

Article

Negative Indefinite Constructions in Bantu: ‘Nobody’

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Abstract: This paper presents a first typology of negative indefinites in Bantu languages. The lack of interest in expressions of ‘nobody’ in Bantu languages is connected with the idea that they merely involve a generic noun for ‘person’ and main clause negation. Our study, based on a dataset of 85 Bantu languages, shows that exponents of ‘nobody’ can be quite diverse, either resembling exponents of ‘somebody’ or differing from them through the use of pragmatically strong modifiers like scalar additive operators or explicit quantifiers like the numeral ‘one’. We also look at the constructions in which exponents of ‘nobody’ occur and observe that next to canonical SVO constructions, two construction types are used which are known to express information structure in Bantu languages: inversion constructions and existential cleft constructions. Inversion constructions are shown to be especially frequent with intransitive clauses but we also find object inversion for either ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’ but not for both in the same language. Existential cleft constructions, on the other hand, are shown to be especially frequent with transitive clauses and, more importantly, they are more frequently used for expressions of ‘nobody’ than for expressions of ‘somebody’ in line with recent observations for South-East Asian and Mixtec languages.

Keywords: somebody; nobody; Bantu; existentialization; inversion; indefiniteness

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1. Introduction

While there are a number of typological or at least cross-linguistic studies on various aspects of Bantu standard and non-standard negation (e.g., Devos et al., 2010; Devos & van der Auwera, 2013; Devos & Van Olmen, 2013; Bernander et al., 2022, 2023), negative indefinites, as expressed by English *nobody*, have not received much attention. This is partially due to the fact that dedicated pronominal elements with negative polarity such as *anybody* in (1)a, negative concord such as *ain’t ... nobody* in (1)b, or inherent negativity such as *nobody* in (1)c are rare in Bantu (Devos, 2025, p. 306).

(1) Negative indefinites in English

- a. I haven’t seen anybody
- b. I ain’t seen nobody.
- c. I have seen nobody.

In this respect, Bantu is not different from African languages, more generally. Haspel-math (1997, p. 241), when summarizing the worldwide distribution of indefinite pronoun types, states that African languages have generic-noun-based indefinites. In a worldwide typological study of negative indefiniteness Van Alsenoy used a sample of 179 languages

and ‘[a]ll 22 African languages use polarity-neutral noun phrases to express negated indefinites’ (Van Alsenoy, 2014, p. 215; see also Zerbán & Krifka, 2008, pp. 393–394; Van Alsenoy, 2011).

Our starting point is a section in Devos (2025, pp. 306–307), which is a survey article on Bantu negation. Devos (ibidem) suggests that for negative indefiniteness the Bantu languages have two main strategies, canonical (S)VO in (2) and existentialization in (3), and in both one finds polarity-neutral generic nouns in combination with negated verb forms.

- (2) Ruwund (L53¹, Devos, 2025, p. 307, based on Nash, 1992, p. 284)

nì-men-àp	mu-ntu
SM1SG-SEE.PRS-NEG	1 ² -person
‘I see nobody.’ (lit. ‘I don’t see a person.’)	

- (3) Kanincin (L53A, Devos, 2025, p. 307, Michael Tshibanda Kasombo, pers. comm.)

kw-ìkil	mû-ncw	wàà-bul-àṅ	mw-aàn
SM17-not_be	1-person	SM1.REL.PST-hit-PRF	1-child
‘Nobody has hit the child.’ (lit. ‘There is no person who hit the child.’)			

Devos (ibidem) formulates three additional hypotheses: (i) the ‘existential cleft’ strategy, as in (3), is the preferred one when the indefinite is in the subject position; (ii) when the first strategy is used for subjects, the construction tends to contain an additional marker of indefiniteness; and (iii) generic nouns drop the preprefixal nominal marker, called ‘augment’, for the expression of ‘nobody’. The last hypothesis, of course, only applies in those Bantu languages that have a productive +/– augment alternation, an example of which is given in (4).

- (4) Kuria (JE43, Mary Zakaria Charwi, pers. comm.)

a.	o-moo-nto	a-roche	u-m-nyarobheri	w-ane
	AUG-1-person	SM1-SEE.PFV	AUG-1-neighbor	1-POSS1SG
	‘Someone saw my neighbor.’			
b.	moo-nto	a-ta-roche	u-m-nyarobheri	w-ane
	1-person	SM1-NEG-SEE.PFV	AUG-1-neighbor	1-POSS1SG
	‘Nobody saw my neighbor.’			

The brevity of these remarks calls for more work. So does the idea that Bantu languages avail themselves of existential constructions. This is interesting for two reasons: (i) there is recent general work on existential constructions in the Bantu languages (Devos & Bernander, 2022; Bernander et al., 2024), so this begs the question of whether there is any link between the general use of existential constructions in Bantu and the specific use for negative indefiniteness; and (ii) there is recent work on the use of existential constructions for negative indefiniteness in other languages, in particular, in languages of Mainland Southeast Asia (van der Auwera et al., 2023) and in the Mixtec languages (van der Auwera, 2023), so one wonders whether the use of existential negative constructions in these languages resembles what we find in Bantu.

In this paper, we will extend the brief account found in Devos (2025) and to characterize what the Bantu languages do for ‘nobody’, we will also study what they do for ‘somebody’. For this purpose, we established a database of 85 Bantu languages. This database is not itself a sample; i.e., it is not representative and has a bias toward Eastern Bantu languages, which is why we also define a sample. In Section 2, we characterize both the dataset and the sample. We then describe the data that we tried to collect and explain the shortcomings of our dataset. In Section 3, we examine the noun phrase exponents of expressions of ‘nobody’ and ‘somebody’, and in Section 4, we describe the different construction types. Correlations between exponent types, construction types, negation, and

transitivity are explored in Section 5, which also briefly looks at the distribution of the different patterns. Section 6 is the conclusion.

2. Languages and Constructions

Our dataset contains 85 Bantu languages. They are listed in Appendix A, together with the sources and with the names of the informants and/or colleagues who helped us. To make the data more representative, we took the phylogenetic classification of the Bantu languages in Grollemund et al. (2015) and included only 4 languages for each of the 5 major branches. These four languages were chosen based on the quality of the available data. To these 20 languages, we added 4 Grassfields Bantu languages, also added in Appendix A, giving us a sample of 24 languages (cf. Section 5.4 and Tables 4 and 5). These are the languages that are underlined in Appendix A. We started out by perusing grammars and articles for relevant information. In most, if not all cases, the information was incomplete, and in 51 of the languages, we were able to add information through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was very simple. We wanted to find out how Bantu speakers say what English speakers do with *nobody*, as contrasted with *somebody*, dependent on whether they occur in the subject or object position, and for the subject position, whether the verb is transitive or intransitive like either *arrive* or ‘locative-existential’ *be*.

- (5) a. Nobody saw my neighbor.
- b. Nobody arrived.
- c. Nobody was there.
- d. Somebody saw my neighbor.
- e. Somebody arrived.
- f. Somebody was there.
- g. My neighbor saw somebody.
- h. My neighbor saw nobody.

That the subject versus non-subject is an important cross-linguistic parameter is clear from the account in Devos (2025), from which we started. For non-subjects, we limit the work to (patient) objects. We also look at intransitives to see whether they involve different construction types from transitives. Of the two intransitive constructions in the questionnaire, one is a locational one (5)c,f, allowing us to see whether languages use an existential–locational construction with ‘somebody/nobody’ or do something different still. We made it clear that we wanted natural sentences, not just translations, and that we were interested in all natural renderings, not just one. Of the 85 languages in our dataset, 49 languages have natural renderings for all 8 sentences. Overall, our dataset is restricted in several ways. First, we do not have complete information for all languages, and the information we do have is sometimes lacking in detail. Not all of the respondents were linguists, and for some languages, we only have written replies to our questionnaire, which lack tonal information and phonetic detail. Although necessarily incomplete, we do include these data, hoping that this will incite further detailed research. Next, we have more and better information on Eastern Bantu languages; hence, the creation of a smaller more representative sample. Third, although we were able to capture some intralingual variations in the expression of ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’, we most probably still missed a lot. Moreover, we did not perform an in-depth analysis of the attested variation. For now, we assume that the different translations given are all (equally) natural renderings of the sentences in the questionnaire. Finally, our study of negative indefinite constructions is limited to declarative main clauses. As hinted at in Section 5.3, non-declarative clauses may show different patterns.

We classify the constructions along two parameters. One concerns the noun phrase exponent of the entity that is asserted to exist or not exist. In (2), this is *muntu*, and in (3), it is

mûncw, and we characterize them both as generic nouns for ‘person’. The other parameter concerns the construction in which this exponent appears. For (2), we characterize the construction as an (S)VO³ pattern, and for (3) as an existential pattern and more precisely an existential cleft construction. We will now describe and illustrate the various types, first for the exponents (Section 3), and then for the constructions (Section 4).

3. The First Parameter: Exponents of ‘Somebody’ and ‘Nobody’

To characterize the exponent of ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’, we distinguish between three main types: (1) the exponent is absent, (2) the exponent is the generic noun for ‘person’, and (3) the exponent includes an adnominal modifier.

3.1. No Exponent

The first type is a bit paradoxical—there is simply no exponent, at least not in the shape of a noun phrase (this exponent type corresponds to *absent* in Tables 1–5). There are two points to make about the absence of the exponent: first, it is exclusively linked to the existentialization pattern (see Section 4.2) and, second, in most cases, the generic noun for ‘person’ can be added.

(6) Luganda (JE15, Deo Kawalya pers. comm. & Betty Ayugi pers. comm.)

- | | | | |
|----|--|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| a. | wa-li-wo | e-y-a-tuuse | |
| | SM ₁₆ -be-LOC ₁₆ | REL-SM ₁ -PST-arrive.PFV | |
| | ‘Somebody arrived.’ (lit. ‘There is who arrived.’) | | |
| b. | wa-li-wo | o-mu-ntu | e-y-a-gy-a |
| | SM ₁₆ -be-LOC ₁₆ | AUG-1-person | REL-SM ₁ -PST-come-FV |
| | ‘Somebody came.’ | | |

3.2. The Exponent Is the Bare Generic Noun for ‘Person’

The exponent can be the bare generic noun for ‘person’. In the majority of languages, this is a reflex of *mò-ntò ‘person’ (Bastin et al., 2002). However, in the Central-Western Bantu languages Liko and Budu, either this reflex or another noun, also translated as ‘person’, may fill the slot. In Liko and especially Budu, there is a clear preference to use the second (innovated?) noun to render ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’ alike.

(7) a. Liko (D201, Gerrit de Wit pers. comm.)

- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|
| motó ‘person’ & mombánzó ‘person’ | | |
| mũ-lángá | á-mun-ă-ndi | mũ-mbánzó |
| 1-boy | SM ₁ .PST-see-FV-PST | 1-person |
| ‘The boy saw somebody.’ | | |

b. Budu (D332, Asangama, 1983, p. 219; David Kopa wa Kopa pers. comm.)

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|--------|
| moto ‘person’ & moombi ‘person’ | | |
| mo-mbi | óná-kómó | tídö |
| 1-person | SM ₁ .PST.SEE-NEG | father |
| ‘Nobody saw my father.’ | | |

Another potentially more telling variation concerns the presence or absence of an augment on the generic noun. It should be noted that we discuss the augment in this Section even though it is a cross-cutting characteristic: it is not just restricted to bare generic nouns but can also occur on generic nouns with an adnominal modifier or on the adnominal modifier itself if the latter is used independently. In Bantu studies, the term ‘augment’ is used to refer to a bound element that precedes the nominal prefix of nouns (or independently used adnominal modifiers) without affecting “the class assignment of the noun, nor its lexical meaning, nor the syntactic position it can occupy” (Van de Velde, 2019, p. 248). It

is difficult to characterize the use of the augment in individual Bantu languages, let alone across Bantu (de Blois, 1970; Van de Velde, 2019; Halpert, 2025). Halpert (2025) makes a distinction between languages with a default augmentless pattern and languages with a default augmented pattern. In languages with a default augmentless pattern, it is the presence of the augment that needs to be explained (Halpert, 2025, pp. 170–171). In the North-Western Bantu language Eton, the noun appears with an augment in a restricted set of syntactic environments, more precisely, when the noun is followed by a restrictive relative clause or by a demonstrative (Van de Velde, 2017, p. 55). In some Eastern Bantu languages like Kagulu, on the other hand, the augment is never obligatory. When it appears, it is said to help convey specificity, topicality, or deixis (Petzell, 2003, p. 10). The question now is how these languages deal with exponents of ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’ as far as the augment is concerned. As could be expected, generic nouns expressing ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’ are typically augmentless in languages with a default augmentless pattern. An example from Kagulu is given in (8). The augmentless generic noun expresses ‘somebody’ in the subject position.

(8) Kagulu (G12, Malin Petzell & Sauli Lengoliga pers. comm.)

mu-nhu	yu-monga	ha-kengil-a
1-person	1-other	PST-SM1.PST.arrive-FV
‘Somebody arrived.’		

Augmented generic nouns occur in two languages with a default augmentless pattern in our dataset, i.e., the Eastern Bantu languages Vwanji and Kinga. In Vwanji, the noun phrase referring to ‘somebody’ includes an augment when it functions as a subject, both pre-verbally and post-verbally.

(9) Vwanji (G66, Helen Eaton & Ahimidiwe Mahali pers. comm.)

u-muu-nhu	ju-monga	a-lis-ile/a-lis-ile	u-muunhu	ju-monga
AUG-1-person	1-other	SM1-arrive-PFV		
‘Somebody arrived.’				

In Kinga, for which we have data from four varieties, some varieties allow the presence of the augment when the post-verbal generic noun expressing ‘somebody/nobody’ is indexed on the verb either as a class 1 object marker or as a class 1 subject marker. When ‘somebody’ functions as the object, co-indexed on the verb by a class 1 object marker, the augment is present in all four varieties. Interestingly, for ‘nobody’, the presence of the augment is also attested under these conditions, be it only in two varieties, and in each case, the generic noun is followed by a restrictive relative clause that could trigger the presence of the augment (as explained for Eton above). The examples below come from two different varieties. In (10), both ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’ have an augment when functioning as the object. The generic noun is indexed on the verb by the class 1 object marker and in the case of ‘nobody’ followed by a restrictive relative clause. In (11), only the generic noun referring to ‘somebody’ has an augment. When ‘nobody’ is expressed, the augment is absent. Note that the generic noun is not followed by a restrictive relative clause in this case.

(10) Kinga (G65, Enock Mbiling’i pers. comm.)

a.	u-jilani	v-ango	a-ka-m-bwene	u-mu-nu
	AUG-1A.neighbor	1-POSS1SG	SM1-PST-OM1-see.PFV	AUG-1-person
	‘My neighbor saw somebody’			
b.	u-jilani	v-ango	na-ka-m-bon-e	
	AUG-1A.neighbor	1-POSS1SG	NEG.SM1-PST-OM1-see-NEG.PST	
	u-mu-nu	uvya-vets-ag-a		
	AUG-1-person	REL1.SM1.PST-be-IPFV-FV		
	‘My neighbor saw nobody’			

(11) Kinga (G65, Enock Mbiling'i pers. comm.)

- | | | | | |
|----|----------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------|----------------|
| a. | u-jirani | v-ango | a-ka-m-bwene | u-mu-nu |
| | AUG-1a.neighbor | 1-POSS1SG | SM1-PST-OM1-See.PFV | AUG-1-person |
| | 'My neighbor saw somebody' | | | |
| b. | u-jirani | v-ango | na-ka-m-bon-e | |
| | AUG-1a.neighbor | 1-POSS1SG | NEG.SM1-PST-OM1-See-NEG.PST | |
| | mu-nu | | | |
| | 1-person | | | |
| | 'My neighbor saw nobody' | | | |

In Kinga 'somebody/nobody' functioning as the subject almost always occupies the post-verbal slot. It either follows a copula in an existential cleft construction (Section 4.2), or it follows the main verb in a subject inversion construction (Section 4.3). If the subject marker on the verb is in a locative class, the augment is always absent (12). However, if the subject marker agrees with the post-verbal subject, the augment is present with 'somebody' (12)b but absent with 'nobody' (12)c.

(12) Kinga (G65, Enock Mbiling'i pers. comm.)

- | | | | |
|----|-----------------------|----------------|----------------|
| a. | ku-li | mu-nu | a-sikh-e |
| | SM17-COP | 1-person | SM1-arrive-PFV |
| | 'Somebody was there.' | | |
| b. | a-kha-le-po | o-mu-nu | pala |
| | SM1-PST-COP-LOC16 | AUG-1-person | 16.DEM |
| | 'Somebody was there.' | | |
| c. | na-kha-le-po | mu-nu | |
| | NEG.SM1-PST-COP-LOC16 | 1-person | |
| | 'Nobody was there.' | | |

In sum, in languages with a default augmentless pattern generic nouns expressing 'somebody/nobody' are most likely to occur without an augment. Exceptions can occur and they mostly involve expressions of 'somebody' indexed on the verb by a class 1 subject marker or object marker.

Let us now turn to languages with a default augmented pattern. In these languages, it is the absence of the augment that needs to be explained (Halpert, 2025, pp. 172–178). Augment drop, whether optional or obligatory, typically happens in the post-verbal domain and tends to be triggered by negation, indefiniteness, and/or focus (Halpert, 2025, p. 178). In the Eastern Bantu language Luganda, any noun in the scope of negation will drop the augment (Hyman & Katamba, 1993; van der Wal & Namyalo, 2016). Luganda and several more or less closely related interlacustrine languages in our dataset show a contrast between augmented generic nouns expressing 'somebody' and augmentless generic nouns expressing 'nobody' when they function as the object in post-verbal position, as seen in (13) for Ishenyi. This contrast does not suggest a differential treatment of specific indefinites versus negative indefinites in terms of the augment but simply adheres to a grammatical rule. Hyman and Katamba (1993) show that definite nouns in Luganda also lose their augment when they are in the scope of negation.

(13) Ishenyi (JE45, Rasmus Bernander field notes)

- | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|
| a. | o-mw-ibhatani | one | na-rooche | o-mo-nto |
| | AUG-1-neighbor | 1.POSS1SG | FOC.SM1-see.PFV | AUG-1-person |
| | 'My neighbor saw somebody.' | | | |
| b. | o-mw-ibhatani | one | ta-rooche | mo-nto |
| | AUG-1-neighbor | 1.POSS1SG | NEG.SM1-see.PFV | 1-person |
| | 'My neighbor saw nobody.' | | | |

Similarly, the contrast between augmented ‘somebody’ and augmentless ‘nobody’ in some languages is due to the specific construction in which they occur. In Kirundi, another interlacustrine Bantu language, the augmented generic noun is used to express ‘somebody’ in the subject position, whereas an augmentless generic noun is used for ‘nobody’ functioning as the subject. This is a direct result of the type of construction the noun occurs in. ‘Somebody’ occupies the pre-verbal slot, as in (14), whereas ‘nobody’ is introduced by a negative existential copula, as in (14). Halpert (2025, p. 172) confirms that augmentless nouns are often required after the copula (but see the Simbiti data in (18)) and that the pre-verbal position typically requires the presence of the augment.

(14) Kirundi (JD62, Pascal Tuyubahe pers. comm.)

- | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-----------|
| a. | u-muu-ntu | ya-rá-boon-ye | u-mu-báanyi | w-aanje |
| | AUG-1-person | SM1.REM.PST-DISJ-SEE-PFV | AUG-1-neighbor | 1-POSS1SG |
| | ‘Somebody saw my neighbor.’ | | | |
| b. | nta | muu-ntu | ya-bóon-ye | |
| | COP.NEG | 1-person | SM1.REM.PST-SEE-REL.PFV | |
| | u-mu-báanyi | w-aanje | | |
| | AUG-1-neighbor | 1-POSS1SG | | |
| | ‘Nobody saw my neighbour.’ | | | |

However, in two languages, the contrast between augmented ‘somebody’ and augmentless ‘nobody’ cannot be attributed to negation nor to a constructional difference. In Kuria, a generic noun occurs in the pre-verbal position to express either ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’ functioning as the subject. Whereas ‘somebody’ has an augment, ‘nobody’ is augmentless. It should be noted that a subject different from ‘nobody’ does not drop the augment in a negative clause, as seen in (15)c.

(15) Kuria (JE43, Mary Zakaria Charwi pers. comm.)

- | | | | | |
|----|----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|
| a. | o-moo-nto | a-roche | u-mu-nyarobheri | w-ane |
| | AUG-1-person | SM1-SEE.PFV | AUG-1-neighbor | 1-POSS1SG |
| | ‘Somebody has seen my neighbor.’ | | | |
| b. | moo-nto | a-ta-roche | u-mu-nyarobheri | w-ane |
| | 1-person | SM1-NEG-SEE.PFV | AUG-1-neighbor | 1-POSS1SG |
| | ‘Nobody has seen my neighbor.’ | | | |
| c. | u-mu-nyarobheri | w-ane | a-ta-roche | moo-nto |
| | AUG-1-neighbor | 1-POSS1SG | SM1-NEG-SEE.PFV | 1-person |
| | ‘My neighbor saw nobody.’ | | | |

This pattern is partially attested in Ngoreme. Whereas ‘somebody’ is expressed by a specific indefinite noun (Section 3.3.1), which never has an augment, ‘nobody’ involves the augmentless generic noun in the pre-verbal position.

(16) Ngoreme (JE401, Rasmus Bernander fieldnotes)

- | | | | |
|----|----------------------|----------------------|-------------|
| a. | ṇáni | a-aní | há |
| | 1A.certain | SM1-PRS.COP | 16.DIST.DEM |
| | ‘Somebody is there.’ | | |
| b. | mó-nto | tá-á-tj-ire | |
| | 1-person | NEG.SM1-PST-COME-PFV | |
| | ‘Nobody came.’ | | |

This is remarkable, as augmentless subjects appear to be extremely rare in pre-verbal position, at least as far as languages with a default augmented pattern are concerned (Halpert, 2025; Schneider-Zioga, 2007 for Kinande; van der Wal & Namyalo, 2016 for Luganda). Halpert (2025, p. 175) shows that in Kinande, for example, a generic noun

expressing ‘somebody’ can be augmentless in the post-verbal position but never in the pre-verbal position.

(17) Kinande (JD42, Halpert, 2025, p. 175)

a.	o-mu-ndu AUG-1-person ‘Someone’s knocking./The person is knocking.’	a-ma-gong-a SM1-PRS-knock-FV
b.	*mu-ndu 1-person intended: ‘Someone’s knocking.’	a-ma-gong-a SM1-PRS-knock-FV
c.	ha-ma-gonga SM16-PRS-knock ‘Someone’s knocking.’	mu-ndu 1-person
d.	ha-ma-gonga SM16-PRS-knock ‘A/The person is knocking.’	o-mu-ndu AUG-1-person

Considering the data from Kuria and Ngoreme, it thus seems to be the case that the ban on pre-verbal augmentless nouns can be lifted with pre-verbal ‘nobody’. What is more, Kuria adheres to the typology of Becker (2022, pp. 264–269), following which the augment is an ‘inclusive-specific’ article, i.e., an article that may have both a definite and a specific indefinite function, as with ‘somebody’ in (15), but not a non-specific one. ‘Nobody’ is non-specific, so there cannot be an augment/inclusive-specific article, as in (15). However, as with most attempts at giving a cross-linguistic generalization of the function of the augment, counterexamples can be found. In Simbiti, for example, the augment is only dropped if ‘nobody’ is a post-verbal object. When ‘nobody’ is introduced by a negative existential copula, the generic noun is augmented.

(18) Simbiti (JE431, Johnny Walker, pers. comm.)

a.	o-mo-menyani AUG-1-neighbor ‘My neighbor saw nobody.’	w-aane 1-POSS1SG	ti-yaa-rööshë NEG-SM1.PST-see.PFV	mö-ntö 1-person	hë NEG
b.	taaho NEG.LOC.COP	ö-mö-ntö AUG-1-person	ono REL1	yaa-hik-irë SM1.PST-arrive-PFV	hë NEG
	‘Nobody arrived.’				

In summary, we cannot uniformly characterize the way in which Bantu languages deal with exponents of ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’ as far as the augment is concerned. The only generalization that can be made is that exponents of ‘nobody’ are more likely to drop the augment (or exclude it) than exponents of ‘somebody’ and that languages of the default augmented pattern can even do so in pre-verbal position, against a strong cross-Bantu tendency.

3.3. More Complex Exponents

We now come to syntactically complex exponents of ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’. They may include an adnominal modifier. Adnominal modifiers normally take a nominal or pronominal prefix of class 1 in agreement with the head noun, i.e., the generic noun for ‘person’. The latter can often be omitted, in which case the adnominal modifier is used independently. Modifying nouns are also attested. They do not agree with the head noun, which may again be omitted. In one case, the generic noun is modified by a restrictive relative clause. Next, we also encounter non-nominal invariables, mostly scalar additive operators (following the typology proposed by Gast & van der Auwera, 2011), but also other focus markers and the interrogative pronoun ‘who’. The expression of ‘nobody’ often includes

a combination of these markers. The discussion below is structured as follows: we start with modifiers shared by exponents of both ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’ (Section 3.3.1) before turning to modifiers and invariables specific to the expression of ‘nobody’ (Section 3.3.2).

3.3.1. Indefiniteness Markers

Modifiers shared by expressions of ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’ typically express indefiniteness. Our dataset shows several markers expressing notions on a scale between specific indefiniteness and non-specific indefiniteness. We start with specific indefinites (subsumed under *indefinites* in Tables 1–5). Many Bantu languages have a specific indefinite referring to a certain person, often said to be a known person of whom the speaker has forgotten the name or whom he does not want to name. The translation equivalents given by Laman (1936, p. 267) for the specific indefinite noun *kingándi* attested in Yombe and possibly other Kongo varieties illustrate the typical meaning range of such specific indefinites:

(19) Laman (1936, p. 267)

quelqu’un, un certain, un tel, qui est ainsi et ainsi, personne dont on a oublié le nom
ou qu’on ne veut pas nommer
[somebody, a certain, such a, so and so, person whose name one has forgotten
or whom one does not wish to name]

Specific indefinites can be used to express ‘someone’. They are normally excluded from negative contexts in our dataset, but some specific indefinites also pop up in expressions of ‘nobody’, which suggests that they are evolving into non-specific indefinites. Many specific indefinites in our dataset function as modifying nouns. They either occur in combination with the generic noun for ‘person’ or they are used independently. The specific indefinites *nyarebe* and *nyabhorebhe* from the interlacustrine languages Gusii and Simbiti are cases in point. They both seem to involve nominalizations of the adnominal modifier *rebe/lebe*, attested in several more or less related languages with specific indefinite meanings, as seen in (20).

(20) **rebe/lebe**

Kinande JD42	lebe/rebe	‘certain one, certain unnamed thing, so and so’	(Fraas, 1961, pp. 61, 273, 318; Kambale, 2006, pp. 71, 297; Mutaka & Kavutirwaki, 2012, pp. 208, 359)
Hunde JD51	lèbe	‘certain, a certain one’	(Kaji, 1992, p. 168)
Havu JD52	lebe	‘a certain one, designating a precise person or thing which one does not name’	(Aramazani, 1985, p. 208)
Tembo JD531	rébè	‘certain, some’	(Kaji, 1986, p. 328)

What is more, the pre-stem element *nya-* is known in Gusii (Cammenga, 2002, p. 201) and in Bantu more generally (Schadeberg & Bostoen, 2019, p. 195), to refer to personal names and common nouns. It thus seems quite certain that *nyabhorebhe* and *nyarebe* are, at least in origin, specific indefinites.⁴ In Simbiti *nyabhorebhe* is used in combination with the generic noun for person (21) to express ‘somebody’ functioning as the subject or the object. It is not attested in expressions of ‘nobody’.

(21) Simbiti (JE431, Johnny Walker pers. comm.)

a.	ö-mö-ntö	nyabhorebhe	yaa-rööshë	o-mo-menyani
	AUG-1-person	1A.certain	SM1.PST-See.PFV	AUG-1-neighbor
	w-aane			
	1-POSS1SG			
	‘Someone saw my neighbor.’			

- b. o-mo-menyani w-aane yaa-rööshë ö-mö-ntö **nyabhorebhe**
 AUG-1-neighbor 1-POSS1SG SM1.PST-SEE.PFV AUG-1-person 1A.certain
 ‘My neighbor saw somebody.’

In Gusii, *nyarebe* is used independently to express ‘somebody’ functioning as the subject or the object (22). It cannot be used as a subject in negative sentences but does occur as an object expressing ‘nobody’, suggesting that it might be developing into a non-specific indefinite marker.

(22) Gusii (JE42, Enoch Matundura pers. comm.)

- a. o-mo-amate one na-roche **nyarebe**
 AUG-1-neighbor 1-POSS1SG FOC.SM1.PST-SEE.PFV 1A.certain
 ‘My neighbor saw somebody.’
- b. o-mo-amate one ta-roch-i **nyarebe**
 AUG-1-neighbor 1-POSS1SG NEG.SM1.PST-SEE.PFV-NEG 1A.certain
 ‘My neighbor saw nobody.’

The Swahili specific indefinite *fulani* ‘a certain one, certain’, a loan from Arabic (Sacleux, 1939, p. 229), is used in Swahili like *nyabhorebhe* is in Simbiti. It may combine with the generic noun for ‘person’ and is not attested in expressions of ‘nobody’. The same goes for the specific indefinite *ñani* in Ngoreme, which is used to express ‘somebody’ but not ‘nobody’ (16). A different distribution is found for *kingándi* in Yombe, which, judging from the translation equivalents given by Laman (1936, p. 267, cf. (19)), is a specific indefinite but it is used for expressions of both ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’.

(23) Yombe (H16c, Hilde Goes & Abel Massiala pers. comm.)

- a. **ki-ngandi** be ku-iz-a
 7-certain_person SM1.REM.PST NP15-arrive-FV
 ‘Somebody arrived.’
- b. **ki-ngandi** ka-sa ku-iz-a kó
 7-certain_person SM1-NEG.REM.PST NP15-arrive-FV NEG
 ‘Nobody arrived.’

A last enigmatic case involves the restrictive relative clause *uvyavetsaga*. It occurs in Kinga and together with the preceding generic noun its meaning was described by our language consultant as ‘a concerned person’. Surprisingly, this seemingly specific indefinite meaning is only attested for the expression of ‘nobody’ in the object position, as seen in (10), repeated here as (24).

(24) Kinga (G65, Enock Mbiling’i pers. comm.)

- u-jilani v-ango na-ka-m-bon-e
 AUG-1A.neighbor 1-POSS1SG NEG.SM1-PST-OM1-SEE-NEG.PST
 u-mu-nu uvya-vets-ag-a
 AUG-1-person REL1.SM1.PST-be-IPFV-FV
 ‘My neighbor saw nobody’

Adnominal modifiers either historically or synchronically related to the numeral ‘one’ may be involved in the expression of ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’. Especially with ‘somebody’, the use of the numeral ‘one’ involves the grammaticalization of this numeral into an indefinite marker. We distinguish three patterns. The first pattern (classified as *indefinite* in Tables 1–5) involves indefinite markers diachronically related to the numeral ‘one’, which are used for the expression of ‘somebody’ but not for the expression of ‘nobody’. The North-Western Bantu language Tuki shows this pattern. It uses a reflex of the Proto-Bantu numeral ‘one’ (*mòl ‘one’ (Bastin et al., 2002)) for the expression of ‘somebody’ (*mo*), whereas ‘nobody’ involves the innovated numeral ‘one’ (*mwasi*).

(25) Tuki (A601, Edmond Biloa pers. comm.)

- a. mò-tò omo a-má-úle
 1-person 1.IND SM1-REM.PST-arrive
 ‘Somebody arrived.’
- b. mò-tò o-mwasí a-tá-éná mòtò odzo nakongo
 1.person 1-one SM1-NEG.REM.PST-see 1.person who near
 na ngoto
 with me
 ‘Nobody saw my neighbor.’

The second pattern (classified as *numeral ‘one’/indefinite* in Tables 1–5) involves a marker diachronically or synchronically related to the numeral ‘one’, which is used for the expression of both ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’. Crucially, the expression of ‘nobody’, although making use of the same marker, is syntactically more complex, typically involving a scalar additive operator (and thus literally expressing ‘(not) even one person’). In Kako, the expression of ‘somebody’ involves a form identical to the numeral ‘one’. However, whereas the numeral regularly follows the head noun (26)a, the indefinite marker used for the expression of ‘somebody’ precedes it (26)b. For the expression of ‘nobody’, the numeral again follows the head noun. Moreover, it occurs twice with a scalar additive operator in between (26)c.

(26) Kako (A93, Ernst, 1992, p. 67)

- a. mu-mə wɛtɛ ta kwa si-ɛ ɓo
 1-person one FUT leave we-and them
 ‘One (1) person will leave with us.’
- b. wɛtɛ mu-mə kɛ numɛy
 one 1-person at door
 ‘There’s someone at the door.’
- c. mu-mə wɛtɛ nə wɛtɛ tì nje na
 1-person one SAO one NEG came NEG
 ‘Nobody (not even one person) came.’

In Yombe, the indefinite marker *mesi* used in expressions of ‘somebody’ is formally related but not identical to the synchronic numeral ‘one’ in the language, which is *mosi*. Like in Kako, expressions of ‘nobody’ use the same marker but in combination with the scalar additive operator *ne* (27)b.

(27) Yombe (H16c, Heidi Goes & Abel Massiala pers. comm.)

- a. mu-tu mesi Ø-be-di vana
 1.person IND SM1-PST-COP there
 ‘Somebody was there.’
- b. ne mu-tu mesi ka-sa va ba kó
 SAO 1-person one SM1-NEG.REM.PST there be NEG
 ‘Nobody was there.’

The two patterns exemplified above show that whereas grammaticalization of the numeral ‘one’ into an indefinite marker is a trigger for its use in expressions of ‘somebody’, this is not the case for expressions of ‘nobody’. They rather use the innovated numeral ‘one’ or the (old) numeral in a negative quantifying configuration typically expressing ‘(not) even one’.

The third pattern (also classified as *numeral ‘one’/indefinite* in Tables 1–5) involves a marker that is ambiguous between numeral ‘one’ and an indefinite reading, as with *mókó* in the Lingala example in (28). This marker is used, without further modifications, for

the expression of both ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’, as seen for Lingala in (28) and for North Boma in (29). We assume that this is possible because both the indefinite and the numeral ‘one’ reading are synchronically available.

(28) Lingala (C30B, Meeuwis, 2020, p. 140; Joseph Koni Muluwa pers. com.)

- | | | | | | |
|----|---|-------------|-----------------|---------------|-------|
| a. | mo-to | mókó | a-yá-ákí | ko-luk-a | yó |
| | 1-person | one | SM1AN-COME-PST1 | INF-search-FV | 2SG |
| | ‘One person came to look for you.’/‘A certain person came to look for you.’ | | | | |
| b. | mo-to | mókó | a-zal-ákí | wáná | |
| | 1-person | one | SM1AN-be-PST1 | there | |
| | ‘Someone was there.’ | | | | |
| c. | mo-to | mókó | té | a-zal-ákí | wáná |
| | 1-person | one | NEG | SM1AN-be-PST1 | there |
| | ‘Nobody was there.’ | | | | |

(29) North Boma (B82, Sara Pacchiarotti & Guylen Bonkako, pers. comm.)

- | | | | | | |
|----|------------------------|-------------|----------|---------------|-----|
| a. | tà:rá | á-mó:n-ì | mò:-rò | í-mórì | |
| | 1A.father | SM1-see-PST | 1-person | 9-one | |
| | ‘Father saw somebody.’ | | | | |
| b. | tà:rá | á-mó:n-ì | mò:-rò | í-mórì | kó |
| | 1A.father | SM1-see-PST | 1-person | 9-one | NEG |
| | ‘Father saw nobody.’ | | | | |

Another adnominal modifier used in expressions of ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’ is the indefinite distributive marker ‘(an)other’ (referred to as ‘(an)other’/indefinite in Tables 1–5). It should be noted that in some Bantu languages ‘other’, especially in the sense of ‘(an)other of the same kind’, is derived from the numeral ‘one’ (Kadima, 1967, pp. 26–27).⁵ In Tsonga, for example, *ɲwana* ‘other’ (30), is said to be composed of the numeral one *ɲwe* and a diminutive suffix *-ana* (Junod, p. 83; cited by Kadima, 1967, p. 27). Siteo (1996, p. 173) gives the translation equivalents ‘(an)other’ and ‘certain’. The adnominal modifiers discussed here are all synchronically attested with the meaning ‘other’ and are often cognate with regional reconstructions of ‘other’ proposed by Kadima (1967). They are either used alone, as in Tsonga, or in combination with the generic noun, as in Kagulu. In both languages ‘other’ only occurs in expressions of ‘somebody’. In Gusii, on the other hand, ‘other’ is restricted to expressions of ‘nobody’.

(30) Tsonga (S53, Benito Trollip pers. comm.)

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| u-ɲwana | u-fik-ile |
| 1-other | SM1-arrive-PFV |
| ‘Somebody arrived.’ | |

(31) Kagulu (G12, Malin Petzell & Sauli Lengoliga pers. comm.)

- | | | |
|---------------------|----------|-----------------------|
| mu-nhu | yu-monga | ha-kengil-a |
| 1-person | 1-other | PST-SM1.PST.arrive-FV |
| ‘Somebody arrived.’ | | |

(32) Gusii (JE42, Enock Matundura pers. comm.)

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------------|
| o-nde | ta-ra-ik-a |
| 1-other | NEG.SM1.PST-REC.PST-arrive-FV |
| ‘Nobody arrived.’ | |

In Chewa, *ina* ‘other’ can be used to express ‘somebody’ too, but this gives rise to ambiguous readings and the preferred constellation includes a third-person singular possessive, which does not have a possessive reading but expresses something like ‘another of the same kind’ (Peter Msaka pers. comm.).

(33) Chewa (N31b, Peter Msaka pers. comm.)

wina-wake	a-na-fik-a
1.other-1.POSS ₁	SM1-PST-arrive-FV
'Somebody arrived.'	

3.3.2. Adnominal Modifiers and Invariables Restricted to the Expression of 'Nobody'

We now turn to a set of invariable and adnominal modifiers that are restricted to expressions of 'nobody': scalar additive operators, free choice items, (negative) focus markers, and a single instance of an interrogative pronoun. They are not necessarily negative; i.e., most of them can also be used in affirmative contexts but they never partake in expressions of 'somebody'.

Conjunctive coordinators in Bantu languages are known to be polyfunctional. They are often used not only as the conjunctive coordinator 'and' but also as a comitative preposition 'with' and an additive focus marker 'too, also, as well' (cf. [Andrason, 2019a](#) on Xhosa; [Andrason, 2019b](#) on Kituba; [Creissels, 2016](#) on Tswana; [Schneider-Zioga, 2015](#) on Kinande). In some languages, the semantic map of the conjunctive coordinator is broadened still to include a use as a scalar additive operator (SAO in Tables 1–5). The latter use is attested in Xhosa ([Andrason, 2019a](#)) and also, but less prominently so, in Tswana ([Creissels, 2016](#)) and Kituba ([Andrason, 2019b](#)). In Xhosa the conjunctive coordinator *na* is used in both affirmative and negative contexts. Following the typology developed in [Gast and van der Auwera \(2011\)](#), it is used as a 'BEYOND-operator' in affirmative contexts. In (34), the local proposition of the scalar additive operator, i.e., a mouse, is pragmatically stronger than all corresponding context propositions. In other words, being afraid of a mouse is unexpected in comparison to being afraid of, e.g., a lion.

(34) Xhosa (S41, [Andrason, 2019a](#), p. 39)

ne-mpuku	le	i-ya-m-nkywantis-a
SAO-9.mouse	DEM9	SM9-FOC-OM1-frighten-FV
'Even a mouse frightens her.'		

The use of *na* in negative contexts shows that it can be considered an extended BEYOND-operator; i.e., its minimal host proposition (including negation) is pragmatically stronger than all relevant context propositions ([Gast & van der Auwera, 2011](#)). Although the local proposition of 'having a cent' in (35) is pragmatically weak, the minimal host proposition of 'not having a cent' is pragmatically strong.

(35) Xhosa (S41, [Andrason, 2019a](#), p. 40)

U-sipho	a-ka-na-yo	ne-senti
AUG-1A.Sipho	NEG-SM1-have-REL9	SAO-9.cent
'Sipho has not even a cent.'		

When *na* is involved in the expression of 'nobody', it typically combines with the numeral 'one' (indicated as SAO & numeral 'one' in Tables 1–5), as has already been illustrated in Section 3.3.1 for Yombe (27). Another example comes from the Eastern Bantu language Tharaka, in (36). Nyakyusa, another Eastern Bantu language, shows the same construction but without the generic noun for 'person', as seen in (37). Merged forms like *na-jomo* in Nyakyusa are further discussed in Section 4.5.

(36) Tharaka (E54, [Muriungi, 2010](#), p. 100)

mu-ntû	noa	û-mwe	a-ti-ra-gur-a	î-buku
1-person	SAO	1-one	SM1-NEG-PST-buy-FV	7-book
'Nobody bought a book.'				

- (37) Nyakyusa (M31,
- [Persohn, 2017](#)
- , p. 73)

po	na-ju-mo	a-ti-kw-i-tuufy-a-mo
then	SAO/NEG-1-one	SM1-NEG-PRS-REFL-praise-FV=some

‘So no one ever praises oneself ...’

Languages in which the scalar additive operator and the generic noun alone can express ‘nobody’ are rare in our dataset, but they do occur. The Central-Western language Babole in (38) is a case in point.

- (38) Babole (C101,
- [Leitch, 1994](#)
- , p. 205)

à-ka-én-í	na	mo-tò
SM1-NEG-see-PFV	SAO	1-person

‘He didn’t see anybody.’

The combination with the numeral ‘one’ is not only attested with *na*, but also occurs with other scalar additive operators for which we have less information on their etymology. In the Central-Western Bantu language Liko, *gotógu* seems to be used as an extended BEYOND-operator. In the affirmative sentence in (39), *gotógu* signals that its local proposition ‘that they plunge fish hooks (=to fish)’ is pragmatically strong. The men were not used to fishing but had to try it to obtain food ([de Wit, 2015](#), pp. 275–276). In the negative sentence in (40), the minimal host proposition referring to ‘not listening’ is pragmatically strong. The speaker could have disobeyed the advice, but he did not even listen to it.

- (39) Liko (D201,
- [de Wit, 2015](#)
- , pp. 275–276)

6a-lókú	6a-kungil-ag-ă	ndı	gotógu
2-man	SM3PL-try-PLUR-FV	PST3	SAO
6é	6ó-lub-ög-í	masikıdǎngı	
COMP	SM3PL-plunge-PLUR-SBJV	6.fish_hook	

‘The men even tried to fish.’ (lit. ‘that they plunge fish hooks.’)

- (40) Liko (D201,
- [de Wit, 2015](#)
- , p. 276)

ná-kukan-a	gotógu	ndı	mo-tíwı	ka-babă	ıbú
SM1SG-NEG:hear-FV	SAO	PST3	3-advice	GEN-1A.father	2.PRO
na	mamá				
with	1A.mother				

‘I did not even listen to the advice of my father and my mother.’

Just like with *na*, *gotógu* combines with the numeral ‘one’ in expressions of ‘nobody’. What is more, the pragmatic strength of its minimal host proposition can be reinforced by the addition of the contrastive focus marker *áka*.

- (41) Liko (D201, Gerrit de Wit pers. comm.)

gotógu	mo-mbáńzó	be-motı	(áka)	Ø-ká-mın-á-gu
SAO	1.person	1.NUM-one	FOC	SM3SG-NEG-see-FV.PST-NEG

mo-lángá
1-boy_(first one to be circumcised)
‘Not even one person/Nobody saw the first boy to be circumcised.’

Note that in Yombe, an emphatic negative marker with a minimizing effect (mvéla ‘not even a bit’, [Laman, 1936](#), p. 633) can be used together with the scalar additive operator instead of the numeral ‘one’ (cf. also (27)). It can also be the only modifier of the generic noun for ‘person’.

(42) Yombe (H16c, Heidi Goes & Abel Massiala pers. comm.)

- a. **ne** **mu-tu** **mvela** ka-sa mon-a kó di-sia
 SAO 1-person NEG.FOC SM1-NEG.REM.PST see-FV NEG 5-neighbor
 di-ama
 5.POSS1SG
 ‘Nobody saw my neighbor.’
- b. di-sia di-ama ka-sa mon-a **mu-tu** **mvela**
 5-neighbor 5-POSS1 SM1-NEG.REM.PST see-FV 1-person NEG.FOC
 kó
 NEG
 ‘My neighbor saw nobody.’

In the West-Western language Nzadi the scalar additive operator *áta* also combines with the numeral ‘one’ for the expression of ‘nobody’. *áta* is probably a loan from the local lingua franca Kituba and possibly, just like in Swahili, it ultimately derives from the Arabic preposition ‘until’ (Sacleux, 1939, pp. 273–274). Whereas in languages like Kituba (Fehderau, 1992, p. 2) and Swahili, it functions as a ‘universal scalar additive operator’ (as in the typology by Gast & van der Auwera, 2011), it is restricted to negative utterances in Nzadi (Crane et al., 2011, p. 179).

(43) Nzadi (B865, Crane et al., 2011, p. 179)

- atá muur ómótúk ko ya bō
 SAO person one NEG.PST come NEG
 ‘No one came.’

Interestingly, in a number of languages, scalar additive operators seem to have developed into ‘scalar negators’, incorporating an expression of negation (Gast & van der Auwera, 2011). As will be further discussed in Section 4.5, scalar negators may occur without clausal negation, as seen in (44), from the South-Western language Nyaneka.

(44) Nyaneka (R13, da Silva Maia, 1966, p. 377)

- na-wike u-mu-hole
 SAO/NEG-1.ONE SM1-OM1-love-PFV
 ‘Nobody loves him.’

We now turn to exponents of ‘nobody’ which include a free choice item. Free choice items in Bantu languages tend to be related to the universal quantifier ‘all’ and/or to the distributive universal quantifier ‘every’ (Zerbian & Krifka, 2008; Osa-Gómez, 2015). Whereas in some cases one and the same form means both ‘any’ and ‘every’, in other cases, the free choice item is clearly derived from the universal quantifier, against Haspelmath’s (1997, p. 156) generalization that ‘every’ cannot develop in ‘any’. In a footnote, he already gives exceptions from Hebrew and Turkish. Bantu languages provide additional counterexamples. In Swahili, for example, the (distributive) universal quantifier ‘all, every’ preceded by a bound pronoun⁶ has a free choice interpretation. In Chewa, the syntactically complex distributive universal quantifier ‘every’, a relative clause consisting of the copula (*li*) followed by the universal quantifier (*onse* ‘all’ preceded by a bound pronoun), may have a free choice interpretation (Zerbian & Krifka, 2008, p. 15; Paas, 2004, p. 13).

(45) Swahili

- vitabu **vyote** ‘all the books’
 vitabu **vyovyote** ‘any books, whichever books’

(46) Chewa (Paas, 2004, p. 13)

- munthu **aliyense** ‘every person, any person’

Osa-Gómez (2015) gives a detailed analysis of the free choice item in the Eastern Bantu language Nata. Like in Swahili, it consists of the universal quantifier (in Nata *osé* ‘all’) preceded by a bound pronoun. It can be used in (non-episodic) affirmative as well as negative utterances and, following Osa-Gómez (2015), its main function in both environments is domain widening. Through the addition of the free choice item, the speaker urges the hearer to consider all possible, even marginal, alternatives rather than just contextually relevant or salient ones. The free choice item in (47), for example, is used when the speaker thinks that the hearer might exclude marginal alternatives like ‘rotten bananas’. Likewise, the free choice item in (47), makes clear that not a single child will be taken, contrary to the assumed expectation of the hearer.

(47) Nata (JE45, Osa-Gómez, 2015, p. 157)

- | | | | | | |
|----|-------------------------------|--------------|------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| a. | aa | e-bh-ebhúse | m-bhi-háa-ri | e-bhi-tòóké | bhjobhjoosé |
| | no | AUG-8-baboon | COMP-SM8-HAB-eat | AUG-8-banana | FCI8 |
| | ‘No, baboons eat any banana.’ | | | | |
| b. | ne-te-ku-ghégh-a | mu-aná | wowoosé | | |
| | SM1SG-NEG-IPFV-pick-FV | 1-child | FCI1 | | |
| | ‘I won’t take any child.’ | | | | |

Exponents of ‘nobody’ including a free choice item are restricted to post-verbal position in our dataset (but an interesting exception is found in the non-declarative clause, cf. Section 5.3). In Lusoga and Kagulu, the free choice item is derived from the universal quantifiers *ena* ‘all’ and *ose* ‘all’, respectively. In Lusoga, the universal quantifier is fully reduplicated, whereas in Kagulu, it is preceded by a bound pronoun, resulting in a partially reduplicated pattern.

(48) Lusoga (JE45, Osa-Gómez, 2015, p. 157)

- | | | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------|----------|-------------------|
| n-kaali | kú-kóbél-á | múú-ntú | yéénayééná |
| SM1SG-NOT_YET | 15-tell-INF | 1-person | FCI1 |
| ‘I have not yet told anybody.’ | | | |

(49) Kagulu (G12, Malin Petzell & Sauli Lengoliga pers. comm.)

- | | | | |
|-------------------|----------|---------------|--------------------|
| h-echak-a | mu-nhu | wowose | y-eng-ile |
| SM16-lack-PST | 1-person | FCI1 | SM1-arrive-PFV.REL |
| ‘Nobody arrived.’ | | | |

In Chewa (cf. (46)) and Yao, the free choice item is derived from the univerbation of a relative clause involving a copula (*li* and *ana*, respectively) and the universal quantifier, both of which agree in class 1. In Chewa, the construction is also used to express ‘every’ (Zerbian & Krifka, 2008, p. 15; Paas, 2004, p. 13). The free choice item combines with the indefinite ‘(an)other’, rather than with the generic noun for ‘person’ to express ‘nobody’, as seen in (51).

(50) Chewa (N31b, Peter Msaka pers.comm.)

- | | | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------|---------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| neba | w-anga | sa-na-on-e | w-ina | aliyense |
| 1.neighbor | 1-POSS1SG | NEG.SM1-PST-SEE-PFV | 1-other | FCI1 |
| ‘My neighbor saw nobody.’ | | | | |

(51) Yao (P21, Julius Taji pers.comm.)

- | | | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| jilani | jw-angu | nga-na-mw-on-a | mu-ndu | jwanajoose |
| 1A.neighbor | 1-POSS1SG | SM1SG.NEG-PST-OM1-SEE-FV | 1-person | FCI1 |
| ‘My neighbor saw nobody.’ | | | | |

In Southern Sotho, yet another form is attested, involving disjunctive reduplication, not of the universal quantifier ‘all’, but rather of an interrogative pronoun, either ‘who’ (*mang kapa mang*) or ‘which’, as seen in (52).

(52) Southern Sotho (S33, [Malete, 2001](#), p. 267)

ha-ho	mo-tho	o-fe	kapa	o-fe
NEG-LOC.COP	1-person	1-which	or	1-which
eo	b-ana	ba-mo-rat-ang		
DEM1	2-child	SM2-OM1-like-PRS		

‘The children like nobody. (lit.: There is no person which or which whom the children like.)’

This brings us to the use of the bare interrogative pronoun **mang** ‘who’ for the expression of ‘nobody’ in Southern Sotho. Markers that are semantically interrogative but can also be used as indefinites have been referred to as ‘ignoratives’ ([Karcevski, 1969](#); see also [van der Auwera et al., 2023](#)).

(53) Southern Sotho (S33, [Malete, 2001](#), p. 341)

ha-ho	mang	ya-tseb-ang
NEG.LOC-COP	who	SM1.REL-know-PRS

‘Nobody knows. (lit.: There is no who who knows.)’

3.4. Exponent Types: Overview and Discussion

Exponents of ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’ may be quite similar in Bantu languages: they may consist of a bare generic noun or contain an indefinite marker. When expressions of ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’ differ, the expression of ‘nobody’ is typically pragmatically stronger. We have seen that expressions of ‘nobody’ are more likely to drop the augment than expressions of ‘somebody’, a feature often linked to focus in Bantu languages. It should be noted that we did not include information on the presence versus absence of the augment in Tables 1–5 as this feature is not always directly linked to the expression of ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’. As explained in Section 3.2, augment drop may be licensed by negation whether the noun in question is indefinite or not. Next, ‘nobody’, but not ‘somebody’, may involve scalar additive operators and free choice items, both signaling pragmatic strength. Finally, ‘nobody’ often involves a syntactically complex noun phrase including more than one marker like with scalar additive operators expressing ‘(not) even one’, free choice items involving either (partial) reduplication or a relative clause and configurations including an (optional) emphatic focus marker. Tables 1–3 include three exponent types that have not yet been discussed in detail: adnominal negative markers derived from a negative copula (*negative copula*/NEG in Tables 1–3), an SAO in combination with the numeral ‘one’ (*SAO & numeral*/NEG) and the standard negative marker used as an adnominal negative marker (NEG). Since they are intertwined with construction types and/or the position of the negator, they are further discussed in Section 4.2, Section 4.5, and Section 4.4, respectively.

Something that has remained underexposed in our discussion so far is the fact that different exponent types may co-exist in one and the same language. The West-Western Bantu language Yombe, for example, has five co-existing strategies for ‘nobody’: indefinite *kingándi*, the generic noun in combination with the scalar additive operator *ne*, the generic noun in combination with *ne* and either the minimizer *mvéla* or the numeral *mesi*, and the generic noun in combination with the minimizer *mvéla* alone (Heidi Goes & Abel Massiala, pers. comm.). Most languages in our dataset do not show this amount of variation but this is an area in need of further research.

4. The Second Parameter: Construction Types

In this Section, we discuss three construction types attested for both ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’: SV(O) constructions (Section 4.1), existential cleft constructions (Section 4.2), and inversion constructions (Section 4.3). We then take a closer look at the position of the nega-

tor in constructions for ‘nobody’ (Section 4.4). In Section 4.5, we suggest that a reduction in the negative existential cleft construction through a grammaticalization process well-known to affect basic clefts may exceptionally give rise to dedicated pronominal expressions of ‘nobody’ with inherent negativity or negative concord (Section 4.5). The findings of this Section are summarized in Section 4.6, where we also point out that just as exponent types, different construction types may co-exist in one and the same language.

4.1. SV(O) Constructions

In Bantu languages, the pre-verbal domain is typically interpreted as non-focal or topical, whereas the Immediate-After-Verb position has a non-topical or focal interpretation, and the basic or canonical word order associated with this configuration is SVO (Bearth, 2003; van der Wal, 2015). We refer to constructions as SV(O) constructions if the exponents of ‘somebody/nobody’ occur in their ‘normal’ pre-verbal S or post-verbal O slots. The examples from the Eastern Bantu language Kuria (54) and the Central-Western language Boa (55) show SVO constructions for ‘somebody/nobody’ in the subject and object positions, respectively.

(54) Kuria (JE43, Mary Zakaria Charwi pers. comm.)

- | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------|
| a. | o-moo-nto | a-roche | u-m-nyarobheri | w-ane |
| | AUG-1-person | SM1-see.PFV | AUG-1-neighbor | 1-POSS1SG |
| | ‘Somebody saw my neighbor.’ | | | |
| b. | moo-nto | a-ta-roche | u-m-nyarobheri | w-ane |
| | 1-person | SM1-NEG-see.PFV | AUG-1-neighbor | 1-POSS1SG |
| | ‘Nobody saw my neighbor.’ | | | |

(55) Boa (C44, Gerrit de Wit pers. comm.)

- | | | | |
|----|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------|
| a. | pombó | a-mén-i | mo-tó |
| | 1A.young_man | SM1.PST-see-REC.PST | 1-person |
| | ‘The boy saw somebody.’ | | |
| b. | pombó | ká-mén-í | mo-tó |
| | 1A.young_man | NEG.SM1.PST-see-REC.PST | 1-person |
| | ‘The boy saw nobody.’ | | |

Bantu languages like Kuria, and Boa for that matter, allow specific and negative indefinites functioning as the subject to occur early in the sentence. However, the following two construction types show that Bantu languages also have strategies to avoid such a configuration.

4.2. Existential Cleft Constructions

Existential cleft constructions are bi-clausal structures consisting of a matrix, which is an existential clause introducing the exponents of ‘somebody/nobody’, and a relative clause co-indexed with ‘somebody/nobody’. The examples in (56) and (57) from the Eastern Bantu languages Lusoga and Nyamwezi illustrate such ‘existential clefts’. The exponent for ‘somebody’, i.e., the generic noun for ‘person’, is the nominal predicate of an existential clause and the semantic main verb is relativized. As was already hinted at in the introduction and will be further discussed in Section 5.2, existential cleft constructions are especially frequent with expressions of ‘nobody’ and less so ‘somebody’ in the subject position. Below, we first take a look at the characteristics of the matrix, which are shown to correspond to the characteristics of simple existential clauses in Bantu languages. We then look at the whole construction with special attention to indications of signs of a reduction in negative existential cleft constructions.

(56) Lusoga (JE16, Betty Ayugi pers. comm.)

e-li-yo	o-mu-ntu	e-ya-bonn-a	mu-lirwana
SM19-COP-LOC19	AUG-1-person	REL1-SM1.PST-See-FV	1-neighbor
w-ange			
1-POSS1SG			

‘Someone saw my neighbor.’ (lit. ‘There is a person who saw my neighbor.’)

(57) Nyamwezi (F22, Ponsiano Kanijo pers. comm.)

kw-iina	m-nhu	waa-li-hoo
SM17-COM	1-person	SM1.REL.PST-COP-LOC16

‘Somebody was there.’ (lit. ‘There is a person who was there.’)

Recent research on existential clauses in Bantu languages (Devos & Bernander, 2022; Bernander et al., 2024) has shown that they typically display the following three characteristics: locative agreement marking, subject inversion, and the use of a locative copula or a comitative predicate. These characteristics are also attested in the matrix of existential cleft constructions. Locative nouns in Bantu languages are generally derived by the addition of a locative nominal prefix of class 16 *pa-, 17 *ku, 18 *mu or less typically by the locative nominal prefix of class 23/25 (also referred to as class 19) *i- or the locative suffix *-(i)ni* (Meeussen, 1967; Grégoire, 1975; Maho, 1999, pp. 204–206; Schadeberg & Samson, 1994). Locative nouns can induce locative agreement within the noun phrase and on the verb. Locative agreement on the verb can also occur independently to refer to an implicit location or expletively. Locative marking within existential clauses most typically concerns the subject marker slot, as in (57). However, secondary locative marking, often in the form of an enclitic⁷ and exceptionally a proclitic, is attested as well. This secondary locative marking may combine with a locative subject prefix, as in (56), or may be the only locative marking within the existential clause, as seen in (58), from Ishenyi. The existential predicate has a class 1 subject marker that is co-referential with the generic noun for person as well as a class 16 locative enclitic.

(58) Ishenyi (JE45, Rasmus Bernander field notes)

ta-re-ho	mo-nto	ono	a-hik-ire
NEG.SM1-COP-LOC16	1-person	REL1	SM1-arrive-PFV

‘Nobody arrived.’ (lit. ‘There is a person who arrived.’)

A second characteristic of existential clauses is subject inversion; i.e., the entity said to exist follows rather than precedes the existential predicator resulting in a non-canonical VS word order. Based on the typology of Bantu subject inversion proposed in Marten and van der Wal (2014), Devos and Bernander (2022) make a distinction between locative inversion and agreeing inversion in existential clauses. Locative inversion is seen in (56) and (57): the existential predicate has a locative subject marker (used referentially or expletively) instead of a class 1 subject marker agreeing with the post-verbal generic noun. The Makhuwa example in (59), just like the Ishenyi one in (58), displays agreeing inversion: its subject marker is non-locative and agrees with the post-verbal generic noun.

(59) Makhuwa-Enahara (P31E, Jenneke van der Wal pers. comm.)

khaá-vó	ń-tthú	o-n-ly-á	woó-hí-wuryá
NEG.ISM-be.there	1-person	REL1-PRS-eat-FV	1.CONN.15-NEG-drink

‘Nobody drinks without eating.’ (lit. ‘There’s no person who eats without drinking.’)

The third characteristic of existential clauses concerns the verbal element, which typically is either a locative copula, as with *li* in Lusoga, *re* in Ishenyi, and *vo* in Makhuwa, or a comitative predicate, as with *ina* in Nyamwezi. Both types tend to involve reflexes of Proto-Bantu ‘be’ verbs, either *dì or *bá (Bastin et al., 2002). When used as a locative

copula in plain locational or existential clauses, the ‘be’ verb may take a locative enclitic. If the two merge and the copula part is eroded, the locative enclitic itself may function as a copula. This is what must have happened in Makhuwa. Likewise, the merger of the copula with the comitative preposition *na* to express ‘be with, have’ followed by complete or partial erosion of the copula part, or drop of the copula in present tense contexts, has led to inflected forms of the comitative in many Bantu languages (Creissels, 2024). Although negative existential clauses, used for the expression of ‘nobody’, often differ from affirmative existential clauses only in the presence of standard negative marking (Section 4.4), they sometimes involve a specialized predicator typically derived from an inherently negative lexeme (Bernander et al., 2022, pp. 16–22; Bernander et al., 2023, pp. 27–28). In one of the Kinga varieties, for example, the existential cleft construction involves the locative copula *li* for expressions of ‘somebody’ but uses the inherently negative verb *tsila* ‘be without’ for expressions of ‘nobody’.

(60) Kinga (G65, Enock Mbiling’i pers. comm.)

- | | | | | | |
|----|--|----------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------|
| a. | ku-li | mu-nu | a-m-bwene | u-jirani | v-ako |
| | SM17-COP | 1-person | SM1-OM1-See.PFV | AUG-1A.neighbor | 1-POSS1SG |
| | ‘Somebody saw my neighbor.’ (lit. ‘There’s a person who saw my neighbor.’) | | | | |
| b. | ku-tsil-a | mu-nu | a-m-bwene | u-jirani | |
| | SM17-be_without-FV | 1.person | SM1-OM1-See.PFV | AUG-1A.neighbor | |
| | v-ako | | | | |
| | 1-POSS1SG | | | | |
| | ‘Nobody saw my neighbor.’ (lit. ‘There lacks a person who saw my neighbor.’) | | | | |

In all of the examples in this Section, except for the Kinga ones in (60), the existential matrix clause is accompanied by a relativized semantic main verb. Data from another Kinga variety, presented in (61), show the presence of a relativized main verb but the absence, at least in the negative construction, of an existential predicate in the matrix clause.

(61) Kinga (G65, Enock Mbiling’i pers. comm.)

- | | | | | |
|----|---|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| a. | pwa-le | uva-ka-sikh-e | | |
| | SM16.PST-COP | REL1.SM1-PST-arrive-PFV | | |
| | ‘Someone arrived.’ (lit. ‘There’s who arrived.’) | | | |
| b. | na-pamoto | uva-ka-m-bwene | u-jilani | v-ane |
| | SAO/NEG-one | REL1.SM1-PST-OM1-See.PFV | AUG-1A.neighbor | 1-POSS1SG |
| | ‘Nobody saw my neighbor.’ (lit. ‘There isn’t who saw my neighbor.’) | | | |

The absence or reduction of the existential predicate (61) and/or the relative clause marking (60) is probably due to a grammaticalization process known to affect basic clefts crosslinguistically (Harris & Campbell, 1995; Heine & Traugott, 1991) and also in Bantu languages (van der Wal et al., 2025). It concerns the development from bi-clausal constructions to mono-clausal ones and is typically manifested by the reduction or loss of the predicator in the matrix clause and by the reduction or loss of relativization in the relative clause. Relative clauses in Bantu languages are often marked tonally, and because some of our data lack tonal information, we are hesitant to say much about reductions within the relative clause. However, we do see evidence of a reduction in the existential predicator. A number of interlacustrine Bantu languages make use of a more or less similar invariable negative copula in the matrix of the existential cleft constructions. They are listed in (62).

(62) Reduced existential predicates

JD61 Kinyarwanda:	nta	(Zorc & Nibagwire, 2007, p. 300)
JD62 Kirundi:	ńta(a)	(Meeussen, 1959, p. 176)
JD63 Kifuliiru:	ndáá	(van Otterloo, 2011, p. 226)
JE14 Rukiga:	taa	(Kaji, 2023, p. 549)
JE43 Kuria:	ta	Mary Charwi pers. comm.
JE431 Simbiti:	taaho	Johnny Walker pers. comm.

In Kirundi expressions of ‘somebody’ use the SV(O) construction type, whereas expressions of ‘nobody’ involve an existential cleft construction with the invariable negative existential predictor *nta*.

(63) Kirundi (JD62, Pascal Tuyubahe pers. comm., Meeussen, 1959, p. 183)

- a. nta muu-ntu ya-bóon-ye u-mu-báanyi w-aanje
 COP.NEG 1-person SM1.PST-see-PFV.REL AUG-1-neighbor 1-POSS1SG
 ‘Nobody saw my neighbor.’
- b. ntaa ma-búye (a-rí-ho)
 COP.NEG 6-stone (SM6-COP-LOC16)
 ‘There are no stones.’

Although we do not have historical data on these languages, the existential predictors all seem to be reduced forms of an inflected locative copula involving the negative prefix *ta-*. The example in (58) from Ishenyi, yet another interlacustrine Bantu language, gives an idea of what this copula could have looked like. Interestingly, in Rukiga and Kuria, we also see reductions in the relative marking. In Rukiga, the affirmative verb following the matrix clause with the invariable copula **taa** can either be relative (64) a,b or non-relative (64) c, whereas in Kuria it is, at least segmentally, identical to non-relative verbs (65). Still, we need to keep in mind that relativization could be marked tonally.

(64) Rukiga (JE14, Kaji, 2023, p. 549)

- a. ta:mu-ntu o-wa:-yij-a
 COP/NEG-1-person REL1-SM1.PST-COME-FV
 ‘Nobody came./There’s nobody who came.’
- b. ta:mu-shéja o-wá-gyend-ire
 COP/NEG-1-man REL1-SM1.PST-go-PFV
 ‘No man has gone./There is no man who has gone.’
- c. ta:mu-shê:ja wá:-gyend-ire
 COP/NEG-1-man SM1.PST-go-PFV
 ‘No man has gone.’

(65) Kuria (JE43, Mary Zakaria Charwi pers. comm.)

- a. te-moo-nto a-hik-ire hai
 COP/NEG.AUG-1-person SM1-arrive-PFV NEG
 ‘Nobody arrived.’
- b. o-moo-nto a-hik-ire
 AUG-1-person SM1-arrive-PFV
 ‘Somebody arrived.’

Equally interesting is the fact that these invariable negative copula merge with the following noun. Merged forms like the ones in (65) are reminiscent of dedicated negative indefinites without negative concord. However, their distributional features betray their link with existential cleft constructions. In Rukiga, the merged forms can also be used in the object position, but they need to precede the verb, whether followed by a relative clause or not.

(66) Rukiga (JE14, [Kaji, 2023](#), p. 549)

- | | | |
|----|---|----------------------------|
| a. | ta:-mw-á:na
COP/NEG-1-child
'He has no child./There is no child that he has.' | a-gír-a
REL.SM1-have-FV |
| b. | ta:-mw-â:na
COP/NEG-1-child
'He has no child.' | a-gír-a
SM1-have-FV |

In Kuria, on the other hand, the merged forms are only attested in the subject position. In the object position, the (bare) generic noun for 'person' is used, as in (67), reflecting a general tendency for existential cleft constructions to be a preferred strategy only when 'nobody' functions as the subject (cf. also Section 5.2).

(67) Kuria (JE43, Mary Charwi pers. comm.)

- | | | | |
|--|--------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| u-mu-nyarobheri
AUG-1-neighbor
'My neighbor saw nobody.' | w-ane
1.POSS1SG | a-ta-roch-e
SM1-NEG-see-PFV | moo-nto
1-person |
|--|--------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|

Babole has an invariable negative marker *nàká*, which, judging from its distributional features, could also be linked to a negative existential cleft construction. It can only occur before the verb, and there is no negative concord, as seen in (68).

(68) Babole (C101, [Leitch, 1994](#), pp. 205, 208)

- | | | | | | | |
|----|---|-----------------|--------------------|---------------------------|------------|-------------------|
| a. | nàká
COP/NEG
'Nothing fell from the sky.' | ná
even | dz-úmbá
5-thing | dí-kwíe-í
SM5-fall-PFV | lá
from | bw-èndò
14-sky |
| b. | *tò-én-í
*SM1PL-see-PFV
(intended: 'We saw no buffalos.') | nàká
COP/NEG | ná
even | mbíendzà
10.buffalo | | |

Nzadi has a negative existential predicator *ka*, which may or may not combine with the clause-final negative marker *bɔ* (69)a. The same combination occurs in what looks like an existential cleft construction (69)b, i.e., an existential clause followed by a relative clause, which in Nzadi may be left unmarked ([Crane et al., 2011](#), p. 194). However, *ka* can also combine with clausal negation (69)c, suggesting a reanalysis as an adnominal negator in combination with clausal negation, i.e., negative concord.

(69) Nzadi (B865, [Crane et al., 2011](#), pp. 240, 230 & Simon Nsielanga Tukumu pers. comm.)

- | | | | | | | |
|----|--------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|-------------|
| a. | ka
COP/NEG
'There's no child.' | mwàán
child | (bɔ)
NEG | | | |
| b. | ka
COP/NEG
'Nobody cried.' | muur
person | ómótúk
one | (bɔ)
(NEG) | o
PST | lyaa
cry |
| c. | ka
COP/NEG
'Nobody cried.' | muur
person | ómótúk
one | ko
NEG.PST | lyaa
cry | bɔ
NEG |

Nyoro has an adnominal negator that combines with clausal negation (70). We mention it here because the negator is also used as a negative answer particle in combination with locative prefixes (*hâ:ha* (class 16), *kwâ:ha* (class 17) 'no'; [Kaji, 2015](#), p. 532). This is interesting, seeing that [Bernander et al. \(2022\)](#) show that negative answer particles may be derived from dedicated negative existential predicators. The adnominal negator in (70) may thus have an origin in an existential cleft construction.

- (70) Nyoro (JE11, [Kaji, 2015](#), p. 532)

o-mú:-ntu	w-â:ha	ta-iz-îrê
AUG-1-person	1-NEG	NEG.SM1-arrive-PFV

‘Nobody has come.’

Finally, we return to the Kinga example in (61), which shows the complete omission of the negative existential predicator. In Section 4.5, we suggest that this omission of the predicator in negative existential cleft constructions is intertwined with another process, whereby a scalar additive operator attached to the numeral ‘one’, *napamoto* in (61), is reinterpreted as a scalar negator with inherent negativity, rendering the negative predicator redundant.

4.3. Inversion Constructions (Without Clefting)

The third construction type involves inversion without clefting. Inversion is most typically attested when ‘somebody/nobody’ functions as the subject. It then involves subject inversion. As with existential matrix clauses in existential cleft constructions, two main agreement patterns are attested: the verb either agrees with the inverted subject (71) or the verb carries a locative agreement prefix (72), used referentially or expletively. Here as well, we refer to these agreement patterns as ‘agreeing inversion’ and ‘locative inversion’, respectively.⁸

- (71) Xingoni (N12x, Heidrun Kröger, Mustafa Mussa Binamo; Jacinto Saidine Chauré & Paulino Emede pers.comm.)

a-hik-ite	mu-ndu
SM1-come-PFV	1-person

‘Somebody arrived.’

- (72) Changana (S53, Bento Siteo pers. comm.)

a-ku-fik-anga	mu-nhu
NEG-SM17-arrive-NEG.PST	1-person

‘Nobody arrived.’

Secondary locative agreement occurs with both agreeing and locative inversion. Cuwabo and Vwanji display agreeing inversion. The class 1 subject prefix agrees with the inverted subject. Secondary locative agreement occurs in the form of a class 16 locative enclitic and proclitic in Cuwabo (73) and Vwanji (74), respectively. Luganda, on the other hand, has locative inversion. The verb has a class 16 locative subject marker and involves secondary locative agreement in the form of a class 19 locative enclitic (75). In cases of double locative agreement, the subject marker is often used expletively, whereas the locative enclitic has a referential function and shows less restrictions as to the choice of locative class (see, e.g., [Devos et al., 2017](#) on Kirundi).

- (73) Cuwabo (P34, [Guérois, 2015](#), p. 246)

ka-dh-îlé-vó	mu-ttu
NEG.SM1-come-PFV-LOC16	1-person.PL

‘Nobody came.’

- (74) Vwanji (G66, Helen Eaton pers. comm.)

pala	na-pw-a-lya-l-e	muu-nhu
LOC16.DEM	NEG-LOC16-SM1-PST-be-PFV	1-person

‘Nobody was there.’

- (75) Luganda (JE15, Betty Ayugi pers. comm.)

wa-li-yo	o-mu-ntu
SM16.PST-be-LOC19	AUG-1-person

‘Somebody was there.’

A few languages display object inversion, i.e., ‘somebody’/‘nobody’ functioning as the object occurs in pre-verbal rather than post-verbal position. Yombe is a case in point. When ‘somebody’ functions as the subject, the canonical SVO pattern is attested, as in (76). However, when ‘somebody’ functions as the object, it appears in a pre-verbal position resulting in an SOV pattern, seen in (76). The construction in (76)b is also morphologically distinct from the one in (76)a, as it uses a *ka*-prefix rather than a *Ø*-prefix as the third-person singular subject marker of class 1.

(76) Yombe (H16c, Heidi Goes & Abel Massiala pers. comm.)

a.	mu-tu	mesi	Ø-be-mon-a	di-sia	di-ama
	1-person	IND	SM1-PST-see-FV	5-neighbor	5-POSS1SG
	‘Somebody saw my neighbor.’				
b.	di-sia	di-ama	mu-tu	mesi	ka-be-mon-a
	5-neighbor	5-POSS1SG	1-person	IND	SM1-PST-see-FV
	‘My neighbor saw somebody.’				

Bostoen and Mundeke (2012) argue that in Mbun and in H16 Kongo languages like Ntandu and Manyanga object focus involves both syntactic marking, putting the object in the ‘Immediate-Before-Verb’ position, and morphological marking, i.e., the selection of the allomorph *ka*- as the class 1 subject marker. The utterances in (76), thus, show that ‘some-one’ in the object position behaves like a focused object, at least in Yombe. Although more research is needed, it seems that this combined syntactic and morphological marking of object focus is restricted to affirmative utterances. In Yombe, ‘nobody’ in the object position does not trigger a marked SOV word order nor special verbal morphology.

(77) Yombe (H16c, Heidi Goes & Abel Massiala pers. comm.)

di-sia	di-ama	ka-sa	mon-a	ki-ngandi	kó
5-neighbor	5-POSS1SG	SM1-NEG.REM.PST	see-FV	7-certain_person	NEG
‘My neighbor saw nobody.’					

Finally, the Central-Western Bantu language Mbochi has SVO word order when ‘somebody’ functions as the object. When ‘nobody’ functions as the object, the generic noun for person occurs between the auxiliary and the main verb. Dryer (2013) suggests that Mbochi has a different word order with negation (i.e., SOVNeg instead of SVO in affirmative clauses). Our data suggest that the word order change is instigated by more than negation alone. When ‘my neighbor’ functions as the object of a negative clause, no word order change occurs, possibly because ‘my neighbor’ contrary to ‘nobody’ is not in focus.

(78) Mbochi (C25, Guy Kouarata pers. comm.)

a.	obia	la	ngá	á-dz-ee	mo-ro	o-táa	kaá
	1A.neighbor	of	I	SM1-be-PFV	1-person	15-see	NEG
	‘My neighbor saw nobody.’						
b.	mo-ro	á-dz-e	o-táá	obia	la	ngá	kaá
	1-person	SM1-be-PRF	15-see	1A.neighbor	of	I	NEG
	‘Nobody saw my neighbor.’						

4.4. The Position of the Negator

In what follows, we take a closer look at an important additional parameter in constructions with ‘nobody’, i.e., the position of the negator.

In constructions with an SV(O) pattern, three subtypes can be distinguished: clausal negation, adnominal negation, and both adnominal negation and clausal negation (i.e., negative concord). Negation is overwhelmingly expressed at the clausal level. As is typical for Bantu languages, this mostly implies that the verb includes negative morphology. The

Liko example in (41), repeated here as (79), in which the verb has a post-initial and a post-final negative marker, is a case in point.

(79) Liko (D201, Gerrit de Wit pers. comm.)

gútúgú	mú-mbáanzú	6e-motí	(áka)	Ø-ká-mún-á-gú
even	1.person	1.NUM-one	FOC	SM3SG-NEG-see-FV.PST-NEG

mú-lángá
1-boy_(first one to be circumcised)
'Not even one person/Nobody saw the first boy to be circumcised.'

Negation can also be expressed on the exponent. This pattern is attested in Lingala and Kituba (both lingua franca): they have analytical verb phrase negation through the particles *té* and *vé*, respectively, which come at the end of the clause (Meeuwis, 2020, p. 252, Joseph Koni Muluwa pers. comm.). When 'nobody' functions as the subject, the negative particle follows the exponent implying that noun phrase negation rather than verb phrase negation is at stake here, as seen for Lingala in (80) and for Kituba in (81). When 'nobody' functions as an object, the negative marker follows the exponent of 'nobody' immediately and precedes an (optional) adverb, as seen in (80)b.

(80) Lingala (C30B, Joseph Koni Muluwa pers. comm., Michael Meeuwis pers. comm.)

a. mo-to	mókó	té	a-món-ákí	tata	na	ngái
1-person	one	NEG	SM1AN-see-PST1	1A.father	of	me

'Nobody saw my father.' (lit. 'Not one person saw my father.')

b. tatá	a-món-ákí	mo-to	mókó	té	na	balabála
1A.father	SM1AN-see-PST1	1-person	one	NEG	on	9.street

'Father saw nobody on the street.' (lit. 'My father saw not one person on the street')

(81) Kituba (H10, Joseph Koni Muluwa pers. comm.)

mu-ntu	mósi	vé	ku-vand-aka	páana
1.person	one	NEG	15-be-PST	there

'Nobody was there.' (lit. 'Not one person was there.')

Other instances of negative marking in the vicinity of the exponent without clausal negation can be linked to existential cleft constructions, as was already suggested for the Babole example in (68), repeated here as (82), and will be further discussed in Section 4.5.

(82) Babole (C101, Leitch, 1994, p. 208)

nàká	ná	dz-úmbá	dí-kwíe-í	lá	bw-èndò
NEG.FOC	even	5-thing	SM5-fall-PFV	from	14-sky

'Nothing fell from the sky.'

A third and last pattern concerns the negative marking of the exponent as well as clausal negation, i.e., 'negative concord'. Examples are found in four languages in our dataset: Barombi, Mokpe, Nzadi, and Nyoro, and also in the Grassfields language Bamum. The North-Western languages Barombi and Mokpe, as well as the Grassfields language Bamum, have a strict negative concord; i.e., the negated exponent combines with clausal negation whether it is in pre-verbal or post-verbal position, as illustrated for Mokpe and Bamum in (83) and (84), respectively.

(83) Mokpe (A22, [Tanda & Neba, 2005](#), p. 21, Vincent Tanda pers. comm.)

- a. tò mòtò à zrá ówí ɲgówà
 NEG person SM NEG kill pig
 ‘Nobody killed a pig.’
- b. tò mòtò à zrá língàni tò jóma
 NEG person SM NEG likes NEG thing
 ‘Nobody likes anything.’

(84) Bamum (Grassfields, [Nchare, 2012](#), p. 404)

- a. ɲfè-mùm pí mâ m-fù ɲì wá
 NEG-person PST2 NEG PTCP-call 3SG me
 ‘Nobody called me.’
- b. ɲfè-mùm mâ ɲ-gér ì ɲfè-lètwa
 NEG-person NEG PTCP-have 3SG NEG-book
 ‘Nobody has any book.’

For Nyoro, we only have an example with ‘nobody’ in the subject position (70). For Nzadi, it seems that negative marking is more likely with ‘nobody’ in the subject position than with ‘nobody’ in the object position (Simon Nsielanga Tukumu pers. comm.), which confirms the link with an existential cleft construction, suggested in Section 4.2. In an existential cleft construction, we expect negation to be marked in the matrix only, as in (85)a. However, as already mentioned in Section 4.2, the negative predicator seems to have been re-analyzed as an adnominal marker that can combine with clausal negation, i.e., negative concord, as in (85)b. Still, when ‘nobody’ functions as the object, a construction with clausal negation only seems to be preferred, as in (85)c.

(85) Nzadi (B865, [Crane et al., 2011](#), p. 230, Simon Nsielanga Tukumu pers. com.)

- a. ka atá (bɔ) muur ómɔ́túk o ya
 COP/NEG even NEG person one PST come
 ‘Nobody came.’
- b. ka atá muur ómɔ́túk ko ya bɔ
 COP/NEG even person one NEG.PST come NEG
 ‘Nobody came.’
- c. mí ko mɔ́n àtá muur ómɔ́túk
 I NEG.PST see even person one
 ‘I saw nobody.’

Existential constructions come in subtypes as well. Negation is either marked on the existential copula or on the exponent. The first subtype is by far the most frequent one. The existential verb either carries negative morphology, as in (86), or it is intrinsically negative, either a full negative verb as in (87), or a copula as in (88)a. It should be noted that we are not entirely sure whether the utterance in (88)a contains a relative clause or whether it exemplifies an SVO construction with negation marked on the exponent. There are two elements in favor of the former analysis: the low-toned class 1 subject prefix ò- is typical for subject relative clauses ([Stappers, 1986](#), p. 24) and the sentence-initial negative marker â is reminiscent of a negative copula used in identificational clauses ([Stappers, 1986](#), p. 31), see (88)b. If this analysis is the right one, North Boma is another example of a language using an invariable negative copula in the existential clause (cf. Section 4.2).

(86) Swahili (G42, Enock Matundura pers. comm.)

- ha-ku-na (m-tu) a-li-ye-wasili
 NEG-SM17-COM (1-person) SM1-PST-REL1-arrive
 ‘Nobody arrived.’

(87) Lusoga (JE16, Betty Ayugi pers. comm.)

e-zir-a	mu-ntu	e-ya-bonna	mu-lirwana	w-ange
SM19-lack-FV	1-person	REL1-SM1-see-PFV	1-neighbor	1-POSS1SG

‘Nobody has seen my neighbor.’

(88) North Boma (B82, Sara Pacchiarotti & Guylen Bonkako pers. comm., [Stappers, 1986](#), p. 31)

a.	â	mò:-rò	í-móri	ò-mó:n-ì	tá:r	ì	ngàlí	kò
	NEG.COP	1-person	9-one	SM1.REL-see-PST	1A.father	of	me	NEG

‘Nobody saw my father.’

b.	a	bá-kâ:ru	kó
	NEG.COP	2-woman	NEG

‘Those are not women.’

Note that the North Boma clause-final negative marker *kò* is hard to interpret in terms of scope. It is normally the second element of discontinuous negative marking, but in relative clauses, the first negative element is absent ([Stappers, 1986](#), p. 45). The same problem arises in Kivunjo, in which the clause-final negative marker *pfho* is the sole exponent of negation. The available data do not allow us to ascertain whether these clause-final negative markers have scope over the existential matrix clause or over the relative verb. Still, seeing that elsewhere in our database negation is never marked on the relative clause, scope over the matrix clause seems more likely.

(89) Kivunjo (E622C, Gundelinda Shayo pers. comm.)

ku-wo-re	mu-ndu	a-m-bom-a	mo-mraso	o-ko	pfho
SM17-PST-be	1-person	SM1-OM1-see-FV	1-neighbor	1-POSS1SG	NEG

‘Nobody saw my neighbor.’

The existential matrix clause of a few languages does not have a predicator. As mentioned in Section 4.2, the drop of the existential predicator seems to be intertwined with a process whereby scalar additive operators become reinterpreted as (scalar) negators. As these changes pertain to the construction type, the exponent type, as well as to negation, we return to them in a separate Section (Section 4.5). We have already given one example from the Eastern Bantu language Vwanji. Expressions of ‘nobody’ are rendered through an existential cleft construction consisting of a matrix clause without a predicator and a relative clause. The exponent of ‘nobody’ is the scalar additive operator *naa* added to the numeral *wumo*. The scalar additive operator is here re-analyzed as a scalar negator. It is the only negative element in the sentence.

(90) Nyiha (M23, Helen Eaton pers. comm.)

naa-wu-mo	we	á-fis-ile
SAO/NEG-1-one	REL1	SM1-arrive-PFV

‘Nobody arrived.’

Interestingly, there is no split for the inversion types. One could imagine the negator to go either on the verb or on the (inverted) exponent or maybe even on both. However, we only find negation on the verb, both with agreeing inversion (91)—whether or not accompanied by a secondary locative agreement (92)—and locative inversion (93).

(91) Makhuwa (P31E, Jenneke Van der Wal pers. comm.)

kha-w-aále	n-tthu
NEG.SM1-come-PFV	1-person

‘Nobody came.’

- (92) Vwanji (G66, Helen Eaton pers. comm.)
- | | | |
|------------------------|--|----------|
| pala | na-pw-a-lya-l-e | muu-nhu |
| LOC ₁₆ .DEM | NEG-LOC ₁₆ -SM ₁ -PST-be-PFV | 1-person |
- ‘Nobody was there.’
- (93) Changana (S53, Bento Siteo pers. comm.)
- | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------|
| a-ku-fik-anga | mu-nhu |
| NEG-SM ₁₇ -arrive-NEG.PST | 1-person |
- ‘Nobody arrived.’

4.5. Scalar Additive Operators, Negative Concord, and Existential Cleft Constructions

In this Section, we take a closer look at expressions of ‘nobody’ that are univerbations of a scalar additive operator and the numeral ‘one’. The forms in question and the languages they appear in are listed in (94). In each case, the scalar additive operator has merged with the numeral ‘one’, which takes a pronominal prefix of class 1. The latter is optional in Chokwe and absent in Kinga.

- (94) ‘Nobody’ as an univerbation of a scalar additive operator and ‘one’

Kinga (G65)	napamoto (/na-pamoto/)
Rukiga (JE14)	nomwe (/na-u-mwe/)
Chokwe (K11)	nyi(u)mwe (/nyi(-u)-mwe/)
Mbukushu (K333)	noyofotji (/no-yo-fotji/)
Nyiha (M23)	naawumo (/naa-wu-mo/)
Ndali (M301)	naayumo (/naa-yu-mo/)
Nyakyusa (M31)	najomo (/na-ju-mo/)
Umbundu (R11)	lomwe (/la-u-mwe/)
Nyaneka (R13)	naumwe (/na-u-mwe/)
	nawike (/na-u-ike/)

In the previous Section (Section 4.4), we have seen that constructions with ‘nobody’ are most frequently negated on the main verb in SV(O) and inversion construction types, and on the existential predicator in existential cleft constructions. We also saw that a reduction in the negative existential predicate may give rise to different negation patterns involving adnominal negation with or without negative concord (Section 4.2). As shown in Section 3.3.2, SAOs can combine with generic nouns and/or other syntactic markers, typically the numeral ‘one’, to express ‘nobody’. Exponents of ‘nobody’ including an SAO combine with clausal negation, as seen in (38), repeated here as (95), and in (96).

- (95) Babole (C101, Leitch, 1994, p. 205)

à-ka-én-í	na	mo-tò
SM ₁ -NEG-see-PFV	SAO	1-person

‘He didn’t see anybody.’

- (96) Kanincin (L53A, Michaël Kasombo, pers. comm.)

mu-ntw	aâp	wù-mwîng	kàà-shik-a	pend (SV)
1.person	SAO	1-one	NEG.SM ₁ .PST-arrive-FV	NEG

‘Nobody arrived.’

One can easily imagine that SAOs that are frequently used in negative contexts (especially expressions of ‘not even (one)’) become reinterpreted as scalar negators—a standard pathway for a language to acquire negative concord. With this in mind, we will now investigate how the pronominal forms listed in (94) pattern with negation. Do they combine with clausal negation, and could this then be interpreted as negative concord or do other patterns occur?

Four different patterns can be distinguished. First, in Rukiga, *nomwe* occurs in an existential cleft construction. It is introduced by a negative existential verb and does not have inherent negative meaning. We do not know whether *nomwe* can also be used as an object.

(97) Rukiga (JE14, [Taylor, 1985](#), p. 59)

ti-ha-ri-ho	n-o-mwe	o-kor-a	ekyo
NEG-SM16-COP-LOC16	SOA-1-one	SM1.REL-DO-PRS.FV	that
'Nobody does that.'			

Second, in Kinga, Mbukushu, Umbundu, and Nyaneka, the merged forms do not combine with clausal negation. Rather, they behave like dedicated negative indefinites with inherent negativity. When taking a closer look at their distribution, some particularities are observed. In Kinga, *napamoto* only occurs in the subject position, where it is followed by a relative clause (61), never in the object position where a different exponent is used, which combines with clausal negation, for which see (24). In Umbundu (98), Nyaneka (99), and Mbukushu (100), *lomwe*, *naumwe/nawike*, and *noyofotji*, respectively, can fulfill both functions but only in a pre-verbal position. This distributional restriction seems to be dictated by an existential cleft configuration, whether or not the relative clause is reduced, which cannot be deduced from the available data.

(98) Umbundu (R11, [Keiling, 1937](#), p. 25)

a. l-o-mwe	wey-a
SAO/NEG-1-one	SM1.COME-PST
'Nobody came.'	
b. la-vi-mwe	va-ling-a
SAO/NEG-8-one	SM2-DO-PST
'They didn't do anything.'	

(99) Nyaneka (R13, [da Silva Maia, 1966](#), p. 377)

a. na-w-ike	u-mu-hol-e
SAO/NEG-1-one	SM1-OM1-love-PFV
'Nobody loves him.'	
b. na-u-mwe	ndyi-lwete
SAO/NEG-1-one	SM1SG-see.PFV
'I see nobody.'	

(100) Mbukushu (K333, [Fisch, 1998](#), p. 134)

a. no-y-ofotji	temba	mu-nu	gho-ku-pir-a	mu-randu
SAO/NEG-9-one	also	1-person	CONN1-15-have-FV	3-blame
'No one is blameless.'				
b. no-th-fofoji	temba	thi-yama	tu-na-mon-o	
SAO/NEG-9-one	also	9-animal	SM1PL-PRS-see-PFV	
'We saw not a single head of game.'				

Next, in Nyiha and Ndali, *naawumo* and *naayumo* behave like dedicated negative indefinites with non-strict concord ([van der Auwera & Gianollo, 2025](#), pp. 26–32). When used as subjects, they head a matrix clause without an existential predicator and are followed by a relative clause, as illustrated for Nyiha in (101). When used as objects, however, they follow a negative main verb, for which see (101) also from Nyiha. Their use is less intimately connected with the existential cleft construction.

(101) Nyiha (M23, Helen Eaton & Damas Mwashitete pers. comm.)

- | | | | | | |
|----|---------------------------|-----------|---------------------|----------------|-----------|
| a. | naa-wu-mo | we | á-mu-vhweny-i | u-mu-palamani | w-ane |
| | SAO/NEG-1-one | REL1 | SM1-OM1-see-PST | AUG-1-neighbor | 1-POSS1SG |
| | 'Nobody saw my neighbor.' | | | | |
| b. | u-mu-palamani | w-aane | a-tá-mu-vhweny-i | naa-wu-mo | |
| | AUG-1-neighbor | 1-POSS1SG | SM1-NEG-OM1-see-PST | SAO/NEG-1-one | |
| | 'My neighbor saw nobody.' | | | | |

A third pattern is attested in Nyakyusa; *najomo* or related negative indefinites always combine with clausal negation, whether in the pre-verbal (37) or post-verbal position (102). They could thus be said to have strict negative concord. However, it could also be the case that in Nyakyusa, the SAO has not been re-analyzed as a scalar negator and that we simply have the predominant main clause negation pattern here.

(102) Nyakyusa (M31, Persohn, 2017, p. 48)

- | | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| ne | n-ga-job-a | na-si-mo |
| 1SG | SM1SG-NEG-speak-FV | SAO/NEG-10-one |
| 'I haven't said anything.' | | |

Chokwe, finally, seems to be in between the second and suggestive third type. We do not have data on its post-verbal use, but pre-verbally *niumwe* can have negative concord (103)b, or not (103)a.

(103) Chokwe (K11, Mukanda wa Zambzi, 1970)

- | | | | | | | |
|----|---|--------------|-------------|-------------|---------|-----------|
| a. | ni-u-mwe | w-anyingik-a | mwe | mw-ana | shina | tata |
| | SAO/NEG-1-one | SM1-know-FV | ? | 1-child | except | 1A.father |
| | 'No one knows the son except the father.' | | | | | |
| b. | mu-tu | ni-u-mwe | k-echi | k-evw-a | li-ji | li-enyi |
| | 1-person | SAO-1-one | SM1-NEG.COP | SM1-hear-FV | 5-voice | 5-POSS1 |
| | mu | ma-jila | | | | |
| | 18 | 6-street | | | | |
| | 'No one will hear his voice in the street.' | | | | | |

In summary, it could be hypothesized that the SAO became reinterpreted as a scalar negator and that this triggered the grammaticalization toward a mono-clausal structure: the existential verb, no longer necessary for the expression of negation, could easily be dropped. The merged SAO-'one' forms, freed from the existential negative verb, either behave like dedicated negative indefinites with inherent negativity or like dedicated negative indefinites with non-strict or strict negative concord.

4.6. Construction Types: Overview and Discussion

Exponents of 'somebody' and 'nobody' may occur in their canonical pre-verbal subject or post-verbal object slot. However, since pre-verbal subjects in Bantu languages are generally interpreted as non-focal if not topical, strategies avoiding 'somebody/nobody' in a pre-verbal position occur in many languages. Next to SV(O) constructions, we identified existential cleft constructions and inversion constructions. Clefting and word order permutations are well-known strategies for information structure expressions in Bantu languages (van der Wal et al., 2025).

Existential cleft constructions are bi-clausal constructions consisting of an existential clause introducing 'somebody/nobody' and a relative clause. The existential matrix has all the characteristics of Bantu existential clauses, i.e., the presence of locative marking, locative or agreeing inversion, and the use of a locative copula or comitative predicator. Basic or it-clefts are known to be used for exhaustive focus in Bantu languages (van der Wal et al., 2025, p. 22). However, less is known about the pragmatic correlates of existential

clefts in Bantu languages. They are mainly claimed to be used as presentationals and, more specifically, to introduce a new entity into the discourse (Devos & Bernander, 2022, pp. 583, 588–591; Lafkioui et al., 2021 on Kirundi).

Word order permutations (without clefting) mostly involve subject inversion, with ‘somebody/nobody’ functioning as the subject appearing after the verb in a slot dedicated to focus in many Bantu languages, i.e., the Immediate-After-Verb focus position (Kerr et al., 2023, pp. 9–10). We also identified cases of ‘object inversion’ in two DRC Bantu languages. In Yombe and Mbochi, ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’, respectively, occur before the (semantic) main verb when functioning as the object. In the area where these languages are spoken, the dedicated focus position is not IAV but rather IBV, i.e., the Immediate-Before-Verb position (Kerr et al., 2023, pp. 9–10).

It is thus clear that languages that do not use an SV(O) construction, treat exponents of ‘somebody’ and/or ‘nobody’ like they treat focused constituents. However, this does not imply that this is not the case in languages making use of an SV(O) construction. For one, exponents of ‘somebody/nobody’ functioning as objects occur in the IAV focus position in these languages. Moreover, some (zones M and N) Eastern Bantu languages are known to allow pre-verbal focus (Kerr et al., 2023, pp. 10–12). Western Serengeti languages (zone JE), on the other hand, allow detopicalized constituents to occur in a preverbal position (Nicolle, 2015; Aunio et al., 2019; Bernander & Laine, 2020; Devos & Bernander, 2022). In other languages, the use of an SV(O) construction with ‘somebody/nobody’ functioning as the subject is probably due to a rather fixed word order. In Section 5.4, we will investigate whether fixed word orders correlate with heavier syntactic marking of the exponent.

In constructions with ‘nobody’, negation is predominantly marked on the verb. Another, exceptional, pattern involves the negation of the exponent with or without negative concord. We have suggested that some adnominal negative markers are derived from SAO or negative copula and that the change into adnominal negative markers is concomitant with a change from existential cleft into mono-clausal structure.

Before we look for correlations between construction types and exponent types and between construction types and features like negation and transitivity (Section 5), it should be noted that just as is the case with exponent strategies (Section 3.4), construction strategies can compete with each other. In transitive clauses, SVO and existential cleft constructions tend to compete, as in Luganda (104) and Bulu (105), for ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’, respectively, whereas, in intransitive ones, the same two strategies can compete, as seen in Bulu, but optionality more frequently involves inversion and existentialization, as in Xhosa (107), or inversion and SV, as in Kanyok (108).

(104) Luganda (JE15, Betty Ayugi pers. comm.)

- | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------|----------------------|
| a. | o-mu-ntu | ya-lab-a | mu-lirwaana | w-ange (SVO) |
| | AUG-1-person | SM1.PST-saw-FV | 1-neighbor | 1-POSS1SG |
| | ‘Somebody saw my neighbor.’ | | | |
| b. | wa-li-wo | e-ya-lab-a | mu-lirwaana | w-ange (existential) |
| | SM16-COP-LOC16 | REL-SM1.PST-saw-FV | 1-neighbor | 1-POSS1SG |
| | ‘Somebody saw my neighbor.’ | | | |

(105) Bulu (A74, Ebanga, 2019, pp. 53, 19)

- | | | | | | |
|----|---|------------------------|--------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| a. | môd | a-à-á-bá-ya | ki | yənə | Zamba (SVO) |
| | 1.person | SM1-NEG-REC.PST-be-PRF | NEG | see | God |
| | ‘Nobody has seen God.’ | | | | |
| b. | tə-kə | môt | Ø-éziŋ | a-a-yiane | duma ya dz-am ə-tə (exist.) |
| | COP-NEG | 1.person | 1-one | SM1-PRS-deserve | honor of 4-affair 4-DEM |
| | ‘Nobody deserves the honor of this affair.’ | | | | |

(106) Bulu (A74, [Ebanga, 2019](#), p. 45)

- | | | | | | |
|----|--------------------|----------|-----------------|---------|--------------------|
| a. | môt | Ø-éziŋ | a-sá-kə | | zôsô (SVO) |
| | 1.person | 1-one | SM1-COP.NEG-NEG | | right |
| | 'Nobody is right.' | | | | |
| b. | tə-kə | môt | Ø-éziŋ | a-né | zôsô (existential) |
| | COP-NEG | 1.person | 1-one | SM1-COP | right |
| | 'Nobody is right.' | | | | |

(107) Xhosa (S41, [Carstens & Mletshe, 2016](#), p. 782)

- | | | | | |
|----|-------------------------|----------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| a. | a-ku-kho | m-ntu | | o-fik-ile-yo (existential) |
| | NEG-SM17-COP | 1-person | | REL1-arrive-DISJ-REL |
| | 'Nobody arrived.' | | | |
| b. | a-ku-fik-anga | m-ntu (locative inversion) | | |
| | NEG-SM17-arrive-NEG.PST | 1-person | | |
| | 'Nobody arrived.' | | | |

(108) Kanyok (L32, Michael Kasombo pers. comm.)

- | | | | | | |
|----|----------------------|-------|----------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| a. | ka-kw-àkà-dy-oh | bènd | muut | nànsh | wu-mwĩh (locative inversion) |
| | NEG-SM17-PST-COP-NEG | NEG | 1.person | SAO | 1-one |
| | 'Nobody was there.' | | | | |
| b. | muut | nànsh | wu-mwĩh | kà-àka-di-oh | bènd (SV) |
| | 1.person | SAO | 1-one | NEG.SM1-PST-COP-NEG | NEG |
| | 'Nobody was there.' | | | | |

5. Correlations

Now that we know what the exponents can look like and in what type of constructions they occur, we can investigate how types of exponents and types of constructions correlate with each other, with negation (Section 5.1), and with transitivity (Section 5.2). In Section 5.3, we take a brief look at 'nobody' in one type of non-declarative clause. In Section 5.4, finally, we discuss the distribution of exponents and constructions in our dataset versus our sample.

Types of exponents and types of constructions are combined in two sets of parameters in Tables 1–5 (given below). The vertical and horizontal axes of each table represent, respectively, variations as to the type of exponent and type of construction. Tables 1–3 (this Section) concern the languages in our dataset. They plot languages with respect to the way they express 'somebody' and 'nobody' in three environments: functioning as the object and functioning as the subject of a transitive and intransitive verb. Bolded languages concern expressions of 'nobody'.

Tables 4 and 5 (in Section 5.4) plot the languages of our sample following the way they express, respectively, 'somebody' and 'nobody' functioning as the subject of a transitive clause. We use different typographic conventions for the different branches of the phylogenetic tree in [Grollemund et al. \(2015\)](#): North-Western languages are underlined, Central-Western languages are bolded, West-Western languages are in italics, South-Western languages are in italics as well as bolded, and Eastern languages are left unmarked. Grassfield languages are unmarked and preceded by 'GR'.

Table 1. ‘Somebody/Nobody’ object in the dataset.

	<i>canonical VO</i>	<i>existential cleft</i>	<i>object inversion</i>
<i>absent</i>		JD62, JE15, K402, S42 JE15, K402, P21, S33	
<i>generic noun for ‘person’</i>	A22, A41, A601, A71, A801, A93, C25, C322, C44, D201, D332, D54, E55, E622C, E73, F22, G32, G33, G37, G62, G65, H10, JD42, JD62, JD63, JE15, JE16, JE251, JE405, JE43, JE45I, N11, N12x, N13, P312, P31E, P34, R21, S33, S42, S53, S54	E622C, JD61, JD62, JE15, K402, S42	H16c
	A22, A41, A601, A73a, A93, A74, B52, C25, C322, C44, D201, D332, D54, E54, E55, E73, F22, G32, G33, G37, G42, G62, JD42, JE15, JE16, JE405, JE43, JE431, JE45i, JE45n, N11, N12x, P312, P31E, P34, S33, S41, S42, S407, S53, S53(Tsonga), S54	B865, E622C, JE14, JD61, JD62, S33, S42	
<i>indefinite</i>	G42, JE42, JE43, M23, M301, R11 S32, S407 H16c, G65, JE42		H16c
<i>numeral ‘one’/indefinite</i>	B82, B865, C30B, D201, H10, L32, L53, L53A, M31, P21, S33 B82, K12, R11		
<i>‘(an)other’/indefinite</i>	G12, G66, K402, N31b, S42, S53(Tsonga) G66		
<i>scalar additive operator (SAO)</i>	A801, C101		
<i>SAO & numeral ‘one’</i>	B865, G66, H10, K333, L32, L53, L53A, M31, M23, M301		
<i>free choiceitem</i>	E622C, G12, G42, G65, G66, JE16, JE22, P21	S33	
<i>‘(an)other’ & free choice item</i>	N31b		
<i>ignorative</i>		S33	
<i>minimizer</i>	H16c		
<i>SAO/NEG & numeral ‘one’</i>		K333, R11, R13	
<i>negative copula/NEG (& SAO)</i>	B865	JE14	
<i>NEG</i>	C30B, H10		

Table 2. ‘Somebody/Nobody’ transitive subject in the dataset.

	<i>canonical SVO</i>	<i>existential cleft</i>	<i>loc inv.</i>	<i>agr inv.</i>
<i>absent</i>		G65, JE15, JE16, K402, P31E, P34, S42, S53, S54 G33, G37, G66, JD62, JE14, JE15, JE16, K402, N12x, N31b, P21, P312, P31E, P34, R13, R21, S33, S42, S53, S53(Tsonga), S54		
<i>generic noun for ‘person’</i>	A22, A41, A74, A801, B52, B85, C25, C322, C44, D332, E73, H10, JD42, JD62, JD63, JE14, JE15, JE16, JE405, JE43, JE45I, JE45N, K402, N11, N12x, N13, P21, P312	E622C, F22, G32, G33, G37, G42, G62, G65, H21, JD61, JD62, JE15, JE16, S33, S41, S407	M60	P312
	A71, A73a, A74, B52, B85, C25, C322, C44, D332, H10, JE43, JE45n	A74, E55, E622C, E73, F22, G12, G32, G33, G37, G62, G65, H21, JD42, JD61, JD62, JE14, JE15, JE16, JE405, JE43, JE431, JE45i, M60, N11, P31E, P34, R21, S32, S41, S407	S41	
<i>indefinite</i>	A601, B865, G42, H16c, JE431, K11, M23, M301, R11 H16c	B865, R21		
<i>numeral ‘one’/indefinite</i>	B82, C30B, C44, D201, H10, L32, L53, L53A, M31, S33 A601, A74, C322, C44			
<i>‘(an)other’/indefinite</i>	G12, G66, JE42, S32, S53(Tsonga) JE42			
SAO	H16c			
SAO & numeral ‘one’ (& focus)	H10, B865, D201, E54, K12, L32, L53, L53A, M31	JD63, JE14		
SAO & minimizer	H16c			
<i>free choice item</i>		G42, S33		
<i>ignorative</i>		S33		
SAO/NEG	A22, A41			
SAO/NEG & numeral ‘one’	K11, R11, R13	K333, G65, M23, M301		
<i>negative copula/NEG (& SAO & numeral ‘one’)</i>	B865	B865, JE14, JE43		
NEG	C30B, H10			

Table 3. ‘Somebody/Nobody’ intransitive subject in the dataset.

	<i>canonical SV</i>	<i>existential cleft</i>	<i>loc inv</i>	<i>agr inv</i>
<i>absent</i>		G65, JE15, JE16, K402, S42 E73, JD62, JE14, JE15, JE16, K402, N31b, P21, P312, S33, S53(Tsonga)		
<i>generic noun for ‘person’</i>	A22, A41, B85, C25, C322, C44, D332, E73, H10, JD42, JD62, JD63, JE15, JE16, JE405, JE43, JE45i, JE45n, N11, N12x, N13, P34, S41	E622C, F22, G33, G37, G42, G62, G65, JD61, JD62, JE15, JE16, K402, S42, S33, S407	A22, D54, G32, G33, JD42, JD62, JE11, JE12, JE14, JE16, K12, K14, M60, R21, S32, S41, S53, S54	A41, G32, G65, G66, JE251, K333, N12x, N13, N31b, P312, P31E, P34
	A601, A71, A801, B52, B85, C25, C322, C44, D201, D332, G66, H10, JE401, JE43	E622C, F22, G37, G42, G62, G65, H21, JD61, JD62, JD63, JE14, JE15, JE16, JE405, JE43, JE431, JE45, P34, S32, S33, S41, S407	A41, D54, E55, G32, G33, G37, JE11, JE12, K14, M60, N31b, R13, S41, S42, S53, S54	A41, E55, JE14, N11, N12x, P31E
<i>indefinite</i>	A601, A93, G42, H16c, JE401, JE42, JE431, K11, M23, M301, R11 H16c		R13	R21
<i>numeral ‘one’/indefinite</i>	B82, C30B, C44, D201, G66, H10, K11, L32, L53, L53A, M31, P21, R11, S33	B82		
	A74, B865, C322, C44, D201	A74, B82		
<i>‘(an)other’/indefinite</i>	G12, N31b, S53(Tsonga)			
	JE42			
<i>SAO</i>	A93, C101, H16c		C322	P31E
<i>SAO & numeral ‘one’</i>	B865, H10, D201, E54, L32, L53, L53A		C322, L32, L53, L53A	
<i>SAO & minimizer</i>	H16c			
<i>SAO & (an)other</i>	G66			G66
<i>free choice item</i>		G12, G42, S33		
<i>ignorative</i>		S33		
<i>SAO/NEG</i>	A22, A41			
<i>SAO/NEG & numeral ‘one’</i>	K11, K12, R11, R13	K333, M23, M301		
<i>negative copula/NEG (& SAO & numeral ‘one’)</i>	B865, C101, JE11, JE14, JE43	B865, JE14, JE43		
<i>NEG (& numeral ‘one’)</i>	H10, C30B			

5.1. ‘Nobody’ Versus ‘Somebody’

As shown in Section 3, negation entails more variation as to types of exponents with some syntactic markers being specific to expressions of ‘nobody’. We remarked that adnominal modifiers specific to the expression of ‘nobody’ tend to be pragmatically stronger. Another observation is that they typically involve explicit quantifiers like the numeral ‘one’ or the (distributive) universal qualifiers ‘all’ and ‘every’. We noted that whereas the use of the numeral ‘one’ for expressions of ‘somebody’ is typically triggered by its grammaticalization into an indefinite marker, this is not the case for expressions of ‘nobody’, which rather appeal to the (original) cardinal semantics.

This does not imply that syntactic marking as such occurs more frequently with exponents of ‘nobody’ than with exponents of ‘somebody’. Syntactic marking for expressions of ‘somebody’ occurs in 26, 24, and 28 languages (Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3, respectively), whereas syntactic marking for expressions of ‘nobody’ occurs in 27, 27, and 27 languages, respectively. Syntactic marking is also well-spread throughout the Bantu domain for the expression of both ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’. In each case, it occurs with languages from all five branches of the phylogenetic classification.

However, the likelihood of a language having competing exponent strategies is bigger with ‘nobody’ than with ‘somebody’. Examples of languages having a choice between two to four exponent strategies occur for ‘nobody’ in all three Tables (i.e., G65 Kinga, G66 Vwanji, H16c Yombe, and S33 Sesotho in Table 1; C44 Boa, D201 Liko, H16c Yombe, and S33 Sesotho in Table 2; B865 Nzadi, C322 Zamba, H16c Yombe, and S33 Sesotho in Table 3), whereas only one language (i.e., K11 Chokwe), in Table 5, shows a choice between two different exponent strategies for ‘somebody’.

Another difference is that syntactic marking is less restricted to the SV(O) construction type with ‘nobody’ than with ‘somebody’. Some exceptions notwithstanding, all languages with exponents of ‘somebody’ including syntactic marking co-occur with the SV(O) pattern, whereas exponents of ‘nobody’ including syntactic marking, although still showing a slight preference for the SV(O) pattern, show more diversification construction-wise.

Expressions of ‘somebody’ have the same type of constructions as expressions of ‘nobody’. There is no marked difference in the choice of construction type between ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’ functioning as the object (Table 1). However, when ‘somebody’ or ‘nobody’ functions as the subject, there is a clear correlation between expressions of ‘nobody’ and a preference for the existential cleft construction type. In transitive and intransitive clauses, the existential cleft construction type respectively occurs in almost and more than twice as many languages for the expression of ‘nobody’ (43 languages in Table 2 and 35 languages in Table 3) as for the expression of ‘somebody’ (24 languages in Table 2 and 14 languages in Table 3). The data allow the implication that if a Bantu language can use an existential cleft construction for the subject ‘somebody’, it can also use it for the subject ‘nobody’. This is in line with what is found for South-East Asian and Mixtec languages, and we can appeal to the same explanation, viz., a version of the traditional ‘Given before New’ principle (van der Auwera, 2023; van der Auwera et al., 2023): starting to say something about someone who does not even exist is a radical breach of the principle, and it is useful to have the negative existential flag this explicitly. An additional possible explanation lies in the semantics and functional correlates of existential clefts in Bantu languages. As was mentioned in Section 4.6, existential clefts have received little attention in Bantu languages. In line with the general literature on *there*-clefts (e.g., Lambrecht, 2001), they are assumed to be presentational clefts whose main function is to introduce new entities into a discourse. However, Davidse et al. (2022), in a detailed and comprehensive account of different types of *there*-clefts in English, show that *there*-clefts can be either presentational or specificational. Specificational *there*-clefts specify a value (the NP in the matrix clause) for a variable (the relative clause). The most common type of specificational *there*-cleft is a quantifying one that quantifies instances of the value. Importantly, negative quantification is a frequent subtype of quantifying *there*-clefts because “the semantic option that there are *no* instances qualifying for the variable is an important one”. (Davidse et al., 2022, p. 78). Davidse et al. (2022, p. 75) give the following example as a typical profile of specificational *there*-clefts: ‘*There was not one of them there could justify the disparity between the way Britain’s being treated and the treatment of the members of the Six*’.

Expressions of ‘nobody’ thus seem to be especially suited for the matrix of a *there*-cleft. Expressions of ‘somebody’, on the other hand, typically involve indefinite markers that, in

combination with an existential cleft, tend to trigger a presentational reading (Davidse et al., 2022, p. 79), which is more than ‘somebody’ caters for. In sum, if Bantu existential clefts are like English *there*-clefts, then they are especially suited for expressions of ‘nobody’ but less so for expressions of ‘somebody’. Specific characteristics of existential clefts, although in need of further research in Bantu languages, together with the ‘Given before New’ principle, help to explain the pattern of selected construction strategies in, for example, Digo. In the subject position, an SVO construction is used for ‘somebody’ (109)a, whereas ‘nobody’ uses an existential cleft (109)b. In the object position, where the Given naturally occurs before the New, both ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’ make use of an SVO construction (109)c,d.

(109) Digo (E73, Steve Nicolle pers. comm.)

- | | | | |
|----|---|------------------------------------|---|
| a. | mu-tu
1-person
‘Somebody saw me.’ | wa-ni-on-a
SM1.PST-OM1SG-see-FV | |
| b. | ta-pha-na
NEG-LOC16-COM
‘Nobody saw me.’ | mu-tu
1-person | a-ri-ye-ni-on-a
SM1-PST-RM1-OM1SG-see-FV |
| c. | ná-on-a
SM1SG.PST-see-FV
‘I saw somebody.’ | mu-tu
1-person | |
| d. | si-on-ere
NEG.SM1SG-see-NEG.PST
‘I saw nobody.’ | mu-tu
1-person | |

Another finding is that in many languages (34 languages in Table 3) the locational intransitive clause with ‘nobody’ (i.e., ‘Nobody was there.’) does not simply use an existential clause but rather an existential cleft. Kagulu, for example, has an existential clause involving locative inversion and the negative verb *ichaka* ‘lack, be without’, as seen in (110)a. However, it uses an existential cleft for ‘nobody’, as seen in (110)b.

(110) Kagulu (G12, Petzell, 2008, p. 167, Malin Petzell & Sauli Lengoliga pers. comm.)

- | | | | |
|----|---|---------------------------|----------------|
| a. | kw-ichak-a
SM17-lack-FV | wa-nhu
2-person | |
| | ‘There are no people.’ (lit. ‘It (the place) lacks people.’) | | |
| b. | hechak-a
SM16.lack-FV | mu-nhu
1-person | wowose
FCI1 |
| | | yow-ile
SM1.REL.be-PFV | bahaya
here |
| | ‘Nobody is here.’ (lit. ‘Here lacks any person who is here.’) | | |

As argued in Devos and Bernander (2022, p. 597), following Creissels (2019, p. 10), existential clauses (as in (110)a mainly flag a difference in perspectivization (from ground to figure, rather than from figure to ground) and are only indirectly related to information structure. The use of the negative existential cleft with ‘nobody’ emphasizes that there is not one person that qualifies for the variable (i.e., being here).

5.2. Syntactic Roles and Transitivity

The attested types of exponents do not vary much depending on whether ‘somebody’/‘nobody’ is used as a subject or as an object or depending on whether the clause is transitive or intransitive. The specific position and whether it is pre-verbal or post-verbal might be more important. It was observed that exponents of ‘nobody’ including a free choice item only occur post-verbally, i.e., in the dedicated IAV focus position. Interestingly, the apparent ban on pre-verbal ‘nobody’ when including a free choice item is lifted when the main verb is in the subjunctive. This is further discussed in Section 5.3.

Construction types do show a strong correlation with syntactic roles and transitivity. When ‘somebody’/‘nobody’ functions as the object, VO is by far the most common construction type (cf. Table 1). When functioning as the subject, however, existential cleft constructions become more important, especially for the expression of ‘nobody’ (cf. Section 5.1). Intransitive clauses allow for still more diversification as they also make more frequent use of inversion constructions (cf. Table 3). The higher incidence of inversion constructions in intransitive clauses is in line with the implicational hierarchy of predicate types in inversion constructions given in [Marten and van der Wal’s \(2014\)](#) paper on the typology of subject inversion in Bantu languages. Following this hierarchy, inversion will not occur with transitive verbs if it does not also occur with copula and intransitive verbs.

Let us now also take a closer look at the two types of intransitive clauses our questionnaire catered for, i.e., locational intransitives (‘somebody/nobody was there’) and unaccusative intransitives with the verb ‘arrive’ (‘somebody/nobody arrived’). Although we do not always have data for both types and we merge the types in Table 3, we do observe that locative inversion is more easily allowed with locational intransitives, a tendency that also adheres to [Marten and van der Wal’s \(2014\)](#) implicational hierarchy in which copulas come before unaccusatives. For some languages, we see locative inversion in the equivalent of ‘somebody/nobody was there’ but agreeing inversion or the non-inverted SV type in the equivalent of ‘somebody/nobody arrived’. Kwere (111) illustrates the former alternation and Kanincin the latter. In Kanincin, locative existentials use either locative inversion or SV, whereas the unaccusative intransitive only uses SV (112).

(111) Kwere (G32, Aron Zahran, pers. comm.)

- | | | | | | |
|----|------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| a. | ha-kal-a | ha-bule | mu-nhu (loc. inv.) | | |
| | SM16-be.PST-FV | SM16-NEG.EXIST | 1-person | | |
| | ‘There was nobody there.’ | | | | |
| b. | chi-kal-a | chi-gonsel-a | bali | ha-fik-ile | mu-nhu (agr. inv.) |
| | SM1PL-be.PST-FV | SM1PL-wait-FV | but | NEG.SM1-arrive-PFV | 1-person |
| | ‘We waited but nobody came.’ | | | | |

(112) Kanincin (L53A, Michaël Kasombo, pers. comm.)

- | | | | | | |
|----|---------------------|------|----------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| a. | kwà-ding | pènd | mu-ntw | aâp | wù-mwîng (loc. inv.) |
| | SM17.PST-COP.PST | NEG | 1-person | SAO | 1-one |
| | ‘Nobody was there.’ | | | | |
| b. | mu-ntw | aâp | wù-mwîng | kàà-shik-a | pend (SV) |
| | 1-person | SAO | 1-one | NEG.SM1.PST-ARRIVE-FV | NEG |
| | ‘Nobody arrived.’ | | | | |

5.3. ‘Nobody’ and the Subjunctive

This Section takes a preliminary look at the expression of ‘nobody’ in marked clause types, and more specifically at ‘nobody’ in combination with a verb in the negative subjunctive. The Bantu subjunctive is used for prohibition and (deontic) modality in main clauses ([Nurse & Devos, 2019](#)). Although our questionnaire only asked for ‘somebody/nobody’ in main clauses, we came across some data suggesting that languages using the existential cleft construction with ‘nobody’ revert to an SV(O) construction when the verb is in the negative subjunctive. A search for translation equivalents of ‘nobody’ in the Swahili New Testament shows the omnipresence of the existential construction (113)a,b, except when the verb is in the subjunctive, in which case there is a clear preference for an SV(O) (113)c–e word order. The exponent of ‘nobody’ may be the bare generic noun (113)e or the generic noun with the free choice marker (113)c,d. This is also exceptional as we noted that expressions of ‘nobody’ including a free choice item show a strong preference for the post-verbal slot (Section 5.2).

(113) Swahili (G42, *New testament in Swahili (Zanzibar)*, 1921)

- a. ha-ku-na a-m-ju-a-ye Mw-ana ila
 NEG-SM17-COM SM1-OM1-know-FV-REL1 1-child except
 Baba
 9.father
 ‘Nobody knows the Son, except for the Father.’
- b. kwa_sababu ha-ku-na m-tu a-li-ye-tu-ajiri
 because NEG-SM17-COM 1-person SM1-PST-REL1-OM1PL-hire
 ‘Because nobody hired us.’
- c. basi, sasa m-tu yeyote a-si-ni-sumbu-e tena
 so now 1-person FCI1 SM1-NEG-OM1SG-harass-SBJV again
 ‘Furthermore, let no one be harassing me.’
- d. tangu leo hata mi-lele m-tu yeyote
 from 9.today until 4-forever 1-person FCI1
 a-si-l-e ma-tunda kw-ako
 SM1-NEG-eat-SBJV 6-fruit 17-POSS2SG
 ‘No one may eat fruit from you; no longer, forever.’
- e. basi, m-tu a-si-ji-vun-i-e wa-tu
 so 1-person SM1-NEG-REFL-boast-APPL-SBJV 2-person
 ‘So, let no one boast in men.’

For now, our data mainly come from Swahili and closely related languages like Kwere and Zalamo, both of which use the free choice marker and an SV(O) word order in combination with a verb in the negative subjunctive, as seen in (114), whereas they use existential cleft constructions or inversion constructions in (unmarked) main clauses. Further research will indicate whether this is a widespread feature in Bantu and whether the subjunctive triggers changes in default focus positions.

(114) Kwere (G32, *Zahran*, 2023, p. 76)

- yoyose seke-ya-swel-e hishima
 FCI1 PROH-SM1-lack-SBJV 9.respect
 ‘Nobody should lack respect.’

5.4. The Distribution of Types of Exponents and Types of Constructions

In this Section, we look at the distribution types of exponents and types of constructions for ‘somebody/nobody’ functioning as the subject of a transitive clause. In our dataset, the number of languages using the bare generic noun as the exponent of ‘somebody/nobody’ almost doubles the number of languages involving syntactic marking (cf. 42 versus 24 languages for ‘somebody’ and 41 versus 27 languages for ‘nobody’, Table 2). The high number of bare generic nouns is tuned down in our sample (Tables 4 and 5), where the bare generic noun and syntactic marking are evenly distributed. Bare generic noun exponents occur in all five branches. They are not attested in Grassfields for ‘somebody’ but do occur for ‘nobody’. Syntactic marking occurs in all five branches and in Grassfields for ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’ alike.

In our dataset, ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’ differ greatly as to construction type, at least as the subject of a transitive clause (cf. Section 5.1). For ‘somebody’, the number of languages taking an SVO construction is double the number of languages using an existential cleft construction (cf. 50 versus 24 languages in Table 2). For ‘nobody’, the scales are reversed, with fewer languages opting for an SVO than for an existential cleft construction (cf. 32 versus 43 languages in Table 2). In our sample as well, existential cleft constructions are better represented with ‘nobody’ than with ‘somebody’. However, there is no rever-

sal of scales as SVO constructions still outnumber existential cleft constructions with both ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’ (cf. 22 versus 3 languages in Table 4 and 18 versus 7 languages in Table 5). The higher number of existential cleft constructions in our dataset is a consequence of the bias toward Eastern Bantu languages. In our sample (Tables 4 and 5), SVO constructions are found in all five branches and in Grassfields for both ‘somebody’ and ‘nobody’. Existential cleft constructions are less well distributed. They occur in Eastern Bantu, West-Western, and South-Western Bantu for ‘somebody’ and additionally in North-Western Bantu for ‘nobody’. Grassfields and Central-Western languages in our sample do not have existential cleft constructions. When returning to our dataset, we see that existential cleft constructions are entirely absent from North-Western Bantu and West-Western Bantu, except for the North-Western Bantu language Bulu. In this language, an existential cleft construction can be used as an alternative to an SVO construction for expressions of ‘nobody’, as seen in (105), repeated here as (115).

(115) Bulu (A74, Ebanga, 2019, pp. 53, 19)

- a. mōd a-à-á-bé-ya ki yənə Zamba (SVO)
 1.person SM1-NEG-REC.PST-be-PRF NEG see God
 ‘Nobody has seen God.’
- b. tə-kə mōt Ø-éziŋ a-a-yiane duma ya dz-am ə-tə (exist.)
 COP-NEG 1.person 1-one SM1-PRS-deserve honor of 4-affair 4-DEM
 ‘Nobody deserves the honor of this affair.’

The near-absence of existential cleft constructions in North-Western and Central-Western Bantu languages does not come as a surprise seeing that these languages typically do not have dedicated existential constructions (Devos & Bernander, 2022). Rather, they show a complete identity between plain locational and existential constructions. These languages are characterized by a rather fixed word order, which might have been triggered by the loss or reduction of the locative agreement system, which plays an important role in inversion constructions. Be that as it may, languages without existential constructions do not have an existential cleft construction as a potential strategy for expressions of ‘nobody’.

A follow-up question is whether languages with more fixed word orders rely more heavily on syntactic marking of the exponent for the expression of ‘somebody/nobody’. Our dataset does not show evidence of such a compensation. Bare generic nouns are just as frequent as more complex expressions of ‘somebody/nobody’ in North-Western and Central-Western Bantu languages.

Table 4. ‘Somebody’ transitive subject in the sample.

	<i>canonical SVO</i>	<i>existential</i>
<i>absent</i>		K402 , JE16
<i>generic noun for ‘person’</i>	<u>A22</u> , <u>A41</u> , <u>A74</u> , C25 , C44 , D332 , B52, K402 , JE16, N11	F22, JE16
<i>indefinite</i>	GR_Bafut, GR_Awing, GR_Babungo, GR_Bamum, <u>A601</u> , B865, H16c, K11 , M23	B865
<i>numeral ‘one’/indefinite</i>	C44 , D201 , B82, L32, L53	

Table 5. ‘Nobody’ transitive subject in the sample.

	<i>canonical SVO</i>	<i>existential</i>
<i>absent</i>		K402 , JE16
<i>generic noun for ‘person’</i>	GR_Awing, <u>A74</u> , C25 , C44 , D332 , B52	<u>A74</u> , F22, JE16, N11
<i>indefinite</i>	GR_Bafut, GR_Awing, H16c	
<i>numeral ‘one’/indefinite</i>	<u>A601</u> , <u>A74</u> , C44	
<i>SAO</i>	GR_Babungo, H16c	
<i>SAO & numeral ‘one’ (& focus)</i>	D201 , B865, H16cL32, L53	
<i>SAO/NEG</i>	<u>A22</u> , <u>A41</u>	
<i>SAO/NEG & numeral ‘one’</i>	K11	M23
<i>negative copula/NEG (& SAO & numeral ‘one’)</i>	B865	B865
<i>NEG</i>	GR_Awing, GR_Bamum	

6. Conclusions

This study started out from the observation in the typological literature, as well as in the Bantu literature, that Bantu does not have dedicated expressions for ‘nobody’. Bantu languages were believed to simply use a generic noun in combination with clausal negation. Still, some preliminary investigations showed that ‘nobody’, when functioning as the subject, favors an existential cleft construction. This was interesting for two reasons: (1) research on East Asian and Mixtec languages showed a similar preference and (2) recent research into existentials in Bantu languages has given us a detailed picture of Bantu existential constructions. Hence, despite the apparent unexceptional nature of Bantu indefinites, we embarked upon a study of negative indefinites in comparison with specific indefinites, in a dataset of 85 Bantu languages.

As for the exponents of ‘nobody’ and ‘somebody’, we found that although they share some expressions, the bare generic noun for person being the most obvious one, we observed differences and could point to interesting details. The expression of ‘nobody’ typically involves pragmatically heavier exponents containing, for example, scalar additive operators or free choice items. Concerning the latter, we confirmed a doubt put forward by Haspelmath (1997) about the unidirectional nature of the semantic change of ‘any’ into ‘every’. Several cases of ‘any’ clearly derived from ‘every’ or ‘all’ are attested in Bantu languages. Regarding the semantics of the exponents of ‘nobody’, it was observed that they often involve explicit quantifiers. Interestingly, in this respect, the use of the numeral ‘one’ for expressions of ‘somebody’ tends to be triggered by its change into an indefinite marker, whereas expressions of ‘nobody’ typically appeal to the (original) cardinal semantics, often in combinations like ‘not even one’. We also observed that ‘nobody’ can be expressed by an augmentless generic noun in the pre-verbal position, which is a very unusual slot for augmentless nouns throughout the Bantu domain. Future studies on Bantu augments in specific languages could thus benefit from a systematic investigation of ‘nobody’. Last but not least, dedicated negative indefinites have been shown to occur in Bantu languages.

They involve a univerbation of the scalar additive operator **na** and the numeral ‘one’, and display varying negation patterns. Some have inherent negativity, in which case they are closely related to existential cleft constructions. Non-strict and strict negative concords also occur.

Turning to our findings on construction types, we could confirm the initial hypothesis that existential cleft constructions are more frequent with exponents of ‘nobody’ than with exponents of ‘somebody’. Just like South-East Asian and Mixtec languages, Bantu languages allow the implication that if existentialization is possible with specific indefinites, then it is also possible with negative indefinites. Existential cleft constructions are most likely to occur when ‘nobody’ is the subject of a transitive clause, less likely in an intransitive clause, and least likely when ‘nobody’ is the object. In intransitive clauses, inversion competes with existentialization. The fact that inversion is more likely to occur in intransitive clauses is in line with the implication that inversion only occurs with transitive verbs if it also occurs with intransitive verbs. However, the existential cleft construction is not just an alternative to inversion in transitive clauses. It also frequently occurs with locational clauses instead of a simple existential clause. One would think that the locational clause, ‘Nobody is there’, could simply be rendered by an existential clause (‘There is not a person there’). Although this is indeed sufficient in some languages, many languages use an existential cleft construction (‘There is not a person who is there’). So, existential cleft constructions are not only used to flag a radical breach of the Given before the New Principle, but their use for ‘nobody’ also confirms the importance of recognizing quantifying *there*-clefts (Davidse et al., 2022). This type of specificational *there*-cleft is especially suited for negative quantification, and specifically to emphasize that there is no one qualifying for the variable expressed through the relative clause. *There*-clefts with indefinite markers tend to have a presentational interpretation, which is not a necessary meaning of ‘someone’. They are thus less well suited for the expression of ‘somebody’.

Although we have not yet performed a detailed examination of the geographical distribution of types of exponents and types of constructions, our study confirms the (near-)absence of existential constructions in North-Western and West-Western Bantu languages, possibly due to more fixed word orders in these languages. Exponents of ‘somebody/nobody’ occur in their canonical pre-verbal S and post-verbal O slots, and contrary to expectations, these languages do not seem to compensate for the lack of marked construction types by a heavier marking of the exponent. We also found interesting variations within languages that are known to have an IBV focus position. In Yombe, ‘somebody’ functioning as an object occurs immediately before the verb but ‘nobody’ occurs after the verb. In Mbochi, on the other hand, the reverse pattern is attested.

Finally, this study has shown that an interesting field of further research, next to obtaining complete and reliable data for all the languages of the dataset (and more), is to see how ‘nobody’ behaves in non-declarative clauses. When the verb is in the subjunctive in Swahili and closely related languages, ‘nobody’ functioning as the subject occurs in its canonical pre-verbal slot, and it can be accompanied by a free choice item, which in our dataset, pertaining to declarative clauses, was systematically avoided.

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Abbreviations

1, 2, 3 ...	noun class 1, 2, 3
1PL, 3PL	1st, 3rd person plural
1SG, 2SG, 3SG	1st, 2nd, 3rd person singular
AN	animate
APPL	applicative
AUG	augment
COM	comitative
COMP	complementizer
CONN	connective
COP	copula
DEM	demonstrative
DISJ	disjoint
DIST	distal
FCI	free choice item
FOC	focus
FUT	future
FV	final vowel
GEN	genitive
HAB	habitual
IND	indefinite
INF	infinitive
IPFV	imperfective
LOC	locative
NEG	negative
NUM	numeral
OM	object marker
PFV	perfective
PLUR	pluractional

POSS	possessive
PRF	perfect
PRO	pronoun
PROH	prohibitive
PRS	present
PST, PST ₂ , PST ₃	past tenses
PTCP	participial
REC	recent
REFL	reflexive
REL	relative
REM	remote
SAO	scalar additive operator
SBJV	subjunctive
SM	subject marker

Appendix A. List of Languages

<u>Awing</u>	(Fominyam, 2021 ; Nyomy, 2020)	JE14 Rukiga	(Taylor, 1985 ; Kaji, 2023)
<u>Babungo</u>	(Schaub, 1985)	JE15 Luganda	(Kiyinikibi, 2021 ; van der Wal & Namyalo, 2016); Deo Kawalya pers. comm.; Betty Ayugi pers. comm.
<u>Bafut</u>	(Chumbow & Tamanji, 1994 ; Tamanji, 2009)	JE16 Lusoga	(Nabirye, 2016); Betty Ayugi pers. comm.
<u>Bamum</u>	(Nchare, 2012)	JE22 Haya	(Riedel, 2009)
A22 Mokpe	(Tanda & Neba, 2005)	JE42 Gusii	Enock Matundura pers. comm.
<u>A41 Barombi</u>	(Atindogbé, 2011)	JE43 Kuria	Mary Zakaria Charwi pers. comm.
<u>A601 Tuki</u>	Edmond Biloa pers. comm.	JE45 Ishenyi	Rasmus Bernander fieldnotes
A71 Eton	(Van de Velde, 2008)	JE45 Nata	(Gambarage, 2019); Joash Gambarage pers. comm.
A73a Bembele	(Djomeni, 2014)	JE251 Kwaya	(Odom, 2015)
<u>A74 Bulu</u>	(Ebanga, 2019)	JE401 Ngoreme	Bernander fieldnotes
A801 Gyeli	(Grimm, 2021); Nadine Grimm pers. comm.	JE405 Kabwa	Johnny Walker pers. comm.
A93 Kako	(Ernst, 1992)	JE431 Simbiti	Johnny Walker pers. comm.
<u>B52 Nzebi</u>	(Marchal-Nasse, 1989)	<u>K11 Chokwe</u>	(Barbosa, 1989 ; Martins, 1990 ; van den Eynde, 1960); <i>Mukanda wa Zambi, 1970</i>
<u>B82 North Boma</u>	(Stappers, 1986); Sara Pacchiarotti & Guylen Bonkako pers. comm.	K12 Ngangela	(Baião, 1938)
B85 Yansi	(Rotland, 1970)	K14 Luvale	(Horton, 1949, 1953)
<u>B865 Nzadi</u>	(Crane et al., 2011); Simon Nsielanga Tukumu pers. comm.	K333 Mbukushu	(Fisch, 1998)
C101 Babole	(Leitch, 1994)	<u>K402 Fwe</u>	(Gunnink, 2018); Hilde Gunnink pers. comm.

<u>C25 Mbochi</u>	Guy Kouarata pers. comm.	<u>L32 Kanyok</u>	Michael Tshibanda Kasombo; pers. com
C30B Lingala	(Meeuwis, 2020); Michael Meeuwis pers. comm.; Joseph Koni Muluwa pers. comm.	L53 Ruwund	Michael Tshibanda Kasombo; pers. com
<u>C44 Boa Yewu</u>	Gerrit de Wit pers. comm.	<u>L53A Kanincin</u>	Michael Tshibanda Kasombo; pers. com
C322 Zamba	(Bokamba, 1971)	<u>M23 Nyiha</u>	Helen Eaton & Damas Mwashitete pers. comm.
D201 Liko	(de Wit, 2015); Gerrit de Wit pers. comm.	M301 Ndali	Helen Eaton & Safari Mbughi pers. comm.
<u>D332 Budu</u>	(Asangama, 1983); David Kopa wa Kopa pers. comm.	M31 Nyakyusa	(Persohn, 2017); Bastian Persohn pers. comm.
D54 Bembe	(Iorio, 2015)	M60 Bantu Botatwe	(Fowler, 2000 ; Madan, 1908 ; Torrend, 1967 [1931])
E54 Tharaka	(Lindblom, 1914 ; Muriungi, 2010)	<u>N11 Manda</u>	(Bernander, 2017); Bernander & Cecilia Haule pers. comm.
E55 Kamba	(Lindblom, 1926)	N12x Xingoni	Heidrun Kröger, Mustafa Mussa Binamo; Jacinto Saidine Chauré & Paulino Emede pers. comm.
E622C Kivunjo	Gundelinda Shayo pers. comm.	N13 Matengo	(Yoneda, 2011)
E73 Digo	(Nicolle, 2013); Steve Nicolle pers. comm.	N31b Chewa	Peter Msaka pers. comm.
<u>F22 Nyamwezi</u>	Ponsiano Kanijo pers. comm.	P21 Yao	Julius Taji pers. comm.
G12 Kagulu	(Petzell, 2008); Malin Petzell & Sauli Lengoliga pers. comm.	P31E Makhuwa-Enahara	(van der Wal, 2009); Jenneke van der Wal pers. comm.
G32 Kwere	(Zahran, 2023); Aron Zahran pers. comm.	P312 Shangaji	Devos fieldnotes
G33 Zalamo	(Zahran, 2023); Aron Zahran pers. comm.	P34 Cuwabo	(Guérois, 2015); Rozenn Guérois pers. comm.
G37 Kutu	(Zahran, 2023); Aron Zahran pers. comm.	R11 Umbundu	(Guennecc & Valente, 1972 ; Keiling, 1937 ; Valente, 1964)
G42 Swahili	Enock Mwagechure pers. comm. (<i>New testament in Swahili (Zanzibar)</i> , 1921)	R13 Nyaneka	(da Silva Maia, 1966 ; Huila, 1958)
G62 Hehe	Lengson Ngwasi pers. comm.	R21 Kwanyama	(Brincker; Tobias & Turvey, 1954 ; Tönjes, 1910)
G65 Kinga	Enock Mbiling'i	S32 Northern Sotho	(Mojapelo, 2007)
G66 Vwanji	Helen Eaton & Ahimidiwe Mahali pers. comm.	S33 Sesotho	(Malete, 2001); Benito Trollip pers. comm.

H10 Kituba	Joseph Koni Muluwa pers. comm.; Simon Nsielanga Tukummu pers. comm.	S41 Xhosa	(Bloom Ström, 2020; Carstens & Mletshe, 2016)
H16c Yombe	Heidi Goes & Abel Massiala pers. comm.	S42 Zulu	(Buell, 2007; Halpert, 2012); Muhle Sibisi pers. comm.; Benito Trollip pers. comm.
H21 Kimbundu	(O Mikanda Ikola, 1980)	S53 Changana	(Sitoe, 1996; Sitoe, 2017); Bento Sitoe pers. comm.; Ezra Chambal Nhampoca pers. comm.
JD42 Kinande	(Progovac, 1993)	S53 Tsonga	Benito Trollip pers. comm.
JD61 Kinyarwanda	(Kimenyi, 1979; Kimenyi, 1976; Zorc & Nibagwire, 2007)	S54 Ronga	Bento Sitoe pers. comm.
JD62 Kirundi	(Meeussen, 1959; Nshemezimana, 2016; Zorc & Nibagwire, 2007); Pascal Tuyubahe pers. comm.	S407 Isindebele	Peter Mabena pers. comm.; Benito Trollip pers. comm.
JD63 Kifuliiru	(van Otterloo, 2011)		
JE11 Nyoro	(Kaji, 2015)		
JE12 Tooro	(Kaji, 2007)		

Notes

- ¹ The referential classification of the Bantu languages in this paper is based on Maho (2009), which is an updated version of Guthrie's (1971) classification, in which languages are divided into geographic zones that are assigned letters.
- ² Numbers in the glosses refer either to a grammatical person or, alternatively, to the noun class belonging to a noun, adnominal, or pronominal agreement marker. Typically, Bantu languages have an elaborate noun class system consisting of "class pairs", where odd numbers denote singular and even numbers plural, as well as evaluative noun classes, a class for deverbal nouns (/infinitives), and, finally, a set of locative noun classes (further described in Section 4.2). For more on the elaborate noun class system of Bantu, see, inter alia, Maho (1999) and Van de Velde (2019).
- ³ We put the S for Subject between parentheses because when 'somebody/nobody' functions as the object the construction does not necessarily contain a nominal subject.
- ⁴ The **bho** in Simbiti **nyabhorebhe** is probably a class 14 nominal prefix.
- ⁵ In North Boma, the adnominal modifier *môri* expressing 'other' (Stappers, 1986, p. 19) is formally closely related but not identical to the numeral 'one' *môri* involved in the expression of both 'somebody' and 'nobody' in (29).
- ⁶ The bound pronoun consists of a pronominal prefix and by the so-called '-ô of reference' (Dammann, 1977). The class 1 bound pronoun has a suppletive form **ye**. The same forms can also be used as enclitics (cf. Section 4.5).
- ⁷ Locative enclitics typically consist of a locative pronominal prefix followed by the same '-ô of reference' as referred to in fn 3 (see Dammann, 1977 and Persohn & Devos, 2017, for an overview of the forms and uses of locative enclitics in Bantu languages).
- ⁸ Locative subject markers can have a referential or an expletive use. In the latter case, the inversion pattern is referred to as 'default inversion' in Marten and van der Wal (2014). However, we often lack the necessary data to distinguish between referential or expletive uses of (originally) locative subject markers. We therefore use a single label, i.e., 'locative inversion'.

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