

Ineffable tenses in Benue-Kwa and Romance

Victor Manfredi, Boston University
12 September 2012

ABSTRACT Some natural languages can't distinguish past from present perfect without recourse to periphrasis or context. This expressive gap is unexpected if tenses are autonomous meaning postulates (Reichenbach 1947, Hornstein 1990, Giorgi & Pianesi 1997), but is grist for theories where tense interpretations emerge from syntax-pragmatics interaction indirectly (McCawley 1971, Vikner 1985, Enç 1987). English has an unambiguous present perfect (**I have danced yesterday*, Klein 1992) but French doesn't (*J'ai dansé hier* taking over *Je dansai hier*), and the atrophy of the simple preterite in northern Romance coincides with several other developments related to case, agreement and aspect (Zamboni 2000, 87 cited by Ledgeway 2012, 314). In the Benue-Kwa (BK) subgroup of Niger-Congo, an unambiguous present perfect occurs in most of the major clusters, including Akan, Èdò, Igbo, Cross, Plateau and Bantoid, but does not exist in a substantial, contiguous subset—call it BK2—comprising Gbè, Yorùbá, Nupe and Idomà, where any finite affirmative episodic predicate in principle allows either present perfect or simple past construal. This bifurcation of BK arguably followed on the erosional loss of finite affixation in BK2, and introduced other correlated changes of a quantal nature in its wake (Manfredi 2005a, 2009). One reason UG doesn't need to stipulate a tense system is that time reference is partly redundant with default interpretation of lexical *Aktionsart* (Green & Igwè 1963, 53; Welmers & Welmers 1968, 76; Dowty 1986, Déchaine 1991, Sorace 2000). But the crosslinguistic parallelism is incomplete: in southern Romance, present perfect morphology automatically codes for recent past, but in BK1 these two traits are orthogonal (Welmers 1973).

1. Benue-Kwa

Crosslinguistic variation among tense constructions is widely observed in Niger-Congo, e.g. in the Benue-Kwa (BK) group.¹ Welmers (1973, 343-50) discusses two apparently orthogonal differences: general past/completive and recent/remote:

For the most part, the verbal systems of Niger-Congo languages are best described in terms of a unidimensional list of “verbal constructions” rather than in terms of a bidimensional or multidimensional grid with intersecting categories such as tense, aspect and mode [sc. mood]. There may be ways of expressing twodimensional parallelisms such as the simple vs. progressive action in the past and in the future (as ‘he worked, he was working; he will work, he will be working’), but (as in English also) these distinctions typically do not involve combinations of morphemes as a verbal form, but rather auxiliaries and similar secondary constructions. Even the affirmative-negative contrast is usually asymmetrical; there are typically more affirmative than negative constructions, and not all negatives are formed in the same way or in terms of a single simple transformation applied to affirmatives. In the Bantu languages, the unidimensional character of the system is so conspicuous that many grammarians, having applied the term “tense” to forms with obvious reference to past, present and future time, have felt compelled to extend that label to other forms with similar morphological composition, so that one hears such incongruous combinations as “the subjunctive tense” and “the conditional tense”.

In many languages there is a single construction which has explicit and exclusive reference to past action; for such languages it is quite legitimate to speak of a “past” construction. It has already been noted, however, that some languages use a single construction to refer to past time for active verbs and present time for stative verbs [...] Some Bantu languages distinguish a “near past” (particularly with reference to action performed earlier on the same day) and a “remote past” (or perhaps better a “general past”). Such a distinction is reported in LoNkundo (see Hulstaert 1938, pp. 55, 189-90). [...] The two past constructions of LoNkundo are distinguished only by tone [...] There is some evidence that what is suffixed to the verb base in each of these constructions is two morphemes, one indicating past time and the other indicating degree of remoteness; these would then be subtypes of one construction, not two totally distinct constructions in a unidimensional list. Thus from a verb whose root is /kis/ ‘sit down’:

á kis-à-kí	‘he sat down (today)’	H L-L-H	LoNkundo [C61, BK1]
á kis-á-kí	‘he sat down (earlier)’	H L-H-H	

Not every report of a distinction between “near past” and “remote past” however can be taken at face value. Abraham (1940b, pp. 47-48) appears to describe such a distinction for Tiv, but it is clear on the basis of the data he himself presents that the distinction is rather between a completive [aspect] and a simple past [tense]. [...]

A similar misinterpretation of the usage of constructions has been applied to LuGanda, in which three degrees of remoteness in the past have been seen by some: immediate (today), near (roughly yesterday) and remote (earlier). The first of these, however, cannot be used in an equivalent of ‘I did it this morning’ if one is speaking in the late afternoon, i.e. after some time has elapsed; on the other hand it can be used with reference to something that happened at an unspecified earlier time if the focus of attention is on the resultant present situation. [...] The LuGanda completive and recent past both use... the root plus an inflectional ending... which appears rather commonly in Bantu in forms like /-ile/ but which in Luganda and some other languages conditions a complicated set of morphophonemic alternations. E.g., using a root /kól-/ ‘work’, the three constructions are:

ì kózé	‘I have worked’	L H-L	LuGanda [E15, BK1]
n-à kózé	‘I worked (recently)’	L H-L	
n-à kól-à	‘I worked (earlier)’	L H-L	

Three degrees of past actually do appear to be distinguished, however, in KiKóongo. [...] The immediate past is... formally the completive with a suffix consisting of /ng/ plus the preceding vowel repeated, with high tone; the same or a homophonous suffix appears also in the customary [mood]. In a pattern strikingly similar to that of LuGanda, the immediate and near past, as well as the completive, use the root with an inflectional suffix which in this case has the form /-idi/... The four KiKóongo constructions are illustrated with a verb whose root is /suumb/ ‘buy’; only high tone [sc. HL pitch accent] is marked here

n suumb-idi-ngí nkóombo	‘I bought a goat (today)’	KiKóongo [H10, BK1]
yá suumb-idí nkóombo	‘I bought a goat (yesterday)’	
ya súumb-a nkóombo	‘I bought a goat (earlier)’	
n suumb-idi nkóombo	‘I have bought a goat’	

1. Benue-Kwa (Givón 1975, Elugbe & Williamson 1977) is the union of Greenberg's Kwa and Benue-Congo (1963). I've added wordspaces to Welmers' transcriptions, which assume the traditional templatic approach (Guthrie 1948, Meussen 1959).

In Welmers' KiKóongo paradigm, the difference between the suffixes has a prosodic correlate: the root accent heard before the default *-a* suffix (the so-called “final vowel”) of the general past is overridden by the present perfect suffix *-idi*. This effect is not unexpected in a language where the root and its finite desinence share one spellout domain, on the hypothesis that phrasal accentuation is a derivational index (Bresnan 1971, Wagner 2005, Scheer 2012). In Igbo too, the audible profiles of the present perfect (1a) and general past (1b) contrast in prosody as well as affixation.²

- (1)a. É-rú-ole m. H-!HHH !H Igbo [BK1]
pro-arrive-INFL1 1S.GEN
‘I have arrived (here&now)’
- b. É-rù-ru m e-rú. H-L-L L L-H
pro-arrive-INFL2 1S NOM-arrive
‘I arrived (duly, as expected, at the time in question)’

This contrast was lost in the BK2 languages, despite their ample morphological resources in the Aux domain (Oyèláràñ 1982, Aboh 2004, 153–91). So in Yorùbá (2a), *tí* in clause-second position is traditionally said to mark “perfective tense” (Bámgbósé 1966, 94f., cf. Abraham 1958, 639) but in fact *tí* is unnecessary for the sentences to have a present perfect interpretation, and conversely second-position *tí* is felicitous even in (2b) where present anchoring is contextually disfavored (Awóyálé 1991, 195f.).³ All the sentences in (2) denote nonfuture but are otherwise temporally vague, thus it is only contextual and periphrastic factors which can disambiguate them as to present relevance.

- (2)a. Mo ti dé (báyíí). Yorùbá [BK2]
1S AUX arrive here&now
‘I have arrived here (now)’
- b. Mo dé bí/bè (níjóun/àtiójó).
1S arrive here/there at.past.day/since.days
‘I arrived here/there (once upon a time/long ago)’
- c. Mo dé.
1S arrive
‘I have arrived (here now)’ OR ‘I arrived (here/there once upon a time)’

2. Romance

Ledgeway (2009, 439–41) collects modern Neapolitan examples of the *passato prossimo* form with simple past interpretation, and cases in older texts of the opposite substitution: a morphological *passato remoto* used with relevance to utterance time.

...sotto l'influsso dell'italiano, si avverte apparentemente nel corso degli ultimi vent'anni, specie tra le generazioni giovani, un'estensione del passato prossimo a scapito del passato remoto (*seniètta* > *aggiù sentuto*; Radtke 1997, 87) [FN5: In modo analogo, Maturi (2002, 237) segnala nei dialetti del Sannio “la netta tendenza ad una graduale ‘crescita’ del PP ai danni del PR”], osservazione che spiegherà l'oscillazione apparentemente libera tra passato remoto e passato prossimo in esempi quali

Indovinate pè chi me pigliaie? M'a guardato nu poco e po divette [...] (De Filippo¹ 111)

A parte occasionali esempi come questo, però, la distinzione tra i due tempi passati perfettivi rimane vitale presso la maggior parte dei parlanti, cosicché la distinzione tra i due tempi non differisce molto da quella valida per altre varietà romanzo come lo spagnolo peninsulare e l'italiano scritto standard.

A volte, specie nei testi antichi, il passato remoto può sostituire il passato prossimo per esprimere l'aspetto compiuto inviando a situazioni, i cui effetti o risultati perdurano fino al momento dell'enunciazione:

<i>Perché venisti cqua? [...] Venne [sono venuto] pensando comparar alcuna cosa galante io nascette sbentorata [sono nata sfortunata] a 'sto munno Isso dice che è ricco, che lo patre lo rimmanette [l'ha lasciato] buono Quando nasciste [sei nato] tenire quinnece anne?</i>	(Brancati ¹ 12.11-13) (Basile 90) (Scarpetta ⁴ I.3) (Di Maio ⁸ I)
--	---

Ledgeway (2011, 449f. = 2012, 314) cites Zamboni (2000, 87) for five additional properties correlated across Romance with expansion of the *passato prossimo* form to include general past reference: V2; nominative/accusative alignment of clitics; overt casemarking; aspectual split between *have* and *be* auxiliaries; nominative participle agreement. Assuming all these traits cohere in a kind of local parameter, it remains (i) to know which of them was determinant of the others, (ii) to compare the innovation of tense ineffability effects in Romance with that in Benue-Kwa and (iii) to explain the obtained semantic outcomes as intermodular (sc. interface) effects.

2. In (1a), the raised exclamation mark in the toneme string of denotes downstep juncture, a boundary cumulatively lowering subsequent feet until a reset. In (1b), the presence of *è-rú*, a bound nominalization of *-rú* ‘arrive’, is required by considerations of case and viewpoint aspect, and its interpretation depends on surface transitivity (Éménanjo 1984, Déchaine & Manfredi 1998, Manfredi 2005b). The analysis of Igbo inflectional suffixes is controversial in all possible respects; here I use the neutral glosses INFL1 and INFL2.
3. I have confirmed both options explicitly with multiple speakers and by unelicited observation. Second-position *tí* also occurs in clauses with adjunct traces, where it is glossed as ‘from’ (Abraham 1958, 640; Carstens 1986), e.g.

- (i) Mo ti Èkó ló.
1S TI Lagos go
‘I went from/via Lagos’
- (ii) Ní ibo ni o tí ló?
at where COMP 2S TI go
‘Where did you go from/via?’

Of course, mere difference of English translation does not disprove structural identity. Note also that *tí* can introduce a nominal adjunct, in which case it is glossed ‘of’ or ‘the one of’ (Ajibóyé 2005).

References

- Aboh, O. [2004]. *The Morphosyntax of Complement-head Sequences; clause structure & word order patterns in Kwa*. Oxford University Press.
- _____. [2007]. Leftward versus rightward focus; the Kwa-Bantu conspiracy. *SOAS WPL* **15**, 81-104.
- Aboh, O. & J. Essegbe, eds. [2010]. *Topics in Kwa Syntax*. Springer, Dordrecht.
- Abraham, R. [1940b]. *The Principles of Tiv*. Crown Agents for the Colonies, London.
- _____. [1958]. *Dictionary of Modern Yorùbá*. University of London Press.
- Ajibóyè, O. [2005]. *Topics on Yorùbá nominal expressions*. Dissertation, University of British Columbia.
- Awóyálé, 'Y. [1991]. The tense system of Yorùbá. *Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere* **27**, 193-221.
- Bámgbósé, A. [1966]. *A Grammar of Yorùbá*. Cambridge University Press.
- Basile, G. [1634-36/1986]. *Lo cunto de li cunti*. Garzanti, Milano.
- Brancati, G. [1480-81/1988]. *Vita e favole di Esopo. Volgarizzamento del secolo VX*. Liguori, Napoli.
- Bresnan, J. [1971]. Sentence stress and syntactic transformations. *Language* **47**, 257-81.
- Carstens, V. [1986]. *Proper government in Yorùbá*. M.A. thesis, U.C.L.A., Los Angeles.
- Chomsky, N. [2001]. Derivation by phase. *Ken Hale; a life in language*, edited by M. Kenstowicz, 1-52. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Déchaine, R.-M. [1991]. Bare sentences. *SALT* **1**, 31-50. Distributed by Cornell Working Papers in Linguistics, Ithaca New York.
- Déchaine, R.-M. & V. Manfredi. [1998]. SVO ergativity and abstract ergativity. *Recherches linguistiques de Vincennes* **27**, 71-94.
- De Filippo, E. [1973]. *I capolavori di Eduardo*. Einaudi, Torino.
- Di Maio, G. & O. [1982]. *Ce penza Mammà*. www.giantinati.it/copioni2.php
- Dowty, D. [1986]. The effects of aspectual class on the temporal structure of discourse; syntax or pragmatics? *Linguistics & Philosophy* **9**, 37-61.
- Elugbe, B. & K. Williamson. [1977]. Reconstructing nasals in Proto-Benue Kwa. *Linguistic Studies Offered to Joseph Greenberg*, edited by A. Juillard, 339-63. Anma Libri, Saratoga.
- Éménanjo, 'N. [1984]. Ìgbo verbs; transitivity or complementation? 5th Annual Conference of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria, Department of Linguistics & Nigerian Languages, University of Nigeria, Nsúká ("Nsukka").
- Enç, M. [1987]. Anchoring conditions for tense. *Linguistic Inquiry* **18**, 633-57.
- Giorgi, A. & F. Pianesi. [1997]. *Tense & Aspect; from semantics to morphosyntax*. Oxford University Press.
- Givón, T. [1975]. Serial verbs and syntactic change: Niger-Congo. *Word Order & Word Order Change*, edited by C. Li, 49-112. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Green, M. & G. Igwè. [1963]. *A Descriptive Grammar of Igbo*. Akademie, Ost-Berlin.
- Greenberg, J. [1963]. *The Languages of Africa*. Mouton, the Hague.
- Guthrie, M. [1948]. *Bantu Word Division; a new study of an old problem*. [= International African Institute Memorandum **22**] Oxford University Press.
- Hale, K. [1988]. Warlpiri categories. Class lecture, 24-960, 21 November. M.I.T., Cambridge, Mass.
- Hornstein, N. [1990]. *As Time Goes By; tense & Universal Grammar*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Hulstaert, G. [1938]. Praktische grammatica van het Lonkundo (Lomongo). De Sikkel, Antwerp.
- Hyman, L. [2004]. How to become a Kwa verb. *Journal of West African Languages* **30**, 69-88.
- Klein, W. [1992]. The present perfect puzzle. *Language* **68**, 525-52.
- Ledgeway, A. [2009]. *Grammatica diacronica del napoletano*. Niemeyer, Tübingen.
- _____. [2011]. Syntactic and morphosyntactic typology and change. *Cambridge History of the Romance Languages 1; Structures*, edited by M. Maiden & al., 382-471, 724-34. Cambridge University Press.
- _____. [2012]. *From Latin to Romance; morphosyntactic typology & change*. Oxford University Press.
- Longobardi, G. & C. Guardiano. [2009]. Evidence for syntax as a signal of historical relatedness. *Lingua* **119**, 1679-1706.
- Manfredi, V. [2005a]. Tense parameters and serial verbs. Invited to *Studies in the Syntax of Kwa; a generative perspective*, edited by E. Aboh & J. Essegbe; withdrawn after failure to obtain peer review, cf. Aboh & Essegbe eds. (2010). <http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/svc.pdf>.
- _____. [2005b]. Aspect versus the serialization parameter. Institute for African Studies, Universität Leipzig, 12 October 2005. <http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/Leipzig.pdf>.
- _____. [2009]. Morphosyntactic parameters and the internal classification of Benue-Kwa. *Historical Syntax & Linguistic Theory*, edited by P. Crisma & G. Longobardi, 329-43. Oxford University Press. <http://people.bu.edu/manfredi/DIGS9.pdf>.
- Maturi, P. [2002]. *Dialecti e substandardizzazione nel Sannio beneventano*. Lang, Frankfurt.
- McCawley, J. [1971]. Tense and time reference in English. *Studies in Linguistic Semantics*, edited by C. Fillmore & D. Langendoen, 96-113. Holt, New York.
- McCoard, R. [1978]. *The English Perfect; tense-choice & pragmatic inferences*. North Holland, Amsterdam.
- Meeussen, A. [1959]. *Essai de grammaire rundi*. Musée Royal du Congo Belge, Tervuren.
- Oyélárán, O. [1982/1992]. The category AUX in Yorùbá phrase structure. 15th West African Languages Congress, Port Harcourt, April./*Research in Yorùbá Language & Literature* **3**, 59-86.
- Radke, E. [1997]. *I dialetti nella Campania*. Il Calamo, Roma.
- Reichenbach, H. [1947]. *Elements of Symbolic Logic*. Free Press, New York.
- Scarpetta, Eduardo. [1883]. Amore e polenta; 'na paglia 'e Firenze. www.giantinati.it/copioni2.php
- Scheer, T. [2012]. Chunk definition in phonology; prosodic constituency vs. phase structure. *Modules & Interfaces*, edited by M. Bloch-Trojnar & A. Bloch-Rozmiej. [=Studies in Linguistics & Methodology **4**]. Katolicki Uniwersytet Jana Pawła II, Lublin.
- Sorace, A. [2000]. Gradients in auxiliary selection with intransitive verbs. *Language* **76**, 859-90.
- Vikner, S. [1985]. Reichenbach revisited; one, two or three temporal relations? *Acta Linguistica Hafniensia* **19**, 81-98.
- Wagner, M. [2005]. *Prosody & recursion*. Dissertation, M.I.T., Cambridge, Mass.
- Welmers, W. & B. Welmers. [1968]. *Ìgbo—a learner's manual*. Department of Linguistics, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Welmers, W. [1973]. Verbal constructions in Niger-Congo. *African Language Structures*, 343-83. University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Williamson, K. [1985]. How to become a Kwa language. *Linguistics & Philosophy; essays in Honor of Rulon S. Wells*, edited by A. Makkai & A. Melby, 427-43. Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- _____. [1989]. Niger-Congo/Benue-Congo overview. *The Niger-Congo Languages*, edited by J. Bendor-Samuel, 3-45/247-74. American Universities Press, Lanham, Md.
- Zamboni, A. [2000]. *Alle origini dell'italiano; dinamiche & tipologie della transizione dal latino*. Carocci, Roma. [Not personally consulted; cited by Ledgeway 2011/2012.]