

Dedicated Auxiliaries in Tswana (Bantu S31)

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Abstract

This article discusses the subclass of Tswana auxiliaries that cannot be analysed as resulting from the grammaticalization of regular forms of verbs also used predicatively in the present state of the language. It describes the general characteristics of the dedicated auxiliaries, their individual properties and their possible etymologies. No generalization is possible about the way dedicated auxiliaries may depart morphologically from the regular inflection of synthetic verb forms, and there is a sharp contrast between a group of three auxiliaries occurring in a variety of tense forms each, and the other ones, which have a very limited number of possible tense forms. Each of the auxiliaries selects particular forms of the lexical verb (either infinitive, circumstantial, sequential, or subjunctive). The negation of the analytic tenses formed by means of auxiliaries can often be obtained by putting the lexical verb in the negative form without modifying the auxiliary, but never by putting the auxiliary in the negative form without modifying the lexical verb.

Keywords: Bantu, Tswana, ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ constructions, dedicated auxiliaries, negation

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1 Introduction

Some of the auxiliary verbs found in Tswana coincide with regular inflected forms of a verb also attested with predicative uses, i.e., a verb found in clauses in which it determines the type of event denoted by the clause and assigns semantic roles to NP referents. For example, (1a) is a clause projected by the verb *aga* [áχá] ‘build’, in which the noun phrases *batho ba* [bà^hò bá] ‘those people’ and *lesaka* [lisàká] ‘kraal’ express the semantic roles ‘builder’ and ‘thing being built’ that constitute the argument structure of this verb. By contrast, in (1b), the same verb occurs in a construction in which its contribution is limited to adding an aspectual specification to the event denoted by another verb.

- (1) a. *Batho ba ba aga lesaka.*
 bà-t^hò bá 'bá-áχá lí-sà:ká
 PL-person(2) CL2.DEM SI:CL2-build.PRS SG-cattle.kraal(5)
 ‘Those people are building a cattle kraal.’
- b. *Mhero o aga o tlhoga.*
 m-hèrò ó-áχà ó-t^hò:χà
 SG-weed(3) SI:CL3-build.PRS SI:CL3-grow.PRS.CIRC
 ‘Weeds don’t stop growing.’

However, ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ constructions syntactically and semantically comparable to (1b) may also involve ‘dedicated auxiliary verbs’, whose forms do not coincide with those of verbs used predicatively in the present state of the language.

This article describes the dedicated auxiliary verbs of Tswana. It complements an article on auxiliarization in Tswana (Creissels forthcoming 2026) in which I discuss in detail the Tswana verbs that can by themselves project clauses in which they assign semantic roles to the referents of noun phrases, but are also used as auxiliaries in some of their regularly inflected forms, like *aga* [áχá] in (1).¹

The discussion in Sections 3 to 12, which constitute the main body of the article, is limited to dedicated auxiliaries, but Section 2 summarizes the necessary background information already presented in Creissels (forthcoming 2026) about the ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ construction, and the complete list of Tswana auxiliaries (including those discussed in Creissels forthcoming 2026) is summarized in the Appendix.

The data analysed in this article were either provided to me directly by five Tswana consultants, or taken from a variety of written sources and checked (and sometimes adapted) with the help of the same consultants, who are native speakers of the Ngwaketse and Ngwato varieties of Tswana. In all cases, the phonetic transcription reflects the pronunciation of the consultants with whom they were elicited. Among my consultants, I observed no variation that might have an impact on the analyses presented in this article, but in written sources I also came across forms or constructions that are not actively used by my consultants. They are presumably

¹ For an overall presentation of Tswana morphosyntax, see Cole (1955), Creissels (2003), and Krüger (2006, 2013a, 2013b). For a systematic presentation of the inflection of the synthetic verb forms of Tswana, see Creissels (2006), for a detailed discussion of the tonal morphology of Tswana verbs, see Creissels et al. (1997), and for details on the conjoint vs. disjoint contrast in Tswana, see Creissels (2017a). Pretorius (1997) is the main reference on Tswana auxiliaries.

specific to other dialects, and would require further investigation with speakers of the relevant Tswana varieties.

As regards the presentation of the examples, given the complexity of the tonal morphology of Tswana verbs and the pervasiveness of fusion and multiple exponence at segmental level (Creissels 2006), a decomposition of verb stems into morphs would not be of much help for the readers (and could even be confusing) in the absence of a detailed discussion of multiple exponence and of the role played by tonal variations that cannot be analysed in terms of tonal interaction between morphs. This is the reason why, in the glossing of the examples presented in this article, verb stems are not segmented into morphs, and the grammatical meanings expressed morphologically that have no straightforward concretization as prefixes or post-finals are simply enumerated after the lexical gloss of the verb form, separated from the lexical gloss and from each other by dots.

2 General properties of Tswana auxiliary verbs

In this article, as in Creissels (forthcoming 2026), the term ‘auxiliary verb’ without further specification refers to a class of Tswana words whose distinctive property is that they occupy the first position in two-word sequences meeting the following conditions:

1. The first word of the sequence (the ‘auxiliary verb’) does not necessarily display full regular verb inflection, but it shows at least one of the regular paradigms of obligatory subject indexes that characterize Tswana verbs.
2. The second word of the sequence (the ‘lexical verb’) is a regular inflected form of a verb that can also be found in monoverbal constructions.
3. The auxiliary verb and the lexical verb cannot be analysed as acting separately as clause nuclei; taken together they project a single clause whose structure is not different from that of clauses projected by synthetic verb forms.

Moreover, Tswana has several derivational suffixes encoding valency operations (reciprocal, decausative, causative, applicative, and passive), but does not have voice auxiliaries, which means that all Tswana auxiliaries form with the lexical verb a construction whose valency properties, both formally and semantically, are exactly the same as those of the lexical verb. In the ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ construction, the auxiliary plays no role in the selectional restrictions on the nominal terms of the clause; it does not contribute to participant structure (or ‘argument structure’) and cannot have its own modifiers. In particular, the subject NP that may precede the auxiliary and the subject index that constitutes an obligatory element of the auxiliary represent a participant whose semantic role is fully identical to that expressed by the subject of the lexical verb in monoverbal constructions.

The general type of construction ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ as defined above shows variation as regards the following two properties:

- depending on the auxiliary, the lexical verb may be in one of the following forms: infinitive, circumstantial,² subjunctive, or sequential;³

²For a detailed analysis of the specificity of the circumstantial mood (aka situative) and of the relationship between indicative, circumstantial and relative verb forms in Tswana, readers are referred to Creissels (2024b).

³The forms of the sequential mood mark non-initial clauses in clause chains referring to sequences of events in which the verb of the first clause is in a form of the indicative mood. The sequential mood consists of two tenses,

- some auxiliary verbs (those discussed in this article) are dedicated auxiliaries that do not coincide with regularly inflected forms of a verb with the ability to project clauses by itself, whereas some others (those discussed in Creissels forthcoming 2026) are identical to inflected forms of a verb that has the ability to act by itself as the predicative nucleus of a clause.

Moreover, as will be described in detail in Sections 3 to 12, morphologically, some of the dedicated auxiliaries have a morphological structure fully identical to that of regular verb forms acting as the predicative nucleus of clauses, whereas some others variously depart from the regular structure of the verb forms that lend themselves to a predicative use.

Readers are referred to Creissels (forthcoming 2026) for a detailed discussion of the following points: the dual behaviour of the verbs that can be used both predicatively and as auxiliaries (Creissels forthcoming 2026, Section 3.2), the distinction between synthetic verb forms and ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ constructions (Creissels forthcoming 2026, Section 3.3), the distinction between monoclausal constructions involving auxiliaries and biclausal constructions (Creissels forthcoming 2026, Section 3.4), subject indexation in the ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ construction (Creissels forthcoming 2026, Section 3.5), object indexation in the ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ construction (Creissels forthcoming 2026, Section 3.6), the auxiliary as the syntactic head of the ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ construction (Creissels forthcoming 2026, Section 3.7), and recursivity of the ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ construction (Creissels forthcoming 2026, Section 3.8).

3 General properties of the dedicated auxiliaries

As already mentioned, Creissels (forthcoming 2026) discusses in detail the auxiliaries that coincide with regular inflected forms of verbs that can also be used predicatively in the present state of Tswana. The remainder of this paper is devoted to a systematic description of the dedicated auxiliaries and to a discussion of their possible etymology.

3.1 Subject indexation

The only aspect of verb morphology shared by all the auxiliaries, including those that do not have the ability to project clauses by themselves, is the obligatory subject index prefixed to the stem. Moreover, the subject indexes prefixed to auxiliaries are always perfectly regular, both at segmental and tonal level. Consequently, the selection of a particular set of subject indexes is essential for the identification of the morphological nature of auxiliary forms.

3.2 Irregularities and defectiveness in the inflection of dedicated auxiliaries

Irregularities in the tone pattern and the final vowel of the stem are common among dedicated auxiliaries, and do not have obvious historical explanations.

In particular, the final vowel of several dedicated auxiliaries is invariably realized with a L tone, even in contexts in which the general rules of tone spreading would predict the spreading of a preceding H tone. However, the tone pattern of auxiliary forms is often essential to ensure the distinction between the different possible forms of a given dedicated auxiliary.

As regards the final vowels of the dedicated auxiliaries, they often do not show the alternations that help to identify the morphological nature of verb forms in regular verb inflection.

labeled here sequential past (used with reference to past or conditional events) and sequential future (used with reference to future or habitual events).

Moreover, the auxiliaries *bo* [bò] and *ne* [nè] have the particularity that their vowel may undergo regressive assimilation. However, this assimilation is generally optional, and in the examples quoted in the following sections, it is only taken into account in the contexts where it has a regular character.

As regards the range of their possible inflected forms, all dedicated auxiliaries are defective. However, they show important variation in their inflectional potential, and from this perspective, they can be divided into two groups: *bo* [bò] (§4), *ne* [nè] (§5) and *ka* [ká] (§6) occur in a relatively wide variety of tense forms each, whereas the auxiliaries examined in Sections 7 to 12 have a very limited number of possible tense forms.

3.3 Dedicated auxiliaries and the inflectional expression of syntactic dependencies between clauses

Although this will not be systematically illustrated in the following sections, whenever a dedicated auxiliary occurs in independent assertive clauses in the indicative mood, it can also occur in the corresponding circumstantial and relative forms in the relevant syntactic contexts.

3.4 Dedicated auxiliaries and negation

Comparison with the regular inflection of Tswana verbs makes it possible to identify as either positive or negative the inflected forms in which the dedicated auxiliaries occur. However, as will be apparent in the following sections, it is striking that the negative counterpart of the analytic tenses involving positive forms of dedicated auxiliaries can never be obtained by putting the auxiliary in the negative form without modifying the lexical verb, and can often (but not always) be obtained by putting the lexical verb in the negative form without modifying the auxiliary. More precisely, the following two regularities can be observed:

- When the auxiliary is in a positive form and the lexical verb in a circumstantial form (which constitutes a particularly common configuration) or in the subjunctive (see Sections 6.7.1–2), negation can generally be expressed by putting the lexical verb in the corresponding negative form, never by putting the auxiliary in a negative form. By contrast, expressing negation by means of a negative form of the lexical verb is never possible when the lexical verb is in a sequential form or in the infinitive.
- ‘Auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ constructions with a dedicated auxiliary in a negative form, when possible, are never the negative counterpart of a construction with a positive form of the same auxiliary and the same form of the lexical verb. Either they express meanings that have no exact positive counterpart (as for example the construction expressing ‘never’ presented in Section 6.2.1), or they have no straightforward morphological relationship with their positive counterpart (which may be a synthetic verb form, or an ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ construction involving another auxiliary, as for example in the case of the narrative past; see example (38) in Section 6.4).

Moreover, in two cases (see Sections 5.2–5.3 and Section 6.3.4), it is possible to combine a positive and a negative form of a dedicated auxiliary with the same form of the lexical verb, but semantically, the construction with the auxiliary in the negative form is not the negative counterpart of the construction in which the auxiliary is in the positive form.

The situation observed in Tswana is much more complex than that described by Pietraszko (2018) for Ndebele, and apart from the fact that, in constructions with the lexical verb in a

circumstantial form, negation is expressed in the lexical verb, the straightforward generalizations she proposes for Ndebele clearly do not apply to Tswana.

3.4 The contraction of ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ constructions

In Southern Bantu languages, it may happen that ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ constructions involving dedicated auxiliaries have contracted forms in which the subject marker of the auxiliary is dropped, converting the stem of the auxiliary into an invariable proclitic particle. For example, in Southern Sotho, *ke ne ke bua* [kì-nè kí-búá] ‘I was speaking’ (equivalent of Tswana *ke ne ke bua* [kì-nè kí-bùá]) has a contracted variant *ne ke bua* (Doke and Mofokeng 1985, 253; tones added with the help of a Sotho consultant). In this respect, a remarkable property of Tswana is the total lack of such contracted forms of auxiliary verb + lexical verb constructions.

4 The auxiliary *bo* [bò]

4.1 General remarks on the auxiliary *bo* [bò]

The inflected forms taken by the auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the various constructions in which it occurs can be identified as present, future, potential, subjunctive, sequential future, and sequential past. However, its vowel does not show the alternations that contribute to identifying the inflected forms of the verb in the regular inflection of Tswana verbs. It is not invariably *o* [o], but when it occurs as [e] or [a], this is due to assimilation to the vowel of the subject index, and has nothing to do with the alternations that affect the final vowel of verbs in the regular inflection of Tswana verbs. Moreover, *o* [o] does not occur as a final vowel in the regular inflection of Tswana verbs.

This auxiliary is probably a reflex of *bá ‘be’, although nothing in the system of present-day Tswana and in the regular correspondences between Proto-Bantu and Tswana can explain how the original *a may have become [o], nor how the original high tone may have been lost.

The regular reflex *ba* [bá] of *bá ‘be’ can be found as a copular verb in some Tswana dialects and in the other Sotho-Tswana languages, but not in the dialects that constitute the basis of Standard Tswana, where the copular verb ‘be’ is *nna* [ńná] (also used predicatively with the meaning ‘stay’).

4.2 The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the disjoint form of the present

In the disjoint form of the present, marked by -à- (glossed DJ) immediately after the subject index, the auxiliary *bo* [bò] can combine with the circumstantial present and circumstantial perfect forms of the lexical verb. Semantically, these combinations can be viewed as emphatic variants of the synthetic forms of the present and the perfect, whose precise meaning varies according to the conditions in which they are uttered. According to Cole (1955, 291), they may express “impatience, annoyance, curiosity, surprise and benevolent interest”, i.e., shades of meaning expressed in English either by intonation, or periphrastically.

Given the general distribution of disjoint verb forms, auxiliaries are not expected to take the disjoint form, but I have no explanation to offer for this anomaly.

4.2.1 *bo* [bò] in the disjoint form of the present, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial present

(2) *O a bo o tshega nna ke utlwa botlhoko.*⁴

ò-à-bò ó-ts^héχá ñná kí-ùtlwá bò-t^hò:kò
 SI:2SG-PRS.DJ-AUX SI:2SG-laugh.PRS.CIRC 1SG SI:1SG-feel.PRS.CIRC SG-pain(14)
 ‘You are LAUGHING when I am in pain!’

The corresponding non-emphatic form of the present positive would be *ò a tshega* [ò-à-ts^hèχà] ‘you are laughing’.

4.2.2 *bo* [bò] in the disjoint form of the present, lexical verb in the negative form of the circumstantial present

(3) *Ò a bo o sa tshege lefa o kgatlhega.*

ò-à-bò ó-sá-ts^hèχí 'lífá ó-q^hàtl^hê:χà.
 SI:2SG-PRS.DJ-AUX SI:2SG-NEG-laugh.PRS.CIRC even.if SI:2SG-be.amused.PRS.CIRC
 ‘You are NOT LAUGHING even though you are amused!’

The corresponding non-emphatic form of the present negative would be *ga o tshege* [χà-ó-ts^hèχí] ‘you are not laughing’.

4.2.3 *bo* [bò] in the disjoint form of the present, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial perfect

(4) *Re a bo re etile re sa tshola sepe.*

rì-à-bò rì-ètílé rì-sà-ts^hòlà
 SI:1PL-PRS.DJ-AUXSI:1PL-travel.PRF.CIRC SI:1PL-NEG-take.away.PRF.CIRC
 sî:-pè
 CL7-none
 ‘We DID NOT TRAVEL without taking anything.’

The corresponding non-emphatic form of the perfect negative would be *re etile* [rì-ètílé] ‘we travelled’.

⁴In the presentation of the examples, the first line is in the current Tswana orthography, whereas the second line is a broad phonetic transcription. Given the topic of this article, it is important to emphasize that the current orthography of Sotho-Tswana languages gives a distorted view of word division, since many affixes are written as if they were independent words, which in particular blurs the distinction between synthetic and analytical verb forms. In fact, Sotho-Tswana languages are as agglutinative as the other Bantu languages. The correct grouping of morphemes into words is given on the second line, and is reflected in the glosses.

4.2.4 *bo* [bò] in the disjoint form of the present, lexical verb in the negative form of the circumstantial perfect

(5) *Re a bo re sa eta ka taletso ya bone.*

rì-à-bò **rí-sá-ètá** 'ká Ø-'tálétsò
 SI:1PL-PRS.DJ-AUX SI:1PL-NEG-travel.PRF.CIRC INS SG-invitation(9)
 já-bò:né
 CL9.GEN-CL2.PRO
 'We DID NOT TRAVEL at their invitation.'

The corresponding non-emphatic form of the perfect negative would be *ga re a eta* [χà-rí-á-ètá] 'we did not travel'.

4.3 The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the future

The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the future combines with the circumstantial present and circumstantial perfect forms of the lexical verb to express the meaning of future progressive and future perfect.

4.3.1 *bo* [bò] in the future, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial present

(6) *Ó a bo a sa reke bojalwa, mme kgantele ó tlaa bo a bo batla.*

ó-á-bò á-sà-rékí bó-dzálwá mmí 'q^hántilé
 SI:CL1-PRS.DJ-AUX SI:CL1-NEG.buy.PRS.CIRC SG-beer(14)but soon
ó-tláá-bò **á-bò-bâ:tlà**
 SI:CL1-FUT-AUX SI:CL1-OI:CL14-want.PRS.CIRC
 'As it happens s/he is not buying beer now, but s/he will be wanting some soon.'

The corresponding synthetic form of the future would be *o tlaa bo batla* [ó-tláá-bó-bâ:tlà] 's/he will want'.

4.3.2 *bo* [bò] in the future, lexical verb in the negative form of the circumstantial present

(7) *Ka dikgomo di tlaa bo di sa tsala ka nako eo, ke tlaa bo ke sa tlhoke modisa.*

ká dí-q^hòmś 'dí-tláá-bò dí-sá-tsálà
 since PL-cow(8/10) SI:CL8/10-FUT-AUX.CIRC SI:CL8/10-NEG-give.birth.PRF.CIRC
 ká Ø-nákò éś **kì-tlàà-bò** **kí-sá-tl^hòkí**
 INSSG-time(9) CL9.DEM SI:1SG-FUT-AUX SI:1SG-NEG-need.PRS.CIRC
 mò-dí:sà
 SG-herdsman(1)
 'Since the cows will not have calved by then, I will not be needing a herdsman.'

The corresponding synthetic form of the future negative would be *ke tlaa se tlhoke* [kì-tlää-sì-t^hòkí] ‘I will not need’.

4.3.3 *bo* [bò] in the future, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial perfect

(8) *Metsi a tlaa bo a fokotsegile mo molapong kgantele.*

mètsí 'á-tlää-bò á-fókótséχilé 'mó mó-làpó-ḡ
 PL.water(6) SI:CL6-FUT-AUX SI:CL6-decrease.PRF.CIRC LOC SG-river(3)-LOC

q^hánti:lé

soon

‘The water in the river will have decreased soon.’

The corresponding synthetic form of the future would be *a tlaa fokotsega* [á-tlää-fókótséχà] ‘it will decrease’.

4.3.4 *bo* [bò] in the future, lexical verb in the negative form of the circumstantial perfect

(9) *Re tlaa bo re sa roba ka Seetebosigo.*

rì-tlää-bò rí-sá-ròbá 'ká síètíbòsì:χò
 SI:1PL-FUT-AUX SI:1PL-NEG-harvest.PRF.CIRC INS June

‘We will not have harvested by June.’

The corresponding synthetic form of the future negative would be *re tlaa se robe* [rì-tlää-sì-ròbí] ‘we will not harvest’.

4.4 The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the potential

The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the potential combines with the circumstantial present and circumstantial perfect forms of the lexical verb to express the meanings of potential progressive and potential perfect. As illustrated by the following examples, these forms are mainly found in conditional sentences.

4.4.1 *bo* [bò] in the potential, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial present

(10) *Nka bo ke rekisa dikgomo fa dikabo di nonne.*

ḡ-ká-bò kí-rèkísá dí-q^hòmó 'fá 'dí-ká-bò
 SI:1SG-POT-AUX SI:1SG-sell.PRS.CIRC PL-COW(8/10) if SI:CL8/10-POT-AUX

dí-nònnè

SI:CL8/10-be.fat.PRF.CIRC

‘I would be selling the cows if they were fat.’

The corresponding synthetic form of the potential would be *nka rekisa* [ḡ-ká-rèkísá] ‘I can sell’.

4.4.2 *bo* [bò] in the potential, lexical verb in the negative form of the circumstantial present

(11) *Nka bo ke sa rekise dikgomo fa go ne go se leuba.*

ḡ-ká-bò **kí-sà-rékísí** dí-q^hòmó 'fá 'χó-né
 SI:1SG-POT-AUX SI:1SG-NEG-sell.PRS.CIRC PL-COW(8/10) if SI:CL17- AUX
 'χó-sí lí-ù:bà
 SI:CL8/10-not.to.be.PRS.CIRC SG-drought(5)
 'I would not be selling cows if there had not been drought.'

The corresponding synthetic form of the potential negative would be *nka se rekise* [ḡ-ká-sì-rékísí] 'I cannot sell'.

4.4.3 *bo* [bò] in the potential, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial perfect

(12) *Fa a ka bo a sa reka poo ele, nka bo ke e rekile.*

fá 'á-ká-bò á-sà-réká Ø-pòó 'élé
 if SI:CL1-POT-AUX SI:CL1-NEG-buy.PRF.CIRC SG-bull(9) cl9.DEM
ḡ-ká-bò **kí-ì-rékî:lè**
 SI:1SG-POT-AUX SI:1SG-OI:cl9-buy.PRF.CIRC
 'If s/he had not bought that bull, I would have bought it.'

The corresponding synthetic form of the potential would be *nka e reka* [ḡ-ká-ì-réká] 'I can buy it'.

4.4.4 *bo* [bò] in the potential, lexical verb in the negative form of the circumstantial perfect

(13) *Fa ba ne ba sa thoga, ba ka bo ba sa sia.*

fá 'bá-né 'bá-sá-ts^hòχá **bá-ká-bò**
 if SI:CL2-AUX.PRF.CIRC. SI:CL2-NEG-be.scared.PRF.CIRC **SI:CL2-POT-AUX**
bá-sà-sî:à
 SI:CL2-NEG-run.PRF.CIRC
 'If they had not been scared, they would not have run away.'

The corresponding synthetic form of the potential negative would be *ba ka se sie* [bá-ká-sì-sî] 'They cannot run'.

4.5 The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the subjunctive

The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the subjunctive combines with the circumstantial perfect of the lexical verb to express the meaning of subjunctive perfect. Note that the HL tone pattern of this form is essential to identify it as a subjunctive form, since it does not show the final vowel [ε] that characterizes the subjunctive in the regular inflection of Tswana verbs.

(14) *Ke batla gore o bo o feditse tiro e kamoso.*

kì-bàtlà χòrì **ó-bò** **ó-fédítse** Ø-tírò
 SI:1SG-want.PRS that SI:2SG-AUX.SBJV SI:2SG-finish.PRF.CIRC SG-work(9)

é kámò:só
 CL9.DEM tomorrow
 ‘I want you to have finished this work by tomorrow.’

The corresponding synthetic form of the subjunctive would be *o fetse* [ó-fétsé] ‘you should finish’.

4.6 The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the sequential future

The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the sequential future combines with the circumstantial present of the lexical verb into an analytical verb form which is semantically a mere emphatic variant of the synthetic form of the sequential future of the lexical verb. Note that the LH tone pattern of this form is essential to identify it as a sequential future form, since it does not show the final vowel [-i] that contributes to the identification of the sequential future in the regular inflection of Tswana verbs.

(15) ... *ke bo ke lema tshimo e.*
 kì-bò k'í-límá Ø-ts'ímò: é
 SI:1SG-AUX.SEQ.FUT SI:1SG-cultivate.PRS.CIRC SG-field(9) CL9.DEM
 ‘... and I certainly will cultivate this field.’

The corresponding non-emphatic form of the sequential future would be *ke leme* [kì-límí] ‘and I will cultivate’.

4.7 The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the sequential past

The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the sequential past can be identified as such by the presence of the prefix that characterizes the sequential past. The tonal behaviour of this form is also similar to that of the sequential past in the regular inflection of Tswana verbs.

The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the sequential past can combine with three different forms of the lexical verb: the circumstantial present, the circumstantial perfect, and the sequential past.

4.7.1 *bo* [bò] in the sequential past, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial present

This combination expresses the progressive aspect in the contexts that require the use of a sequential past form.

(16) ... *ka bo ke bua le Mpho.*
 k-à-bò k'í-bùá lí-m̀:phó
 SI:1SG-SEQ.PST-AUX SI:1SG-speak.PRS.CIRC COM-PRN
 ‘... and then I happened to be speaking with Mpho.’

The corresponding synthetic form of the sequential past would be *ka bua* [k-à-bùà] ‘and I spoke’.

4.7.2 *bo* [bò] in the sequential past, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial perfect

This combination expresses the meaning of perfect in the contexts that require the use of a sequential past form.

(17) ... *ka bo ke lemile tshimo e.*

k-à-bò **kí-límílé** Ø-ts^hímò: é
 SI:1SG-SEQ.PST-AUX SI:1SG-cultivate.PRF.CIRC SG-field(9) CL9.DEM
 ‘... and then it happened that I had cultivated this field.’

The corresponding synthetic form of the sequential past would be *ka lema* [k-à-limà] ‘and I cultivated’.

4.7.3 *bo* [bò] in the sequential past, lexical verb in the sequential past

Semantically, this combination is a mere emphatic variant of the synthetic form of the sequential past of the lexical verb. In this form, the vowel of the initial syllable of both the auxiliary and the lexical verb is invariably the [a] that represents the characteristic marker of the sequential past, which may explain why, in this combination, the final vowel of the auxiliary is not [o], but [a].

(18) ... *ka ba ka ya ko Gauteng.*

k-à-bá **k-á-jà** kó χàútê:ŋ
 SI:1SG-SEQ.PST-AUX SI:1SG-SEQ.PST-go LOC PRN
 ‘... and finally I went to Johannesburg.’

The corresponding synthetic form of the sequential past would be *ka ya* [k-à-jà] ‘and I went’.

4.8 The auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the infinitive

The paradigm of the synthetic inflected forms of Tswana verbs does not include a perfect positive form of the infinitive. This gap is filled by an analytical form consisting of the auxiliary *bo* [bò] in the infinitive and the positive form of the circumstantial perfect of the lexical verb.

In this form, *bo* [bò] shows a high tone which has no possible explanation in a synchronic perspective, since, as a rule, low-toned stems do not undergo tonal modification in the infinitive. However, diachronically, this H tone can be analysed as the retention of the H tone of *bá, which has been lost in the other forms of this auxiliary.

(19) *Go bo o re thusitse go siame.*

χò-bó **ó-rì-t^húsítsé** χó-siâ:mì
 INF-AUX SI:2SG-OI:1PL-help.PRF SI:CL17-be.good.PRF
 ‘It’s good that you helped us.’ lit. ‘For you to have helped us is good.’

Note that the synthetic forms of the infinitive do not include a subject index (the slot occupied in the other verb forms by the subject index being filled in the infinitive by the infinitival prefix, which coincides with the nominal prefix of class 17). For example, the present form of the infinitive ‘to help us’ would be *go re thusa* [χò-rí-t^húsá]. By contrast, in this analytical form of

the infinitive, a subject index is obligatorily present in the circumstantial perfect form of the lexical verb.

4.9 Summary of the functions of the auxiliary *bo* [bò]

The auxiliary *bo* [bò] can take a number of inflections and different complements. It can be used to form emphatic variants of some synthetic verb forms (Sections 4.2, 4.6, and 4.7.3), or to form analytical tenses expressing aspectual meanings: progressive if the lexical verb is in the circumstantial form of the present, perfect if the lexical verb is in the circumstantial form of the perfect (Sections 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.7.1, 4.7.2, and 4.8).

5 The auxiliary *ne* [nè]

5.1 General remarks on the auxiliary *ne* [nè]

The auxiliary *ne* [nè] is most likely to be cognate with the defective and irregular verb *na* [nà] ‘have’, found not only in Tswana but also in the other Sotho-Tswana varieties, itself a reflex of the Bantu comitative preposition **na* ‘with’ (Creissels 2024a). Note that, in Sotho-Tswana languages, **na* as a comitative preposition has generally been replaced by *le* [lí]. In some varieties (for example, Southern Sotho), **na* does not subsist at all as a preposition, whereas in some others (including Tswana), **na* is still found as a preposition, but only in a very marginal way.

5.2 The auxiliary *ne* [nè] in the disjoint form of the present

With a marker identical to that characterizing the disjoint form of the present inserted between the subject index and the stem, this auxiliary combines with the circumstantial present of the lexical verb. The meaning expressed is ‘sometimes’, ‘from time to time’.

5.2.1 *ne* [nè] in the disjoint form of the present, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial form of the present

(20) *Ó a ne a rekisa kgomo go bona madi.*

ʃ-á-nè á-rékísá Ø-q^hòmó χò-bóná mà:-dí
 SI:CL1-PRS.DJ-AUX SI:CL1-SELL.PRS.CIRC SG-COW(9) INF-SEE PL-money(6)
 ‘S/he sometimes sells a cow to get money.’

5.2.2 *ne* [nè] in the disjoint form of the present, lexical verb in the negative form of the circumstantial form of the present

(21) *Ó a ne a sa rekise kgomo.*

ʃ-á-nè á-sà-rékísí Ø-q^hò:mó
 SI:CL1-PRS.DJ-AUX SI:CL1-NEG-SELL.PRS.CIRC SG-COW(9)
 ‘Sometimes s/he does not sell any cow.’

5.3 The auxiliary *ne* [nè] in the negative form of the present

In the regular inflection of Tswana verbs, this form of the auxiliary *ne* [nè] would be the negative counterpart of the form described in Section 5.2. However, the meaning it expresses is not the negation of ‘sometimes’, but the negation of the future.

(22) *Ga ke ne ke rekisa kgomo.*

χà-kí-né kí-rèkísá Ø-q^hò:mó
 NEG-SI:1SG-AUX.PRS SI:1SG-sell.PRS.CIRC SG-COW(9)
 ‘I will not sell any cow.’

Note that the same meaning (future negative) can be expressed by the synthetic verb form *ke tlaa se rekise* [kì-tlàà-sì-rékísí] combining the future marker *tlaà* and the negative marker *sì*, by the analytical forms presented below in Sections 7.2.2 and 7.5, and by an analytical form in which the auxiliary is a regular form of *na* [ná] ‘have’ (Creissels forthcoming 2026, Section 5.1).

5.4 The auxiliary *ne* [nè] in the perfect

The perfect form of the auxiliary *ne* [nè], whose uses are described in this section, and the subjunctive form, described in Section 5.5, have the same segmental form, both consisting of a subject index and the stem *ne* [nè]. In the regular inflection of Tswana verb, the perfect and the subjunctive have distinct final vowels, but this is not the case for the auxiliary *ne* [nè].

However, these two forms do not involve the same paradigm of subject markers. The form described in this section has low-toned subject markers in the first and second person, and a subject marker *o* [ó] in class 1, whereas the form described in Section 5.5 has high-toned subject markers in all persons, and a subject marker *a* [á] in class 1, and this justifies identifying the former as a perfect form, and the latter as a subjunctive form.

With the auxiliary *ne* [nè] in the perfect, the lexical verb may be in one of the following forms: sequential past, circumstantial present, circumstantial perfect, circumstantial future, and circumstantial potential.

5.4.1 *ne* [nè] in the perfect, lexical verb in the sequential past

This combination, designated as past tense in Cole’s (1955) grammar, is very frequent in texts. It can be characterized semantically as narrative past, since it constitutes the usual way of referring to past events viewed as disconnected from the situation in which the sentence is uttered (in contrast to the meaning of current relevance implied by the synthetic form of the perfect).

(23) *Ngogola ke ne ka etela ko Aforika Borwa.*

ηòχólá kí-nè k-à-ètèlà kó áfòríká bò:rwá
 last.year SI:1SG-AUX.PRF SI:1SG-SEQ.PST-travel LOC PRN
 ‘Last year I visited South Africa.’

5.4.2 *ne* [nè] in the perfect, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial present

This combination, designated as past continuous tense in Cole’s grammar, is used to represent events as ongoing or habitual with reference to some point in the past.

(24) *Ba ne ba nna mmogo sentle.*

bá-nè bá-ñná òmmóχó sín:tìè
 SI:CL2-AUX.PRF SI:CL2-stay.PRS.CIRC together well
 ‘They lived well together.’

5.4.3 *ne* [nè] in the perfect, lexical verb in the negative form of the circumstantial present
This combination is the negative counterpart of that presented in Section 5.4.2.

(25) *Re ne re sa dire sepe.*

rì-nè **rí-sá-dìrì** 'sì:-pè
SI:1PL-AUX.PRF SI:1PL-NEG-do.PRS.CIRC CL7-none
'We were not doing anything.'

5.4.4 *ne* [nè] in the perfect, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial perfect

This combination expresses a meaning similar to that expressed by the forms traditionally labeled 'pluperfect' in the grammars of European languages (reference to events presented as having occurred prior to some point in the past).

(26) *Tshimo e ne e lemilwe.*

Ø-tshímó **í-nè** **í-lìmî:lwè**
SG-field(9) SI:CL9-AUX.PRF SI:CL9-cultivate.PASS.PRF.CIRC
'The field had been cultivated.'

5.4.5 *ne* [nè] in the perfect, lexical verb in the negative form of the circumstantial perfect

This combination is the negative counterpart of that presented in Section 5.4.4.

(27) *Tshimo e ne e sa lengwa.*

Ø-tshímó **í-nè** **í-sá-lì:ŋwá**
SG-field(9) SI:CL9-AUX.PRF SI:CL9-NEG-cultivate.PASS.PRF.CIRC
'The field had not been cultivated.'

5.4.6 *ne* [nè] in the perfect, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial future

This combination expresses a counterfactual meaning: the event could have occurred in the past under some conditions, but did not occur. Note that in (28), the second part of the sentence includes the circumstantial form of the combination '*ne* [nè] in the perfect, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial perfect' described in Section 5.4.4.

(28) *Lo ne lo tlaa tsamaya le bone fa lone lo tsile ka nako.*

lò-nè **lò-tláá-tsàmàjà** lí-bòné 'fá 'lò-né
SI:2PL-AUX.PRF SI:2PL-FUT-go.FUT.CIRC COM-CL2.PRO if SI:2PL-AUX.CIRC

lò-tsilé 'ká Ø-nâ:kò
SI:2PL-COME.PRF.CIRC INS SG-time(9)
'You could have left with them if you had come in time.'

5.4.7 *ne* [nè] in the perfect, lexical verb in the negative form of the circumstantial future

This combination is in principle possible as the negative counterpart of that presented in Section 5.4.6, and it is not rejected in elicitation, but it is not mentioned in the literature on Tswana and does not occur in my data of spontaneous discourse.

5.4.8. *ne* [nè] in the perfect, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial potential

This combination expresses a counterfactual meaning very similar that presented in Section 5.4.6, with an additional nuance of potentiality. In (29), as in (28), the second part of the sentence includes the circumstantial form of the combination ‘*ne* [nè] in the perfect, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial perfect’ described in Section 5.4.4.

(29) *Dikgomo di ne di ka nona fa pula e ne e nele.*

dì-q^hòmó **dí-nè** **dí-ká-nónà** fá 'Ø-púlá
 PL-COW(8/10) SI:CL8/10-AUX.PRF SI:CL8/10-POT-grow.fat.CIRC if SG-rain(9)
 'í-né í-nì:lé
 SI:cl9-AUX.PRF.CIRC SI:cl9-rain.PRF.CIRC

‘The cows could have grown fat if it had rained.’

5.4.9 *ne* [nè] in the perfect, lexical verb in the negative form of the circumstantial potential

This combination is semantically the negative counterpart of that presented in Section 5.4.8.

(30) *Dikgomo di ne di ka se none fa pula e ne e sa na.*

dì-q^hòmó **dí-nè** **dí-ká-sì-nòní** 'fá
 PL-COW(8/10) SI:CL8/10-AUX.PRF SI:CL8/10-POT-NEG-grow.fat.CIRC if
 'Ø-púlá 'í-né í-sà:-ná
 SG-rain(9) SI:cl9-AUX.CIRC SI:cl9-rain.PRF.CIRC

‘The cows could not have grown fat if it had not rained.’

5.5 The auxiliary *ne* [nè] in the subjunctive

The auxiliary *ne* [nè] in the subjunctive combines with the lexical verb in the circumstantial present (positive or negative). The meaning expressed can be glossed as ‘it would be better if...’. As in the case of *bo* [bò] (see Section 4.5), the tone pattern of this form of the auxiliary *ne* [nè] is essential to identify it as a subjunctive form.

5.5.1 *ne* [nè] in the subjunctive, lexical verb in the positive form of the circumstantial present

(31) *O ne o re gopola fa o le ko Makgoeng.*

ó-nè ó-rì-ǰópólá 'fá 'ó-lí kó
 SI:2SG-AUX.SBJV SI:2SG-OI:1PL-think.PRS.CIRC when SI:2SG-be.PRS.CIRC LOC
 mà-q^hóê:-ìj
 PL-European(6)-LOC

‘You should think of us when you are in Europe.’

5.5.2 *ne* [nè] in the subjunctive, lexical verb in the negative form of the circumstantial present

(32) *O ne o se re lebale fa o le ko Makgoeng.*

ó-nè ó-sì-rí-libáli 'fá 'ó-lí
 SI:2SG-AUX.SBJV SI:2SG-NEG-OI:1PL-forget.PRS.CIRC when SI:2SG-be.PRS.CIRC

kó mà-q^húê:-ìj
 LOC PL-European(6)-LOC
 ‘You should not forget us when you are in Europe.’

6 The auxiliary *ka* [ká]

6.1 General remarks on the auxiliary *ka* [ká]

The auxiliary *ka* [ká] is most likely to be cognate with the prefix *-ká-* marking the potential tense in the inflection of the synthetic forms of Tswana verbs (as in *re ka simolola* [rì-ká-simólólà] ‘we can begin’), and in spite of the irregular tonal correspondence, both are probably reflexes of *ngà ‘be like’. On the one hand, Sotho-Tswana *k* is the regular reflex of Bantu *ng, and on the other hand, as discussed in Creissels (2017b), evidence that verbs originally expressing similarity between two concrete entities may get involved in the expression of non-epistemic modalities can be found in quite a few language families.

The auxiliary *ka* [ká] is mainly used in negative forms, in ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ constructions that are functionally the negative counterparts of synthetic verb forms. Some of the analytic negative tenses formed by means of the auxiliary *ka* [ká] are in competition with a synthetic negative form, whereas others constitute the sole possibility of expressing the negation of the corresponding positive form.

In fact, the construction described in Section 6.7 is the only one in which the auxiliary *ka* [ká] occurs in a positive form. This suggests a relatively recent grammaticalization of *ngà ‘be like’ into an auxiliary verb, and further into a verbal prefix, the grammaticalization process being more advanced for the positive forms than for the negative ones.

In contrast to *bo* [bò] and *ne* [nè], most of the forms of the auxiliary *ka* [ká] are morphologically regular. This can be viewed as additional evidence that the grammaticalization of this auxiliary is relatively recent in the history of Tswana.

6.2 The auxiliary *ka* [ká] in the negative form of the present

6.2.1. *ka* [ká] in the present negative, lexical verb in the circumstantial present

The auxiliary *ka* [ká] in the present negative combines with the circumstantial present of the lexical verb to express ‘never’. In this combination (and only in this combination), its stem can optionally be expanded by a nasal. A possible explanation is put forward below.

(33) *Ga o (n)ke o re etela.*

χà-ú-(í)kí ú-rì-étê:là
 NEG-SI:2SG-AUX.PRS SI:2SG-OI:1PL-visit.PRS.CIRC
 ‘You never pay us a visit.’

Example (34) illustrates the same combination with the auxiliary in the circumstantial form of the present negative (which mainly differs from the indicative form in the use of a distinct negative marker).

(34) *Ka o se ke o re etela, ga o tsala ya rona.*

ká 'ú-sí-kí ú-rì-étê:là χà-ú
 since SI:2SG-NEG-AUX.PRS.CIRC SI:2SG-OI:1PL-visit.PRS.CIRC NEG-SI:2SG

Ø-tsàlà já-rò:ná
 SG-friend(9) CL9.GEN-1PL.PRO
 ‘Since you never pay us a visit, you are not our friend.’

Note that exactly the same meaning can be expressed by using the present negative of the dedicated auxiliary *ka*, as in (33), or the present negative verb *nna* [ńná] ‘stay, be’ in auxiliary function, as in (35).

(35) *Ga ba nne ba nthusa.*

χà-bá-ńńí bá-ń-t^hû:sà
 NEG-SI:CL2-stay.PRS SI:CL2-OI:1SG-help.PRS.CIRC
 ‘They never help me.’ lit. ‘They don’t stay helping me.’

This synonymy may have been the cause of the development of a nasalized variant of the auxiliary *ka* [ká] in its use to express ‘never’ (and only in this use).

6.2.2 *ka* [ká] in the present negative, lexical verb in the sequential future

In the present negative, the auxiliary *ka* [ká] can combine not only with the circumstantial present of the lexical verb to express ‘never’, but also with the sequential future of the lexical verb to express the meaning of future negative.

(36) *Ga re ke re leme tshimo e.*

χà-rí-kí rí-lìmí Ø-tshímò: é
 NEG-SI:1PL-AUX.PRS SI:1PL-cultivate.SEQ.FUT SG-field(9) CL9.DEM
 ‘We will not cultivate this field.’

6.3 The auxiliary *ka* [ká] in the perfect positive

The auxiliary *ka* [ká] in the perfect positive combines with the sequential past of the lexical verb to express the meaning of experiential perfect, i.e., to denote that an event has taken place at least once in the past.

(37) *Re kile ra etela ko Makgoeng .*

rì-kilè r-à-ètèlà kó mà-q^hóê:-ń
 SI:1PL-AUX.PRF SI:1PL-SEQ.PST-travel LOC PL-European(6)-LOC
 ‘We once travelled to Europe.’

6.4 The auxiliary *ka* [ká] in the negative form of the perfect

Contrary to what the formal relationship between these two forms might suggest, the combination of the auxiliary *ka* [ká] in the perfect negative with the sequential past of the lexical verb, illustrated in (38b), does not express the negation of the meaning of experiential perfect expressed by the analytical verb form presented in Section 6.3. Semantically, it constitutes the negative counterpart of the narrative past described in Section 5.4.1 above, i.e., an analytical form involving the auxiliary *ne* [nè], as in (38a).

(38) a. *Ba ne ba duelwa ka madi.*

bá-nè **b-à-dúélwà** ká mà:-dí
 SI:CL2-AUX.PRF SI:CL2-SEQ.PST-pay.PASS INS PL-money(6)
 ‘They were paid in money.’

b. *Ga ba a ka ba dulewa ka madi.*

χà-bá-à-ká **b-à-dúélwà** ká mà:-dí
 NEG-SI:CL2-PRF-AUX SI:CL2-SEQ.PST-pay.PASS INS PL-money(6)
 ‘They were not paid in money.’

6.5 The auxiliary *ka* [ká] in the negative form of the future

In the negative form of the future, the auxiliary *ka* [ká] combines with the sequential future of the lexical verb to express the meaning of future negative (which can also be expressed by an analytical verb form involving another form of the same auxiliary – see Section 6.2.2 – or by a synthetic verb form, in this case *re tlaa se leme* [rì-tlàà-sì-lìmí]).

(39) *Re tlaa se ke re leme tshimo e.*

rì-tlàà-sì-kí **rì-lìmí** Ø-ts^hímò: é
 SI:1PL-FUT-NEG-AUX SI:1PL-cultivate.SEQ.FUT SG-field(9) CL9.DEM
 ‘We will not cultivate this field.’

6.6 The auxiliary *ka* [ká] in the negative form of the potential

In two forms that can be identified as two variants of the potential negative, the auxiliary *ka* [ká] combines with the sequential past of the lexical verb to express the meaning of potential negative.

(40) a. *Ò ka se ka wa tsaya podi wa tlogela potsana.*

ò-ká-sì-ká **w-à-tsájá** Ø-^lpódí w-á-tlòχèlà
 SI:2SG-POT-NEG-AUX SI:2SG-SEQ.PST-take SG-goat(9) SI:2SG-SEQ.PST-leave
 Ø-pótsà:ná
 SG-kid(9)
 ‘You cannot take the goat and leave the kid.’

b. *Ga o ka ke wa tsaya podi wa tlogela potsana.*

χà-ó-kà-kí **w-à-tsájá** Ø-^lpódí w-á-tlòχèlà
 NEG-SI:2SG-POT-AUX SI:2SG-SEQ.PST-take SG-goat(9) SI:2SG-SEQ.PST-leave
 Ø-pótsà:ná
 SG-kid(9)
 ‘You cannot take the goat and leave the kid.’

These two ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ constructions are synonymous, not only between themselves, but also with the synthetic form of the potential negative, which in this case would be *ò ka se tsee* [ò-ká-sì-tséí] ‘you cannot take’.

Formally, it must be noted that, in the variant illustrated in (40a), the auxiliary has the morphological structure of the potential negative in the regular inflection of synthetic verb forms, with the negation expressed by means of the negative marker *se* [sì] following the potential marker. By contrast, the combination of the negative marker *ga* [χà] preceding the subject index

and the potential marker *ka* [ká] that characterizes the auxiliary in the variant illustrated in (40b) does not occur in the regular inflection of synthetic verb forms.

6.7 The auxiliary *ka* [ká] in the positive form of the subjunctive

The subjunctive form of the auxiliary *ka* [ká] is irregular, since instead of the [ɛ] ending that characterizes the subjunctive in regular verb inflection, its ending is [o] or [e] depending on the vowel of the subject index ([o] if the vowel of the subject index is [ɔ], otherwise [e]). It combines with the subjunctive of the lexical verb (positive or negative) to express the same meaning as the synthetic form of the subjunctive, with some additional emphasis, as illustrated in (41a–b) and (42a–b).

6.7.1 *ka* [ká] in the subjunctive positive, lexical verb in the subjunctive positive

(41) a. *A re thuse!*

á-rì-t^hû:sè

SI:2SG-OI:1PL-help.SBJV

Let him/her help us!’ (synthetic form of the subjunctive positive, non-emphatic)

b. *A ke a re thuse!*

á-kè

á-rì-t^hû:sè

SI:2SG-AUX.SBJV SI:2SG-OI:1PL-help.SBJV

‘Just let him/her help us!’

6.7.2 *ka* [ká] in the subjunctive positive, lexical verb in the subjunctive negative

(42) a. *O se ba thuse!*

ó-sì-bá-t^hû:sì

SI:2SG-NEG-OI:CL2-help.SBJV

‘Stop helping them!’ (synthetic form of the subjunctive negative, non-emphatic)

b. *O ko o se ba thuse!*

ó-kò ó-sì-bá-t^hû:sì

SI:2SG-AUX.SBJV SI:2SG-NEG-OI:CL2-help.SBJV

‘Do stop helping them!’

6.8 The auxiliary *ka* [ká] in the negative form of the subjunctive

In the negative form of the subjunctive, the auxiliary *ka* [ká] combines with the sequential past of the lexical verb to express the meaning of subjunctive negative. The fact that the vowel of the auxiliary is [a] instead of the [ɪ] normally found in the subjunctive negative may be due to the assimilation to the vowel of the first syllable of the lexical verb, which in the sequential past can only be [a].

(43) *Re tlaa tswela ko ntle gore re se ka ra go tlhodia.*

rì-tlàà-tswèlà kó ñtlé χóti rí-sì-ká

SI:1PL-FUT-go.OUT.APPL LOC outside so.that SI:1PL-NEG-AUX.SBJV

r-á-χò-t^hódî:à

SI:1PL-SEQ.PST-OI:2SG-disturb

‘We will go out so as not to disturb you.’

This form is synonymous with the synthetic form of the subjunctive negative, which in this case would be *re se go tlhodie* [rí-sí-χò-t^hódî].

6.9 The auxiliary *ka* [ká] in the negative form of the sequential future

In a form that does not exist in the regular inflection of synthetic verb forms but can be described as resulting from the addition of the negative marker *se* [sì] to the sequential future, the auxiliary *ka* [ká] combines with the sequential future of the lexical verb to express the negation of the sequential future, which cannot be expressed by means of a synthetic verb form.

(44) ... *ba se ke ba dire sepe.*

bà-sì-kí

bá-dìrì

!sî:-pè

SI:CL2-NEG-AUX.SEQ.FUT

SI:CL2-do.SEQ.FUT

CL7-none

‘... and they won’t do anything.’

6.10 The auxiliary *ka* [ká] in the negative form of the sequential past

In a form that does not exist in the regular inflection of Tswana verbs but can be described as resulting from the addition of the negative marker *se* [sì] to the sequential past, the auxiliary *ka* [ká] combines with the sequential past of the lexical verb to express the negation of the sequential past, which cannot be expressed by means of a synthetic verb form.

(45) ... *ka se ka ka bona mekoti ya gauta.*

k-à-sì-ká

k-à-bóná

mí-kòtí

jà-Ø-χâ:tà

SI:1SG-SEQ.PST-NEG-AUX

SI:1SG-SEQ.PST-see

PL-mine(4)

CL4.GEN-SG-gold(9)

‘... and I didn’t see the gold mines.’

7 The auxiliary *tle* [tlé]

This auxiliary, cognate with the verb *tla* [tlà] ‘come’, can be used in two different but synonymous forms to express the aspectual meaning ‘occasionally, sometimes’. In both cases, the lexical verb is in the sequential future. What justifies analysing these two forms as a dedicated auxiliary, instead of *tla* [tlà] ‘come’ in auxiliary function, is their irregular ending [e] and irregular tone pattern. They differ in the presence or absence of the prefix that marks the disjoint form of the present positive in regular verb inflection. With the auxiliary *tle* [tlé], the presence of this prefix is purely optional, and has nothing to do with the conjoint vs. disjoint contrast. It could be freely suppressed in (46), and added in (47), without any change in the acceptability and the meaning of these two examples.

(46) *Ba a tle ba re etele ka Keresebose.*

bá-à-tlé

bá-rì-étéli

ká

'kírísímò:sì

SI:CL2-PRS.DJ-AUX

SI:CL2-OI:1PL-visit.SEQ.FUT

at

Christmas

‘They sometimes visit us for Christmas.’

(47) *Ke tle ke ye morakeng ka thsipi.*

kì-tlé kì-yí m'ò-ràké-ṅ ká Ø-'tshî:pi
 SI:1SG-come.PRS SI:1SG-go.SEQ.FUT SG-cattle.post(3)-LOC by SG-sunday(9)
 'I sometimes go to the cattle-post on Sundays.'

8 The auxiliary *tshogana* [ts^hòχànà]

Morphologically, the auxiliary *tshogana* [ts^hòχànà] could be the reciprocal form of *tshoga* [ts^hòχà], an intransitive verb that can be glossed as 'experience a feeling of fear'. However, this reciprocal form does not exist as such, which justifies analysing *tshogana* [ts^hòχànà] as a dedicated auxiliary, whatever its etymological relationship with *tshoga* [ts^hòχà] 'experience a feeling of fear' may be.

In combination with the present circumstantial or perfect circumstantial of the lexical verb, *tshogana* [ts^hòχànà] expresses the meaning 'unexpectedly'. It can occur in various forms, all perfectly regular, for example the perfect in (48) and the future in (49).

(48) *Re tshoganye re utlwa lentswe la gagwe.*

rì-ts^hòχàpì rì-ùtlwá lí-ṅtswí 'lá-χâ:χwè.
 SI:1PL-AUX.PRF SI:1PL-hear.PRS.CIRC SG-voice(5) CL5.GEN-CL1.PRO
 'All of a sudden, we heard his voice.'

(49) *Fa o sa dire thata ko sekolong, o tlaa tshogana o paletswe ke dithuto.*

fâ 'ò-sá-dirí 't'átá kó sì-kóló-ṅ
 if SI:2SG-NEG-work.PRS.CIRC much LOC SG-school(7)-LOC
 ò-tlâà-ts^hòχànà 'ò-pàlétswí kí dì-t'û:tò
 SI:2SG-FUT-AUX SI:2SG-be.too.difficult.APPL.PASS.PRF.CIRC by PL-study(10)
 'If you don't work much at school, you will have the unpleasant surprise of having failed.'

9 The auxiliary *bolo* [bòl'ò]

This auxiliary is only used in a form identifiable as present negative, with the lexical verb in the infinitive. The meaning expressed is that the event denoted by the lexical verb did not occur recently, or occurred long ago.

(50) *Kgomo ga e bolo go swa.*

Ø-q^hòm'ò χà-í-bòl'ò χ'ò:-swá
 SG-COW(9) NEG-SI:CL9-AUX.PRS INF-die
 'The cow has long been dead.'

(51) *Ga ke bolo go etela Kitso.*

χà-kí-bòl'ò χ'ò-ètèlà kí:tsò
 NEG-SI:1SG-AUX.PRS INF-visit PRN
 'I visited Kitso long ago.'

A plausible etymology (which is consistent with the tonal contour of this auxiliary, its irregular ending [ɔ̃], and the selection of the infinitive form of the lexical verb) is that it was originally a form of the auxiliary *bo* [bò] followed by the comitative proclitic *le* [lí] ‘with’, whose vowel [ɪ] assimilated to the [ɔ̃] of the infinitive prefix.

10 The auxiliary *ise* [ísí]

This auxiliary, which has a tonal variant [ísí] in some Tswana varieties, occurs only in an indicative form and its circumstantial counterpart. The indicative form, which can be identified as present negative, combines with the sequential future of the lexical verb to express a nondumitive meaning (‘not yet’).

(52) *Dijo ga di ise di rekwe.*

di-dzó ɣà-dí-ísí dì-rê:kwì
 PL-food(8/10) NEG-SI:CL8/10-AUX SI:CL8/10-buy.SEQ.FUT
 ‘The food has not been bought yet.’

The circumstantial form of the auxiliary *ise* [ísí] is irregular, since it expresses the same nondumitive meaning as the indicative form but includes no negative marker corresponding to the negative prefix *ga* [ɣà] found in the indicative form (normally, the auxiliary in (53) should not be *ke ise* [kí-ísí], but **ke se ise* [kí-sì-ísí], with the negative marker *se* [sì]).

(53) *Kitso o tsamaile ke ise ke goroge.*

kítsó ɔ̃-tsamáílè kí-ísí kí-ɣòrô:ɣì
 PRN(1) SI:CL1-leave.PRF SI:1SG-AUX.PRS.CIRC SI:1SG-arrive.SEQ.FUT
 ‘Kitso left before I arrived (lit. I not having arrived yet).’

I have nothing to propose about a possible etymology of this auxiliary.

11 The auxiliary *kitla* [kítlá]

This auxiliary, which occurs as *ketla* [kítlá] in some Tswana varieties, is only found in forms that can be identified as irregular forms of the present negative. Followed by the circumstantial form of the present positive of the lexical verb, it gives one of the variants of the future negative. It is probably cognate with *tla* [tlà] ‘come’, but its first syllable and its tonal contour have no obvious explanation.

(54) *Ga ba kitla ba tla kwano.*

ɣà-bá-kítlá 'bá-tlá 'kwâ:nò
 NEG-SI:CL2-AUX.PRS SI:CL2-come.PRS.CIRC here
 ‘They will not come here.’

Example (55) illustrates the circumstantial form of this auxiliary.

(55) *Ke tlaa ya ko toroppong lefa ke se kitla ke reka.*

kí-tlàà-jà kó Ø-tòròpó-ŋ lífá 'kí-sí-kítlá
 SI:1SG-FUT-go LOC SG-town(9)-LOC although SI:1SG-NEG-AUX.PRS.CIRC

kí-rè:ká

SI:1SG-buy.PRS.CIRC

‘I’ll go to town although I am not going to buy anything.’

12 The auxiliary *sena* [síná]

This auxiliary only occurs in syntactic contexts requiring the use of the circumstantial mood (for example in clauses introduced by the conjunction *fa* [fá] ‘if, when’, as in (56)), in combination with the infinitive of the lexical verb. It selects the paradigm of subject indexes used for the circumstantial in the regular inflection of Tswana verbs, but the tone pattern of the stem (LH) is not the regular tone pattern of verb stems in the circumstantial. Its meaning can be glossed as ‘having finished’. Note that it cannot be cognate with *fela* [félá], which is the regular predicative verb expressing ‘finish’ in Tswana.

(56) *Fa o sena go kwala, o balolole se o se kwadileng.*

fá	ʔ-síná	χò-kwálá	ʔ-bálòlòlé	ʔsé
when	SI:2SG-AUX.PRS.CIRC	INF-write	SI:2SG-read.OVER.SBJV	CL7.REL

ʔ-sì-kwádílè:-ń

SI:2SG-OI:CL7-write.PRF-REL

‘After writing, you must read over what you have written.’

A plausible hypothesis is that this auxiliary is cognate with *se na* [-sí-ná], the negative form of the circumstantial of the defective and irregular verb *na* [nà] ‘have’ (i.e., a form that can be glossed as ‘not having’). Semantically, it is not difficult to imagine a shift from ‘not having to V’ to ‘after V-ing’. However, the tonal difference between these two forms has no obvious explanation. Moreover, the negative form of the circumstantial of *na* [nà] ‘have’ itself is irregular (since, in principle, the negative marker in circumstantial forms is not *se* [-sí-], but *sa* [-sà-]), which further complicates attempts at explanation.

13 Conclusion

In this article, I have described the uses of the dedicated auxiliaries of Tswana and tried to analyse their etymology. The question that arises is to what extent the data described in Sections 4 to 15 lend themselves to generalizations.

A first observation, which certainly has to do with the fact that there is no reason to think that these auxiliaries share a common history, is the lack of obvious generalizations in the way many dedicated auxiliaries depart morphologically from the regular inflection of synthetic verb forms.

As regards the inflectional potential of dedicated auxiliaries, there is a sharp contrast between a group of three auxiliaries that occur in a variety of tense forms each (*bo* [bò], *ne* [nè] and *ka* [ká]), and the other ones, which have a very limited number of possible tense forms, sometimes just one. Among the auxiliaries that occur in a relatively wide variety of inflected forms, *ka* [ká] has the particularity that it mainly occurs in negative forms in ‘auxiliary verb + lexical verb’ constructions that are the negative counterparts of positive synthetic verb forms that include the cognate potential marker *-ká-*.

Among the auxiliaries with relatively rich tense inflections, it is also remarkable that most of the inflected forms of *bo* [bò] and *ne* [nè] select circumstantial forms of the lexical verb, whereas with *ka* [ká], the lexical verb is predominantly in a sequential form.

Finally, as discussed in Section 3.4, the negative counterpart of analytic verb forms involving positive forms of the auxiliary can often be obtained by putting the lexical verb in the negative form without modifying the auxiliary, but never by putting the auxiliary in the negative form without modifying the lexical verb, and in the two cases in which the latter is possible, the construction with the auxiliary in the negative form is not the semantic counterpart of the construction in which the auxiliary is in the corresponding positive form.

Abbreviations

APPL = applicative, AUX = auxiliary, CIRC = circumstantial, CL = class, in the sense of gender-number agreement marker, COM = comitative, DEM = demonstrative, DJ = disjoint, FUT = future, GEN = genitival linker, INF = infinitive, INS = instrumental, LOC = locative, NEG = negative, OI = object index, PASS = passive, PL = plural, POT = potential, PRF = perfect, PST = past, PRN = proper name, PRO = pronoun, PRS = present, REL = relative, SI = subject index, SEQ = sequential, SG = singular, SBJV = subjunctive

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Appendix: Summary of Tswana auxiliaries and the meanings they express

This appendix consists of two parts. The first part lists the verbs that can by themselves project clauses in which they assign semantic roles to the referents of noun phrases and that can also be found in auxiliary function, whose detailed description constitutes the topic of Creissels (forthcoming 2026). The second part lists the dedicated auxiliaries dealt with in this article.

In general, when the same auxiliary is mentioned as expressing two or more meanings, each of the possible interpretations is bound to particular tense forms of the auxiliary and/or the lexical verb. For the auxiliaries listed in the first part of the appendix, see Creissels (forthcoming 2026) for details. For those listed in the second part, the details can be found in the relevant sections of this article.

A/ Verbs that can project clauses by themselves and that are also used in auxiliary function

	LEXICAL MEANING	MEANING IN AUXILIARY FUNCTION
<i>aga</i> [áχá]	‘build’	continuous aspect (‘not to stop doing something’)
<i>akofa</i> [àkòfà]	‘hurry up’	immediate sequentiality
<i>atisa</i> [àtisà]	causative of <i>ata</i> [àtà] ‘increase (intr.)’	frequentative aspect (‘do something often’)
<i>batla</i> [bàtlà]	‘look for, want, need’	approximative (‘almost, nearly’)
<i>boa</i> [bóá]	‘return’	duplicative aspect (‘again’)
<i>dika</i> [díká]	‘surround’, ‘revolve’	(1) ‘in the past year’ (2) ‘later the same year’
<i>eta</i> [ètà]	‘travel’	simultaneity
<i>fela</i> [fêlá]	‘become finished’	conclusive aspect (‘eventually’)
<i>feta</i> [fità]	‘pass’	sequentiality
<i>fitlha</i> [fitl ^h à]	‘arrive’	(1) sequentiality (2) associated motion; occur/do upon arrival

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<i>gana</i> [χáná]	‘refuse’	negation
<i>lala</i> [lálá]	‘spend the night somewhere’	(1) hesternal past (‘the day before’) (2) hodiernal future (‘later the same day’) (3) ‘never’
<i>losetsa</i> [lòsètšà]	causative-applicative form of <i>lwa</i> [lwà] ‘struggle’	approximative (‘almost, nearly’)
<i>na</i> (<i>le</i>) [nà lí-]	‘have’	(1) habitual aspect (2) obligative modality (3) future negative
<i>nama</i> [nàmà]	‘stretch’	(1) continuative aspect (‘continue to do something’) (2) conclusive aspect
<i>nna</i> [ńná]	‘sit, stay, be’	(1) continuative aspect (2) durative aspect (3) potential modality (4) ‘never’
<i>nnela</i> [ńnélá]	applicative of <i>nna</i> [ńná] ‘sit, stay, be’	continuous aspect
<i>phakela</i> [p ^h àkèlà]	‘get up early in the morning’	(1) hodiernal past (‘earlier the same day’) (2) crastinal future (‘next day’)
<i>rata</i> [rátá]	‘love, like, want’	approximative (‘almost, nearly’)
<i>sala</i> [sálá]	‘remain somewhere’	(1) iamitive aspect (‘already’) (2) ‘in the absence of someone’
<i>sa le</i> [sà-lí]	‘still be’ (persistence form of the copular verb <i>le</i> [lí] ‘be’)	(1) ‘for a long time’ (2) remote past (‘long ago’)
<i>senka</i> [síńká]	‘look for’	approximative (‘almost, nearly’)
<i>simolola</i> [símolólà]	‘begin (tr.)’	inchoative aspect
<i>tla</i> [tlà]	‘come’	(1) ‘occasionally, sometimes’ (2) approximative (‘almost, nearly’) (3) sequentiality (4) simultaneity (5) associated motion: occur/do during movement towards the deictic centre
<i>tlhola</i> [tl ^h òlà]	‘spend the day somewhere’	(1) continuous aspect (2) cessative aspect (‘not anymore’)
<i>tloga</i> [tlòǵà]	‘leave’	imminent future

<i>tsamaya</i> [tsàmàjà]	‘go’	continuous aspect
<i>tsamaela</i> [tsàmàèlà]	applicative form of <i>tsamaya</i> [tsàmàjà] ‘go’	imminent future
<i>tshela</i> [ts ^h ílá]	‘live’	continuous aspect
<i>tshwanela</i> [ts ^h wánélá]	‘suit’, ‘fit’	obligative modality
<i>tsoga</i> [tsóǰá]	‘get up’	(1) hodiernal past (‘earlier the sameday’) (2) crastinal future (‘next day’)
<i>tswa</i> [tswà]	‘go out’, ‘come from’	(1) ‘for a long time’ (2) remote past (‘long ago’) (3) recent past
<i>ya</i> [jà]	‘go’	imminent future

B Dedicated auxiliaries

<i>bo</i> [bò]	(1) emphatic variants of the following tenses: present, positive (§5.2.1) and negative (§5.2.2); perfect, positive (§5.2.3) and negative (§5.2.4); sequential future (§5.6), sequential past (§5.7.3) (2) future progressive, positive (§5.3.1) and negative (§5.3.2) (3) future perfect, positive (§5.3.3) and negative (§5.3.4) (4) potential progressive, positive (§5.4.1) and negative (§5.4.2) (5) potential perfect, positive (§5.4.3) and negative (§5.4.4) (6) subjunctive perfect (§5.5) (7) sequential past progressive (5.7.1) (8) sequential past perfect (§5.7.2) (9) infinitive perfect (§5.8)
<i>bolo</i> [bòlò]	‘not recently’, or ‘long ago’ (§10)
<i>ise</i> [ísí]	nondumitive (‘not yet’) (§11)
<i>ka</i> [ká]	(1) ‘never’ (§7.2.1) (2) future negative (§7.2.2, §7.5) (3) experiential perfect (§7.3) (4) narrative past negative (§7.4) (5) potential negative (§7.6) (6) emphatic variant of the subjunctive, positive (§7.7.1) and negative (§7.7.2) (7) subjunctive negative (§7.8) (8) sequential future negative (9) sequential past negative
<i>kitla</i> [kítlá]	future negative (§12)

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<i>ne</i> [nè]	(1) ‘sometimes’ (§6.2) (2) future negative (§6.3) (3) narrative past positive (§6.4.1) (4) past continuous, positive (§6.4.2) and negative (§6.4.3) (5) pluperfect, positive (§6.4.4) and negative (§6.4.5) (6) counterfactual (§6.4.6, §6.4.8, §6.4.9) (7) ‘it would be better if...’ (§6.5)
<i>sena</i> [siná]	‘after’ (§13)
<i>tle</i> [tlé]	‘sometimes’ (§8)
<i>tshogana</i> [ts ^h òχàná]	‘unexpectedly’ (§9)