Tunen syntax and information structure

Kerr, E.J.

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The language Tunen (also known as 'Nen' and referred to in Tunen as *tunəni*) is predominantly spoken in the Centre and Littoral regions of Cameroon by somewhere over 35,000 people, likely numbering around 70,000-100,000 people today (Mous 2003; Gordon 2005; Chapter 2 section §2.5). It is a Niger-Congo language classified under the Narrow Bantu subfamily, with code A44 in the Guthrie classification of Bantu languages (Guthrie 1948, 1967-1971; Maho 2003, 2009; Hammarström 2019) and code [tvu] in the ISO 639-3 classification.

Tunen is well-known in the linguistic literature on Bantu languages as being the only Bantu language with consistent object-verb (OV) word order, with all other described Bantu languages having VO basic word order (Bearth 2003; Dugast 1971; Mous 2003, 2014, 2005). Tunen also shares other unusual linguistic features with its neighbouring languages of the Mbam subgroup of A40/A60 Bantu languages, including more analytical morphosyntax than the canonical Bantu language, the loss of final vowels and tone lowering in utterance-final position, and an advanced tongue root (ATR) vowel harmony system (Dugast 1971; Van Leynseele 1977; Van der Hulst et al. 1986; Bancel 1991; Mous 1986, 2003; Boyd 2015). Because of these unusual properties, the proper placement of Tunen as Narrow Bantu versus (non-Bantu) Bantoid is of some debate, and comparative studies of Bantu often mention Tunen as a particularly unusual language or simply exclude it from further consideration.

In this thesis, I build on the foundation of prior descriptive work on Tunen to investigate its unusual syntax in more detail. I look specifically at the extent to which information structure influences Tunen syntax, based on the observation that information structure is core to the syntax of canonical Bantu languages (Downing and Hyman 2016; Downing and Marten 2019; Van der Wal 2015, i.a.). Investigating the relationship between information structure and Tunen syntax therefore fits into the broader question as to how dissimilar Tunen's grammar is from (other) Bantu. The central research question of the thesis is given in (1) below.

(1)   **Central research question**
       To what extent is Tunen's syntax influenced by information structure?

To answer this research question, I first provide the reader with background information on Tunen and the methodological and theoretical background for this thesis, as well as an overview of Tunen grammar that introduces the necessary background on the language. I then present three studies on the interaction between syntax and information structure in Tunen and a conclusion which ties together the key findings. I briefly describe the contents of each chapter below.

1.2   Structure of the thesis

1.2.1   Preliminaries

This thesis begins with preliminary information. In Chapter 2, I provide background information on both the conceptual basis for the thesis and on the Tunen language. The conceptual background considers key concepts that are necessary in order to answer this thesis' core research question on the relationship between syntax and information structure in Tunen. I thus provide an overview of key concepts in information structure, background on the general syntactic framework adopted in this thesis, and discussion of the importance of Bantu languages in furthering understanding of the interaction between syntax and information structure crosslinguistically. The background on the Tunen language gives a brief description of the language context, situating Tunen in an areal and typological context, and provides an overview of prior work on the Tunen language.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology used in this thesis, beginning with the conceptual framework adopted for the study. I then discuss the methodology for data collection, which is based on the overarching methodology of the NWO Bantu Syntax and Information Structure (BaSIS) research project in which this project was conducted. I therefore introduce the BaSIS project methodology (Van der Wal 2021),

discussing how the information-structural categories introduced in Chapter 2 were investigated in field research. I give some more detailed discussion of my personal approach to field research and I discuss my use of secondary sources. The field data I collected, which form the main empirical basis of this thesis, are available alongside this thesis in the associated archival deposit (Kerr in prep.). The chapter concludes with an overview of the format and analysis of this dataset and details on how these archived materials can be accessed.

1.2.2 Grammatical overview

The thesis continues with Chapter 4, which presents an overview of Tunen's grammar, introducing the phonology and transcription system adopted throughout this thesis and giving an overview of Tunen's morphosyntax. This chapter draws on previous work on Tunen's grammar, especially Dugast's (1971) book-length descriptive grammar, Mous' (2003) grammar sketch, and the (morpho)syntactic studies by Kongne Welaze (2010) and Mous (1997, 2005, 2014). However, it also supplements these main sources with new insights from fieldwork and highlights areas where my data differ from the previous authors'.

The main goal of the chapter is to provide the necessary linguistic overview of the Tunen language in order to prepare the reader for the more detailed linguistic studies that form the subsequent chapters of this thesis. I therefore do not go into the full level of detail required for an independent grammar sketch, instead referring the reader to appropriate sources. An exception is for topics which are not covered explicitly in previous descriptions, such as the relative order of nominal modifiers, for which I provide slightly more detailed explanation.

While the later chapters of this thesis are written within the framework of generative syntax, the grammatical overview in Chapter 4 is intended to be accessible to more general audiences in linguistics and can be read as a stand-alone chapter.

1.2.3 Studies on Tunen syntax and information structure

The next three chapters of this thesis discuss the influence of information structure on Tunen syntax, each serving to address the central research question introduced in (1) above.

Chapter 5 considers how information structure is expressed in Tunen, providing a descriptive overview of the interaction between Tunen syntax and information structure. I consider different types of focus, topic, functional passive constructions, and referent expression over discourse. Finally, I compare the findings for Tunen to other Bantu and Bantoid languages, showing that Tunen has relatively

little influence of information structure, thereby illustrating the diversity found in the interaction between syntax and information structure in the Northwestern Bantu/Bantoid languages.

Chapter 6 considers Tunen's unusual OV word order, which can be more specifically described as the subtype S-Aux-O-V-X (or S-TM-O-V-X). I test previous accounts of Tunen's syntax in more detail, conducting an empirical investigation of the extent to which this OV order is conditioned by information-structural considerations versus other factors such as TAM context, object type, or clause type. I then provide the first formal analysis of OV syntax in Tunen, for which I draw up and evaluate three different possible analyses within a generative syntax framework. Finally, I reflect on the relation between OV in Tunen to OV/VO variation in West/Central Africa and more broadly, and I consider the potential grammaticalisation of OV order from a VO proto-language.

Chapter 7 covers another core feature of Tunen syntax that is unusual both from a Bantuist and a general typological perspective, namely discontinuous noun phrases (DPs) of the form noun-verb-modifier (S-O-V-Mod). I show evidence that these constructions are less influenced by information structure than is expected both from work on discontinuous DPs crosslinguistically and from previous observations of S-O-V-Mod constructions in Tunen. I then propose an analysis in which the presence of the discontinuous DP construction is related to the OV word order discussed in Chapter 6, using these discontinuous DP data as a case study to motivate the choice of formal analysis of Tunen clausal syntax between the options discussed in Chapter 6.

1.2.4   Discussion and conclusion

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by taking stock of the main findings. I present the first formal model of Tunen syntax in consideration of its relation with information structure, highlighting empirical predictions and the possible extension from this synchronic model to a diachronic model. I then reflect on the implications of this study of Tunen's syntax and information structure both for understanding of syntactic variation in Bantu languages and for the relationship between syntax and information structure more broadly. Specifically, I consider how information structure should be formalised in theoretical models of Tunen's syntax, presenting a strong hypothesis in which information structure is not part of the syntax component of Tunen grammar. Finally, I consider the limitations of this work and highlight areas of interest for further study.

1.2.5 Appendix and archival materials

In order to give a sense of the language, four transcribed, interlinearised and translated texts of natural speech are provided in the Appendix. These texts form part of the audiovisual corpus of field data which is the main empirical base of this thesis. All the data — including transcriptions, original recordings, and metadata — are available open access as part of the archival materials associated with this thesis, archived with *The Language Archive* (Kerr in prep.). Details on how to access these materials are given at the end of Chapter 3 (section §3.6.2).