

**ABSTRACT for
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Towards the Reconstruction of the Tense-Aspect-Mood System in Early Bantoid

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ABSTRACT: Towards the Reconstruction of the Tense-Aspect-Mood System in Early Bantoid

The purpose of this study is to increase our understanding of the tense-aspect-mood categories in early Bantoid and their possible implications for the internal classification of Bantoid. In this study particular attention will be given to the presence or absence of tense as a morphological category within South Bantoid.

It is assumed that the various subgroups of South Bantoid, including Bantu, derive from various speech forms of the early (South) Bantoid period. If subgroups of Bantoid share certain innovations then it is assumed that they share an earlier history. Those assumptions are at work in the variety of lexicostatistical studies that have included the Bantoid languages within their scope (Henrici 1973; Heine 1973; Coupez, Evrard and Vansina 1975; Bennett and Sterk 1977; and Piron 1995 and 1998). In these studies it is assumed that a shared lexical innovation indicates a shared history.

Williamson and Blench (2000) note that Piron's lexicostatistic studies (1995, 1998) indicate that South Bantoid is a coherent group. The problems come in determining the internal boundaries among the subgroups of South Bantoid. By their proposed classification of Bantoid languages, Williamson and Blench (2000: 35) suggest that the Bantu languages form the first branch within the South Bantoid group, with all the other South Bantoid subgroups forming a parallel branch. More nuanced proposals than this one have been made as noted in Watters (1989). These proposals place the Bantu languages in a more integrated way within Bantoid. It is expected that the study of tense-aspect-mood within Bantoid subgroups will raise some questions as to the place of Bantu relative to the other subgroups and the other subgroups relative to one another.

When it comes to comparative studies of tense-aspect-mood systems, the study of these systems in Bantoid is made significantly more feasible because of Nurse (2003, 2008) and his study of tense and aspect in Bantu as well that of Nurse, Rose and Hewson (2010) and their work on tense and aspect in Niger-Congo. The current distribution of these systems in the South Bantoid sub-groups including Bantu suggests a more complex situation than the lexicostatistic studies seem to suggest. At the deepest level there appears to have been an early distinction between two different speech forms. At issue is the marking of tense as a morphological category. One group of languages continued with what they likely inherited

from their Benue-Congo and Niger-Congo origins. They have verbal systems that do not mark tense morphologically. By contrast, another group of languages began to develop a system in which they marked tense morphologically. These would eventually develop complex sets of tense systems.

Examples of a more original system are found in Ekoid (Watters 1981), Nyang (Abangma 1987) and other Bantoid groups. They probably include Bendi (Stanford 1967) and Upper Cross River languages such as Mbembe (Barnwell 1969) and Legbo (Hyman, Narrog, Paster, and Udoh 2002), either as a common genetic feature or an areal feature. These languages generally work off an aspectual system that distinguishes perfective and imperfective in Comrie's (1976) sense, along with other moods such as conditional and subjunctive. The Ejagham language provides an example (See Watters 2010, 2012).

(1) Ejagham (Ekoid Bantu) - language without tense

a. <i>à-kí-ràbbhé</i>	'he/she is opening' (PROG)	}	IMPERFECTIVES
b. <i>à-ràbbh-á</i>	'he/she opens' (HAB)		
c. <i>á-ràbbh-á</i>	'he/she opens' (IMPV:ConstF)		
d. <i>à-ràbbhè</i>	'he/she opened' (PFV:OpF)	}	PERFECTIVES
e. <i>à-ràbbh-é'</i>	'he/she opened' (PFV:ConstF)		
f. <i>à-ràbbhè</i>	'he/she has opened' (PFT) – compare (1d, see 7d)	—	PERFECT
g. <i>á-ràbbhé</i>	'if he/she opens' (COND)	—	CONDITIONAL
h. <i>à-ràbbhé</i>	'he/she should open' (HORT)	—	SUBJUNCTIVE
i. <i>ràbbhé</i>	'open' (IMPER)	—	IMPERATIVE

On the other hand, examples of the complex tense systems are found in Grassfields Bantu languages (Watters 2003) such as Mbam-Nkam (Eastern Grassfields). They are standard in Narrow Bantu languages (Nurse 2003, 2008). Less elaborate tense systems are found in the Ring languages of Grassfields Bantu as in Aghem (Anderson 1979) and the Momo languages of Grassfields Bantu as in Ngie (Watters 1980) and Mundani (Parker 1991). A less elaborate tense system is also found in Vute (Thwing and Watters 1987), a Mambiloid language of North Bantoid.

An example of an elaborate tense system and its formal markers in (2) comes from Ngyembɔɔŋ (Anderson 1983:246ff) an Mbam-Nkam language from Grassfields Bantu. All

forms are given in the perfective aspect. The present form is not included. ‘P’ refers to PAST and ‘F’ to FUTURE, with the attached numbers referring to degrees of past and future.

(2) Ngyembɔɔŋ (Mbam-Nkam, Grassfields Bantu) – language with extensive tense

P4 Perfective	à là lá?	nz’á mb’áb	‘he cut the meat (a long time ago)’
	3s P3 AUX	cut meat	
P3 Perfective	à là	nz’á mb’áb	‘he cut the meat (some time ago)’
	3s P3	cut meat	
P2 Perfective	à kà	zà? mbàb	‘he cut the meat (yesterday)’
	3s P2	cut meat	
P1 Perfective	à ně	nz’á? mb’àb	‘he cut the meat (earlier today)’
	3s P1	cut meat	
P0 Perfective (= Anterior)	à	zǎ? mb’àb	‘he has just cut the meat’
	3s	cut meat	
F1 Perfective	à gè	z’á? mb’àb	‘he will cut the meat (later today)’
	3s F1	cut meat	
F2 Perfective	à t’ó	z’á? mb’àb	‘he will cut the meat (tomorrow)’
	3s F2	cut meat	
F3 Perfective	à l’ù	z’á? mb’àb	‘he will cut the meat (some time from now)’
	3s F3	cut meat	
F4 Perfective	à l’á?	z’á? mb’àb	‘he will cut the meat (a long time from now)’
	3s F4	cut meat	

The contrast between the lack of tense in Ejagham and elaborate marking in Ngyembɔɔŋ is striking in that they are both Bantoid languages. The contrast raises the question: Would the distribution of languages with tense and those without point to a possible narrowing of the origin of Bantu languages to the region where tense innovation became a vigorous process before the Bantu started their migration? Did communities with pre-Bantu forms that migrated east and southeast come from a more specific location than from the general location often referred to as “a region along the Cameroon-Nigeria borderland”?

Whatever is found concerning the distribution of tense, we will also need to eventually correlate the findings with actual morphological markers of tense, developments in noun class systems, reconstructed lexical items as well as with lexicostatistical studies. However, at this time this study will focus on tense marking or the lack thereof in early Bantoid and what its implications might be for classifying the Bantoid subgroups.

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