

Discourse function of marked and unmarked verbs in ʋt-Ma'in narrative

The Benue-Congo (West Kainji) language ʋt-Ma'in [gel] is spoken by approximately 36,000 people in northwestern Nigeria. This paper examines the hypothesis that clauses of the main event line, i.e., propositions which move the narrative chronologically forward, are not marked for tense or aspect (TA). Those clauses that are marked for TA do other jobs in the narrative. This paper shows that this hypothesis accounts for the majority of clauses in narrative texts once one takes into account that direct speech also displays this distribution of TA marked verbs.

Verb stems can only be marked for past tense with the suffix *-g* (as in (1)), perfective with the suffix *-ǝʔsǝ* (always construed as past time), and distal past with the suffix *-ǝn* (which evokes distance in either space or time).

- (1) *ē* *nóŋ-g* *ī-nàŋ* *ì-s-rém.*
 CLASS2.PL do-PAST CLASS.DIM-argument CLASS.DIM.ASSOC.MRK-CLASS4-speech
 'They had a debate.' (Lit: They did an argument of speeches.)

Other TA distinctions can be made using a series of auxiliaries: present progressive *ǝ* (see (2)), past progressive *ǝgè*, future *dé*.

- (2) *è-k^hēn* *ǝ* *dzàk* *s-ǝ-t-hí* *ū-rǝ.*
 CLASS2-INDEF PRES.PROG raise CLASS4-ASSOC.MRK-CLASS6-head CLASS3-god
 'Some are thanking god.' (Lit: Some are raising heads to god.)

Clauses marked for TA are used for various functions like introduction, background information, commentary and conclusion. Example (1) above occurs in introductory material to a narrative: the verb is marked for past tense. Example (2) occurs as commentary on the final event of a story: the clause is marked as present progressive by the auxiliary. Example (3) advances the chronological time line of a story: the bare verb stems *wā* 'put' and *nòm* 'do' occur unmarked for TA.

- (3) a. *nā* *wā* *ǝ* *j-ǝ-r-dòg...*
 3.PL.NonSpec put dog C7-AssocMkr-C5-wilderness
 'They choose wild dog...' (Lit: They put wild dog.)
 b. *...jā* *nòm* *ǝ-r-bǝn.*
 C7.3SG do AssocMkr-C5-invitation
 'He gave an invitation.' (Lit: He did an invitation.)

The ʋt-Ma'in data contrast with the claim that perfective forms occur in main story line (or "foregrounded") clauses (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994:126); but do support claims that imperfective forms are used for background clauses (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994:126). This contrastive the use of TA marked forms for backgrounded information and the use of unmarked forms for foregrounded information has been noted for other languages in the region (Levinsohn 1994:8, for Gude [gde]; Follingstad 1994:193, for Tyap [kcg]). In ʋt-Ma'in, bare verb stems unmarked for TA appear to occur only as a narrative form and are not found elsewhere in the language.

References:

- Bybee, J., R. Perkins, & W. Pagliuca. 1994. *The evolution of grammar: Tense, aspect and modality in the languages of the world*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Follingstad, C. M. 1994. Thematic development and prominence in Tyap discourse. In *Discourse features of ten languages of West-Central Africa*. Summer Institute of Linguistics and the University of Texas at Arlington. pp. 151-189.
- Levinsohn, S. H. 1994. Discontinuities in Coherent Texts. In *Discourse features of ten languages of West-Central Africa*. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics. pp. 3-14.