

An account of the stative vs. dynamic split in Saamáka

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Received 7 December 2010; received in revised form 22 July 2012; accepted 25 July 2012
Available online 1 September 2012

Abstract

In this paper, I intend to shed light on the stative vs. dynamic distinction in Saamáka. As in many other creoles, utterances containing an unmarked stative verb have a present interpretation, while those containing an unmarked dynamic verb have a past interpretation. Based on detailed fieldwork, I will demonstrate that the discourse contexts in which the bare verb form occurs matches with those in which present perfect is known to occur cross-linguistically. I postulate that the language has a morphological null perfect morpheme in its TAM paradigm. The Perfect Analysis proposed in this paper exploits the independently acknowledged difference between states and events concerning the inability of the latter to co-occur with a point-like present tense. The 'perfect' must be inserted in these contexts to create a derived resultant state, creating the illusion of a 'past tense' in many interpretational contexts. An advantage of the Perfect Analysis is that it provides a natural account of why the temporal distinction splits along the stative vs. eventive divide without additional stipulations for non-default readings of the bare verb form.

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Keywords: Creole languages; Tense/aspect; Present perfect; Cartography; Syntax/semantic interface

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the temporal interpretation of morphologically unmarked verbs in Saamáka.¹ In this language, as in many other creole (and non-creole) languages, verbs are often unmarked for tense, aspect and modality. Unmarked means that there is no overt morphology present that marks a verb for tense, aspect or modality. A sentence containing an eventive verb has a past interpretation, while one containing a stative verb has a present interpretation, as in (1) and (2) respectively (see also Byrne, 1987; Rountree, 1992; Veenstra, 1996).²

- (1) Context: Who walked in the forest this afternoon?

Dí womímíi wáka a mátu.

DET boy walk LOC forest

'The boy walked in the forest'.

or 'The boy has walked in the forest'

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¹ Saamáka is an English/Portuguese-based creole spoken along the Suriname River, Suriname. The substrate languages are the Gbe languages and Kikongo (Smith, 1987). The language was created by slaves who fled the plantations towards the end of the 17th century (Price, 1983). Currently, the language has 50,000 speaker (Aboh et al., 2013) who reside on the banks of the Suriname River, in Paramaribo, in French Guiana, and in The Netherlands. In the literature, the language is also referred to as Saramaccan.

² Abbreviations: SG = singular; PL = plural; MOD = modal marker; PST = past interpretation; IMP = imperfective; NEG = negation; BE = copula; COMP = complementizer; DET = determiner; ART = article; LOC = locative; Q = question marker; RQ = rhetorical question marker; NARR = narrative marker; FU = prepositional complementizer *fu*; IDEO = ideophone.

- (2) Context: What does the man fear?

Dí wómi feée dí dǎgu.

DET man fear DET dog

'The man fears the dog'.

Since in these examples there is no overt tense, aspect or modality (TAM) morphology present, we must address the question of what triggers the temporal interpretation of these sentences, and of how the difference between stative and eventive verbs might be explained. The observed difference with regard to temporal interpretation between stative and eventive verbs is not an isolated phenomenon (see [Welmers, 1973](#) on Igbo and Yoruba, [Manfredi, 1991](#) on Igbo, [Essegbey, 1999](#) on Ewegbe, [Satre, 2002](#) on Ngomba (Benue-Congo; Bamileke), [Aboh, 2004](#) on Gungbe, [Harley, 2008](#) on Tuwuli (Kwa)). It is interesting for readings that emerge where little morphology is involved. An explanation is, therefore, necessary. This paper presents new data to discuss an old problem. I aim to investigate the bare verb form in Saamáka in a formal fashion, and I will examine different ways of formalizing the decomposition of eventive and stative verbs with regard to their temporal interpretation.

Before I start, a point of terminology is in order which is fundamental for the discussion in this paper. Perfect and perfective aspect differ from each other in the following way: '[T]he former refers to a construction with particular temporal and aspectual characteristics, the latter refers to a closed aspectual viewpoint' ([Smith, 1997:106](#)). Perfective (and imperfective) aspect are 'concerned with different ways of representing the internal temporal constitution of a situation', whereas perfect 'tells us nothing directly about the situation in itself, but rather relates some state to a preceding situation' ([Comrie, 1976:52](#)).

The above described distinction in temporal interpretation is common across creole languages. To elucidate this phenomenon, it has often been argued that unmarked (eventive) verbs convey a perfective aspect reading (see [Gibson, 1992](#) on Guyanese Creole, [Hackert, 2004](#) on Bahamian Creole, [Hagemeijer, 2007](#) on Santome, [Gooden, 2008](#) on Belizean Creole, [Yakpo, 2009](#) on Pichi). In the present study, [Winford's \(2000\)](#) analysis of the unmarked verb form in Sranan ([section 3](#)), Saamáka's sister creole, is taken as inspiration for this Perfective Analysis. The expectations and consequences of the Selection for Covert Perfective Analysis are spelled out in a formal fashion, and it is investigated whether this can account for the difference in temporal interpretation between stative and dynamic verbs. I will demonstrate that a Perfective Analysis cannot account for the Saamáka data ([section 5](#)). The data discussed in this paper is based on fieldwork which was undertaken in the core of the Saamáka speech community. Questionnaires which specifically targeted simple past, perfective or perfect readings were developed to tease apart the interpretation of the bare verb form. The data I collected was elicited in a discourse context, and these contexts do not match with a discourse context in which only a perfective could be used. They do match with a discourse context in which a perfect is used. To explain the difference in temporal interpretation, I, therefore, postulate that Saamáka has a morphological null perfect morpheme in its TAM paradigm. This null perfect is obligatorily present in the underlying structure of a sentence containing an unmarked eventive verb, while it is optionally present for stative verbs. I postulate that present tense in Saamáka is momentary and, therefore, it can only embed stative predicates. Eventive verbs have to be merged with a state deriving functional head (e.g. modal, perfect) to be able to combine with present tense ([section 6](#)). The stativity requirement placed by present tense on its complements, and the obligatorily presence of the morphological null perfect morpheme when the verb is eventive provides a natural account of why the temporal distinction splits along the stative vs. dynamic divide, rather than according to a boundedness criterion (which would be the case under a Perfective Analysis). I will demonstrate that the Perfect Analysis proposed in the present study is a more compelling analysis than the Perfective Analysis. The Perfect Analysis can account for all readings of the bare verb form in Saamáka, and no additional stipulations are required to explain non-default readings. Such stipulations would be necessary under a Perfective Analysis.

This paper is organised as follows. [Section 2](#) presents an overview of the several temporal interpretations of the unmarked verb form in Saamáka. [Section 3](#) presents an overview of [Winford's \(2000\)](#) ideas regarding the unmarked verb form in Sranan. This is followed by an overview of my theoretical assumptions regarding the composition of tense and aspect in [section 4](#). In [section 5](#), I lay out the Selection for Covert Perfective Analysis which argues that eventive verbs select for a null aspectual head which is interpreted as 'perfective'. With respect to the Saamáka data, I will present empirical and conceptual problems against this analysis. [Section 6](#) presents my own account which argues that the temporal difference between stative and eventive verbs is to be explained by the presence of a morphological null perfect morpheme in Saamáka's TAM paradigm. I end this paper with some concluding remarks.

2. Temporal interpretations of the bare verb form

As (1) and (2) respectively exemplify, eventive verbs can give rise to a past interpretation, and stative verbs to a present interpretation. Furthermore, in temporal 'when' clauses, as in (3), and in conditionals, as in (4), an unmarked eventive verb can have a future interpretation.

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