

# Ergativity and antipassive in Grassfields Bantu

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## Background

**Shupamem** (ISO 639-3: bax) is a Grassfields language of Cameroon.

- Nchare (2012) describes postverbal particle *nà* as perfective.
- A.L. Nchare (p.c.) also describes use of *nà* as “high FOC”.
- New data find that *nà* may/must be used with some A(gents of tr.) but not S(ubjects of intr.) or P(atients of tr.) .
- Superficially looks like **ergativity** ( $A \neq S = P$ )
- Accusative alignment** elsewhere (e.g., “low FOC” *pò:* on P, not A/S in core clauses).
- On further inspection, *nà* is also sensitive to TAM, voice and (pro)nominality of co-arguments.
- Usage of *nà* differs in what we identify as the **antipassive voice** (recognized elsewhere in Bantu, cf. Bostoen et al., 2015)

This poster concerns the relation between antipassive voice and what we identify as split ergative alignment).

## Immediately After the Verb (IAV) Focus

- SVO is most common word order in Shupamem.
- Nà* is found in the IAV position.
- In SVO, its availability is affected by **TAM and transitivity**:

## IAV Focus in SVO

Feature	Available	Unavailable
Tense	present	past
Aspect	perfective	imperfective
Mood	indicative	interrogative
Transitivity	transitive	intransitive

Table 1:Availability of postverbal *nà* in SVO

## TAM and transitivity

- n̄zĩə* ↓(*ná*) *mì*...  
1SG/say (FOC) COMP...  
“I have said that...” [today]
- m̄s* *rĩə* ↓(*\*ná*) *mì*...  
1SG say FOC COMP...  
“I said that...” [before today]

## ExVSO Clauses (Antipassive voice)

- Shupamem Ex(pletive)VSO *subject focus* clauses begin with the expletive *à*, followed by the verb, subject, and other material.
- We analyze ExVSO clauses as **antipassive**, i.e. with a syntactically deranked logical object.

## Optional IAV-nà

IAV-nà is available in ExVSO intransitive clauses (3-4):

- m̄imf̄ə* *gb̄ì* ↓(*\*ná*)  
Mimshe fall FOC  
“Mimshe fell/has fallen.”
- à* *gb̄ì* ↓(*ná*) *m̄imf̄ə*  
EXPL fall FOC Mimshe  
“It is Mimshe who has fallen.”  
[today][\*before today]

In transitive clauses, optionality pattern is:

## IAV Focus in ExVSO

	SUBJ PRON.	SUBJ NOUN
OBJ PRON.	obligatory	obligatory
OBJ NOUN	optional	obligatory

Table 2:Optionality of postverbal *nà* in aVSO

When A and P are in the third person and A is pronominal (4), regardless of animacy:

- à* *p̄ĩə?* ↓(*ná*) *má* *m̄imf̄ə* *ᵑḡw̄ǎn*  
EXPL take FOC 1SG Mimshe TOP/go  
*ᵑtén*  
market  
“I take Mimshe to the market.”
- à* *k̄íp* ↓(*ná*) *wí* *rì*  
EXPL break FOC 3SG chair  
“He has broken the chair.”

## Obligatory IAV-nà

When both A and P are nouns (7) or pronouns (8-9), regardless of relative person ranking (1,2 > 3):

- à* *w̄ǎn* ↓(*ná*) *m̄imf̄ə* *l̄èwà*  
EXPL go FOC Mimshe book  
“Mimshe went to school.” [3 > 3]
- à* *f̄ú* ↓(*\*ná*) *má* *wí*  
EXPL call FOC 1SG 3SG  
“I have called him/her.” [1 > 3]
- à* *p̄ĩə?* ↓(*\*ná*) *wí* *wú* *ᵑḡw̄ǎn* *t̄èn*  
EXPL take FOC 3sg 2sg TOP/go market  
“(S)he takes you to the market.” [3 > 2]

When A is a proper name and P is 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> pers. (10-11):

- à* *p̄ĩə?* ↓(*\*ná*) *m̄imS̄ə* *wá* *ᵑḡw̄ǎn*  
EXPL take FOC Mimshe 1SG TOP/go  
*m̄f̄y* *ᵑdùn* *t̄èn*  
LOG top market  
“Mimshe took me to the market.”  
(LOG = logophoric spatial orientation marker)

## Obligatory IAV-nà

But referential conditioning does not tend to apply in active SVO clauses:

- m̄imf̄ə* *f̄ú:* *r̄âj̄è*  
Mimshe call Raye  
“Mimshe called Raye.”

## Comparative Outlook

- In Aghem (ISO-639-3: agq; Glottocode: aghe1239), obligatory post-verbal *n̄* when VP is verb-final (SV intransitives included) (Hyman et al., 2010).
- n̄* marks constituency at the right edge of VP (*idem*).
- Authors unsure of what accounts for the optionality of *n̄* in non-verb-final VPs.
- We propose: Shupamem data suggests referential prominence of post-verbal arguments may be involved in accounting for optionality.

## Conclusion

- TAM-, transitivity- and voice-conditioning.
- Nominality of S/A and G/P determines optionality of IAV-*nà* (obligatory only in noun A > pronoun P/G scenarios)
- while S/A-marking lends itself to a “marked nominative” alignment analysis, it is only obligatory when A outranks P/G in nominality. Hence our split ergativity proposal.
- This accords with Differential Argument Marking across languages (Haspelmath, 2018).

## Selected References

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