The Structure of Bambara
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1 Introduction
The focus in this talk will be on the verb. This will be looked at from three angles:
- TAM elements
- copula forms
- derivational suffixes

2 Some general notes on the language
- Bambara is a member of the Mande language family in West Africa (Niger-Congo phylum)
- it is – besides Swahili, Hausa and Fula – one of the most important languages in Africa with regard to distribution and the number of speakers
- it is spoken in Mali, Ivory Coast, Upper Guinea, in the western part of Burkina Faso and in eastern Senegal
- it is a tone language (high /low)
- Bambara has only one pronominal paradigm:

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- it is highly isolating and has a very strict word order:

| Subject | AUX /TAM | Object | Verb | ... |

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1 This material was largely compiled for a structure course of Bambara during the last semester. Many thanks to my colleague Klaus Beyer who is – in contrast to me – an expert with regard to Mande languages and provided me with many valuable insights.
3 TAM elements in Bambara

3.1 An overview of the TAM markers in Bambara

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<td>la/ha</td>
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3.1.1 (Simple) Present

a) Transitive verbs

(1)a. Sanu bÈ baara kÈ
     Sanu PRES.AFF work do
     ‘Sanu works.’

    b. Sanu tÈ baara kÈ
       Sanu PRES.NEG work do
       ‘Sanu does not work.’

b) Intransitive verbs

(2)a. An bÈ taa sugu la.
     1PL PRES.AFF go market POSTPOS
     “We go to the market.”

    b. An tÈ taa sugu la.
       1PL PRES.NEG go market POSTPOS
       “We do not go to the market.”

c) Reflexive verbs

(3)a. n bÈ n ko.
     I PRES.AFF PRO.REFL wash
     ‘I wash myself.’

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2 This overview is based on the *Bamankan Learner’s Reference Grammar* (Fofarna and Traoré). Changes in the interlinear translation – as for example with regard to the modification of the abbreviation PRED – are my own.
b. n **tE** n ko.
I PRES.NEG PRO.REFL wash
‘I do not wash myself.’

The third person singular constitutes an exception, as the “reflexive pronoun” here is not *a* – as one would expect – but *i*.

c. a **bE** i ko.
She/he PRES.AFF PRO.REFL wash
‘She washes herself.’ / ‘He washes himself.’

3.1.2 Present Progressive

a) Transitive verbs

(4)a. N **bE** ka liburu kalan.
1SG PRES.AFF PROG book read
‘I am reading the book.’

b. N **tE** ka liburu kalan.
1SG PRES.NEG PROG book read
‘I am not reading the book.’

(5)a. U **bE** liburu-kalan **na**.
3PL PRES.AFF book read.PROG POSTPOS
‘They are reading the book.’

b. U **tE** liburu-kalan **na**.
3PL PRES.NEG book read.PROG POSTPOS
‘They are not reading the book.’

b) Intransitive verbs

(6)a. Birama **bE** ka taa so.
Birama PRES.AFF PROG go home
‘Birama is going home.’

b. Birama **tE** ka taa so.
Birama PRES.NEG PROG go home
‘Birama is not going home.’

(7)a. A **bE** yaala **la**.
3SG PRES.AFF take a walk POSTPOS
‘She is taking a walk.’

b. A **tE** yaala **la**.
3SG PRES.NEG take a walk POSTPOS
‘She is not taking a walk.’
2.1.3 Simple Past
   a) Transitive verbs
   (8)a. N  tun  bE  liburu  kalan.
       1SG  PAST  PRES.AFF  book  read
       ‘I was reading the book.’ / ‘I used to read the book.’
   
b. N  tun  tE  liburu  kalan.
       1SG  PAST  PRES.NEG  book  read
       ‘I was not reading the book.’

b) Intransitive verbs
   (9)a. Musa  tun  bE  taa.
       Musa  PAST  PRES.AFF  go
       ‘Musa was going.’ / ‘Musa used to go.’
   
b. Musa  tun  tE  taa.
       Musa  PAST  PRES.NEG  go
       ‘Musa was not going.’

3.1.4 Perfect Tense
   a) Transitive verbs
   (10)a. Birama  ye  liburu  kalan.
       Birama  PERF.AFF  book  read
       ‘Birama has read the book.’
   
b. Birama  ma  liburu  kalan.
       Birama  PERF.NEG  book  read
       ‘Birama has not read the book.’

b) Intransitive verbs
   (11)a. Fali  sa-ra
       donkey  die-PERF.AFF
       ‘The donkey has died.’
   
b. Fali  ma  sa.
       donkey  PERF.NEG  die
       ‘The donkey has not died.’

(12)a. Birama  segin-na
       Birama  return-PERF.AFF
       ‘Birama has returned.’
   
b. Birama  ma  segin.
       Birama  PERF.NEG  return
       ‘Birama has not returned.’
(13)a. Tabali kari-la
   table break-PERF.AFF
   ‘The table has broken.’

   b. Tabali ma kari.
      table PERF.NEG break
      ‘The table has not broken.’

3.1.5 Past Perfect
a) Transitive verbs
(14)a. Umu tun ye malo tobi.
      Umu PAST PERF.AFF rice cook
      ‘Umu had cooked rice.’

   b. Umu tun ma malo tobi.
      Umu PAST PERF.NEG rice cook
      ‘Umu had not cooked rice.’

b) Intransitive verbs
(15)a. Anw tun taa-ra so.
      1PL PAST go-PERF.AFF home
      ‘We had gone home.’

   b. Anw tun ma taa so.
      1PL PAST PERF.NEG go home
      ‘We had not gone home.’

3.1.6 Future Tense
a) Transitive verbs
(16)a. Birama na mobili ko.
      Birama NEAR.FUT car wash
      ‘Birama is going to wash the car.’

   b. Birama tena mobili ko.
      Birama FUT.NEG car wash
      ‘Birama will not wash the car.’

(17)a. Muso bena den sOQO
      Muso DIST.FUT baby have
      ‘The woman will have a baby.’

   b. Muso tena den sOQO
      Muso FUT.NEG baby have
      ‘The woman will not have a baby.’
b) Intransitive verbs

(18)a. Umu na taa market la.
   Umu NEAR.FUT go market POSTPOS
   ‘Umu is going to the market.’

   b. Umu tena taa market la.
   Umu FUT.NEG go market POSTPOS
   ‘Umu is not going to the market.’

(19)a. Umu bena taa market la.
   Umu DIST.FUT go market POSTPOS
   ‘Umu will go to the market.’

   b. Umu tena taa market la.
   Umu FUT.NEG go market POSTPOS
   ‘Umu is not going to the market.’

4 Copula forms in Bambara

4.1 don

don is a presentative element and corresponds to English be. It expresses existential being.

4.1.1 Present

(20)a. ne don
   1SG COP
   ‘It’s me.’

   b. ne tE
   1SG COP.NEG
   ‘It is not me.’

(21)a. ce-w don
   man-PL COP
   ‘They are men.’

   b. ce-w tE
   man-PL COP.NEG
   ‘They are not men.’

4.1.2 Simple Past

(22)a. Misi tun don
   cow PAST COP
   ‘It was a/the cow.’

   b. Misi tun tE
   cow PAST COP.NEG
   ‘It wasn’t a/the cow.’

4.2 bE

This construction expresses idea or action.

4.2.1 Present

(23)a. Tile bE
   sun COP
   ‘It is sunny.’

   b. Tile tE
   sun COP.NEG
   ‘It is not sunny.’

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3 In some sources the copula forms are labeled as PRED. As I find this term quite misleading, I use COP throughout this section.
4.2.2 Simple Past
(24)a. Funteni tun bE
    heat PAST COP
    ‘It was hot.’

b. Funteni tun tE
    heat PAST COP.NEG
    ‘It was not hot.’

4.3 ye...ye
The construction with ye ... ye, in which the noun is surrounded by the two particles, expresses subject focus by which the subject is identified. In negative contexts the first realization of ye is replaced by tE

4.3.1 Present
    this COP dog COP
    ‘This is a dog.’

b. Nin tE wulu ye.
    this COP.NEG dog COP
    ‘This is not a dog.’

4.3.2 Simple Past
(26)a. Nin tun ye wulu ye.
    this PAST COP dog COP
    ‘This was a dog.’

b. Nin tun tE wulu ye.
    this PAST COP.NEG dog COP
    ‘This was a dog.’

4.4 ka
ka and its negative correspondent, man, link noun and adjective. However, they cannot be used with all adjectives.

4.4.1 Present
(27)a. N ka yan.
    1SG COP tall
    ‘I am tall.’

b. N man yan.
    1SG COP.NEG tall
    ‘I am not tall.’

4.4.2 Simple Past
(28)a. cE tun ka surun.
    man PAST COP short
    ‘The man was short.’

b. cE tun man surun.
    man PAST COP short
    ‘The man was short.’
Verbal Derivation

- **-la** (-na after nasal) /-baga /-baa: Nomina Agentis / Noun Agent

- **productive**

- **-la (-na)** can only be suffixed to transitive verbs with incorporated objects that precede the verbal part within the agent noun. This derivation is used to describe a person with regard to her/his usual and characteristic actions.

- **-la / -na** (Kastenholz 1998):
  - kà móbili bòli ‘to drive a car’ => móbili-boli-la ‘driver’
  - kà sEnÈ kÈ ‘to work’ => sEnÈ-kÈ-la ‘farmer’
  - on the field’
  - kà mQgOfàga ‘to kill a person’ => mQgOfaga-la ‘killer’

- **-baga** (The New Bambara Grammar):
  - kà sé ‘to achieve’ => sé-baga ‘champion’
  - kà à kàlan ‘to read something’ => kàlan-baga ‘reader of’
  - kà tága ‘to go away’ => tága-baga ‘someone who goes away’

- **-baa** (The New Bambara Grammar):
  - kisi ‘to save’ => Kisi-baa ‘Savior’
  - bange ‘to bring forth’ => bange-baa ‘parent’
  - dila ‘to make’ => dila-baa ‘maker’

Agent nouns can – as already mentioned – be used in relative-like constructions:

Ne tè₄ a dila-baa dòn.
1SG PRES.NEG 3SG maker know
‘I don’t know who made it.’

- **-lan (-na(n) after a nasal vowel or consonant):**

  **Instruments** in the broadest sense

  - **highly productive, can be suffixed to all verbs**

  - **very often lexicalized and part of the lexicon**

  **Examples** (Kastenholz 1998):
  - sigi ‘sit’ => sigi-lan ‘chair’
  - dàtugu ‘to cover’ => dàtugu-lan ‘lid’
  - bàmu ‘to carry a child on the back’ => bàmu-nan ‘sling’

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4 I did not change tone or vowel quality in these examples, but present them in the way in which they occur in the original sources.
-\textit{li} (-\textit{ni}): Nomina Actiones /Verbal Nouns

\textbf{Examples} (Kastenholz 1998):

\begin{itemize}
  \item jìra \textit{‘show something’} \Rightarrow jìra-\textit{li} \textit{‘the showing’}
  \item dúmu \textit{‘eat’} \Rightarrow dúmu-\textit{ni} \textit{‘the eating’}
  \item wùli \textit{‘get up’} \Rightarrow wùli-\textit{li} \textit{‘the getting up’}
\end{itemize}

The derivations with \textit{-li} can be combined with the postpositions \textit{lá (ná, rá..)} and \textit{kàn} to form a kind of progressive in nominal clauses.

\textbf{Examples} (Kastenholz 1998, interlinearization my own):

\begin{verbatim}
1SG  bÈ    dúmu-ni    ná
\end{verbatim}

\textit{‘I am eating.’}

\textit{lit.: ‘I am at the eating.’}

\begin{verbatim}
3SG  bÈ    sÈbÈn-ni    kàn
\end{verbatim}

\textit{‘She /He is writing.’}

\textit{lit.: ‘She /He is at the writing.’}

-\textit{len} (-\textit{nen} after nasal): Result of an action / Past Participle (passive)

\textbf{Examples} (Kastenholz 1998):

\begin{itemize}
  \item nà (intr.) \textit{‘come’} \Rightarrow nà-\textit{nén} \textit{‘come’}
  \item bin (intr.) \textit{‘fall’} \Rightarrow bin-\textit{nén} \textit{‘fallen’}
  \item sègin (intr.) \textit{‘come back’} \Rightarrow sègin-nen \textit{‘come back’}
  \item dØn (tr.) \textit{‘know’} \Rightarrow dØn-nen \textit{‘known’}
\end{itemize}

The past participle can be used as adjective. It follows the noun, and plural is either marked on the noun or on the participle.

\textbf{Examples} (Kastenholz 1998, interlinearizations are my own):

\begin{verbatim}
3SG  PERF.AFF  ocra  wash-PPP  put  pot  POSTPOS:in
\end{verbatim}

\textit{‘She put washed ocra into the pot.’}

bà    siri-len-w
\textit{‘tied goats’}

bà-w  siri-len bÈ  bîn  Òmi \textit{(nyimi)}
\textit{‘The tied goats chew grass.’}
The past participle can also be used in a predicative way. Then it forms the predicate together with the following TAM marker.

**Examples** (Kastenholz 1998, interlinearization my own):

kú tůru-len bE
yams plant-PPP PRES.AFF
‘The yams is planted.’

bà-w siri-len tE túgun
goat-PL tie-PPP PRES.NEG anymore
‘The goats are not tied anymore.’

mùso-w sigi-len tūn bE só kQhO
woman-PL sit-PPP PAST PRES.AFF house POSTPOS: in
‘The women sat in the house.’

The past participle can also be used to express a temporal sequence.

tīle bīn-nen, Ncī wūli-la
sun fall-PPP Ncī get up-PERF.AFF
‘When the sun had fallen, Nci got up.’

_The New Bambara Grammar_ gives an example of a past participle in a relative context (interlinearizations are my own):

O mògò sigi-len na-na yan kunun.
DEM.PROX person sit-PPP come-PERF.AFF here yesterday
‘This person who is seated came here yesterday.’

❖ _tO Expression of an action during its occurrence / Present Participle_

This suffix is used to form the present participle of transitive and intransitive verbs. With transitive verbs the reading is passive. These participles follow the noun and have adjectival function. The plural is marked on the noun or on another attribute, but not on the participle.

**Examples** (Kastenholz 1998):

sé ‘reach’ => sé-tO ‘reaching’
sègin ‘come back’ => sègin-tO ‘coming back’
tūru ‘to plant’ => tūru-tO ‘being planted’

According to Kastenholz these participles are most often used as sentence-initial complement and express simultaneity (‘when’, ‘while’ etc.).

sán nà-tO mQhO sí má yé
rain come-PPA person not at all none see
‘When /While it rained no person was seen.’
The following examples from *The New Bambara Grammar* illustrate further usage of the present participle (interlinearizations are my own.)

**predicative:**

I  
2SG  
‘Where are you going?’

Ne  
1SG  
‘Was I not going to school?’

**modifying:**

Jiri  
‘The falling tree kills a man.’

instead of a relative clause:

O  
‘That man coming is my father.’ / ‘That man who is coming is my father.’

**as complement:**

A  
‘He did not see the snake entering into the hole.’

**with the copula don:**

A  
‘He is coming.’

- **-ta: Anticipation of an action / Potential / Anticipatory Participle**

The suffix -ta can only be combined with transitive verbs to form the so-called Anticipatory Participle. *The New Bambara Grammar* describes this form as “adjective of quality” and compares it to the English forms ending in -ible und -able.

ye  
‘to see’  
‘visible’

sa  
‘to die’  
‘mortal’

mèn  
‘to endure, to last’  
‘durable’

- **-bali**

Another verbal suffix mentioned in *The New Bambara Grammar* is -bali. It is an ‘adjective or noun expressing the opposite of the quality indicated in the Verb (English form un-, in-)’.
Examples (Ebermann 1986)
ka .. ye’ to see something’ => fèn ye-bali ‘invisible thing’
ka ban ‘to come to an end, => fèn ban-bali ‘eternal thing’
to stop’

In addition to these (and other) derivational suffixes, tonal derivation is another means of forming new words in Bambara.

6 Summary
In this talk I illustrated the strategies of a highly isolating language to express forms – in this case verbal forms and actions – in the absence of rich morphology. For me personally this study was and is very interesting, as it is a good means to overcome stereotypical views on different kinds of languages, on the concept of “simplicity” as well as ability.

Abbreviations
COP copula
COP.NEG negated copula
DEM.DIST distal demonstrative
DEM.PROX proximal demonstrative
DIST.FUT distant future
FUT.NEG negated future
INT.PART particle marking a clause as a question
NEAR.FUT near future
PAST past
1/2/3SG/PL first, second and third person singular /plural
POSS.PRO possessive pronoun
POSTPOS postposition
PA anticipatory participle
PERF.AFF perfect affirmative
PERF.NEG perfect negative
PPA present participle
PPP past participle
PREP preposition
PRES.AFF present affirmative
PRES.NEG present negative
PRO.REFL reflexive pronoun
PROG progressive
VN verbal noun

References