ASPECT AND TENSE IN NIGER-CONGO

Derek Nurse

In 2010 three of us produced a web document dealing with verbal categories, mainly aspect and tense, across Niger-Congo (Nurse, D, S. Rose, J. Hewson. 2010. Verbal categories in Niger-Congo languages. http://www.mun.ca/linguistics/nico/index.php), referred to in John Watters' abstract for this conference). It contains two contradictory and not reconciled theoretical frameworks, some factual errors, and some material which is not widely known. Nevertheless it is the first attempt to examine tense and aspect across all of NC. Since it has not received much attention, I propose to discuss its conclusions at the Paris conference. It is important to have public discussion of the conclusions and problems.

Its main points are:

Five aspects are widely attested across today's NC languages: Factative (FAC)/Perfective (PFV), Perfect (PFT), Imperfective (IPFV), Progressive (PRG), and Habitual (HAB)/Iterative. The distinction between Factative and Perfective needs more examination. The first two/three are 'completives', the last three 'incompletives'. Although this is a typological statement, it is likely that all five can be assumed for PNC.

Tense contrasts were not a PNC or an early NC feature. Only a minority of NC families have developed clear tense contrasts.

Thus, evidence from NC suggests that aspects become aspects, not vice versa. This fits with what has been found elsewhere in the world. In some cases, tense systems emerged independently, in other cases, it is an areal feature, having apparently spread across genetic lines.

The picture is untidy in some areas, for various reasons. For instance, some West African families have only aspectual systems, but have been analysed as having future tense(s). This needs more examination.