



Introduction to the Special Issue: Advancing the Study of Auxiliary Systems in Bantu

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Introduction

Bantu languages are notoriously described as “verby” (Nurse 2008, 21), referring to the highly agglutinative nature of the inflected verb, whose complexities have sparked extensive research. Now that Bantu verbal morphology is much better understood, the time has come to widen the scope of research beyond the limits of the inflected, lexical verb to auxiliary verbs, which play an important role in Bantu verbal constructions but have enjoyed relatively little dedicated attention. This special issue is the outcome of an open call for papers issued by editors of the *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, inviting contributions on auxiliary verb constructions in Bantu languages. The call was designed to capture the breadth and diversity of current research on Bantu auxiliaries, encouraging submissions that address their categorical status, functional range, diachronic development, contact-induced change, and interaction with broader grammatical systems.

A total of nine papers were accepted for publication and are included in the issue. The studies cover a plethora of Bantu languages, spoken across the entire Bantu-speaking area, from the extreme northwest and northeast all the way to the far southeast, with contributing authors based in both the Global North and the Global South. The contributions are presented in the special issue in the order of their Guthrie codes (see footnote 1), reflecting both the geographical diversity of the studies and the variation and recurring patterns in auxiliary constructions across the Bantu area.

The primary objective of these papers is to advance the systematic study of auxiliary verb constructions in Bantu languages by bringing together empirically grounded and theoretically informed research that addresses their form, function and development. The papers move beyond viewing auxiliaries merely as transitional or peripheral phenomena, instead foregrounding them as central components of Bantu grammatical systems and as key loci of morphosyntactic and semantic changes.

Bantu auxiliary constructions: Setting the scene

Bantu languages are known for their verb-centred morphosyntax, in which many functional categories are encoded on the verb, and for the tendency of new grammatical material to emerge from lexical sources. One of the most salient manifestations of this diachronic dynamic is the recurrent development of auxiliary constructions and their further evolution into bound verbal morphology. Across the Bantu family, lexical verbs are continually recruited into auxiliary functions and may subsequently grammaticalise into prefixes or other inflectional materials (Heine and Reh 1984; Heine 1993; Güldemann 1999, 2003; Nurse 2008), contributing to the rich and complex verbal systems characteristic of these languages.

From a functional perspective, auxiliary constructions can express a remarkably wide range of grammatical meanings. As noted by Anderson (2006, 36), auxiliaries can encode “virtually every non-nominal [...] category described as ‘inflectional’,” and Bantu languages provide abundant empirical evidence to support this observation. In addition to the well-documented use of auxiliaries in expressing tense and aspect (see, for example Nurse 2008), Bantu auxiliary constructions are attested in domains such as modality (Bernander et al. 2022 and further references therein), negation (Bernander et al. 2023a; Devos and Van Olmen 2013), directionality (Devos 2014; Guérois et al. 2021), focus marking (Devos and van der Wal 2010), voice (Guerois 2025), phasal polarity (many of the contributions in Kramer 2021; Zahran and Bloom Ström 2022; Bernander et al. 2023b), and a range of adverbial functions (Gibson 2025; Crane et al. forthcoming). This functional diversity emphasizes the importance of auxiliary constructions

not only for synchronic grammatical description but also for understanding pathways of grammatical change in Bantu languages.

Despite their typological and theoretical significance, Bantu auxiliary constructions have historically received relatively limited attention in the general literature (Bernander et al. 2022; Crane et al. *forthc*). Traditional research has primarily focused on the internal morphology of the simplex verbal word, often treating auxiliary constructions as peripheral, transitional, or merely substitutive structures along a presumed path towards synthetic morphology (Nurse 2008). As a result, both the formal properties of auxiliary constructions and the full range of functions they encode have remained insufficiently explored in a systematic and comparative manner. This imbalance is particularly striking, given the prevalence of auxiliary constructions in contemporary Bantu languages and their evident relevance for broader questions of morpho-syntactic organisation.

From a historical perspective, several fundamental issues remain unresolved, most notably the extent to which auxiliary constructions can be reconstructed to Proto-Bantu or to early Bantu ancestor varieties, including the core question of whether these stages featured predominantly analytic (auxiliary-like) or synthetic predicate structures (Nurse 2008, ch. 6; Nurse and Watters 2022; Güldemann 2003, 2022). Closely related questions concern the potentially cyclic nature of grammaticalization along the verb–affix continuum (Givón 1979; Heine 1993; Bybee et al. 1994). These open issues underscore the need for detailed empirical studies grounded in both synchronic descriptions and historical comparisons, including careful consideration of possible contact-induced developments and areal patterns (Bernander 2025).

At the same time, defining and delimiting what constitutes an auxiliary and auxiliary constructions in Bantu remains theoretically challenging. While heuristic definitions that position auxiliaries along a diachronic form-function continuum between lexical verbs and bound grammatical affixes (Anderson 2006, 7, 2011, 2) have proven productive, their application raises questions about categorical status, structural variation, and the interaction between auxiliary elements and their lexical counterparts. Addressing these challenges, as stated in most current literature (see, for example, Gibson 2019, 2025; Gunnink 2023; Crane et al. *forthcoming*) requires fine-grained analyses that engage with both language-internal evidence and cross-linguistic typology.

Overview of the contributions

The papers in this special issue seek to address some of the gaps mentioned in the previous section, bringing together contributions that engage with a broad range of interrelated questions concerning auxiliary verb constructions in Bantu languages. A central concern running through several papers is the definition and categorical status of auxiliaries and their place within the broader architecture of the verb phrase. Fleischhauer and Kihara examine how auxiliaries can be distinguished from both lexical verbs and light verbs in Gĩkũyũ (E51)¹, and which morpho-syntactic diagnostics are most revealing in making these distinctions. The contribution by Kerr shows that predicate structures in Northwestern Bantu (Zone A) and nearby Bantoid languages often occupy an intermediate position between analytic and synthetic constructions, challenging clear-cut categorisations.

¹ Throughout this section we cite languages with their Guthrie code (the alpha-numeric coding system of Bantu languages consisting of a letter indicating broader zones and numbers identifying the language). The inclusion or omission of language prefixes follows that chosen by the author of the specific article in which the language is referred to.

Another set of papers in the present special issue focuses on the internal structure and functions of auxiliary constructions, highlighting the role and behaviour of the lexical verb element and ways in which auxiliary systems encode complex temporal, modal and pragmatic meanings. Creissels offers a detailed look at the multiple functions of what he terms ‘dedicated’ auxiliaries in Tswana (S31), that is, auxiliaries without lexical counterparts. Botne’s study demonstrates how single and stacked auxiliary constructions in Kihehe (G62) allow speakers to express fine-grained temporal relations and modal nuances, while Bar-el, Kanijo and Petzell’s analysis illustrates the coexistence of multiple grammaticalization stages within a single system in Kagulu (G12). Savić’s study further extends the functional domain of auxiliaries beyond tense and aspect, showing how auxiliary constructions can acquire discourse-pragmatic functions related to information structure and clause linkage in isiXhosa (S41). The stacking of auxiliaries is specifically addressed in Crane et al.’s contribution, which serves as a programmatic call for further investigations into this distinct phenomenon.

Diachronic development and reconstruction form a third primary research agenda in this issue. Several contributions address how auxiliary constructions emerge, involve and sometimes recycle along the verb-auxiliary-affix continuum. Crane’s comparative survey of a large number of auxiliary functions across Southern Bantu (zone S) raises the question of whether extensive auxiliary systems reflect inherent patterns from earlier stages of Bantu or are later innovations, while Botne as well as Bar-el, Kanijo and Petzell provide language-specific case studies that indicate non-linear, potentially cyclic pathways of grammaticalization in Kihehe and Kagulu, respectively. Fleischhauer and Kihara’s analysis of partial decategorization in Gĩkũyũ likewise underscores the gradual and layered nature of auxiliarization.

Finally, the papers in the current special issue foreground the role of language contact and areal dynamics in shaping auxiliary systems. Zahran, Devos and Guérois present a compelling case of contact-induced diffusion in their study of negative ‘have’ auxiliaries in the Middle and Lower Zambezi region (zones M, N and S10), with findings illustrating multilingual interaction. Additionally, Crane notes contact with Khoisan languages as a possible factor in the maintenance or expansion of auxiliary functions in Southern Bantu.

Taken together, these nine contributions demonstrate that auxiliary verb constructions in Bantu cannot be fully understood without considering the interplay of language-internal structure, diachronic change, and areal contact. By offering detailed empirical descriptions, refined analytical distinctions, and comparative and historical perspectives, the papers collectively underscore the value of auxiliary constructions as a window onto broader issues of verb-centred morphosyntax, grammaticalisation, and the interaction between analytic and synthetic structures. Beyond their relevance for Bantu linguistics, the findings presented here contribute to cross-linguistic discussions on auxiliaries, form-function continua, and cycles of morphosyntactic change, and thus speak to a broader audience in linguistic theory and typology.

Similarly, the diversity of languages, methodological approaches, and theoretical frameworks represented in this issue highlights both the progress made and the substantial work that remains to be done in studying and understanding auxiliary constructions in Bantu languages. Future research will benefit from further fine-grained studies of underdescribed languages and varieties, expanded reconstruction efforts across different Bantu subgroups, and closer attention to the role of language contact and multilingual ecologies in shaping auxiliary systems. We hope that this special issue will not only consolidate recent advances but also stimulate continued interdisciplinary and international collaboration on auxiliary constructions in Bantu and beyond.

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