

Verbal Morphology in Karonga Tumbuka

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Introduction

This paper looks at verb morphology in the Karonga dialect of Tumbuka.

Tumbuka is spoken in the African country of Malawi, situated between Tanzania, Zambia and Mozambique. In addition to the national language of Chichewa, there are several other languages spoken, as well. Unless otherwise noted the data for this paper all comes from Siegfried Mkandwire, a consultant in the Field Methods class at the University of Massachusetts from the district of Karonga.

Verbs in Karonga Tumbuka generally have three tenses (present, past and future), several aspects and two moods. Section one gives some background information about tense, aspect and mood. Section two presents the data and includes subsections on subject agreement, an overview of the data to be presented, the present tense (and aspects and moods that occur within present tense), the future tense, the past tense, and finally a subsection on other aspects. Section three compares my analysis with that of Vail 1972. And finally, section four is the conclusion.

1. Theoretical Background

Tense, aspect and mood are three ways to mark verbs to impart information about time and the speaker's attitude. They are often hard to distinguish or separate from each other but they are commonly viewed as related but distinct operations.

Tense deals with the progression of events as they occur on a real time timeline. In Tumbuka, as in many languages including English, events that are occurring right now are in the present tense, events that have yet to occur are in the future tense and events that have already occurred are in the past tense.

In addition to viewing an event on a broader timeline, aspect describes the event on an internal timeline (Payne 1997). For instance, the perfect aspect describes events as already completed but in relation to the following situation. In Tumbuka the perfective accompanies a tense resulting in a present perfect, future perfect and past perfect. Present perfect would be "He has slept" meaning he is not sleeping right now. In the future, "He will have slept" implies that at some point in the future that we are concerned with he will have slept but will not be sleeping at that moment in question. Similarly, in the past perfect (sometimes called "pluperfect"), "He had slept" refers to the state that he had been sleeping but at the point in time in question is no longer sleeping. Both future and past perfect shift the "now" point either forward or back on the timeline (Payne 1997).

Another form of aspect is continuative. This aspect is used for specific events that are repeated (Payne 1997) in whichever time frame the tense has distinguished. For example, the continuous can be in the present "He is jumping,"

the past “He jumped continually,” the future “He will continually jump,” or even the past perfect “He has been jumping continually.” Closely related is the habitual aspect which conveys that some type of event happens regularly but does not refer to a specific event and no information about whether the event is taking place now or not is given (Payne 1997). For example, “He sleeps.”

Mood, on the other hand, gives the attitude of the speaker toward the event. Commonly mood is viewed on a continuum from the realis mode that says an event definitely happened or is true, to the irrealis mode in which neither of those claims is made. Realis is most commonly called declarative “He is sleeping,” whereas irrealis commonly contains the interrogative “Is he sleeping?” or the imperative “Go and sleep” (Payne 1997). There is a range of additional moods that fall along the realis-irrealis continuum. Some of these are deontic “He should sleep,” or potential “He might sleep”.

2. Data Presentation

2.1 Subject Agreement background

While this topic is not explicitly covered in this paper mention of it is helpful in being able to identify the subject agreement morphemes. Phonology seems to play a part in the variation seen in subject agreement but these are some basic observations. The first person singular is an *n* sometimes with a vowel as in (1b).

1. a. $n + k^h wenda$
I + walk
I walk
- b. $ni + zamogona$
I + will sleep
I will sleep

The second person singular can be *w*, *u*, *ø*.

2. a. *w* +agona
you+ have slept
You have slept
- b. *u* +karya
you + ate
You ate
- c. *ø* +kwenda
you +walk
You walk

The third person singular can be *a*, *ø*.

3. a. *a* +kuniwona
he + sees me
He sees me.
- b. *ø* +kuniwona
he +sees me
He sees me.

The first person plural can be *t* alone or sometimes also with a vowel.

4. a. *t* + agona
we+ have slept
We have slept
- b. *ti* +kwenda
we+ walk
We walk.

The second person plural is usually *mu*.

5. *mu* +kwenda
you(pl)+ walk
You walk.

The third person plural is *w* followed by a vowel though usually *wo*.

6. *wo* +kwenda
they+ walk
They walk.

2.2 Overview of tenses, aspects and moods used in Karonga Tumbuka

The general verb structure in Karonga Tumbuka is:

[subj. agr. + tense + obj. agr. + VRoot + aspect + mood]

There are additional morphemes that can come between the VRoot and aspect that are not discussed in this paper (see Maislin 2004 and Leavitt 2004).

I do not have an example of one verb in one subject that exhibits all of the tenses that I have noted thus for this overview chart I included two different verbs each with differing subjects. SA refers to subject agreement and VR refers to verb root.

<u>Tense</u>	<u>Canonical Form</u>	<u>Example</u>	<u>Possible Gloss</u>
Present	SA+ku+VR+a	ti+ku+gon+a	We are sleeping
Present Perfect	SA+a+VR+a	t+a+gon+a	We have slept
Neg. Pres. Perf.	SA+nda+VR+e	ti+nda+gon+e	We [have] not [been] sleeping
Pres. Perf. Cont.	SA+a+VR+aŋg+a	t+a+gon+aŋg+a	We [have been] sleeping cont.
Future	SA+zamu+VR+a	ti+zamu+gon+a	We will sleep
Near Future	SA+ti+VR+eŋge	ti+ti+gon+eŋge ¹	We will sleep (near fut.)
Future Perfect	SA+zamuβa SA+a+VR+a	a+zamuβa a+lum+a	He will have bitten
Neg. Fut. Perf.	SA+zamuβa SA+nda+VR+e	a+zamuβa a+nda+lum+e	He will not have bitten
Future Cont.	SA+zamu+VR+aŋg+a	ti+zamu+gon+aŋg+a ²	We will be sleeping cont.
Past	SA+ka+VR+a	ti+ka+gon+a	We slept
Proximate Past	SA+ŋgu+VR+a	ta+ŋgu+gon+a	We were asleep (when smthg happened)
Past Cont.	SA+ka+VR+aŋg+a	ti+ka+gon+aŋg+a ³	We were sleeping cont.
Subjunctive	SA+ø+VR+e	a+ ø +lum+e	He should bite

¹ this is an inference—I only collected “we [will] not [be] sleeping”= *ise titigonenge yayi*

² this is an inference—I only collected “we will not be sleeping”= *ise tizamugonanga yayi*
(*yayi* is a negative marker)

³ this is an inference—I only collected “we were not sleeping”= *ise tikagonanga yayi*

2.3 Present tense

The present tense can be deceptively difficult to elicit because there are many different meanings within the present and also because the present can be used in the future or past for effect (Payne 1997). Because of this there was some inconsistency with the answers Siegfried gave since the class was not always clear enough in what we wanted translated. Regardless, I can say that there are a number of present tense verb operations.

First, there is regular present tense. It is formed by inserting *-ku-* between the subject agreement and the verb root. *-a* is used at the end of the verb to signify that the verb is realis.

7. *ti +ku +gon+a*
 we+pres+VR + realis
 We sleep.

This can also signify a present continuous aspect “We are sleeping”. Many times Siegfried would omit the present tense morpheme *-ku-* for instance in the following examples.

8. a. *ta +gon+a*
 we+VR +realis
 We sleep.
- b. *ti +kwend+a*
 we+ VR +realis
 We walk.

When asked to distinguish between *tikugona* and *tagona* Siegfried said that the first was “We are sleeping” and the latter “We have slept.” The construction of *tagona* does fit with the present perfect formation but the number of times that he gave this form for present tense signifies to me that his notion of present is

different from my English one but further research would be needed to delve into this issue.

Also complicating the present tense operations is the habitual aspect. There is some evidence that the present habitual is expressed by reduplicating the verb root and mood ending after the initial subject agreement morpheme but only two examples of this could be found. Further study is needed.

9. a. o+ gon+ a +gon+a
he+ VR+realis+VR+realis
He sleeps (habitually)
- b. wo+ gon+a +gon+a
they+VR+realis+VR+realis
They sleep (keep waking up and going back to sleep)

Again, there is limited data on this, but because there are times when this reduplication does not occur I think it may only work for dynamic verbs and perhaps is more of an iterative aspect (“He is sleeping” did not elicit this repetition but “He sleeps” did).

Present perfect is formed by inserting *-a-* between the subject agreement morpheme and the verb root.

10. t + a +gon+a
we+ Pres.Perf +VR+realis
We have slept.

In Tumbuka, there is a negative marker, *yayi*, which stands alone after some verbs in their regular tense. For instance:

11. a. tizamugona
We will sleep
- b. tizamugona yayi.
We will sleep not
We will not sleep

Following this formation I guessed that I would get **tagona yayi* to make the present perfect negative but I did not. Instead I got *tindagone*.

12. a. *tagona yayi
We have slept not
We have not slept
- b. ti +nda +gon+e
we+Neg.+VR + irrealis
We have not slept

Not only is *yayi* not used in (12b), but also the final vowel has been changed from *-a* to *-e*. The vowel switch indicates that the mood has changed to irrealis because this is a negative. This verb can also signify “We do not sleep” further complicating the odd relationship between present and present perfect. It seems that only the perfect aspects have a negative inflection and that when *yayi* is used to mark the negative in other aspects the mood does not change (for more information on negatives in Tumbuka see Houghton 2004).

Yet another confusing present tense operation is that of present perfect continuous. This seems to operate somewhat like the imperfect does in Spanish which is used to describe events that happened in the past as descriptors to a narrative of that past. Because its formation fits more with a present perfect continuous I included it in the present tense discussion. It is formed by inserting *-a-* between the subject agreement morpheme and the verb root and then inserting *-ang-* between the verb root and the mood marker.

13. t +a +gon+ ang +a
we+Pres.Perf.+VR+ Cont.+realis
We have been sleeping (cont). / We were sleeping.

One further distinction made in the third person singular present is between performing an action at the present moment and the capability to perform that action. For example, there is variation among (14a) and (14b). This does not seem to occur for any other subjects. It performs similarly to a potential aspect but I would then expect that this form would be able to be used for all subjects and that it would have an irrealis mood, which it does not.

14. a. a +gon+a
 currently+VR+ realis
 He is sleeping (right now)
- b. o +gon+a
 can+VR+realis
 He can sleep (has the ability)

2.4 Future tense

There is one more operation within the future tense than the present tense. First is the regular future which is formed by inserting *-zamu-* between the subject morpheme and the verb root. This future is distinguished from the near future that is shown in (15b). Because neither of the morphemes used to make the near future tense are used elsewhere I cannot differentiate the meaning of each of them separately if that is possible.

15. a. ti +zamu+gon+a
 we+Future + VR+realis
 We will sleep.
- b. ti +ti +gon +enje
 we+Near Fut.+ VR+
 We will sleep in the near future.

I have not been able to figure out the significance of *-enje*. If it is really more like *-eng-* plus the irrealis *-e-* ending I am not sure why this should be irrealis.

The future also has a perfect aspect. It is a compound verb formed by adding *-zamuβa* to the subject agreement morpheme for the first word and for the second word having the same formulation as the present perfect.

16. a +zamuβa a +lum+a
 he+ Fut. Perf. he+VR +realis
 He will have bitten (Vail 1972)

Similar to how the present perfect operates the negative future perfect uses the same first word and then inserts *-nda-* between the subject morpheme and the verb root in the second word and finishes with an irrealis mood final vowel.

17. a +zamuβa a+nda+lum +e
 he+Fut. Perf. he+Neg+VR+irrealis
 He will not have bitten (Vail 1972)

The final future tense aspect that will be discussed is the future continuous. This formation is similar to regular future except that instead of ending with the realis mood marker *-aŋg* is inserted between the verb root and the mood marker.

18. ti +zamu+gon+aŋg +a
 we+Future+ VR+Cont. +realis
 We will be sleeping continually

2.5 Past Tense

The regular past tense is formed by inserting *-ka-* between the subject morpheme and the verb root.

19. ti +ka +gon+a
 we+Past+VR+realis
 We slept

This is a very regular operation with little irregularities or complications. Similar to the near future, the past also has a near past commonly called the proximate past. It is formed by inserting *-ŋgu-* after the subject agreement morpheme and before the verb root.

20. ta + ŋgu +gon+a
 we+Prox.Past +VR+realis
 We have slept (recently but are not now)

I did not find a past perfect (pluperfect) aspect so perhaps this proximate past can stand in for it. Siegfried did at one point give *andalume* for “He had not bitten” (neg. past perf.) but I was not able to ask how this would be distinguished from “He has not been biting” (neg. pres. perf.), which he also gave as *andalume*. Otherwise, I did not find a negative past perfect.

I am not sure if there definitely is a past continuous. I got a negative one with *yayi* and have made a supposition that it would work without the *yayi* to be positive but this is not confirmed.

21. *ti +ka +gon+anɟ +a
 we+Past+VR +Cont.+realis
 We were sleeping (continually)

2.6 Other aspects

The final two aspects that were collected were imperative forms and subjunctive. The imperative is produced by using the regular present tense form for either the second person singular or plural (depending on the addressee(s)) and changing the realis *-a-* ending to the irrealis *-e-*.

22. a. mu +gon+a
 you(pl)+VR+realis
 You (pl) sleep (declarative)
- b. mu +gon+e
 you(pl)+VR+irrealis
 You(pl) go and sleep. (imperfect)

The subjunctive also uses the irrealis ending. There is no tense marker.

23. a+ +lum+e
he+∅+VR +irrealis
He should bite. (Vail 1972)

3. Comparison with the work of Vail

Vail wrote his PhD dissertation on the Aspects of the Tumbuka Verb over thirty years ago and on a different dialect than Siegfried's. Perhaps because of differences attributed to the variations in the dialects or perhaps for some other reason, many of the results that I obtained are different than his. Some of his aspects were not found in Siegfried's dialect. Vail has past stative, pluperfect, plupf. neg., potential, future pot., fut. transitional, fut. motive and emphatic subjunctive, none of which I found in Siegfried's dialect. This could be either because they do not exist or because I did not ask for them in a way in which Siegfried could distinguish them from other aspects.

As discussed in section 2.5 when asked for the negative pluperfect (past perfect) Siegfried gave the same form as the negative present perfect (I was not able to ask how he would differentiate them). When I showed him Vail's pluperfect form (24) he said that *akati* means "reported speech" rather than anything to do with the pluperfect.

24. a+kati a+nda+lum+a
he+Pluperf he+Neg.+ VR +realis
He had not bitten. (Vail 1972)

Siegfried did understand and recognize the future perfect and neg. fut. perf. (16) and (17) but never offered these 2-word tenses. When asked to produce a phrase in the future perfect aspect Siegfried gave the example in (25) which is the

same as the construction of the regular future tense. Another confusing response was that he supplied *wandagone* to mean “they will not have slept” but there was no inherent part of the verb that distinguished it from the negative present perfect in (12b).

12. b. ti +nda +gon+e
 we+Neg. +VR + irrealis
 We have not slept

25. a +zumu+lum+a
 he+Fut. +VR + realis
 He will have bitten.

Two other aspects that Siegfried understood when shown Vail’s examples but never gave on his own are the past stative (26a) and the emphatic subjunctive (26b). Siegfried never mentioned a far past. This could be because I was not explicit in asking for a long ago past or because it is not commonly used. While he recognized the emphatic subjunctive form the meaning he gave was slightly different than Vail’s. Siegfried gave “We should maybe bite” rather than Vail’s definitive “He definitely should bite.” Since I already got rid of the future emphatic that Vail had (changed to near future-- see section 2.4) perhaps Karonga just does not have emphatics.

26. a. wa +liku +lum+a
 they+Past Stat+VR+realis
 They bit (long ago).

b. ti +wa+lum+e
 Emph+he +VR +irrealis
 He definitely should bite (Vail 1972)

The potential, future pot., fut. transitional, and fut. motive never come up in my discussions with Siegfried.

The subjunctive was also a little different than Vail's. It is a particularly difficult aspect to elicit partly because it is not used explicitly in English and is therefore hard to ask for. When I showed Siegfried Vail's subjunctive example (23) he recognized it but never offered this form otherwise. When Siegfried wanted to express doubt, rather than using an affix of some sort he would instead use the word *panji*, "perhaps" directly before the verb. Curiously, this would also be expected to be in the irrealis mood but it retains the realis *-a-* ending.

27. *panji* *n+k^ha +gon+a*
 perhaps I +Past+VR+realis
 I might have slept

Some of Vail's aspects I called by different names. For example, he listed future emphatic but based on the information Siegfried provided this formation seemed to more resemble a near future. Also, he used the term past present but I used present perfect.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Karonga Tumbuka has three tenses, numerous aspects and two moods. These can be difficult to tease apart from each other and from other aspects or moods that I may not have discovered or differentiated. Phonological processes at work as well as human error may have masked some aspects or tense distinctions that should have been made. Many contrasts were made between my findings and Vail's, which may be attributed to differences in dialect. This is a very preliminary sketch of the tense, aspect, and mood system in Tumbuka. Because of the subtle variations in meanings between many of these tenses and aspects further research is needed to confirm and fully describe these operations.

References

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