

Aspectual classes of Verbs in Nyamwezi

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Abstract

This dissertation deals with the classification of verbs in Nyamwezi, a Bantu language spoken in central-west Tanzania. The major aims of this study have been twofold: first, to classify Nyamwezi verbs into different aspectual classes, and second, to present a variety of tests that were used as evidence for a verb's aspectual class membership. The data for the analysis and classification of verbs in this study were collected using a variety of fieldwork techniques mostly direct elicitation (sentence translation from questionnaires) and contextual elicitation (testing the acceptability of a construction based on a range of imaginary discourse contexts provided to the consultant). Other techniques that were used to collect data were informal or conversational interviews, back translation and digital recordings of oral narratives and conversations.

In classifying verbs into aspectual classes, this study has adopted Botne and Kershner's (2000) framework. This framework classifies verbs into aspectual classes based on three successive phases: ONSET (representing the phase leading up to the change), NUCLEUS (representing the change itself; it can also be represented as a lead-up phase if the verb lacks an onset) and CODA (representing the result state). In this framework, verbs are classified based on the number of phases they encode and on the semantic properties of the encoded phases, i.e., based on whether the phases are punctual/durative or dynamic/static.

The phasal structures encoded by Nyamwezi aspectual classes are determined using various diagnostic tests. Some of these tests are based on checking the interpretational differences or co-occurrence restrictions of a given verb with either grammatical aspect constructions (grammatical aspect tests) or lexical items, such as *-andya* 'start', *-oya* 'stop', *-mala* 'finish' and *hadoóhádó* 'slowly' (lexical tests). Other tests are based on checking the interpretational differences or co-occurrence restrictions of the verb with tense markers and time adverbials (tense and time adverbial tests). Most of these tests give results that to a large extent are similar to those observed in other studies on aspectual classes in Bantu languages. Other tests give results which cannot be generalized to other Bantu languages. This is because these tests do not test exactly the same thing in all languages. The differences between aspectual classes shown by the diagnostic tests will hopefully have an implication for an overall typology of aspectual classes.

KEYWORDS: Nyamwezi, aspectual class, phasal structure, diagnostic test