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Adjunction in *Mbere* Verb Phrase



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Reçu: 05/05/2026, **Accepté :** 28/07/2025, **Publié :** 30/07/2026

Financement : L'auteur déclare qu'il n'a reçu aucun financement pour réaliser cette étude. **Conflit d'intérêts :** L'auteur ne signale aucun conflit d'intérêts. **Anti-plagiat :** cet article a été soumis au test anti-plagiat de **Plagiarism Checker X** avec un taux de 3 %.

Abstract: This paper examines the syntactic distribution of verb adjuncts in Mbere, a Bantu language spoken in Congo-Brazzaville. It aims to identify the categories that function as verb adjuncts in Mbere and to determine whether their movement within the sentence obeys a universal principle of free recursiveness or is instead constrained by parametric variation. Data were collected through participant and non-participant observation, interviews, and introspection, and the analysis is conducted within Chomsky's Minimalist Program (MP). The results show that adjuncts in Mbere are realized as adverbial phrases (AdvPs) and prepositional phrases (PPs). When the adjunct merges as an adverb, its distribution depends on the type of adjunct. If it is a temporal adverb, the distribution is free (final, middle, and initial positions). However, if it belongs to another category of adverb, the only attested position is final. If the adjunct occurs as a prepositional phrase, it can merge either in final or initial position, but not in the middle. These findings indicate that the recursiveness of adjuncts is not a universal property but rather a parametric one: in some languages their distribution is free, while in others, such as Mbere, their distribution is subject to specific distributional constraints.

Keywords: adjuncts, merger, movement, Mbere, distribution.

¹ **Comment citer cet article:** Ndongo Ibara Y-P. et Ekorì Tsoloboa D. C., (2026) « Adjunction in Mbere Verb Phrase », *Cahiers Africains de Rhétorique*, Vol 5, n°1, pp.334-342



Adjonction dans l'expression verbale *Mbere*



Résumé : Cet article porte sur la distribution syntaxique des compléments verbaux (adjuncts) en Mbere, une langue bantoue parlée au Congo-Brazzaville. Il vise à identifier les catégories qui fonctionnent comme compléments verbaux en Mbere et à déterminer si leur mouvement au sein de la phrase obéit à un principe universel de récursivité libre ou s'il est plutôt soumis à une variation paramétrique. Les données ont été recueillies par observation participante et non participante, par entretiens et par introspection, et l'analyse est menée dans le cadre du programme minimaliste de Chomsky (MP). Les résultats montrent que les compléments verbaux en Mbere se réalisent sous forme de syntagmes adverbiaux (AdvPs) et de syntagmes prépositionnels (PPs). Lorsque le complément apparaît comme adverbe, sa distribution dépend de la nature du complément. S'il s'agit d'un adverbe temporel, la distribution est libre (positions finale, médiane et initiale). En revanche, s'il s'agit d'une autre catégorie d'adverbe, la seule position attestée est la finale. Si le complément apparaît comme syntagme prépositionnel, il peut être distribué en position finale ou initiale, mais pas en position médiane. Ces résultats montrent que la récursivité des compléments verbaux n'est pas une propriété universelle mais plutôt paramétrique : dans certaines langues, leur distribution est libre, tandis que dans d'autres, comme le Mbere, elle est soumise à des contraintes distributionnelles spécifiques.

Mots clés : complément verbal, combinaison, mouvement, Mbere, distribution.

Introduction

This paper considers a syntactic analysis of verb adjunct merger in Mbere, a Bantu language spoken in Congo Brazzaville. Put otherwise, it concerns how verb adjuncts are distributed and how they undergo movement from their logical position (within the verb phrase) to their phonetic position (outside the latter) within a Mbere sentence. The literature on adjuncts stipulates that adjuncts are recursive in their distribution (Chomsky 2008; Mberi Ngakala 2014; Carnie 2021; Hanson 2025; Idan 2021). Adjuncts also convey information about manner, time, place, and cause (Arts 2001). However, adjunct merger is related to Late Merger/Pair Merger and the Invisibility Condition (Chomsky 2004, 2008; Sakumoto 2021), a mechanism which, in principle, allows adjuncts to merge freely at any point in the structure without affecting its semantic interpretation.

Yet, preliminary observation of Mbere data indicates that this freedom of distribution is not systematic: some adjuncts move across several positions in the sentence, while others are confined to a single position. This constitutes the problem addressed in this paper: if adjunction is, in principle, a free and recursive operation, why do certain categories of adjuncts in Mbere resist movement, while others do not? In other words, is the distribution of verb adjuncts governed by a universal principle of free recursiveness, or is it instead subject to language-specific (parametric) constraints? More specifically, this



paper addresses the following questions: What adjuncts exist in Mbere? How do they move within the structure?

The objective of this paper is twofold: first, to identify and categorize the elements that function as verb adjuncts in Mbere; second, to determine the conditions governing their distribution and movement within the sentence, in order to establish whether such movement is regulated by universal principles or by parametric variation.

On the basis of the literature reviewed above and preliminary observation of the data, two hypotheses are formulated. First, verb adjuncts in Mbere are not restricted to a single syntactic category: they are expected to be realized as adverbial phrases (AdvPs) and prepositional phrases (PPs). Second, the recursiveness of adjuncts in Mbere is not uniform: it is expected to be free for temporal adverbials, but constrained for other categories of adverbs and for prepositional phrases, whose distribution should be limited to specific positions rather than fully free.

To test these hypotheses, this paper is organized into two main sections. The first section deals with verb adjunct categories in Mbere, while the second examines the conditions on verb adjunct movement.

Theoretical Framework

This study is couched within Chomsky's Minimalist Program (MP) (Chomsky 2004, 2008), a framework that reduces the syntactic component to a minimal set of operations essentially Merge, Agree, and Move responsible for building and interpreting linguistic structures. Within this framework, structure-building proceeds through Merge, which combines two syntactic objects into a new one. Chomsky (2004, 2008) distinguishes two modes of Merge: Set-Merge, which builds core structure by combining arguments and heads (subjects, objects, complements), and Pair-Merge, also called Late Merger or adjunction, which attaches an adjunct to an already-formed constituent without altering its label or its argument structure.

Because adjuncts are introduced by Pair-Merge, they are said to merge on a "separate plane" (Chomsky 2004:117–118): the host constituent retains all of its properties, while the adjunct is attached as additional, non-selected information. This accounts for the Invisibility Condition: adjuncts do not enter into the core syntactic relations, such as c-command, that hold among Set-Merged elements, and they remain syntactically invisible until the point of Transfer, when they must be reintegrated into the primary plane to receive a semantic and phonological interpretation (Chomsky 2004; Sakumoto 2021). It is precisely this late, countercyclic character of adjunction that is taken, in the literature, to license the free recursiveness and mobility of adjuncts noted by Chomsky (2008), Carnie (2021), Mberi Ngakala (2014), Hanson (2025), and Idan (2021).

In addition to this derivational definition, the framework draws on functional criteria to identify adjuncts as opposed to arguments. Following Arts (2001:79) and Newson (2006:238), adjuncts are optional constituents that provide peripheral information about the manner, time, place, or cause of the event denoted by the verb, and they attach



to an intermediate projection (V-bar) rather than to the verbal head itself. For Bantu languages specifically, Bearth (2003:125) proposes four diagnostic properties that set adjuncts apart from arguments: their occurrence is not constrained by the valency of the verb, they are not registered in verb morphology, their relative order tends to be variable, and, when nominal, they require a preposition or a specialized suffix to be licensed. These criteria, combined with the Minimalist notions of Pair-Merge and Invisibility, constitute the analytical tools used in Sections 1 and 2 to identify verb adjuncts in Mbere and to account for the constraints on their distribution and movement.

Corpus and Methodology

The analysis is based on a corpus of Mbere sentences built to illustrate the distribution of verb adjuncts realized as adverbial phrases (AdvPs) and prepositional phrases (PPs), as presented in examples (1) to (3). For comparative purposes, the corpus is complemented with Laali data drawn from Mberi Ngakala (2014), Laali being another Bantu language spoken in Congo-Brazzaville, in order to determine whether the constraints observed in Mbere are also attested elsewhere in the family or whether they are specific to Mbere.

Data were gathered through four complementary techniques: participant observation, which consisted in taking part in everyday communicative situations among Mbere speakers in order to record naturally occurring adjuncts; non-participant observation, which consisted in recording spontaneous speech without directly intervening in the exchange; interviews, through which native speakers were asked to produce and judge sentences containing adjuncts; and introspection, whereby the researchers' own competence as speakers familiar with the language was used to construct and refine the test sentences.

The data collected were then organized into minimal sets in which the same adjunct is placed successively in initial, medial, and final position, all other elements of the sentence being held constant. Native speakers' grammaticality judgments were used to determine which positions are well-formed and which are not, ill-formed outputs being marked with an asterisk (*), as in examples (3). These minimal sets were subsequently analyzed within the Minimalist Program outlined in the Theoretical Framework, in order to determine, for each category of adjunct, whether its distribution is free (total movement), partial, or blocked.

1-Verb adjuncts categories

This section analyzes the categories identified as adjuncts in Mbere. Accordingly, adjuncts are additional elements of a verb. That is, they are not obligatory components of the verb and do not contribute to its core meaning. According to Arts (2001:79), *“Adjuncts are constituents that tell you more about the how, when, where or why of the activity or situation expressed by the sentence they occur in.”* This means that adjuncts are generally adverbial phrases or prepositional phrases (PPs). Consider the following illustration.

- (1) a-Ndε a-ty-àa Angle *okεkε*
Him/her 3SG-speak-Non.Past English slowly
He/she speaks slowly
- b-Pr Ndongo a-yesu-àa syntax *ndzendzele*
Pr Ndongo 3SG- teach-Non.Past syntax very well
Pr Ndongo teaches syntax very well.
- c-Aline a-yiel-í nkuono *na entsiele*
Aline 3SG-go-Past field in morning
Aline went to the field in the morning.
- d-Lekoba a-sung-àà bare *ma Alini*
Lekoba 3SG'help-Non.Past people of Alieni
Lenkouama helps people of Alieni.

The observation in (1) shows that the verb occurs with NP complements and additional elements. From the literature (Ndongo Ibara 2022; Burton-Roberts 2011), if the adjunct function can be fulfilled by NP, PP, AdvP, and clauses, in the Mbere examples above this function is restricted to adverbial phrases (AdvP) and prepositional phrases (PP). In addition to the category of adjuncts, they are not structurally indispensable elements. They are non-derivational elements, since they are invisible elements (Chomsky 2004). Consider the example below :

- (2) a- Ndε a-ty-í Angle *okεkε*
Him/her 3SG- speak-Past English slowly
He/she spoke slowly
- b-Pr Ndongo a-yesw-í syntax
Pr Ndongo 3SG- teach-Past syntax
Pr Ndongo taught syntax
- c-Aline a-yiel-í nkwono
Aline 3SG-go-Past field
Aline went to the field
- d-Lekoba a-sung-í bare
Lekoba 3SG-help-Past people
Lekoba helpt Peole

The observation in (2) is that all the additional structural elements (*okεkε*, *ndzendzele*, *o tobulu*, *mo eboyi*) of (2) have been removed, but the structure remains syntactically well-formed. This means that adjuncts are extra-structural elements. Chomsky (2004:117–118) states: “Given the basic properties of adjunction, we might intuitively think of it as attached to B on a separate plane, with B retaining all its properties on the ‘primary plane’, the simple structure.” By this, Chomsky means that adjuncts are not essential

elements; they do not contribute to the merger operation. They are not present in the derivation of the structure. This is why they occur in what Chomsky (op. cit.) calls *Pair-Merger*: adjuncts merge in a syntactically separate plane. They are not structure-building elements (*Set-Merge*); their participation modifies the structure without affecting its semantics. In the same vein, Arts (2001:21) stipulates that “*Adjuncts are always optional and express peripheral information.*” That is to say, adjuncts are additional structural information. Newson (2006:238) asserts that “*As the adjuncts adjoin to the phrase, they will not merge with the head word, but rather with the intermediate V-bar.*” This means that adjuncts are never sisters of the verb phrase, but rather additional elements. Bearth (2003:125) distinguishes adjuncts from arguments in Bantu as follows:

- Their occurrence is not constrained by the valency of the verb.
- They are not represented in verb morphology.
- Their internal order tends to be variable.
- Nominal expressions functioning as adjuncts of manner or place are marked by prepositions or specialized suffixes.

In Mbere, the occurrence of adjuncts also does not depend on the quality of the verb. Moreover, the agreement marker is not attested. Thus, adjuncts do not allow the goal–probe relation. The question which arises is that of the recursiveness of adjuncts.

2-Verb Adjuncts movement

This section looks at the distribution of adjuncts and their possible movement. In other words, it examines how adjuncts move in the sentence and the conditions imposed on their movement. From Bearth (2003), it appears that adjuncts are recursive, that is, they can occur at any position within the structure. However, this reality may not be the same in Mbere. Consider the following examples.

- (3) a-Ndε a-ty-a Angle okεke
 He 3SG-speak-Non.pas English slowly
 He speaks slowly
- * Okεke ndε atya Angle
 Slowly, he speak English
 He speak English slowly
- b-Pr Ndongo a-yesu-aa syntax ndzendzεle
 Pr Ndongo 3SG- teach-Non.Past syntax very well
 Pr Ndongo teaches syntax very well
- *- ndzendzεle Pr Ndongo ayesuaa syntax
 very well Pr Ndongo teach syntax
 Pr Ndongo teaches syntax very well
- c- Bɔ atimí ekwɔ mbalé
 Them dig cassavas yesterday

They withdrew cassava yesterday

Bɔ mbalé atimí ekwɔ
 Them yesterday dig cassavas
 They yesterday withdrew cassavas

Mbalé bɔ atimí ekwɔ
 Yesterday them dig cassavas
 Yesterday they withdrew cassavas

d-Aline a-yiel-í nkwno *na entiele*
 Aline 3SG-go-Past field in morning
 Aline went to field in the morning.

Na entyelē Aline a-yiel-í nkwno
 in morning Aline 3SG-go-Past field
 In the morning, Aline went to the field

From the illustrations in (3), it appears that not all adjuncts occur freely in any position within a given structure. Chomsky (2004, 2008) argues that adjuncts are invisible syntactic elements, meaning they c-command nothing and remain invisible during syntactic derivational operations. Sukomoto (2021:197–198) explains: “*The invisibility of adjuncts is explained by pair-merge. However, since adjuncts need to be interpreted at the interface, they must return to the primary plane at the timing of transfer.*” This means that even though they are invisible, adjuncts still obey movement operations what is commonly termed the recursiveness of adjuncts.

However, the recursiveness of adjuncts in Mbere depends on the category that occurs as an adjunct. In Mbere, if the adjunct occurs as an AdvP, its movement depends on whether it expresses manner or time. If the adjunct expresses manner, as in (3a, b), its movement is blocked. But if the adjunct occurs as a temporal adverbial, as in (3c), movement is possible. The difference is that with adverbials, movement can occur from the final to the middle position, and from the middle to the initial position. With PPs, however, movement is only possible from the final to the initial position.

This shows that in Mbere, adjuncts follow the idea that they are freely adjoined to syntactic projections, with their distribution and restrictions determined by lexico-semantic interpretation rather than by specialized syntactic rules (Tholmas 2004). Let us now check this fact in other Bantu languages, such as Laali

- (4) LaaLi (Mberi Ngakal:2014: 86)
- a-Mbama wà-lyákyò [bókébóké.]
 Mbama he-eat it slowly.
 Mbama has it eaten slowly.
- Mbama [bókébókétɪ] wà-lyákyò.

Mbama slowly he-eat-it
 Mbama slowly has eaten it

[Bókébókét₁] Mbama wà-lyá kyò
 Slowly Mbama he-eat-it
 Slowly Mbama has eaten it

b- Bísè deli-móyírè[mú lémíngè.]
 us we-come on Sunday.
 We are coming on Sunday

Bísè [mú lémíngè] délimóyírè
 us on Sunday we-come .
 We, on Sunday are coming

[Mú lémíngèt₁]bísè deli-móyírè.
 on Sunday us w- come
 On Sunday we are coming

The examples in (4) show that adjuncts are satisfied by adverbs, and these adjuncts can occur anywhere in Laali, that is, they occur in initial, middle, and final positions. In Mbere, however, the reality is more restricted. This leads to the conclusion that adjunct movement in Bantu languages is either in-situ or ex-situ.

When adjuncts are movable, the movement can be partial or total. It is **total** when the distribution is attested in all three positions, whereas it is **partial** when only one of the positions is attested. As in the Laali examples in (4) and the Mbere example in (3c), the movement is total. However, in the Mbere examples in (3d), the movement is partial.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine the category and movement of verb adjuncts in Mbere, and to determine whether their distribution is governed by a universal principle of free recursiveness or is instead constrained by parametric variation. The analysis confirms the two hypotheses formulated in the introduction. First, verb adjuncts in Mbere are not restricted to a single syntactic category: they are realized as adverbial phrases (AdvPs) and prepositional phrases (PPs). Second, their recursiveness is not uniform: it varies according to both the category of the adjunct and, within the category of adverbials, the semantic type of adverb involved. Adverbial adjuncts move freely across initial, medial, and final positions only when they are temporal; adjuncts expressing manner or other non-temporal notions are confined to final position. Prepositional adjuncts, for their part, occupy final or initial position, but never the medial one.

These results answer the questions raised at the outset what adjuncts exist in Mbere, and how do they move within the structure. They show that, contrary to the view according to which adjunction is by nature a free and unrestricted operation (Chomsky 2008; Carnie 2021), the recursiveness of adjuncts in Mbere is not an automatic consequence of Pair-Merge, but is filtered by category-specific constraints. Comparison with Laali (Mberi Ngakala 2014), where adjunct movement proves freer, further suggests that this

restriction is not a property of Bantu languages as a whole, but a parameter along which individual languages, such as Mbere, may vary.

Beyond its descriptive contribution to the grammar of Mbere, this study invites further research on a larger and more diversified corpus, extending the analysis to other categories of adjuncts, such as clausal adjuncts, and to other Bantu languages, in order to determine more precisely the typological status of adjunct recursiveness within the family.

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