NEW RESEARCH TOPIC (NRT)

TENSE AND ASPECT IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Silvester Ron Simango

Rhodes University, South Africa

Goal: The goal of this research project is to provide an in-depth investigation into the tense/aspect systems of African languages which will ultimately shed more light on the tense and aspectual properties of the languages and provide a basis for distinguishing between the two phenomena. From a purely descriptive point of view, TAM systems in African languages have not been systematically studied and more importantly, the temporal boundaries between the various tense forms have not been clearly established.

Background: All languages have ways of locating situations in time and various ways of conveying information relating to time reference. The manner in which different languages encode the location of situations in time may differ in terms of the accuracy achievable, and "the relative weight assigned to the lexicon and to the grammar in establishing location in time" (Comrie, 1985:7). Tense is one major way through which events are located in time. Tense has been defined as the "grammaticalisation of the location in time" (Comrie, 1985:1) and this grammaticalisation is reflected by the existence of specific tense morphemes in a given language. Situations can be located in past time, in the present moment, or in future time. Comrie observes that tense is essentially deictic in nature: it takes the present moment, or the time of the utterance (TU) as the deictic centre or reference point. Thus tense is a grammatical instrument which relates the present moment to the time of a situation.

Africanists, and more specifically Bantuists have in the past pointed to the robustness tense systems found in African languages. Bamileke, for example, is said to have at least ten different tense forms (Anderson, 1983); iciBemba is also said have tenses that number into double figures (Chung and Timberlake, 1985); and ciCewa is said to have at least eight tenses (Mtenje, 1987). The categories that have been posited to characterize the tense systems in these languages include: 'simple past', ''recent past', 'remote past', 'present', 'habitual', 'immediate future' and 'remote future'. However, the temporal boundaries between, say, the different types of 'past' have not been clearly defined in the literature.

A relatively recent study by Simango (2003) seems to suggest that there may well be far fewer tense types in these languages than has previously been thought and that certain tense forms that have been posited can be accounted for in terms of the aspectual properties of the language in question. Let us illustrate this point by examining facts from ciNsenga. In ciNsenga there are four ways of saying (1).

1.   Khuzwayo sharpened the spear

The choice of the form to be used depends on a combination of two factors: (a) whether the event occurred on or before the day of the utterance and (b) if the spear is still or is no longer sharp at the time of the utterance (TU). If Khuzwayo's sharpening of the spear occurred on the day of the utterance, and the situation was such that the said spear was still sharp sentence (2) would be used.

2.   Khuzwayo   w– a– nol –a   mkondo

                agr-prf-sharpen-fv   spear

        'Khuzwayo sharpened the spear'

If Khuzwayo's sharpening of the spear occurred on any day prior to the day of the utterance, and the said spear was still sharp at TU sentence (3) would be used.

3.   Khuzwayo   ∅- e- nol –a   mkondo

                agr- pst-sharpen-fv spear

        'Khuzwayo sharpened the spear'

If the situation was such that Khuzwayo's sharpening of the spear occurred on the day of the utterance, but that at TU the said spear was no longer sharp, then sentence (4) would be used.

4.   Khuzwayo   ∅- e- nze   w– a– nol –a   mkondo

                agr- pst-be agr-prf-sharpen-fv spear

        'Khuzwayo sharpened the spear'

Finally, if the situation was such that Khuzwayo's sharpening of the spear occurred on any day prior to the day of the utterance and that the said spear was no longer sharp at TU then sentence (5) would be used.

5.   Khuzwayo   ∅- e- nze   ∅– e– nol –a   mkondo

                agr- pst-be agr-pst-sharpen-fv spear

        'Khuzwayo sharpened the spear'

According to traditional descriptions, (2) was equated with 'present perfect tense'; (3) with 'simple past'; (4) with 'recent past'; and (5) with 'remote past'. But what does it meant to be 'recent' or 'remote', and these distinctions psychologically real to the speakers of the language? In discussing the grammaticalization of degrees of remoteness, Comrie (1985:83-84) cautions that "it is essential to ensure that the distinction under discussion has degree of remoteness as part of its meaning, rather than just implicature deriving from other features

of its meaning." A closer examination of ciNsenga, as shown, above clearly shows that the language only distinguishes between a hodiernal past (i.e. any point today prior to TU) and a pre-hodiernal past (any point on the time line before today) in its tense system. The language thus has clearly marked temporal boundaries in its tense system. Beyond these time frames no other temporal division for past tense is grammaticalized.

The study: The factors that determine the choice of the form to be used in (2) – (5) may well be more widespread among African languages. This line of inquiry has revealed that ciCewa also makes the same kind of past tense divisions as ciNsenga and that iciBemba distinguishes between hodiernal, hesternal, and pre-hesternal past tense forms. Other languages such as Sotho and Swati seem to have only one form of past but have two ways of expressing pastness on the basis of factors considered here. Of course additional factors may also be at play in determining what forms are appropriate for conveying information that relates time of event to time of utterance, and the proposed study would hopefully reveal what these are. Using some version of the Afranaph questionnaire or some other appropriate tools the study seeks to reveal how different African languages cluster temporal relations by the use of tense marking and to document how different tense forms in different languages convey different meanings in different languages.

References

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