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Pascal Boyeldieu\*

# The hidden compound verbs of Modo (SBB, South Sudan)

## 1 Introduction

Modo is an SBB (Sara-Bongo-Bagirmi < Central Sudanic) language spoken in the Republic of South Sudan by some thousands of speakers living in Western Equatoria State (see Map 1, next page). Modo more precisely belongs to a subgroup of closely related languages known as *Morokodo-Beli* (Persson 1997; Hammarström & al. 2024).

Two grammatical sketches (Andersen 1981, Persson & Persson 1991) as well as a short dictionary (Persson & Persson 1991) represent the main information available concerning the language. I will mainly refer to the latter that contains the richest lexical data but sometimes also refer to Andersen (1981), for forms identified as (TA).

The aim of the present paper is to show that Modo reveals traces of a historical process of verb compounding that is not any more productive in the present-day language but may still be tentatively detected by a careful examination of the relations between the phonological constitution and the semantics of some verbs.

The 1991 Perssons' *Dictionary* contains 720 verbs out of which about two thirds (437) have the canonical form VCVCV, one third (269), VCV, while a small rest (14) has the form VCVCVCV (note that all these forms are vowel-initial). I will argue that a fair number of Modo VCVCV verbs most probably result from a compounding process between two VCV verbs. But as will be seen, this assumption results much more from a significative number of likelihoods rather than from firmly established, identified compound forms: the formal details of the phonological combination remain in great part hazy (– how do the two resulting internal vowels behave: VCV + VCV > VCV-CV or VC-VCV? – what happens to the vowels and to the tones in contact in the

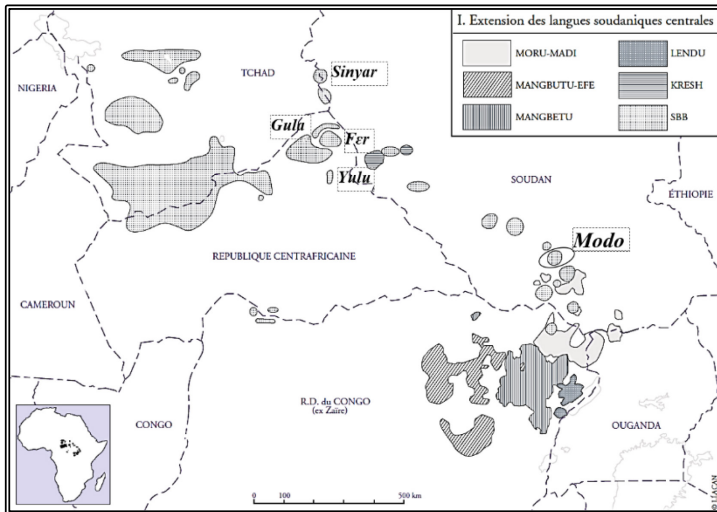
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new, complex structure?) and the presumed semantic similarities are often approximate. Moreover, it seems very likely that certain VCVCV verbs do not result from compounding but rather from the prefixation of a vowel to former \*CVCV nouns or verbs.



**Map 1** Modo (with Sinyar, Gula, Fer, and Yulu) in central Africa  
(Sudan borders as before the 2011 partition)

The paper therefore contains three main sections, namely 2. *Verb extensions*, 3. *Compound verbs*, and 4. *Derived verbs*, followed by a *Conclusion* and *References*. The nature of the present article does not allow to present the overall results but I will rather concentrate on illustrating some methodological principles and regularly refer to reconstructions that have been elaborated, for the SBB languages as a whole, in Boyeldieu, Nougayrol & Palayer (2006).<sup>1</sup> This movement of back-and-forth between Modo and SBB is expected to shed some more light on the history of these languages.

<sup>1</sup> Since its online publication in 2006, the *Lexique Comparatif Historique SBB* has been noticeably augmented, an update that should be accessible soon.

## 2 Verb extensions

Persson & Persson (1991: 9, *passim*) explicitly identify two types of verb extensions, “not any more active in the language”, that result from a VC-prefixation to verbs of the VCV shape. Some selected illustrations of a causative extension (“making transitive verbs from intransitive ones”) are displayed in (1):<sup>2</sup>

- (1) **Causative**
- a. **Prefix *Iy-*** (15 occurrences in total):
- |      |  |   |       |  |
|------|--|---|-------|--|
| ééré | ‘fear, be afraid’  | > | ìyérè | ‘frighten’   |
| òlù  | ‘be black or very dark<br>shade of colour, dirty,<br>dark’ | > | ìyólù | ‘make dark, extinguish,<br>put out, destroy, kill’ |
- b. **Prefix *Ud-*** (2 occurrences):
- |     |  |   |       |          |
|-----|--|---|-------|----------|
| ólú | ‘be lost, disappear,<br>vanish, make a mis-<br>take’ | > | ùdólù | ‘forget’ |
|-----|--|---|-------|----------|
- c. **Prefix *Ik-*** (1 occurrence):
- |     |            |   |       |              |
|-----|------------|---|-------|--------------|
| àpà | ‘be sharp’ | > | ìkápà | ‘make sharp’ |
|-----|------------|---|-------|--------------|
- d. **Prefix *It-* ?** (1 occurrence):
- |     |   |   |       |   |
|-----|---|---|-------|---|
| údí | ‘have a slightly rough<br>surface, have “goose<br>pimples”’ | > | ìtédí | ‘roughen grindstone,<br>beat sth. hard (e.g.<br>stone, iron)’ |
|-----|---|---|-------|---|
- e. **Prefix *Il-* ?** (2 occurrences?):
- |       |                                       |   |       |          |
|-------|---------------------------------------|---|-------|----------|
| ? édè | ‘bend down, go<br>down on all fours’; | > | ìlédé | ‘be low’ |
| ? údè | ‘bend’                                |   |       |          |

The second type of extension explicitly implies the plurality of the subject of the verb. It is limited to three verbs only (2):

- (2) **Plural subject**
- Prefix *Ud-/Id-*** (3 occurrences in total):
- |     |                  |   |       |  |
|-----|------------------|---|-------|--|
| òbò | ‘be wide, thick’ | > | ùdòbò | ‘be broad, wide,<br>thick (with plural<br>subject only)’ |
|-----|------------------|---|-------|--|

<sup>2</sup> I systematically modified the Perssons’ transcription of [+/-ATR] Modo vowels in the following way: < i, u, ë, ö / i, o, e, ə, a > transliterated as < i, u, e, o / ɪ, u, ɛ, ə, a >.

Although these extensions are presented by Persson & Persson (1991) as resulting from prefixations, they might in fact result from former compounding patterns. The different types of prefixes implemented in the case of the causative in particular may suggest that different lexical combinations merged into just one grammatical function. On the other hand, Section 4.2 below will show that Modo verbs reflecting \*SBB \*CVCV reconstructions – which is not explicitly the case here – most likely result from derivation rather than verb compounding.

### 3 Compound verbs

Neither Andersen (1981) nor Persson & Persson (1991) felt the need to mention the existence of any kind of combined or complex verbs. However, a careful examination of the trisyllabic verbs from the Perssons' *Dictionary* suggests traces of compounding based on the following assumption:

Every initial VC(V)- or final -(V)CV subpart of a Modo VCVCV verb that may be both formally and semantically compared and identified

- with another Modo VCV verb,
- or with any subpart of another Modo VCVCV verb,
- or with an \*SBB verb reconstruction,
- or even with the verb of an isolated, related SBB language

potentially represents the witness of a former process of verb compounding. The likelihood of the hypothesis, which may be weak in isolated, semantically vague situations, gains in strength in case of recurrent, semantically clear components. Theoretically, the most favourable situation for such a demonstration would be that where each subpart of a VCVCV verb may be convincingly identified with an isolated VCV verb but we will see that such cases are in fact very limited.

Following these principles, we will identify and illustrate different types of situations:

i.) Initial  $V_1CV_2(CV_3)$  segments of isolated Modo verbs (left column) resemble a Modo (henceforth Md) VCV verb (3a), or an \*SBB reconstruction<sup>3</sup> (3b), or a presumed cognate in a related language like Yulu (3c) (all in the right column). The presumably identified component is tentatively formalized, both phonetically and semantically, in the left column, following an arrow (8 similar occurrences in total):

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<sup>3</sup> \*SBB reconstructions are cited after Boyeldieu, Nougayrol & Palayer (2006).

(3) a.	òpìrì ‘twist’ > *òp(i)- ‘twist’	Md	òpí	‘twist, unlock, drive a car’
b.	úkṗòtù ‘stir with paddling mo- tion, paddle a boat’ > *úkṗ(o)- ‘paddle’	*SBB	*úkṗa	‘drive a boat, paddle’
c.	ìrìndí ‘be heavy’ > *ìr(i)- ‘be heavy’	Yulu	ìrē	‘be heavy’ <sup>4</sup>

ii.) Initial  $V_1CV_2(CV_3)$  segments of several verbs resemble each other (4a-b) and possibly also resemble a Modo VCV verb, and/or an \*SBB reconstruction (4c) (13 similar occurrences in total):

(4) a.	ólúmá ‘sit, live, be accustomed to, do habitually’ òlóbò ‘sit and wait for’ > *ol(ó)- ‘sit’	-		
b.	òlṗṗò ‘come off clean (e.g. hair from rot- ting hide, skin from infected swell- ing)’ òlṗṗò ‘be grazed, come off (of skin)’ òlṗṗò ‘come out (e.g. teeth, hair)’ > *òl(ṗ)- ‘move’?	-		
c.	ùbòbò ‘fan fire, winnow termites to remove wings’ úbòtò ‘puff up, pump up’ úbówú ‘fan someone’ > *ùb(o)- ‘fan, winnow’	Md	úbò	‘winnow’ *SBB *ubu/*ibi ‘blow, fan’

iii.) Final  $(V_1C)V_2CV_3$  segments of isolated verbs resemble a Modo VCV verb (5a-b), and/or an \*SBB reconstruction (5c-d) (17 similar occurrences in total):

(5) a.	ùbòwù ‘scorch, overheat, be choked with weeds’ > *-(ò)wù ‘grow thickly’	Md	òyù <sup>5</sup>	‘grow thickly (of grass or hair)’
b.	ìténdé ‘skim off liquid’ <sup>6</sup> > *-(é)ndé ‘lick’?	?Md	ùndé	‘lick up (e.g. sesame seeds)’

<sup>4</sup> Source: *personal data*.

<sup>5</sup> The comparison of òyù with -(ò)wù is justified by similar consonant variations attested in òyì ~ òwì ‘shave’, óyí ~ ówí ‘strike a light, give light to’, and úyóyò ~ úwówò ‘announce’.

<sup>6</sup> Concerning the initial segments  $Vt-$  of ìténdé ‘skim off liquid’, consider, however, a possible  $V-$  prefixation of former \*tVCV verbs (see Section 4.2. below).

<p>c. ùlòmò ‘burst through, tear, make hole through’ &gt; *-(ò)mò ‘penetrate’</p>	<p>Md ùmò ‘penetrate, break through into, puncture, lance a boil’ *SBB *imo/*imò ?‘penetrate’ *SBB *adò ‘cultivate’</p>
<p>d. ùròdɔ ‘hoe, cultivate’ &gt; *-(ɔ)dɔ ‘cultivate’</p>	

iv.) Final (V<sub>1</sub>C)V<sub>2</sub>CV<sub>3</sub> segments of several verbs resemble each other (6a) and possibly also resemble a Modo VCV verb, and/or an \*SBB reconstruction (6b-c) (10 similar occurrences in total):

<p>(6) a. ìḡáḡá ‘[be] too difficult for’ íláḡà ‘dare, attempt something dif ficult and dangerous’ &gt; *-(a)ḡa ‘be difficult?’</p>	<p>–</p>
<p>b. úḡùrù ‘go round in a circle’ úḡbùrù ‘stir’ &gt; *-(ù)rù ‘move around, in circle’</p>	<p>Md úrú ‘surround, enclose, sew round (e.g. a patch)’ *SBB *EIE ‘drive in, insert’</p>
<p>c. ílílí ‘insert, put in through a narrow opening’ ìsílì ‘pierce sideways (e.g. splinter, thorn)’ &gt; *-(ì)lì ‘insert, pierce?’</p>	<p></p>

v.) The phonic structure of the VCVCV presumed compound verb does not allow to decide whether the component identified with a similar VCV Modo verb occupies the first place (V<sub>1</sub>CV<sub>2</sub>(CV<sub>3</sub>)) or the last place ((V<sub>1</sub>C)V<sub>2</sub>CV<sub>3</sub>) (3 similar occurrences in total):

<p>(7) ìréré ‘carve a pattern (e.g. on a grave post), cut in a pattern (e.g. someone’s forehead)’ &gt; *ìr(ɛ)- OR *-(ɛ)rɛ ? ‘cut, carve’</p>	<p>Md òré ‘slit, cut, score with lines’</p>
--	---

vi.) The same component, identified by comparison with a Modo VCV verb and/or with an \*SBB reconstruction, appears as first element with one verb and as second element with another verb (3 similar occurrences in total):



In fact similar couples are already attested at the \*SBB level as shown in (12):<sup>7</sup>

(12)	Modo (Persson & Persson 1991)	*SBB *SBB *Saɟi/*... ‘urine’ *SBB *Saɟi ‘urinate’ *SBB *kasi/*... ‘cough (n.)’ *SBB *kasi/*... ‘cough (v.)’ *SBB *tigɔ ‘strength’ *SBB *tigɔ ‘be hard, difficult, strong’
	yàdí ‘urine’ ìyàdí ‘urinate’ kàhì ‘cough (n.)’ ìkàhì ‘cough (v.)’ tìgɔ ‘strength’ ìtìgɔ ‘be hard, difficult, strong’	

If we except the fact that a prefixation is probably more likely than a reduction, there seems to be no decisive clue suggesting that the primary form should be the noun rather than the verb. However, the Perssóns’ data reveal that the vowel prefixation may sometimes apply, as in (13), not only to nouns but also to adverbs and qualificatives, thus making Andersen’s explanation (Noun > Verb) much more plausible:

(13)	ɲɔ́dɔ́ (adv.) ‘in a mess’ ɲgòlò (qual.) ‘free, unhindered’	> >	òɲɔ́dɔ́ ‘make a mess’ òɲgòlò ‘be loose, free’
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#### 4.2 Verb > Verb

Leaving apart the minority structures \*CV, \*VRCV, or \*CVRCV, the main verbal reconstructions that can be assigned to the common \*SBB level contain 138 \*VCV, and 26 \*CVCV, as well as 27 cases of variable \*VCV~\*CVCV formulas. Beside the likely cases of derivation from nouns that have just been shown, a good number of the \*CVCV patterns are also derived from \*VCV verbs by means of a consonant prefix, and Modo itself may have preserved reflexes of this process. Let us first consider the data displayed in (14):

(14)	Modo (Persson & Persson 1991)	*SBB *SBB *Aɖɛ/*uɖɛ ‘extract, pull out, re move’ *SBB *tAɖɛ/*tuɖɛ ‘extract, pull out, gather’ ( <i>intensive</i> )
	a. –  ítédé ‘pick berries etc., pull off (e.g. peanuts) from plant’	

<sup>7</sup> The reflexes of these reconstructions, nouns and verbs, have an initial consonant in every language except Modo, whose verbs contain an initial vowel.

b. ? ópà	‘go by different or longer route’	*SBB *upa/*... ‘cut up, split, cut in two’
	útópà	*SBB *tupa/*... ‘split (wood)’ ( <i>intensive?</i> )
c. ùlù	‘suck liquid’	*SBB *ulu/*olu/*... ‘suck, suckle’
	únzùlù	*SBB *njulu ‘suck (e.g. bone)’
	‘suck something solid (e.g. fingers, mango), kiss (a baby)’	

In (14a-b) the \*SBB reconstructions display both a \*VCV verb and its ‘intensive’ derivative \*CVCV prefixed in \*t-, \*tAɗɛ/\*tuɗɛ and \*tupa respectively. In (14a) the reflex of the basic \*VCV form is lost in Modo but it is probably preserved in (14b) ópà, although with a shift in the meaning.

In (14c) Modo more clearly preserves the reflexes of both the \*SBB basic form \*ulu/\*olu and its derivative \*njulu, prefixed in \*nj-.

In all these cases the question arises as to whether the apparent prefixes \*t- and \*nj- indeed represent a process of derivation (extensions) or whether they could result from a former process of verb compounding that would have been preserved in Modo only.

In fact the consonant correspondences bring a clear answer in the precise case of a verb prefix of imprecise value that must be reconstructed as \*SBB \*nɗ-. As illustrated in (15a-c), the Modo reflexes of this consonant are always represented by -r-:

(15)	Modo (Persson & Persson 1991)	*SBB
a.	–	*SBB *igbo/*OgbO ‘wash’
	ùrógò	*SBB *nɗigbo/*nɗOgbO/*... ‘wash, (bathe)’
b.	ùɲù	*SBB *OɲO/*ɔɲɔ/*... ‘eat (sth. hard)’ ( <i>Eastern</i> )
	ùrɔ̀ɲɔ́	*SBB *nɗOɲO/*nɗɔɲɔ/*... ‘itch’
c.	írísì	*SBB *EKE/*nɗEKE/*... ‘roast, fry’
	pan’	

Now Table 1 below shows that the alveolar trill r- represents the regular Modo reflex of the *word-initial* formula \*nɗ- (e.g. \*SBB \*nɗAmɛ > rɛ̀mɛ ‘ground squirrel’, \*nɗuɲma > ròɲá ‘twin’), while the *intervocalic* formula \*-nɗ- is regularly reflected in the Modo prenasalized voiced stop -nd- (e.g. \*SBB \*NONɗO > lónɗò ‘brother’, \*anɗi > àndí ‘be mature’):

*SBB	Modo	*SBB	Modo
*N-	l-, (ŋ-)	*nj-	nz- ?
*ɖ-	d-, r- ?	*-nj-	nz, (nj ?)
*-ɖ-	-d-	*-K-	s, (k, c ?)
*nɖ-	r-	*-gb-	-gb/g-
*-nɖ-	-nd-	*-ʔ-	-w-, -ʔ-
*-j-	-z-		

**Table 1** Some noteworthy regular correspondences of \*SBB/Modo consonants

In other words, the VCVCV Modo verbs *ùrógò* (15a), *ùròṅó* (15b), and *írísì* (15c) cannot be interpreted as compound verbs *ùr(ó)-gò*, *ùr(ò)-ṅó*, and *ír(ì)-sì*, where the *-r-* would be intervocalic, but have necessarily to be analyzed as derivatives *ù-rógò*, *ù-ròṅó*, and *í-rísì*, where the *r-* is word-initial.

Most likely the same interpretation must be extended to all cases where an \*SBB \*CVCV verb may be reconstructed, regardless of the initial consonant. As a consequence, misinterpretations are not excluded when one identifies an *initial* component in a presumed compound verb (see Section 3 i.-ii.) as well as fn. 6 above), and such cases have to be examined with a particular attention.

## 5 Conclusion

The present paper argued that, beside previously recognized cases of verb extensions (causative, plural subject) marked by different types of VC-prefixes (Section 2), many VCVCV verbs of Modo reveal recurrent associations of form and meaning in segmental chains – VC(V)- or -(V)CV – that may be understood as evidence for historical processes of verb compounding (Section 3). However, it is also shown that other historical instances of consonant prefixation represented a competing source for a fair number of VCVCV Modo verbs reflecting \*SBB \*CVCV reconstructions (Section 4).

As a future development these facts should be considered in connection with the verb extensions as well as with the processes of verb compounding attested in related or neighbouring languages such as Gula (Nougayrol 1999), Fèr (Kanzi Soussou 1992), Yulu (Boyeldieu 2007), and Sinyar (Boyeldieu 2022) (see Map 1 above). From a historical/typological point of view, Modo obviously displays the most advanced and eroded stage of *verb compounding* which tends here to be more and more blurred and difficult to catch.

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