Aspect in Yemsa

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Yemsa is an Omotic SOV language spoken in south-western Ethiopia. Morphologically, the basic TAM distinction is modal in that the verbs have two stem forms, viz. a realis and an irrealis one, differing in their stem-final vowel. The stems are used as bases for aspectual, tense and modal forms. Thus, the Simple (perfective), the imperfective and the progressive are formed from the realis stem, whereas the future and the imperative/jussive take the irrealis stem as their base. There are additional verb forms in subordinate and cosubordinate (chained) contexts.

Basically, Yemsa features a cross-linguistically frequent dual aspectual system with a perfective-imperfective dichotomy, or, more precisely, a ±INTRA system in Johanson’s (1996) terms. Since the perfective is the unmarked counterpart both morphologically and functionally, it will be called Simple. It consists of the bare realis stem and person suffixes (cf. ex. (1)-(2)). The imperfective is an expansion of the Simple formally and adds the suffix -fa or -fe (according to person and gender) to the realis stem (cf. ex. (3)-(4)). This suffix was grammaticalised from the verb foo ‘to be there, live’. Its use is primarily habitual, since more focal uses have been taken over by the progressive, which is formed through another expansion: The suffix -di intervenes before the imperfective suffix (ex. (5)). This seems to be a comparatively recent grammaticalisation of a periphrastic verb form since the use of the verb duu ‘to sit’ as a progressive suffix is transparent and it is confined to certain aktionsarts and main clause verbs.

In non-main clause contexts, some of the verb forms distinguish Simple and imperfective forms. In some cases, this seems useless, e.g. with a sequential converb which is claimed to have perfective value anyway (cf. ex. (6)-(7)). As will be shown, however, the imperfective suffix is able to grasp subtleties in the temporal relation between events.

In main clauses, a nominalising suffix -r can occur on the verb forms described above, which leads to further shades of aspectual meaning (cf. ex. (8)-(9) for a nominalised Simple and a nominalised progressive form, respectively).

While the perfective-imperfective dichotomy is rather straightforward with main clause verbs, it is exploited differently in non-main clause contexts. Besides the morphological description of the aspectual forms, this paper will treat these functional differences. In addition, it attempts at an explanation for the appearance of the nominalising suffix on finite verbs.

Reference

(1) Bár tíchä tich-i.
   3sm letter write-REAL[.3]
   ‘He wrote a letter/letters.’

(2) És-seen hànkåló hèp măshkà nàwà kòoní-r-à kár'-ni.
   DEM-DEF.TEMP_j after two female girl give.birth-CV-f reach[.REAL]-1p
   ‘After that we had two girls.’

(3) Tîchä=tū tich-i-fē.
   letter=FOC write-REAL-IPFV[.3m]
   ‘He writes letters.’

(4) Ėstän innò wònòtirí-k hàmm-à nàwàà-s-ō èp'-à yàa-fē-ni.
   then 1p next.morning-INSTR go.CV-f girl-DEF-ACC.f take[.CV]-f come.REAL-IPFV-1p
   ‘Then the next day we go and take the girl.’

(5) Bár tíchä tich-i-dí-fē.
   3sm letter write-REAL-PROG-IPFV[.3m]
   ‘He is writing a letter/letters.’

(6) Tî sēni wóst-āa-t yòó-nà.
   quickly work-CVSEQ-f SS come.IRR-1s/3FUT
   ‘I’ll finish it quickly and I’ll come.’

(7) […] ùgün-tā āaché-r-ē kūn-f-āa-t nàwàà-s-ō dîünk’ō kàbi-r-ē
   road-on hide-CV-m lie-IPFV-CVSEQ-m SS girl-DEF-ACC.f unexpectedly stand.up-CV-m
   bò’e-r-ē […]
   kidnap-CV-m
   ‘…they hide on the road lying (there), then they suddenly kidnap the girl…’

(8) Tā nàanggót-nàa-s-ôn àkàmā-nôn kèesht-ē-nā-nē.
   1s children-1sPOSS-DEF-ACC.f much-ADV love-REAL-1s-NML
   ‘I love my children a lot.’

(9) Bár tíchä tich-i-dí-fē-r.
   3s letter write-REAL-PROG-IPFV[3.m]-NML
   ‘He is/was writing letters/a letter.’