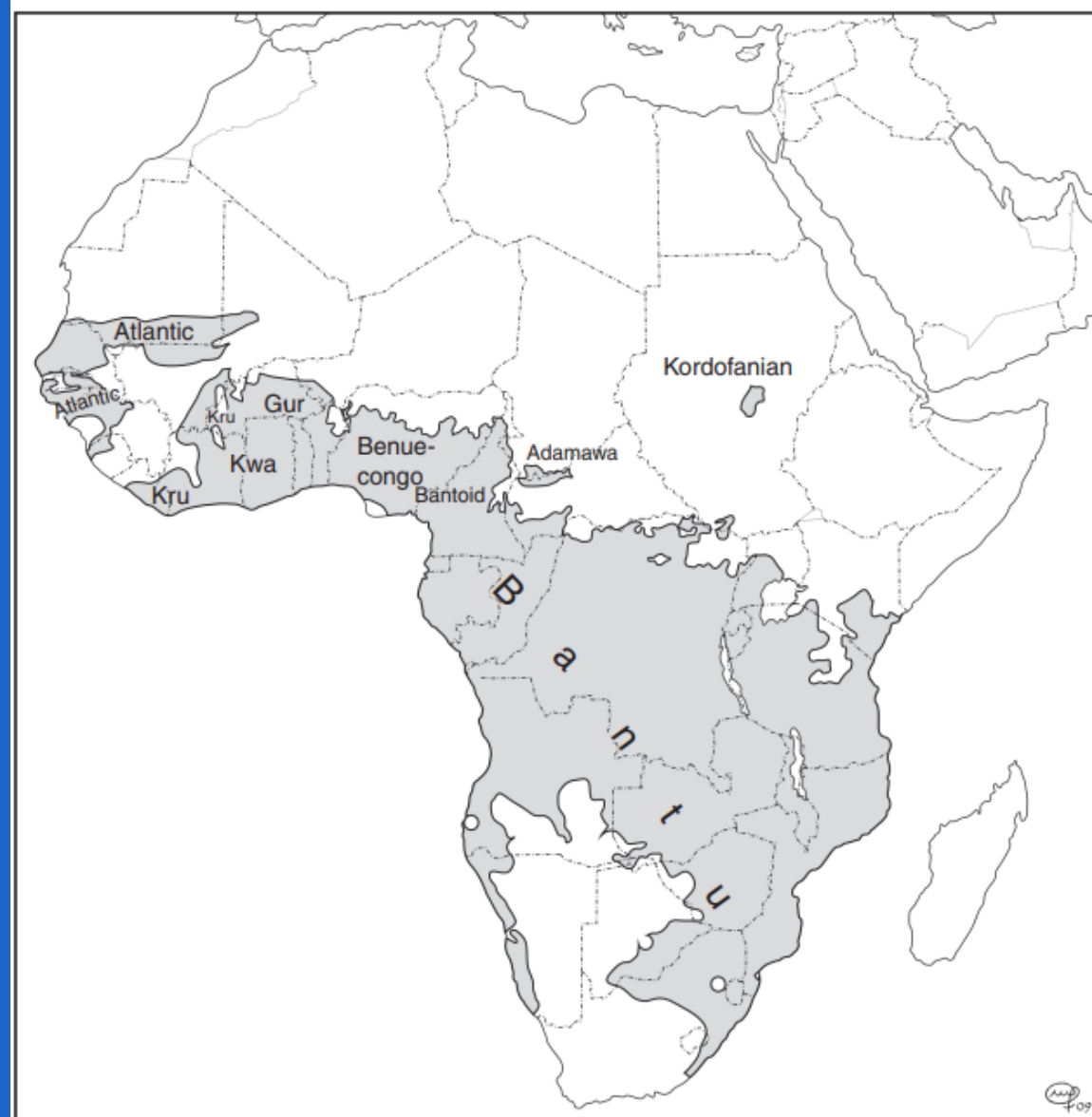
NWB/BANTOID AS INTERMEDIATE

- Northwestern Bantu/Bantoid verbal constructions as **intermediate** between Kwa and Narrow Bantu constructions

- Potential use of their synchronic variation as a means of understanding change undergone within NC

- (Requirement to rule out arbitrary orthographic wordhood differences)
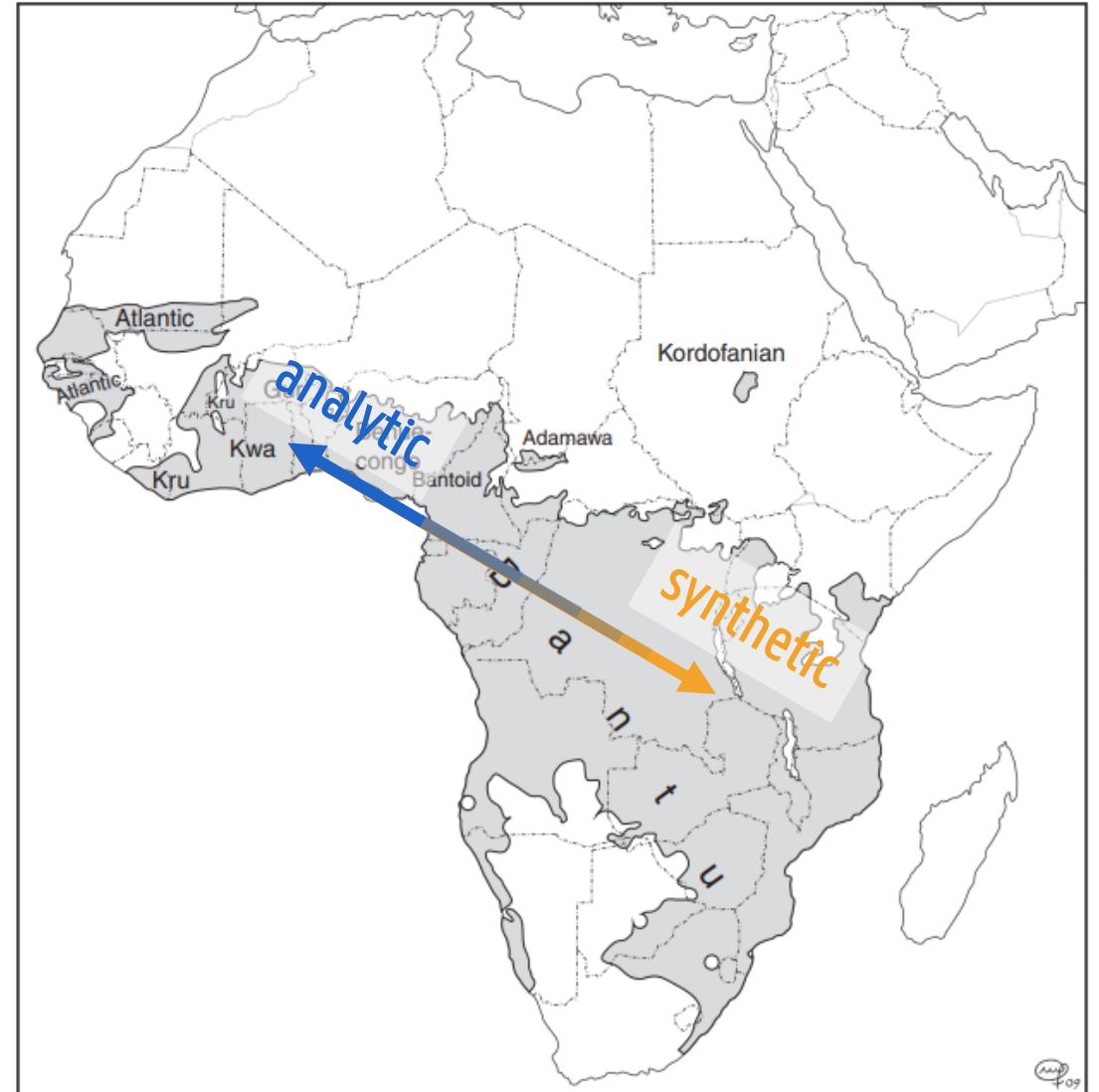
MBAM CASE STUDIES

- Current **FWO project** (Oct 2024 – Sep 2027, Ghent University): case study of morphosyntactic change in the **Mbam**[1] **subgroup** of NWB

- Investigation of **phonological wordhood** versus (morpho)**syntactic wordhood**

[1] =/= Mbam-Nkam.

METHODOLOGY

- **In-situ fieldwork** in Mbam-et-Inoubou, Cameroon
  - Fieldwork #1: Feb – Apr 2025 (2.5 months)

- **4 languages**:

Tunen	A44 [tvu]
Nyokon	A45 [nvo]
Nomaandé	A46 [lem]
Atomb (Tuotomb/Boneck)	A461 [ttf]

https://gadm.org/maps/CMR/centre/mbametinoubou.html
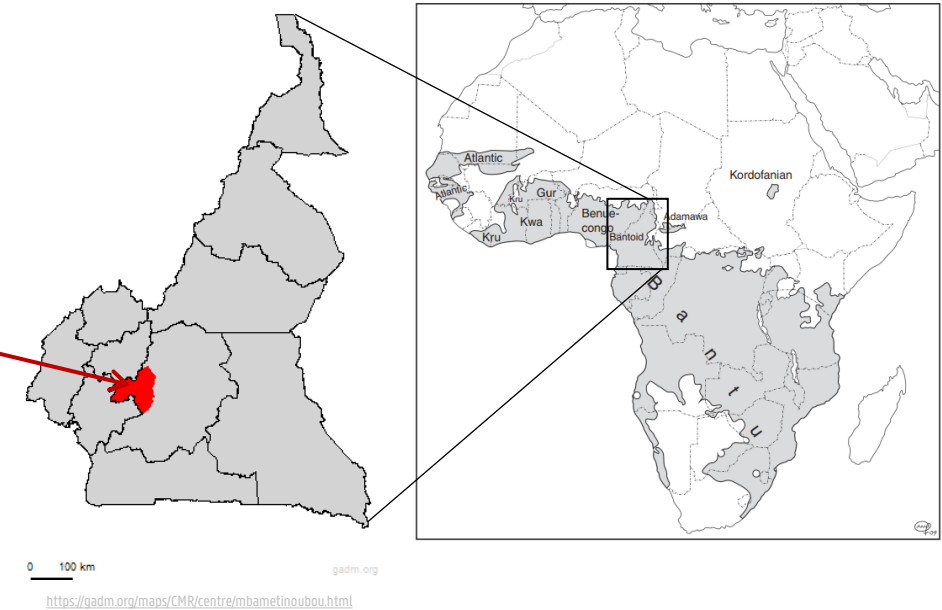
METHODOLOGY

- **Phonological** and **syntactic wordhood tests**

- E.g. vowel harmony, tonal downstep; syntactic interruptability, fragments (free forms/independent occurrences)

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FWO-MBAM PROJECT STIMULI
(STIMULI DU PROJET FWO-MBAM)

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WHY MBAM?

(8) Context: Your friend asks what happened at church. (thetic)

mɔtát **a ná** imbɘ́nu yɛ fɘkin nɛ́ Yɘ́sɘs ɔ Yɛrúsalɛm **nɔŋɔnak**.

/mɔ-táta	**a**	**ná**	ɛ-mbɘ́nu yɛ	fɘkinɘ	nɛ́	Yɘ́sɘsu	ɔ	Yɛrúsalɛmɛ	**nɔŋɔn-aka/**
S	**Aux**		O						**V**
1-pastor	SM.1	PST2	9-news	ASSOC.9	5.entrance	ASSOC.5	Jesus	PREP Jerusalem	tell-DUR

'Le pasteur a raconté des nouvelles de l'entrée de Jésus à Jerusalem'.

'The pastor told the news of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem.'

(Tunen [tvu]; Kerr 2024a:225)

- Syntactic interruptability (**INFL-O-V**) indicates word boundary

- Mbam languages all allow some kind of interruption of INFL and V, to varying extents (Mous 2005, 2014; Kerr 2024a,b, fieldnotes)

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PHONOLOGICAL VS SYNTACTIC WORDHOOD

- Q: Does phonological wordhood match syntactic wordhood in the Mbam languages?

- Phonological wordhood tests: vowel harmony; tone spread; tonal downstep, etc.

- Other (potentially) relevant phonological properties: final vowel loss; maximality restrictions; stem-initial prominence

MBAM PRELIMINARY RESULTS

- Mismatches between phonological and syntactic wordhood

- Domains identified by phonological wordhood tests are larger than those identified by syntactic wordhood tests

- This goes against the idea of phonological change driving syntactic reanalysis

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OTHER FACTORS TO BE INVESTIGATED

- **Stem-initial prominence** (Idiatov & Van de Velde 2016; Hyman et al. 2019) and **maximality restrictions** as characteristic of phonology of NWB/Bantoid languages

- SIP and maximality restrictions seem to **vary in strength** within NWB/Bantoid, and not in the way that would match a smooth cline from Kwa to Bantoid (e.g. stronger phonological restrictions in West-Coastal Bantu than in Mbam – see e.g. Ellington 1997; Hyman & Inkelas 1997; Hyman 2011 on Tiene [tii] (B81) maximality restrictions, Bostoen & Pacchiarotti 2024 on Ngwi [nlo] (B861) final vowel loss)

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CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

- RQ: how should we reconstruct Niger-Congo verb forms?

- General pattern is clear; specifics are not – partly due to an exaggerated binary distribution caused by orthographic wordhood & definitional differences affecting interpretation of areal distribution

- Use of phonological and syntactic wordhood tests for NWB/Bantoid as case studies

- Preliminary results for Mbam subgroup suggest that phonological wordhood changes did not precede/drive syntactic ones

- Comparison of NWB/Bantoid languages suggests more complexity than a smooth cline of variation between Kwa and Bantoid

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