

Interpositions, a rare type of grammatical word

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1. Introduction

I came across the kind of grammatical word (or clitic) for which I propose to coin the term “interposition” in three languages spoken in three different parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. In the three languages in question, Subject-Verb-Object-Oblique is the basic constituent order. The term ‘interposition’ is intended to capture a distribution that fits with none of the possible types of grammatical words proposed in general accounts of part-of-speech systems.

Interpositions can be viewed as a variety of adpositions that had gone unnoticed so far: they have in common with other types of adpositions the obligatory adjacency to NPs, but differ from them in that they must necessarily be adjacent to two NPs (or NP-equivalents) at the same time. This particularity has led some authors to designate them as “linkers,” but this is not a satisfying solution, since the term “linker” is commonly used for various types of grammatical words occurring between two words or phrases that have a direct syntactic relationship and form a constituent (for example, genitival linkers inserted between an adnominal possessor and its head), whereas interpositions occur between two NPs that do not form a constituent, each of them having its own function in the construction of the verb.

The grammatical words or clitics for which I propose the term ‘interposition’ occur exclusively between two NPs (or NP-equivalents) in post-verbal position that do not form a constituent. They never occur when the verb is followed by a single object or oblique, and can only be found between two successive terms (objects or obliques) in the construction of the same verb. In this type of context, the use of an interposition may be obligatory, depending on language-specific rules. In addition to that, the grammatical words or clitics for which I propose the term ‘interposition’ share the following two properties:

- they do not contribute to the recognition of the semantic roles of the adjacent NPs, which means that the NPs in question must be either arguments of the verb, or obliques whose semantic role is retrievable from the lexical meaning or marked independently in some other way;
- the relative order of the two NPs between which an interposition is inserted can be inverted without any change in the denotational meaning.

In one of the three languages in which I have found such a grammatical word (Nande), it agrees with the NP it follows. The other interpositions I am aware of are invariable.

2. The interposition of Ju|’hoan

In the Kx’a language Ju|’hoan (Dickens 2005), verbs divide into three classes (intransitive, transitive and ditransitive) according to the number of the non-subject terms that can be present without triggering the use of a verbal suffix **-a** encoding the presence of at least one term that does not belong to the valency of the verb in postverbal position. Independently of the use of this verbal suffix (glossed VE ‘valency-external participant’), with can be viewed as a kind of applicative suffix, the interposition **kò** is used whenever a postverbal term is followed by another postverbal term. It crucially differs from the suffix **-a** in that the use of this suffix depends on the basic valency of the verb, whereas the use of **kò** depends exclusively on the number of postverbal terms, irrespective of their status as arguments or adjuncts.

(1) and (2) illustrate this mechanism with the intransitive verb **!ái** ‘die’ and with the transitive verb **||ohm** ‘chop’. Note that, in these examples, there are at most two terms in postverbal position, but the presence of additional postverbal terms would require the repetition of **kò** before all postverbal terms not immediately adjacent to the verb.

(1) Ju|’hoan (Dickens 2005: 37–39)

- a. **Mí !ú-n!a`àn !ái.**
1SG grand-father die
‘My grandfather died.’
- b. **Mí !ú-n!a`àn !ái-á |Aotcha.**
1SG grand-father die-VE |Aotcha
‘My grandfather died at |Aotcha.’
- c. **Mí !ú-n!a`àn !ái-á goàq=`àn.**
1SG grand-father die-VE yesterday
‘My grandfather died yesterday.’
- d. **Ha !ái-á |Aotcha kò |ámà hè.**
3SG die-VE |Aotcha INTERP today
‘He died in |Aotcha today.’
- e. **Ha !ái-á |ámà hè kò |Aotcha.**
3SG die-VE today INTERP |Aotcha
‘He died in |Aotcha today.’

(2) Ju|’hoan (Dickens 2005: 37–39)

- a. **Ha kú ||ohm !àhn.**
1SG ICPL chop tree
‘He was chopping the tree.’
- b. **Ha kú ||ohm-a !àhn kò g|úí.**
1SG ICPL chop-VE tree INTERP forest
‘He was chopping the tree in the forest.’

- c. **Ha kú ||ohm-a g|úí kò !àìhn.**
 1SG ICPL chop-VE forest INTERP tree
 ‘He was chopping the tree in the forest.’

In Ju|’hoan, the verb **!a’àn** ‘give’ can be followed by two postverbal terms representing the recipient and the gift. According to the general rule, **kò** must occur between them. The order **!a’àn – recipient – kò – gift** seems to be usual, but according to Baker and Collins (2006), **!a’àn – gift – kò – recipient** is also possible, and valency-external terms may even be inserted between the NPs representing arguments, or precede them, as shown in (3).

(3) Ju|’hoan (Baker and Collins 2006: 54-55)

	Mi	 ’an	Maria	ko	ambere	ko	tzi.
	1SG	give	Maria	INTERP	bucket	INTERP	outside
~	Mi	 ’an	tzi	ko	Maria	ko	ambere.
~	Mi	 ’an	Maria	ko	tzi	ko	ambere.
~	Mi	 ’an	ambere	ko	Maria	ko	tzi.
~	Mi	 ’an	tzi	ko	ambere	ko	Maria.
~	Mi	 ’an	ambere	ko	tzi	ko	Maria.

‘I give Maria the bucket outside’

3. Interpositions in other !Xun varieties?

Ju|’hoan belongs to the !Xun dialect cluster. Although this question is not explicitly addressed by Heine and König (2015), the examples they provide suggest that an interposition **kò** with the same distribution as in Ju|’hoan can be found in the other Southeastern !Xun dialects. By contrast, the “linker” **ke** found in the other !Xun dialects is clearly nothing else than an ordinary preposition with just an unusually broad distribution and no semantic content. The point is that, contrary to **kò**, **ke** can flag NPs in immediate post-verbal position, as in (4).

(4) Northwestern !Xun (Heine and König 2015: 193)

Mí	m	-ē	tūín	tí	kē	hà.
1SG	TOP	PST	ask	PASS	PREP	CL1.PRO

‘I was asked by him.’

4. Interpositions in other Khoisan languages?

It has been claimed in the literature on Khoisan languages that grammatical words similar to Ju|’hoan **kò** constitute a common feature of non-Khoe South African Khoisan languages. However, not only in Northwestern and Central !Xun, but also for example in N|uuki (Collins and Namaseb 2011) and †Hoan (Collins and Gruber 2014), it turns out that the so-called “linkers” are simply prepositions with just a somewhat unusual distribution and a very low degree of semantic specificity.

Crucially, N|uuki **ŋ** and †Hoan **kì**, contrary to Ju|’hoan **kò**, must not necessarily be adjacent to two NPs at the same time. As illustrated by (5) and (6), like typical prepositions, they can be found in immediate postverbal position.

(5) N|uuki (Collins and Namaseb 2011: 45–46)

- a. **Ku !ũ ke xa |ʔaa ŋ g!ari.**
 3SG grandfather DECL PST die PREP Upington
 ‘His grandfather died in Upington.’
- b. **Ku-a si |qhō’o ŋ !haeka.**
 3SG-DECL IRR dance PREP tomorrow
 ‘He will dance tomorrow.’

(6) #Hoan (Collins and Gruber 2014:141–142)

- a. **Ci ’a kyxái kì !kôa na.**
 3PL PROG dance PREP house in
 ‘They are dancing in the house.’
- b. **Ma ’a ’ám kì ǐ-#ám.**
 1SG PROG eat PREP spoon
 ‘I am eating with a spoon.’

Cross-linguistically, prepositions with a very broad range of uses and a very low degree of semantic specificity are not uncommon. This is a question of degree, and there is no justification for treating prepositions like N|uuki **ŋ** or #Hoan **kì** as a special type of grammatical words. In other words, the question of whether interpositions really comparable to Southeastern !Xun **kò** can be found in other Khoisan languages remains open.

5. The interposition of Lamba

According to Aritiba (1988), in Lamba (a language belonging to the Gurunsi branch of the Gur family), much in the same way as in Ju|’hoan, the NPs representing the recipient and the gift in the construction of ‘give’ do not have a fixed order, but the first NP is immediately juxtaposed to the verb, and the interposition **kà’** must be inserted before the second one. In the absence of the interposition, the first NP could only be interpreted as the genitival modifier of the second one, as in (7).

(7) Lamba (Aritiba 1988: 8–9)

- a. **Yàl há húlò ká ’Úrò.**
 woman.SG give.CPL hat.SG INTERP Uro
 ‘The woman gave a hat to Uro.’
- b. **Yàl há Úrò ká ’húlò.**
 woman.SG give.CPL Uro INTERP hat.SG
 ‘The woman gave a hat to Uro.’
- c. **Yàl há Úrò húlò.**
 woman.SG give.CPL Uro hat.SG
 ‘The woman gave Uro’s hat (to someone else).’

- d. *Yàl há húlò Úrò.
 woman.SG give.CPL hat.SG Uro

More generally, Lamba **kà'** has distributional characteristics essentially similar to those of the interposition of Ju|'hoan. It occurs not only in the construction of verbs whose argument structure is similar to that of 'give', but also in other constructions in which two unflagged NPs constitute two distinct terms in the construction of the same verb, as in (8). This led Aritiba to designate it as a "disjunctive marker". By the choice of this term, he aimed at underscoring its demarcative function.

(8) Lamba (Aritiba 1988: 8)

- a. Cà mà h̃ kà rávìir.
 Cama hit.CPL dog.SG INTERP stick.SG
 'Cama hit the dog with a stick.'
- b. Cà mà rávìir ká 'h̃.
 Cama hit.CPL stick.SG INTERP dog.SG
 'Cama hit the dog with a stick.'

Interestingly, Lamba has a homophonous **kà'** used as an optional linker between nouns and numerals (as in **hásó nàsôl ~ hásó kà ná 'sôl** 'two dogs'), and another **kà'** occurring in some clause sequences. It is however difficult to imagine a plausible connection between these three items.

To the best of my knowledge, nothing similar has been reported to exist in any other Gurunsi language, and more generally in any other West African language, and I am not aware of comparative data that might shed some light on the emergence of the interposition in the history of Lamba.

6. The interposition of Nande

The Bantu language Nande has a grammatical word which, like the Ju|'hoan interposition **kò** or the Lamba interposition **kà'**, can only be found between two successive terms in the construction of the same verb.

Baker and Collins (2006) briefly describe its use and put forward a formal analysis aiming at a unified account of the Nande interposition and of the "linkers" found in Kx'a and Tuu languages. However, their analysis is basically flawed by the vagueness of their notion of "linker," which includes not only interpositions as defined here, but also ordinary prepositions that have just a relatively broad range of uses and a very low degree of semantic specificity.

In a series of recently published papers (Schneider-Zioga 2014a, 2014b; Schneider-Zioga and Nguessimo Mutaka 2015a, 2015b, 2015c), Patricia Schneider-Zioga and Philip Nguessimo Mutaka provide a much more precise description of the Nande interposition, rectifying some errors in Baker and Collins's description, and making it possible to put forward a diachronic scenario responsible for the emergence of this interposition.

The main differences between Nande and Ju|'hoan are as follows:

- (a) In constructions with more than two successive terms in postverbal position, the interposition of Nande can occur only once, between the first and the second postverbal terms.
- (b) The interposition of Nande agrees in class (gender-number) with the NP it immediately follows.

With respect to the linear order of postverbal terms, Nande has possibilities of variation similar to those of Ju|'hoan, as illustrated in (9) and (10).

(9) Nande (Schneider-Zioga and Nguessimo Mutaka 2015(c): 101)

- a. **Kámbale ágúlira ekitábú kyo Nadíne.**
 (CL1)Kambale CL1.bought.APPL CL7.book CL7.INTERP (CL1)Nadine
 ‘Kambale bought a book for Nadine.’
- b. **Kámbale ágúlira Nadíne y(o) ekitábu.**
 (CL1)Kambale CL1.bought.APPL (CL1)Nadine CL1.INTERP CL7.book
 ‘Kambale bought Nadine a book.’

(10) Nande (Baker and Collins 2006: 309)

- a. **Kambale moasenyire olukwi l(o) omo-mbasa.**
 (CL1)Kambale AFF.CL1.chopped CL11.wood CL11.INTERP CL18-CL9.axe
 ‘Kambale chopped wood with an axe.’
- b. **Kambale moasenyire omo-mbasa m(o) olukwi.**
 (CL1)Kambale AFF.CL1.chopped CL18-CL9.axe CL18.INTERP CL11.wood
 ‘Kambale chopped wood with an axe.’

To the best of my knowledge, Nande is the only Bantu language in which a similar phenomenon has been observed. However, taking into consideration (a) language-internal data on the homonymy between the interposition and other items, (b) typological data on the relationship between copulas and focus marking, and (c) the particularities of East Bantu languages in the expression of focus, it is not difficult to elaborate a plausible grammaticalization scenario accounting for the emergence of this interposition.

Schneider-Zioga (2014b) rightly emphasizes that the interposition is phonologically identical to two other items in Nande: a copula (11a) and a focus marker found in cleft constructions (11b). Moreover, it is very similar to a third item: the enclitic object pronoun (11c).

(11) Nande (Schneider-Zioga 2014(b))

- a. **Omúkali yó mwami**
 CL1.woman CL1.COP CL3.chief
 ‘It is the woman who is the chief.’
- b. **Ekitábu kyo Kámbale ágúla.**
 CL7.book CL1.FOC (CL1)Kambale CL1.bought
 ‘It is the book that Kambale bought.’

- c. **Nadíne ágúlá-kyô.**
 (CL1)Nadine CL1.bought-CL7.PRO
 ‘Nadine bought it (the book).’

Pronouns consisting of a class prefix and a stem **-o** are common across Bantu languages. Since pronouns are widely attested as the source of either equative copulas or focus markers,¹ there is no difficulty in accepting the hypothesis that the Bantu pronoun **CL-o** is the common source, not only of the enclitic pronoun illustrated in (11c), but also of the copula illustrated in (11a), and of the focus marker illustrated in (11b).

As regards Nande **CL-o** as an interposition, it is not difficult to imagine a grammaticalization path from **CL-o** as a copula or focus marker. The point is that IAV (immediately after verb) focus positions are common in eastern Bantu languages, and in many cases, nouns in IAV focus position are overtly marked in the same way as nouns in equative predicate function. Consequently, the hypothesis I would like to propose is that the interposition found in Nande started as a focus marker making explicit the focus function of the NP in IAV position (remember that, in Nande, if more than two phrases follow the verb, the interposition can only occur after the first one!). Subsequently, the use of the former focus marker generalized in this position when the verb was followed by more than one term, so that it lost its initial function and became a purely syntactic marker.

7. Interpositions and ‘bidirectional case markers’

In this section, I discuss the similarities and differences between the interpositions presented in the previous sections, and another rare type of grammatical word, found in some Mande and Songhay languages, for which Heath (2007) coined the term ‘bidirectional case marker’. Crucially, the property of occurring only between two NPs that do not form a constituent is shared by interpositions and the grammatical words analyzed by Heath (2007) as ‘bidirectional case markers’, but at the same time, they are very different in many respects.

In the Mande and Songhay languages that Heath (2007) analyzes as having ‘bidirectional case markers’, for example Soninke (Mande), clauses show rigid **S O V X** constituent order (S = subject, O = object, V = verb, X = obliques), and have a paradigm of TAM-polarity markers occupying a position immediately after the subject NP, such as Soninke **wá** (incompletive) and **má** (completive negative), illustrated in (12).

(12) Soninke (pers. doc.)

- a. **Múusá wá sállí-ní.**
 Moussa ICPL pray-GER
 ‘Moussa is praying.’
- b. **Múusá má sállí.**
 Moussa CPL.NEG pray^L
 ‘Moussa did not pray.’

¹ Among many others, Ganja (Creissels and Biaye 2016: 123, 142–143, 261) is a case in point.

c. **Múusá wá hàrê-n gáagà-ná.**

Moussa ICPL donkey-D sell-GER
'Moussa is selling the donkey.'

d. **Múusá má hàré-n gàagà.**

Moussa CPL.NEG donkey-D sell^L
'Moussa did not sell the donkey.'

Moreover, in the languages in which Heath (2007) proposes to recognize 'bidirectional case markers', the TAM-polarity value 'completive positive' is not overtly marked in intransitive clauses, whereas in the transitive clauses expressing the same TAM-polarity value, a morpheme obligatorily appears between the subject and the object – example (13).

(13) Soninke (pers. doc.)

a. **Múusá Ø sállì.**

Moussa pray
'Moussa prayed.'

b. **Múusá dà hàrê-n gáagà.**

Moussa ? donkey-D sell
'Moussa sold the donkey.'

The property of being obligatorily adjacent to two NPs at the same time is shared by morphemes such as Soninke **dà** in (13b) and by the interpositions presented in the previous sections. However, the morphemes analyzed by Heath as 'bidirectional case markers' differ from interpositions in many respects. Their position in the transitive construction and the fact that they are only found in transitive clauses expressing a TAM-polarity value that is not overtly marked in intransitive clauses make it possible to analyze them as allomorphs of TAM-polarity markers having a zero allomorph in intransitive clauses. Heath's (2007) proposed to characterize them rather as 'bidirectional case markers' to account for the fact that they can only occur between two NPs fulfilling the syntactic roles of subject and object, but one may have doubts about the relevance of the notion of case marking, since in languages with rigid S O V X constituent order, the syntactic roles of the NPs in question are unambiguously determined by their linear order. Another possible analysis is that Soninke **dà** and morphemes with the same distribution in other Mande and Songhay languages are transitivity markers (since they occur exclusively in transitive clauses) fulfilling a demarcative function when no TAM-polarity marker is inserted between the subject and object NPs.

I will not try to go further into the discussion of the status of morphemes such as Soninke **dà**, but I would like to emphasize that the fact that they are only found between NPs fulfilling specific syntactic roles and the way they interfere with TAM and polarity marking distinguishes them from the interpositions presented in the first part of this paper. Consequently, classifying them as belonging to the same type of grammatical words (as suggested by the term 'bidirectional case markers' proposed by Heath) would imply to ignore essential aspects of their distribution.

8. Conclusion

In sections 2 to 4, I have proposed the term ‘interposition’ to capture the specificity of a morpheme **kò** found in Southeastern !Xun dialects, which previous accounts did not distinguish clearly from the prepositions with an unusually broad distribution and no semantic content found in other Kx’a and Tuu languages. In section 4 to 6, I have shown that morphemes with an essentially similar distribution are found in Lamba (Gur) and Nande (Bantu). Finally, in section 7, I have tried to show that the morphemes found in some Songhay and Mande languages for which Heath (2007) coined the term ‘bidirectional case markers’ differ from the interpositions of Southeastern !Xun, Lamba and Nande in some crucial respects, although they share with them the property of being found exclusively between two NPs that do not form a constituent.

Abbreviations

AFF = affirmative, APPL = applicative, CL = noun class, COP = copula, CPL = completive, D = definite, DECL = declarative, FOC = focus, GER = gerundive, ICPL = incompletive, INTERP = interposition, IRR = irrealis, L (superscript) = low morphotoneme, PASS = passive, PREP = preposition, PRO = pronoun, PROG = progressive, PST = past, SG = singular, TOP = topic, VE = valency-external.

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