

Teasing Apart Perfective Aspect and Past Tense: Evidence from Siamou

1. Problem. Siamou (Niger-Congo, Kru) has a verb form, often marked by low-tone (henceforth L-tone verb), which is sometimes labeled past tense (Prost 1964), and sometimes perfective aspect (Traoré 1985, Marchese 1986). Siamou also has a sentence-final particle *ín*, which seems to function as past tense. I argue that L-tone verbs encode perfective aspect, while *ín* encodes past tense.

2. L-tone verbs are perfective. First L-tone verbs usually have a past construal (1). This is predicted by theories of default tense which state that perfective events have a past interpretation by default (Smith 2008). However, L-tone eventive verbs are felicitous in at least one non-past context: namely, with performatives (2). This is predicted if they are perfective, but unexpected if they are past tense (Smith 2008). **Second**, L-tone verbs can not combine with the imperfective to produce a past imperfective; this is expected if they are perfective, but not if they are past (Klein 1994). **Third**, L-tone verbs are part of a larger paradigm of aspectual morphemes (3-4); this indicates that the L-tone is an autosegmental aspectual morpheme. **Fourth**, L-tone verbs conform to the semantic definition of perfectives: the event is contained within the timeframe of a temporal adverb (Smith 1997). **Fifth**, L-tone verbs are like perfectives in that accomplishments and achievements have a culmination entailment (Rothstein 2004). **Sixth**, L-tone verbs pattern like perfectives in that they have an inceptive reading with punctual adverbs (Smith 1997).

3. The sentence-final particle *ín* is past tense. First, *ín* occurs only in past tense contexts. **Second**, *ín* combines with the imperfective to yield a past imperfective (5). **Third**, *ín* freely combines with any aspectually marked verb to shift the reference time of the event to the past (5-10). **Fourth**, *ín* has implicatures that are consistent with it being past tense:

- (i) expressions with future morphology combined with *ín* have a counterfactual implicature (6) (Iatridou 2000);
- (ii) perfect and imperfective expressions with *ín* have a cessation implicature (7) (Altshuler and Schwarzschild 2012);
- (iii) *ín*-marked sentences can convey politeness (8) or doubt (9) (Botne and Kershner 2008);
- (iv) consistent with the default past construal of Siamou perfectives, when past tense *ín* combines with the perfective, it has a remoteness implicature (10).

4. Implications. Tense diagnostics confirm that *ín* instantiates past tense, while aspectual diagnostics confirm that L-tone verbs instantiate perfective aspect. Consistent with Smith (2008), the past interpretation that arises with perfective aspect is a default. Tense/aspect defaults are also sensitive to lexical aspect. The role of the telic/atelic partition in default aspect has been explored (Bohnemeyer and Swift 2004). However, in Niger-Congo languages, the significant partition is not telic/atelic but eventive/stative (Welmers 1974, Déchaine 1993). Siamou has a class of verbs that are interpreted as either stative (11) or inceptive (12). Taking the inceptive as basic, the stative construal derives from the default past interpretation of the perfective: these are result states. These leads to the surprising conclusion that Siamou does not have statives as a lexical class.

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1. **Ń** **ni** **nun** **yè**
1SG PART water drink.PRFV
I drank water.
2. **Ń** **ni** **ń** **ká**
1SG PART 1SG refuse.PRFV
I refuse./*I refused
3. **Ń** **ni** **nun** **laàn**
1SG PART water drink.IMPV
I am drinking water.
4. **Ń** **ni** **nun** **gbɛ-è**
1SG PART water drink-CMPL
I (recently) drank water.
5. **Ń** **ni** **nun** **laàn** **ín**
1SG PART water drink.IMPV PST
I was drinking water.
6. **Ń** **bè** **nun** **gbɛ-a** **ín**
1SG PART water drink-FUT PST
I was going to drink water (but I didn't).
7. **Ń** **ni** **nun** **gbè-ɲèn** **ín**
1SG PART water drink-PERF PST
I was drinking water (but I'm not anymore).
8. **Ń** **ni** **kpàr** **búr-è** **ín.**
1SG PART mat spread-CMPL PST
I spread a mat. (You're welcome to join me on it.)
9. **À** **bè** **kpàr** **blín-ɲèn** **ín.**
3SG PART mat fold-PERF PST
He folded a mat (maybe).
10. **Ń** **ni** **nun** **yè** **ín**
1SG PART water drink.PRFV PST
I drank water (awhile ago).
11. **À** **nun-î** **ɲèn.**
DEF water-DEF become.hot.PRFV
The water is hot.
12. **À** **jo-ô** **ri** **sóo** **tèŋn.**
DEF man-DEF PART big become.PRFV
The man became big.

References

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