

ASPECT AND TENSE IN NIGER-CONGO

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For over a decade¹ a group of us² worked³ on verbal categories, especially aspect and tense, first in Bantu and then Niger-Congo. The results are not published yet but can be seen at <http://www.mun.ca/linguistics/nico/index.php>. Judging by the sparse reaction we have had, the document has not been widely read, so I would like to present sections of it today, partly to get reactions from you, as Niger-Congoists, and partly because we are aware it may contain errors. Please tell us about errors in a constructive way so we can improve the contents. We would like to have public discussion of the conclusions and problems. One reason we did not proceed to publication was the co-existence in the document of two partly contradictory theoretical frameworks. They can be seen in Chapter 1 (Nurse, Rose) versus Chapter 23 (Hewson)⁴. My presentation today leans towards one framework. I invite conference attendees to read the Introduction, these two chapters and one or two of those intervening.

Aim of the study

The study was conceived as a sequel to *Tense and Aspect in Bantu* (Nurse 2008). That book concentrated on the typology of tense and aspect (henceforth TA) across a wide and representative set of (Narrow) Bantu languages. It aimed to establish the range within which Bantu languages vary in their grammaticalized expression of TA, how tense and aspect interact, their semantic content, and to some extent their pragmatics. It also examined other verbal categories but in less depth.

Our purpose here is similar. Since we were familiar with verbal categories in Bantu, we were curious about the same categories in wider Niger-Congo and about the general Niger-Congo background from which Bantu had emerged. How far were those categories and that background similar? We discovered many similarities and also found significant differences.

Our purpose can be expressed more broadly. We saw that no one had attempted to present an overview of verb systems in Niger-Congo, and we are aiming to fill that gap. Our main focus is aspect (and tense)⁵. While our main purpose is synchronic and typological, that is, the system of verbal categories, their architecture and meanings, we also wanted to see what could be assumed

¹ 1996 (?) to 2010.

² Christa Beaudoin-Lietz, John Hewson, Sarah Rose, and myself.

³ We met once a week, including most summers.

⁴ Where reference is made to just Hewson, Rose, or Nurse, or to a chapter, without date, it refers to the web document.

⁵ Details of word order, verb structure, mood, imperatives, focus, relativization, negation, and auxiliary verbs, particularly „be“, can also be found in the web document because they are important sources of aspect in Niger-Congo. They are not discussed here.

for Proto-Niger-Congo, so dealt with diachrony and reconstruction, change and grammaticalisation⁶. We would emphasize the systemic and cognitive nature of this study – it is not merely a list of morphemes, but an attempt to organise them as a system. We recognize the limitations of this study. It is a first attempt to examine tense and aspect across all of NC and the proposals will certainly need later modification.

Choice of languages, what constitutes Niger-Congo?

Niger-Congo is a huge phylum. In the „lumping“ view, it consists of around 1500 languages, of which some 500 are Bantu, the others non-Bantu. „Splitters“ have recently voiced doubts about the membership of some families in Niger-Congo. Güldemann (2008) excises Atlantic, Dogon, Ijoid, and Mande, to which Dimmendaal (2008) adds Ubangi. Based on verbal evidence, we incline to the mainstream view of Niger-Congo as a unit, and base our choice of languages on Blench’s recent (p.c.) diagrams of Niger-Congo (1a) and Benue-Congo (1b) (cf Williamson & Blench (2000:18). Even so, it is hard to say how many families there are, and what is family, sub-family, group or subset. Nurse (2008) presented detailed data from a hundred Bantu languages and took data from another hundred or so, out of a total of some 500, so could be reasonably certain that the total (some 40%) sample represented a typological and geographical cross section of Bantu. In our case, how many, and which, of the 1000 or so non-Bantu Niger-Congo languages would constitute a reasonable typological and geographical sample? Many Niger-Congo languages, spoken by small and often dwindling communities, are not described or are underdescribed. This not only immediately limits our choice but also makes judgements about typicality difficult: if a family or group consists of many languages, of which only one is well described, while the others are not described, how are we to know if that one is typical and could represent the others well? Our solution was necessarily simple and arbitrary. We chose one language from each family as shown in Diagram 1 in the web document, and then one language from groups within some of the larger „families“ such as Adamawa-Ubangi or Benue-Congo. The choice of representative language was made largely on the basis of the availability of a description or analysis, or in some cases more than one description or analysis of the language. In some cases, we were able to communicate electronically with authors. Since it is often, but not always, the languages of larger communities that have been described, we run the risk of presenting the verbal systems of languages that have been simplified by long use as lingua francas. At the same time, since they are used by large numbers of people, there is often considerable current dialect variation, and in that case, which variant are we to describe? We recognize these limitations and we

⁶ Again, those are not treated here.

acknowledge that 21 languages⁷ may be inadequate representation of the 1000 or so non-Bantu Niger-Congo languages. **The 21 are: Aghem (Grassfields Bantu, Bantoid, Benue-Congo), Bambara (Mande), (Narrow) Bantu (Bantoid, Benue-Congo, Bijago (formerly part of Atlantic), Degema (Edoid, Volta-Niger), Donno So (Dogon), Doyayo (Adamawa, Gur-Adamawa-Ubangi), Ejagham (Ekoid, Bantoid, Benue-Congo), Ewe (Kwa), Fula (North Atlantic), Godie (Kru), Ijo (Ijoid), Jukun (Benue-Congo), Kabiye (Gur, Gur-Adamawa-Ubangi), Kisi (South Atlantic), Makaa (northwest Narrow Bantu, chosen because NW Bantu languages differ typologically from most other Bantu languages)), Obolo ((Lower) Cross River, Benue-Congo), Otoro (Heiban, Kordofanian), Supyire (Senufic), Yoruba (Volta-Niger), Zande (Ubangi, Gur-Adamawa-Ubangi).**

Verb categories in Niger-Congo are linked to verb morphology, which in turn is linked to the order of sentence constituents. We start by sketching verb structure but omit word order – see the web document. The sketch combines typology and diachrony.

Verb structure We assume PNC had a synthetic verb nucleus consisting of Root – EXT – FV. 11 of the 21 families investigated retain this structure. As we will see below, this structure is important, as it plays a central role in the expression of aspect. This original structure has been lost or reduced in a large area of West Africa: northwestern Bantu, Grassfields Bantu, many Bantoid languages, and languages farther west, such as Yoruba. Most have a reduced nucleus structure Root - suffix, where the suffix incorporates remnants of EXT and FV. Only two (Obolo, Yoruba) have no segmental trace of EXT – FV. The initial impetus for this loss was a limiting of the length of the prosodic stem to four, three, and then two syllables (Hyman 2004), affecting material at the right of the stem. Many of the categories expressed at EXT and FV were then expressed in other ways (tones kept, use of auxiliaries, etc).

Current Niger-Congo languages vary considerably in what precedes the verb nucleus, ranging along a continuum between “analytic” and “synthetic” languages. In fully analytic languages a string of discrete pre-stem material (particles, auxiliaries, adverbials) precedes the nucleus, indicating categories such as subject agreement, tense, aspect, mood, negation, focus, relativization, and often other categories such as conditional and object marking. Fully synthetic languages have fused all the pre-stem material, so a set of inflectional prefixes precedes the nucleus. Between the ends of the continuum are many languages which have fused some morphemes while keeping others discrete. Dogon is excluded from this because all its inflection is post-stem.

⁷ In fact 20, as Narrow Bantu is treated as one language. Makaa, a NW Bantu language, is included separately, being typical of the NW languages, which differ typologically from most Narrow Bantu.

We assume the analytic structure was original and the grammaticalized structures developed from the analytic by cliticization and fusion. Of the Niger-Congo languages/families that have evolved a fully synthetic verb structure, some are adjacent or near Bantu: Ejagham, Jukun, Obolo, Zande. Others are distant: Bijago, Fula, Kabiye, Otoro. In the latter languages/families, synthetic structures resulting from grammaticalization are likely to have developed independently, whereas the emergence of synthetic structures in the families adjacent to Bantu suggests they may be related to what happened in Bantu.

Aspect Aspect is defined variously, as a “verbal category that expresses the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (Comrie 1976) or “the representation of event time, the time contained in the event” (Hewson). Aspect is the difference between “I smoked, I used to smoke, I was smoking, I had been smoking, I had smoked, I have smoked, etc”, all of which could refer or include reference to a single past act last week. All the languages examined have aspect, which fits with an apparent consensus that all natural languages have aspect. Further, all languages examined have several aspects.

Having said that, we did not always find it easy to identify exactly which aspects occurred in the languages. Most of our source materials were written in the (late) twentieth century in different conceptual frameworks (generative, functional, “traditional”, descriptive) with different purposes, they are of different lengths, and use a range of terminology. We found it hard to unravel some descriptions/analyses (often the data was inadequate). We wanted to present everything in a more or less unified framework, and in a more or less standard format. While this makes for easier reading, we realize it might upset some of the source authors. We point out where we depart from our sources. Finally, we had hoped to produce a theoretically uniform study but, as indicated, we succeeded partly but not completely in this.

Five aspects are widely attested across today’s NC languages: Factative (FAC)/Perfective (PFV), Perfect (PFT), Imperfective (IPFV), Progressive (PRG), and Habitual (HAB)/Iterative. All five occur in more than 60% of the sample languages. The first two/three are ‘completives’⁸, the last three ‘incompletives’. The most common contrast in the sample languages is IPFV vs PFV (or FAC), although those are not always the terms used in the descriptions.

The term ‘Imperfective’ occurs with two meanings in the sample languages. In some it is a superordinate, being the only incomplete category to contrast with Factative/Perfective, e.g. in Bambara and Degema. In others it is one of several incomplete categories, co-ordinate with Progressive, Habitual, Iterative, and others. In both usages, it is a wide incomplete, seeing a situation

⁸ Some authors do not treat Perfect as an aspect (e.g. Comrie 1976).

from the inside: the situation has started, the speaker knows not when or it is unimportant, it is ongoing, and will likely continue.

Progressive is a more focused type of imperfective, which narrows attention to the temporal space around the time of reference or speaking. As such, it is often incompatible with stative verbs, whose emphasis is on more permanent state (*I am knowing). The class of stative verbs has a fairly common core across languages but has some intralinguistic variation.

Habitual represents a ‘situation...characteristic of an extended period of time, so extended that ..the situation..is viewed,..as a characteristic feature of a whole period’ (Comrie 1976: 27). An Iterative represents a situation that is repeated, an incomplete series of complete events. While the distinction between Habitual and Iterative is easy enough to grasp objectively, in practice it is not so clear. Some sources describe as Iterative situations what others label Habitual. The examples provided in the sources do not always clarify the situation, being often just one-word translations. So while table (2) uses the two labels in some cases, generally following the source, this section often refers to them as Habitual/Iterative, thus admitting ignorance.

Completives are harder to deal with: Perfect (also referred to in the literature as Retrospective or Anterior). Perfective, Factative. This can be seen by considering what they represent.

Perfective denotes a “complete situation” and “often indicates the completion of a situation when contrasted with an imperfective situation” (Comrie 1976:18,19). There is an obvious close connection between perfectives and past situations, because it is past situations that are most often complete. In many languages perfectives can also represent non-past situations.

Perfect denotes “a situation that started in the past but continues into the present” or “the continuing present relevance of a previous situation” (Comrie 1976:52, also Bybee et al (1994:54,57,318). It focuses on the result phase, immediately subsequent to the situation.

Factative⁹ is not likely to be familiar to many readers outside West African linguistic circles. Attention was first drawn to it by Welmers (1973:346), whose formulation has been repeated since in slightly modified form by others (e.g. Faraclas 1984, 2007, Faraclas et al 2007). In this formulation, Factative has two characteristic features. Structurally, it is nearly always an unmarked form, either a zero form or the least marked aspectual form in a language. In particular, in contrast with Imperfective, it will generally be the unmarked form. Functionally, when used with non-stative or dynamic verbs, it typically represents past, complete, situations, but when used with stative verbs, it represents current, non-past, incomplete, states, that is, presents or futures. Welmers (ibid) says: “(Factative) expresses the most obvious fact about the verb

⁹ Hewson uses Performative to refer to an aspect very similar to Factative. Others use Aorist.

in question, which in the case of active verbs is that the action took place, but for stative verbs is that the situation obtains at present”.

Although that characterization fits many cases of Factative in the sample languages, it does not fit all. Structurally, some languages (e.g. Bambara, Bijago, Degema) have added new suffixes at FV to mark Factative, while others (e.g. Ejagham, Godie) mark the contrast between FAC and IPFV only by tones, so it is hard to tell which is the unmarked form. Functionally, while Factative representing past situations with dynamic verbs and present situations with statives is the normal situation with most of the sample languages, it has expanded its role in some languages. **Thus4**

It ought to be clear from what has been said so far about Perfective, Perfect, and Factative that they share areas of overlap so the differences and similarities need to be made clear. Perfective and Perfect both represent complete situations but whereas Perfectives show no particular connection to the present (“He lived in Lagos for twenty years”, the implication being that he doesn’t now), Perfect representations do show such a connection (“He has lived in Lagos for twenty years”, the implication being that he still does). Perfects and Factatives are superficially quite similar to each other, especially in their both distinguishing dynamic from stative verbs. They differ structurally, in that Factatives are typically unmarked, whereas Perfect marking tend to derive from grammaticalizing auxiliary verbs such as finish or by modifying Perfectives in some way. They differ functionally in their attention to the result phase, which is central to Perfects but not important to Factatives. Finally, Perfectives and Factatives differ most obviously in their treatment of stative verbs: Perfectives have the same morphology for both and the same, complete, meaning for both kinds of verb, where Factatives have the same morphology for both but have different meanings.

One characteristic feature follows from this discussion of Factative, Perfective, and Perfect. Together they make for a crowded semantic and functional space and it is in fact exceptional that all three co-occur. It is especially unusual for Perfective and Factative to occur together, while the co-occurrence of Perfect and Factative is quite common in Niger-Congo (see (2)), as is Perfective and Perfect elsewhere.

A fundamental binary aspectual distinction is usually made between Perfective and Imperfective (e.g. see Comrie 1976:25). However, most Niger-Congo families distinguish rather Factative and Imperfective, with Imperfective being used in its widest, incompletive sense. As (2) shows, all but four of the sample languages/families have Factative, not Perfective. Even the four are doubtful: we simply do not have access to enough diagnostic data to be sure about Aghem, Dogon, Supyire – and others -, and although many Bantu languages have a Perfective, we are not sure how many others, in the northwest and perhaps elsewhere, have a Factative instead. We have made the conservative default judgement that a lack of hard evidence indicates Perfective, not

Factative, but had we made Factative the default case, then probably 20 out of 21 would have shown a Factative, not a Perfective. Factative is more widespread in non-Bantu Niger-Congo than many have hitherto assumed, as it stretches from Kordofanian and Ubangi, in the east, to Atlantic in the far west.

The encoding of aspect in PNC

Earlier we assumed that PNC had a synthetic verb nucleus consisting of Root – EXT – FV. 11 of the 21 families investigated retain this structure. And as (3) shows, roughly half the families surveyed have a small set of morphemes at FV consisting of a single vowel and representing aspect: Mande (Bandi, not Bambara), Bantu (not all Bantu), Bijago, Dogon, ?Doyayo, ?Ejagham, Fula, ?Kru, ?Kabiye, ?Kisi, Otoro, Ubangi. Among these single vowels, /-a/ and /-i/ predominate, with the predominant functional contrast being that of Factative (-i) versus Imperfective (-a) aspect. But those are not the only patterns. Some have shifted the function of the vowels. Thus Ubangian Zande and Gbaya have reversed values for the two vowels, Bijago also has /-i / Imperfective, while Ejagham has one high or at least non-low front vowel but apparently only for Factatives which have focus function. Some have apparently shifted the vowels. Thus Otoro has Factative suffix vowels /-u, -o/ with corresponding Imperfective /-a, -o/, others have reduced one vowel to zero, thus contrasting unmarked zero (most commonly in the Factative) with some other vowel, yet others have reduced both vowels to zero, leaving just a tonal contrast (Ejagham, much of Kru).

Nevertheless, the families or languages which have the contrast of /-i/ Factative versus /- a/ Imperfective, that is, parts or all of Mande, Bantu, Dogon, Atlantic, Ubangi, are typologically disparate and geographically distant, so it is implausible they have innovated the pattern separately. The best hypothesis on the basis of the current data is that in early or Proto-Niger-Congo the FV component of the verb nucleus expressed aspect, specifically a binary contrast between Factative (-i) and Imperfective (-a). More data and insights could modify this proposal.

One of the more controversial parts of this hypothesis concerns the status of the Factative. Mainstream crosslinguistic formulations usually contrast Perfective and Imperfective. Factative stretches across Niger-Congo from west to east. Is Factative an original Niger-Congo category, or did it spread across West and Central Africa, replacing Perfective? If so, was it an internal Niger-Congo development or was it transferred from another African phylum? If so, which one, and what is the distribution of Factative in Africa outside Niger-Congo? There is also the issue of marking. The proposal above is that Factative and Imperfective are commonly associated with /-i/ and /-a/, respectively. But how to reconcile that with the fact that Factative is commonly the unmarked member of the pair in contemporary languages?

The background to the other aspects common today is easier to speculate about. Perfect is not linked to any obvious single morphological pattern: this

suggests that either PNC had no perfect or that it has been replaced so often as to make impossible any reconstruction. Perhaps the completive stage was shared between PFV, FSC, and PFT, with the exact connection to /-i/, /-a/, and unmarked still to be worked out.

Progressives are often compound/analytic forms linked to ‘be’ and a locative (‘in, at’) or nominaliser. Habitual/Iteratives are partly expressed by reduplication but more obviously by being connected to the Imperfective: Imperfective subsumes Habitual, or Habitual is based on the Imperfective plus another feature, or is the Imperfective form of an auxiliary plus a main verb. Habituals are more obviously similar, functionally and morphologically, to Imperfective than are Progressives.

Finally, while the range of categories and morphology occurring at FV is fairly limited, that in the pre-verb/nucleus position is massive, reflecting the analytic nature of the verb and the variation that occurs between verb and subject. Since Factative and Imperfective are mostly expressed at FV, with the other aspects (and tenses) mostly in the large pre-verb position, that reinforces the impression that Factative and Imperfective are more fundamental and ancient than the others, which are built around them. This should not be interpreted to mean that at an earlier point only Factative and Imperfective existed – nearly all families show evidence that some of these other categories and their analytic morphology, while quite disparate from family to family, are long standing.

Tense Tense is also defined variously, either as “grammaticalized expression of location in time” (Comrie 1985), or “representation of the time that contains the event” (Hewson), etc. The default case is that the reference point is the time of speaking. Not all the languages investigated have clear tense contrasts, in fact only a minority (5 of 21) have developed clear tense contrasts: Aghem, Narrow Bantu¹⁰, Supyire, Makaa (for NW Bantu), Zande¹¹.

Bantu languages are known for their multiplicity of past and future tense contrasts: multiple pasts (2, 3, 1, 4) are common, multiple futures less so (1, 2, 3) (Nurse 2008: 89). Over 80% have more than one past, versus nearly 50% with but a single future. Past tense outnumber futures in most languages. Bantu languages with two pasts most often contrast hodiernal vs pre-hodiernal. Those with three contrast hodiernal, hesternal, and pre-hesternal. Future contrasts most often show the same contrasts (hodiernal vs post-hodiernal, hodiernal, crastinal, post-crastinal). These contrasts are flexible in many languages, depending on situation and speaker’s intent. Thus planting crops occurs only once a year so the most recent past (P₁) might be several months back, and P₂ could be over a year away. Future tenses are more fluid than pasts, because reference to the future, which has not happened, contains components of certainty and modality.

¹⁰ In Ch. 23 of our web text, Hewson uses Bukusu (Kenya) instead of Narrow Bantu.

¹¹ Also, though not examined here, some Mambiloid and Cross River languages.

Aghem has two pasts and two futures, both hodiernal vs beyond hodiernal: other Grassfields languages have more contrasts. Makaa also has two pasts and two futures, apparently with slightly different reference from those in Aghem. Hewson and Nurse differ in their analysis of Zande, Hewson seeing Past vs Non-past, while Nurse has two pasts and one future, possibly because the two analyses are based on different sources. Supyire has two pasts (hodiernal vs pre-hodiernal) and one (two?) future.

How similar are these tense systems? As can be seen, where tense systems and contrasts have developed, they tend to be cognitively similar. Morphologically, however, they are not at all similar. This can be graphically illustrated by considering the two varieties of Grassfields Bantu discussed in our web text (ch. 2). Aghem has two pasts (tonal variants of *mɔ*) and two futures (F_1 *si*, F_2 *lɔ*), whereas Bamileke-Dschang has five degrees of past and future, all involving variants of /a/: short *a*, long *a*, high *a*, low *a*, *a* with or without other morphological material following. There is no obvious point of similarity in the morphologies. Similarly, if Aghem, Makaa, Supyire, and Zande are compared, the morphology involved is quite dissimilar. The morpheme that occurs most often in past reference is pre-nucleus/stem /a/, with length and tonal variants, but that is virtually meaningless because it also turns up with much other reference across Niger-Congo. That is also true of Bantu (Nurse 2008:80ff, 277ff).

How and why have these tense systems developed? There are more questions than answers here, for instance:

- it is widely accepted, not just in Africa, that aspect-based systems are more widespread and probably more primordial than TA systems. Aspect-based system morph into TA systems, aspects morph into tenses, not vice versa. Why should this necessarily be? And just because it has happened often in general, what stimulates it in particular situations? Is the stimulus linguistic, cognitive, or does it reflect a changing outside world?

- the evidence suggests strongly that tense was not a feature of PNC or of early NC. So within Niger-Congo, where and when did tense start to develop? Narrow Bantu languages all have tense. Early Bantu was located in Cameroon. NW Bantu languages (Makaa in our sample) are still there, as are the Grassfields languages. They are genetically close and are or were geographically close, so it is reasonable to suggest that one centre of NC tense development was in the Cameroon, as a time when the ancestors of Bantoid, Grassfields, Cross River, etc, lived close together. Two scenarios present themselves: tense contract emerged in a language ancestral to Bantoid, Cross River, etc, and was inherited in the descendants, or it developed in one – the best candidate would be Bantu – and spread laterally to the others. Internal Bantu evidence suggests a single simple pattern evolved initially and became more complex subsequently and kaleidoscopically. This is set out in Nurse 2008: 277-83.

This scenario does not explain Supyire (Senufic) or Zande (Ubangian), both geographically remote from the Cameroon nucleus. Without my knowing

anything about the background to Senufic, it seems that tense contrasts there evolved independently. Zande is said to be unlike other Ubangian languages in several ways, of which tense contrasts is one. The Zande community is also adjacent to several (Zone C) Bantu languages. The binary contrast between the two pasts in Zande is tonal. It is also tonal in several Zone C languages (e.g. C32, Bobangi, and Lomongo, C46). It is plausible that tense contrasts in Zande emerged as a result of contact with current or older Zone C languages.

- part of all this is speculative. The problems here, and a solution, can be illustrated via the two Grassfields languages mentioned, Aghem and Bamileke-Dschang. Their systems are wildly different, cognitively and morphologically. There are more than 50 Grassfields languages. We need more data on them and on adjacent Bantu languages¹². If we had more good data on all the languages in the area, we could sort out the prevailing geographical patterns, we could see what Proto-Grassfields might have had, we could see what is inherited and what is the result of areal contact, and how tense developed. That is true on the wider scale for all of NC.

Future tense? Only 5 of the 21 languages/families analysed are described as having full tense systems. Of the remaining 16 a majority are or have been described as future tense, single or several, beside aspects. Worldwide that is unusual, because if languages have a binary contrast, it is most often past vs non-past, not future vs non-future. In West Africa, this is a regional feature, but not local, as the languages involved stretch all the way from Senegal in the west to Cameroon in the east, and then also in Kordofanian in the Nuba Mts of Sudan¹³. It cuts across genetic boundaries, as many Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic, mostly aspectual, are also described as having future “tense(s)”. As in past reference in those non-Bantu NC languages which have it, the morphology, the number of “futures” (1, 2, 3), and its various referents, are quite diverse. This can be seen in table (4) in Ch. 1 of the web document.

This again raises several questions, for example:

- are these really future tenses? Future situations contain at least two parameters absent from past reference. They contain an element of uncertainty, distant situations being less certain than proximate ones. And they contain modal components such as wish, hope, possibilities, obligations, and so forth. Nearly all future situations have a temporal and a modal component, so the question is which is predominant, which forms are best described as essentially temporal with modal possibilities, and which as modal with future implications? There are some criteria to characterise future tenses. One would be how to ask and answer questions about future situations¹⁴. Another would be, if a language has two forms, one of which can only be used with today and tomorrow, the

¹² At least a few Zone A Bantu languages have a system similar to Aghem’s.

¹³ Fula speakers are also reported in the southern Sudan.

¹⁴ E.g. How would one say: When she (write) the letter? She (write) it tomorrow.

other only with more distant situations, then those would be well described as two future tenses, near and remote. Fleisch (2000) describes the Bantu languages Lucazi as having three future tenses, a simple, a definite, and a remote but all three are shown occurring with the same adverbial, “tomorrow”, so clearly the temporal component is only one factor here. This would not happen in past reference, so either these are not really tenses, or else future tenses have to be defined differently from pasts, which refer to discrete or chronologically ordered time periods.

Of the thirteen languages in (4), only two (Bambara, Kabiye) have futures described in chronological terms, but even here supporting data and criteria are sparse. Of the other eleven, some are described in modal terms (intent, expectation, certain, uncertain, weak versus strong, potential, volitional), while for others no basis is offered, even for one or two to the point of admitting that the difference between them is unclear. This is a gray area, the descriptions being characterized by sparse data and unclear criteria. Traditionally, many West African languages were described in terms of tense, including future(s). More recent analyses have moved towards recognizing the modal component. Thus Ewe, traditionally analysed as having a future tense, has recently had this reanalyzed as a potential (mood) by an author who is both linguist and native speaker (Ameka 1991, 2005 a, b). It seems likely that at least some of the other sample languages might be so reanalyzed, but until we have reliable up-to-date analyses of the other languages, we have to suspend judgement on the status of future “tenses” in these and other West African languages. Until we do, we cannot make judgements about whether West Africa bucks the crosslinguistic trend by having a binary future versus non-future tense contrast.

I don't like to use the phrase “This needs more examination” but it is true.

- if these really are future tenses, how has that come about? A binary contrast future vs non-future is uncommon worldwide but apparently widespread in West Africa. It cuts across genetic boundaries. This strongly suggests it is a contact phenomenon. The morphology involved is apparently diverse but often involves the use of AUXs, such as ‘come, go, like/want, have, etc’, a pattern which is very widespread elsewhere in African and worldwide. So the morphology, the whole pattern, and its possible origin are not and will not be diagnostic until we can connect the geographical dots.

Conclusions, suggestions A survey of this kind has strengths and weaknesses. It enables us to say with some confidence that PNC had a synthetic verb nucleus consisting of Root – EXT – FV, preceded by a string of independent morphemes expressing other verbal categories; that this structure later become agglutinating at different times and places across NC; that the FV encoded expressed aspect, probably PFV vs IPFV, possibly FAC vs IPFV; that PNC was an aspect-based language without tense(s), with basic PFV/FAC vs IPFV, with other aspects (HAB, PRG, maybe PFT) probably expressed via AUX

+ main verb; and that tense distinctions emerged later, possibly along the Benue River, between E. Nigeria and W. Cameroon, during the last three millennia BCE (also possibly independently elsewhere). It does not allow good hypotheses on other issues, such as the following, which therefore need more in-depth work: look carefully at the expression of tense across all/most one area (maybe Grassfields?) and connects the dots; clarify the issue of PFV, FAC, and PFT; look carefully at ‘futures’ in non-Bantu NC and West Africa in general.

Finally, might we make an appeal that scholars working in this and related areas use a single unified set of terms and abbreviations. I see much inconsistency, most obviously in the use of PFV and PFT. Rose et al (2002) has a suggested set of terms, and Nurse (2008:xv–xviii) a suggested set of abbreviations.

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¹⁵ Details of most of the missing references can be found by going to <http://www.ucs.mun.ca/~dnurse/> and clicking on TA Bibliography .