

Pastness, 'Persistence' and Tense/Aspect in African Languages

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The occurrence of any event represents some sort of 'change' in the state of affairs obtaining at a particular time or location. Many Bantu and other African languages encode this change of 'state of affairs' in the tense/aspectual systems associated with past or event situations in two ways: in the first case the tense/aspect form indicates that the change of state arising from the event/situation persists or still obtains at speech time; in the second case, the tense/aspect form indicates that a subsequent change has occurred to the state of affairs arising from the stated event or situation. Consider the event described in (1):

(1) Jack moulded a clay pot

Jack's moulding of a clay pot gives rise to a change in the state of affairs from one in which the clay pot did not exist to one in which the clay pot exist. This pot may exist up to (or beyond) a subsequent time at which a speech event occurs or the pot may go out of existence (e.g. by being broken) by the time the speech event occurs. In reporting (1) the tense/aspect systems in a variety of African languages necessarily capture the continued existence or lack thereof of the pot at speech time. To put it differently, the tense/aspect system makes a contrast between the state of affairs prior to the event and after the event, as well as a contrast between the state of affairs after the event and a subsequent period. Lubukusu (Bantu, E.31) is used here for illustrative purposes. This language has three temporal locations for 'past tense' – hodiernal, hesternal, and pre-hesternal – and for each temporal location there are different affixes or affix combination and tone marking denoting the continued existence or absence of a given state of affairs (2).

(2) Past Tense forms in Lubukusu

Hodiernal		Hesternal		Pre-hesternal	
Persist	Absent	Persist	Absent	Persist	Absent
-il-e	-bele +-ile	-il-é	-béle +-ile	á-	ábá + á-

As a consequence, there are six possible ways of reporting the proposition in (1), depending on whether at speech time (i) the speaker believes that the pot still exist and the reported event occurred today (3a), yesterday (3b), before yesterday (3c); or (ii) the speaker believes that the pot has since been broken (i.e. it no longer exists) and the reported event occurred today (3d), yesterday (3e), or before yesterday (3f).

(3a) Jack abumbile ényungu
Jack a-bumb-il-e e-nyungu
Jack SM.c1-mould-PST-fv 9-pot

(3b) Jack ábumbilé ényungu

Jack a-bumb-il-e e-nyungu
Jack SM.c1-mould-PST-fv c9-pot

(3c) Jack ábúmba ényungu
Jack a-a-bumb-a e-nyungu
Jack SM.c1-PST-mould-fv c9-pot

(3d) Jack abele abumbile enyungu
Jack a-b-el-e a-bumb-il-e e-nyungu
Jack M.c1-be-PST-fv SSM.c1-mould-PST-fv c9-pot

(3e) Jack ábéle ábumbile enyungu
Jack a-b-el-e a-bumb-il-e e-nyungu
Jack M.c1-be-PST-fv SSM.c1-mould-PST-fv c9-pot

(3f) Jack ábá ábúmba enyungu
Jack a-b-a a-a-bumb-a e-nyungu
Jack SM.c1-be-fv SM.c1-PST-mould-fv c9-pot

The goal of this paper is first, to report on the widespread nature of this phenomenon in tense/aspect system of Bantu and other African languages - drawing on data from the Afranaph Sister Project (including some languages that have not yet been, but will soon be, posted on the website). It will be shown that the 'subsequent change of state of affairs' – i.e. the absence of the state of affairs arising from the vent – is encoded by more complex morpho-phonological structures cross-linguistically. Second the paper will seek to provide an analytical account that classifies the available languages in terms of degrees of remoteness expressible in those languages as well as their aspectual properties so as to gain a better understanding of the amount and degree of micro-variation discernible in these languages. It will also seek to account for the overlap in the usage of particular tenses across certain temporal boundaries.

The presentation will draw insights from Botne & Kershner's (2008) cognitive model of tense/aspect systems, a model developed primarily on the basis of evidence from Bantu languages to account for the complexity of the grammaticalized tense and aspect categories of verbal morphology. Botne and Kershner explore the distinctions in temporal remoteness as well as the interaction between lexical aspect and grammatical tense. Central to their proposal is the distinction made in the construal of temporality between the contemporaneous world of the 'present' (the P-domain), and cognitively dissociated worlds (D-domains). Time, it is argued, can be viewed in different ways, and this is reflected not only in the multiplicity tense/aspect markers (both morphological and phonological) found in these languages but also in how these markers are used to mark locations in time. Situations occurring in past time, for example, can be construed as situated either in the P-domain (i.e. the contemporaneous world of the speech event) or in the D-domain (i.e. the dissociated world) depending on the speaker's perspective. Take, for example, a language like ciCewa (Bantu N31)

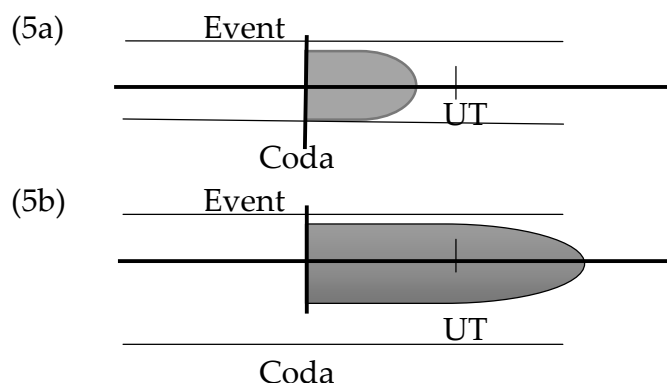
which encodes degrees of remoteness in past time by distinguishing hodiernal from pre-hodiernal past as shown in (4).

(4a) Mavuto wapita kumsika
 Mavuto u- a -pit- a ku-msika
 sm-pst-go-fv loc-market
 ‘Mavuto went to the Market’

(4b) Mavuto anápita kumsika
 Mavuto a- ná- pit- a ku-msika
 sm-pst-go-fv loc-market
 ‘Mavuto went to the market’

Whilst (4a) typically locates an event on the day of speech, (4b) locates an event in a period prior to the day of speech. This, however, is only part of the story. In various contexts the tense form in (4a) can and does locate the said event at a period prior to the day of speech and, as such is compatible with ‘temporal adverbials’ such as *dzulo* ‘yesterday’, *dzana* ‘the day before yesterday’, *mwezi watha* ‘last month’ *caka catha* ‘last year’ particularly when such temporal adverbial are used with proximal demonstratives. These same adverbials, as one would expect, are compatible with the tense form in (4b): which suggests that degrees of remoteness from the deictic center do overlap across tenses. Botne & Kirshner’s model offers some explanation for this overlap by taking cognizance of the fact that temporality can be viewed differently and that distinct construals of time can be targeted separately by different tense forms.

The other key issue addressed in this study, as illustrated by the Lubukusu examples in (3) is the notion of ‘persistence’ which seems to be a preponderant feature of tense/aspect systems in the languages examined so far. Persistence is accounted for by assuming that an event consists of a post-coda phase, shown here by the shaded area in (5), in which the effects of the event are present.



The effects of the event may be present at utterance time (5b) or absent (5a). The inclusion or exclusion of UT in the post-coda phase of the event engenders different morpho-phonological marking on the verb. Importantly, the study shows that the exclusion of UT from the post-coda phase – i.e. (5a) is (i) restricted by the semantics

of the verb and (ii) is generally marked by a more complex morpho-phonological structure.

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