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 in, which seems to function as past tense. I argue that L-tone verbs encode perfective aspect, while in 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 in is past tense. First, in occurs only in past tense contexts. Second, in combines with the imperfective to yield a past imperfective (5). Third, in freely combines with any aspectually marked verb to shift the reference time of the event to the past (5-10). Fourth, in has implicatures that are consistent with it being past tense:
   (i) expressions with future morphology combined with in have a counterfactual implicature (6) (Iatridou 2000);
   (ii) perfect and imperfective expressions with in have a cessation implicature (7) (Altshuler and Schwarzschild 2012);
   (iii) in-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 in combines with the perfective, it has a remoteness implicature (10).

4. Implications. Tense diagnostics confirm that in 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.
1. Ń ni nun yè
   1SG PART water drink.PRfv
   I drank water.

2. Ń ni ň ká
   1SG PART 1SG refuse.PRfv
   I refuse./*I refused

3. Ń ni nun laàn
   1SG PART water drink.IMPF
   I am drinking water.

4. Ń ni nun gbè-è
   1SG PART water drink-Cmpl
   I (recently) drank water.

5. Ń ni nun laàn ín
   1SG PART water drink.IMPF PST
   I was drinking water.

6. Ń bè nun gbè-a ín
   1SG PART water drink-Fut PST
   I was going to drink water (but I didn't).

7. Ń ni nun gbè-pèn ín
   1SG PART water drink-Perf PST
   I was drinking water (but I'm not anymore).

8. Ń ni kpàr bûr-è ín.
   1SG PART mat spread-Cmpl PST
   I spread a mat. (You're welcome to join me on it.)

9. À bè kpàr blin-pèn 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-ì jèn.
     DEF water-DEF become.hot.PRfv
     The water is hot.

12. À jò-ò rì sòò téng.
     DEF man-DEF PART big become.PRfv
     The man became big.
References


