

Journal of West African Languages XV, 2 (1985)

THE INTERRELATION BETWEEN ASPECT AND MOOD IN DENYA

Samson Negbo Abangma
 Department of English
 Ecole Normale Supérieure
 University of Yaoundé

This paper¹ shows that in Dényá, apart from the focal semantic meanings usually associated with imperfective aspect, such as progressiveness, habituality, iterativity etc. (Comrie, 1976:24-40), and the various discourse functions it has, the imperfective aspect reveals meanings, in certain contexts, which are associated with the irrealis mood. In English, such meanings like determination, intention, wish, unwillingness, lack of commitment and so on, are expressed mainly by the use of modals. In Dényá, similar meanings are expressed by either negating the imperfective form of the verb or simply by using certain kinds of verbs.

This paper is intended to lend support to the view that in universal grammar there need not be very sharp distinctions between the various verbal categories.

Cet article montre qu'en Dényá, en dehors des sens fondamentaux habituellement associés à l'aspect imperfectif, tels que le progressif, l'habituel et l'itératif etc. (Comrie, 1976: 24-30) et les diverses fonctions du discours, on trouve que l'aspect imperfectif révèle des sens qui sont associés au mode irréalis. En Anglais, de tels sens comme la détermination, l'intention, le souhait, le refus, le manque d'engagement etc. sont surtout exprimés par l'usage des modalités. En Dényá, des sens semblables sont exprimés soit en mettant à la négative la forme imperfective du verbe ou simplement en utilisant certains types de verbes.

Le présent article vise à appuyer l'idée selon laquelle en grammaire universelle, il n'est pas nécessaire qu'on ait de distinctions très nettes entre les différentes catégories verbales.

The \emptyset and {-ge} forms are used respectively in 1 (a) and (b). It would be incorrect to argue that the \emptyset form is a past tense marker and {-ge} a present tense marker. This is because {-ge} does not always refer to the present moment nor does the \emptyset - form always refer to the past. If we add time adverbials, the time reference will be changed in each case as the following examples illustrate:

2. (a) Eva a-wa-ne **ńnyá menya**
 Eva he-kill-({-ge}:Impf) sometimes animal
 'Eva used to kill animals'
- (b) Eva a-wa-ne **nyíe menya**
 Eva he-kill-({-ge}:Impf) soon animal
 'Eva will kill an animal'
- (c) Eva a-wa-ne **menya nana**
 Eva he-kill-({-ge}:Impf) animal now
 'Eva is killing an animal now'
3. (a) Eva a-w¹á **ńnyá menya**
 Eva he-kill-(\emptyset :pf) sometime ago animal
 'Eva killed an animal sometime ago'
- (b) Eva a-w¹á **nyíe menya**
 Eva he-kill-(\emptyset :pf) not long ago animal
 'Eva killed an animal not long ago'
- (c) Eva a-w¹á **menya nana**
 Eva he-kill-(\emptyset :pf) animal now
 'Eva killed an animal just now'

In 2 (a) to (c) as well as in 3 (a) to (c) the time reference is set by the adverbials and not by the form of the verb. This is not what one sees in some of the grassland Bantu languages of Cameroon like Kom where there are "four past tenses, one present tense and three future tenses" (Chia:1976) or as in Aghem where Anderson (1979:86) notes that there are two past tenses, a present tense and two future tenses.

1.2 ASPECT

The term aspect is used here to refer to the perspective from which the speaker views the situation, event or state. In Comrie's words "aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (1976:3). A major aspectual distinction common in languages of the world (Comrie, 1976:25) is between perfective (pf) and imperfective (impf). Perfectivity involves a lack of explicit reference to the internal temporal structure of a situation. The verb expresses the totality of the action and as Comrie remarks "the whole of the situation is

8. (a) b⁵ 'pick up
 (b) a-b⁵
 he-pick-up-(\emptyset :pf) 'he picked up'
9. (a) fo m^é 'throw'
 (b) a-fom^é
 he throw-(\emptyset :pf) 'he threw'
10. (a) fe-r^é 'remove'
 (b) a-fe-r^é
 he-remove-(\emptyset :pf) 'he removed'

When one examines the various contexts in which the perfective form is used, it becomes clear that there are certain focal semantic meanings associated with it. In examples 5 (a) to 10 (b), where we find activity verbs, the obvious reading is that of a completed punctiliar action. It is probably for this reason that some linguists refer to this aspect as completive aspect (Anderson, 1979:94).

Welmers (1973:246-7) refers to this use of the perfective as the "factative". He says that it "expresses the most obvious fact about the verb in question, which in the case of the active verbs is that the action was observed or took place, but for stative verbs is that the situation obtains at present".

This characteristic of perfective forms is typical of Dényá also. Stative verb and verbs of cognition have a present reading as the following examples show:

11. (a) Eva a-kaá mecho wimbo
 Eva he-know-(\emptyset :pf) matter that
 'Eva knows that matter'

In discourse the perfective performs a number of functions. It is the form used in the event - line⁴ to advance the action. This function of the perfective in sequencing events has long been recognized (A. Forsyth 1970:9-10, Hopper 1979:57-90, Abangma 1981). This is not limited to narrative discourse but extends to procedural discourse where it is the form for the main steps of the procedure as the following extract on how to extract palm oil shows:

12. (a) ɔ-kwo-g^é mmi 'having cut the nuts'
 you-cut-(cond) palm nuts
- (b) ɔ-kp^{!á}
 you-carry-(\emptyset :pf) 'you carry'
- (c) ɔ-p a 'you take off from the cone'
 you-take-off-(\emptyset :pf)
- (d) ɔ-p a-g^é 'having taken off from the cone'
 you-cut-(cond)

- (e) ɔ-b¹ɔ 'you take'
 you-take-(∅:pf)
- (f) ɔ-f¹ú 'you boil'
 you-boil-(∅:pf)
- (g) ɔ-fu-gé 'having boiled'
 You-boil-(cond)
- (h) ɔ-c¹ɔ 'you pound'
 you-pound-(∅:pf)
- (i) ɔ-c¹ɔ 'you pound'
 you-pound-(∅:pf)
- (j) ɔ-c¹ɔ 'you pound'
 you-pound-(∅:pf)
- (k) ɔ-co-gé 'having pounded'
 you-pound-(cond)
- (l) é-bé 'it is ready'
 it-ready

In the above examples, except for 12 (a), (e), (h) and (i) that provide linkage between the main steps of the process, the main actions are all in the perfective.

It is worth noting in 12 (i) to (k), the perfective is used to encode interactive actions which follow in quick succession and which last for a limited duration. In Hortatory discourse the perfective is used to encode DO -it- occasionally injunctions⁵ (Abangma:1981). Again the following examples are relevant. The extract is part of a longer text in which a mother is advising her son who is leaving home for Yaoundé to take up his job.

13. (a) ɔ-bélé-gé kpaá 'after a long time'
 you-sleep-(cond) long
- (b) ɔ-cwɔ 'you come'
 you-come-(∅:pg)
- (c) ɔ-g¹é esé 'you see us'
 you-see-(∅:pf) us
14. (a) ɔ-gé-gé muu 'if you see person'
 you-see-(cond) person
- (b) a-ké 'he said'
 he-say-(∅:pf)
- (c) ɔ-cwɔ-ɔ 'he is coming'
 he-come-(-ge:impf)
- (d) ɔ-na fiso 'you buy soap'
 you-buy-(∅:pf) soap

- (e) ɔ-na mega 'you buy salt'
 you-buy-(∅:pf) salt
- (f) ɔ-na kerésén 'you buy kerosene'
 you-buy-(∅:pf) kerosene
- (g) ɔ-t¹ɔ Esé 'you send us'
 you-send-(∅:pf) us

In 13 (b) and (c) the coming home and seeing of the parents are to be occasional events. Again in 14 (d) to (j) the buying of the things is to be occasionally and will depend on his seeing some reliable person.

1.2.2 The imperfective

The imperfective is marked by the {-ge} suffix (cf. 2.1) and low tone on all the syllables including the SCP. In this section, some of the focal meanings of the imperfective like progressive, habitual, iterative etc. already well documented in other languages (Comrie 1976:14-40; Lyons 1977:706 ff; Hopper 1979; Friedrich 1974 etc.) are seen to be relevant distinctions for Dényá.

A basic function of this aspect is to mark on-going or durative actions. This function is opposed to a punctiliar one associated with the perfective.

The imperfective + type of Verb

With activity verbs like nyú 'drink' nyé 'eat', for example, the imperfective gives a progressive reading, i.e. an on-going action. However, the on-goingness is of a limited duration. This is the most obvious meaning of the imperfective with these verbs. However, with adverbials different readings can be given to it. Compare 15 (a) and (b).

15. (a) Eva a-nyE-E gekwa
 Eva he-eat-((-ge)) plantain
- (b) Eva a-nyE-E gekwa jyé ndé bí
 Eva he-eat-((-ge:impf)) plantain every what day
 'Eva eats plantain every day'

In 15 (a) there is no use of time adverbials while in 15 (b) there is, 'everyday'. 15 (b) has a habitual reading and 15 (a) a progressive. The type of arguments (subjects and objects) accompanying the verb form do also influence the type of reading. Consider the following examples:

16. (a) Eva a-nyE-E nka
 Eva he-eat-((-ge):impf) money
 'Eva spends money'
- (b) Eva a-nyE-E gekwaɔɔ
 Eva he-eat-((-ge):impf) plantain
 'Eva is eating plantain'

- (c) Eva a-nyE-E majwoó
 Eva he-eat-({-ge}:impf) debts
 'Eva incurs debts'
 or 'Eva is a debtor'

It is clear that in 16 (a) and (c), the habitual meaning is the only one possible while in (b) it is the progressive. Since no adverbials are used in each, it is clear that the difference must be due to the objects *nka*, *gekwa*, and *majwoó*.

The imperfective of momentary and transition Verbs

With momentary or punctiliar verbs - (verbs with very little duration) - like *nyó* 'jump', *jo* 'stab, or do 'hit' 'beat', the imperfective gives iterative meaning. Iterativity implies the repetition of a situation. However, it should be noted that the imperfective of these verbs does not indicate just a single repeated event. It usually refers to several repeated actions, all in quick succession. If a speaker wants to call attention to a repeated situation or event, he normally uses the form of the verb where the stem is prefixed by *ma*, without using the imperfective {-ge}.

17. (a) Eva ǎ-ma-jó
 Eva he-rep-stab (∅:pf)
 'Eva stabbed again'

With transition verbs, like *kwoné* 'arrive/reach', *gbó* 'die' for example, the imperfective gives readings to be discussed in the next section dealing with the irrealis mood.

In Dényá discourse (Abangma:1981), this form has several functions. Only a few of these might be mentioned in passing here.

In narrative and procedural discourses it is used to mark the material as background⁷, the perfective, as mentioned above, being the form for the event-line. It was also shown that the imperfective, referred to in that study as the non-past, is also used to indicate climatic events in narrative episodes and main steps of procedure in a procedural text.

In hortatory discourses, the imperfective encodes 'do - always' injunctions as the following example illustrates. In the extract, a father is advising a daughter who has just been married and would in a day or two leave for her husband's house.

18. (a) ɔ-jyE gé
 you-go-(cond)
 'when you have gone'
- (b) ɔ-pe-le ji cáncá
 you-look-({-ge}:impf) him well
 'take care of him well'

possible, hypothetical, contrafactual, dubious, conditional actions/events. In the language, there are a number of syntactic and lexical devices which are used to convey the various meanings of the irrealis, for example, uncertainty and lack of commitment is encoded by preposing the word *ndɔfɔ* 'perhaps' before a given clause or sentence.

20. *ndɔfɔ eva a -cwɔ*
 perhaps eva he-come- (Ø:pf)
 'perhaps Eva came'

To indicate a dubious (db), situation, two particles *wá* and *-a* are used. The former precedes the clause and the latter is suffixed to the verb. The example which follows makes the point clear.

21. *Eva wá a - fɛ - a*
 Eva db he go-(Ø:pf) db
 'Eva might or might not have come, I am not sure'
 (a paraphrase)

If one wanted to make a contrafactual (cf) statement, one would use the form *sɔp + bɔ + v + bɔ + sɔp + v*

22. *Eva á - bɔ á - cwɔ, bɔ ʌ - fɛ*
 Eva he cf he come-(Ø:pf) I - go-(Ø:pf)
 'Had Eva come, I would have gone'

As 22 implies, my going was dependent on Eva's coming. He has not come, therefore I have not gone.

In the rest of this section it will be shown that without using these devices, certain focal modal meaning like determination, intention, wish, unwillingness, lack of commitment, prediction and so on, can be expressed using the imperfective aspect. Such meaning distinctions in English are made by use of modal auxiliary verbs. (Leech 1971:66-98, Palmer 1965:108-120, Lyons 1977).

2.1 IMPERFECTIVE ASPECT + NEGATION

The perfective and imperfective verb forms are negated differently in the language. To negate a perfective form, the *scp* is lengthened and carries a low - high tone. The verb stem carries low tone and the negative particle *wɔ* is placed clause final. Thus example 20 above if negated becomes:

23. (a) *Eva ǎǎ-cwɔ wɔ*
 Eva he-come-(Ø:pf) neg.
 'Eva did not come'

The imperfective forms are negated as follows: the scp is lengthened and like in the perfective, receives low - high tone. Both the stem and the suffix receive high tone. Thus 19 (d) becomes:

àá - kǎlé - gé nka
 he - look - (impf:-neg) money
 'He does not require money'

It is interesting to note that in the language the use of this negative imperfective form yields meanings which are obviously modal. In order to make the point a comparison is made with perfective forms.

24. (a) Eva a - wá menya
 Eva he - kill- (Ø:pf) animal
 'Eva killed an animal'

(b) Eva àá - aw menya wó
 Eva he - kill-(Ø:pf) animal neg
 'Eva did not kill an animal'

25. Eva àá - wá - né menya
 Eva he - kill-((-ge):impf neg) animal
 'Eva can/does not kill animals'

In 24 (a) there is a positive assertion of the statement that Eva killed an animal. In 24 (b), there is the negative form. The proposition expressed by this simply denies the assertion.

In 25 we find the negative imperfective. The proposition expresses the idea of Eva's inability. In the language, ability/inability to perform some action is overtly marked by the use of the imperfective form of *kaá* 'know' plus the verb stem. 25 above can be substituted for 26 which overtly refers to Eva's inability.

26. Eva àá - kǎá - gé wá menya
 Eva he - know-((-ge)-neg) kill animals
 'Eva cannot kill (impf:neg) animals'

Examples 25 and 26 are synonymous in the language.

Given a situation such as the following where speakers A and B are talking about Eva going to a neighboring village, Ache, notice the use of the negative imperfective.

27. (a) A: Eva a - fǎ Ache
 Eva he - go-(Ø:pf) Ache
 'Eva went to Ache'

(b) B: Eva àá - jyǎ Ache wó
 Eva he - go-(Ø:pf) Ache neg
 'Eva did not go to Ache'

- (c) C: Eva àá - jyÉ - é Ache
 Eva he - go-(impf-neg) Ache
 'Eva does not go to Ache'

Though 27 (b) and (c) are both counter statements to 27 (a), they definitely do not convey the same meaning. In 27 (b), the negative form merely suggests the non-achievement of a proposed result. But in 27 (c) there are other nuances like refusal and unwillingness to perform an action, and what are unwillingness and refusal but modal meanings?

2.2 IMPERFECTIVE OF SOME VERBS

With achievement verbs (Vendler 1967:97-121) some state verbs, as well as some transition verbs (Leech 1971:19), and verbs of inert cognition, the imperfective may suggest meanings such as lack of commitment, intention of desire. Consider the following pairs of sentences:

28. (a) m-fere - ge ínó
 I think-({-ge}:impf) that
 Eva a - jyE - E Ache
 Eva he - go-({-ge}:impf) Ache
 'I think that Eva is going to Ache'
- (b) m-féré ínó Eva a - jyE - E Ache
 I think-(∅:pf) that Eva he - go-({-ge}:impf) Ache
 'I thought/think that Eva is going to Ache'
29. (a) mendé yimbo n-kaa - ge ji
 woman that I-know-(impf) her
 'I know that woman'
- (b) mendé yimbo n-káa ji
 woman that I-know-(∅:pf) her
 'I know that woman'

In the above examples, 28 (a) and (b), and 29 (a) and (b), each pair expresses what is perceived by the speaker as the same situation whether as perfective or imperfective. In both 28 and 29, verbs of cognition or mental activity are used. In 28 (a), the imperfective form is used to express uncertainty and doubt or even lack of commitment. The use of the perfective expresses no such doubt. This use of the imperfective is similar to the use of the simple present in English (Leech 1971:24). In examples 29 (a) and 29 (b), the same is true. Given a woman approaching from afar, the speaker would use 29 (a) if he is not completely sure of the person coming. Once he is certain that he knows her, he will use 29 (b).

2.3 IMPERFECTIVE USED TO EXPRESS INTENTION OR WISH

The imperfective is the form suitable for expressing intention or desire to do something. Examples 30 (a) and (b) are illustrative.

30. (a) N - tene - ge fa
 I stand-({-ge}:impf) here
 'I want to stop here'
- (b) N - kele - ge mañjye
 I search-(impf) to go
 'I want to go'

In 30 (a), if we imagine the speaker to have been going along with the hearer and now intends not to continue, although he might still take a few steps ahead, then the statement merely indicates his intention to stop going. Again in 30 (b), the imperfective is used to express a desire or intention to go.

With achievement verbs like *kwone* 'reach', 'arrive', the imperfective may indicate just the intention and determination as in the following example.

31. Eva a - kwone - ge Mamfe
 Eva he reach-(∅:impf) Mamfe
 'Eva is reaching/going to Mamfe'

With transition verbs like *gbo* 'die' the imperfective may also express the meaning of prediction. Again if one imagines that Eva having seen Eta who is lying sick, says to another person.

32. Eta a - gbo - o
 Eta he - die-({ge}:impf)
 'Eta will die'

One can conclude that Eva is predicting Eta's death or inferring it from the condition of his sickness.

3. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

To summarize, I have examined the various meanings which the perfective and imperfective aspects have in the language. So far as the imperfective aspect is concerned, it has been shown that some of the contextual meanings can be described as aspectual - progressivity, iterativity, habituality etc. - and some as modal - intention, unwillingness, lack of commitment, etc. What this has demonstrated is the fact that verbal categories blend and associate in certain ways (Wallace 1982:216). In this study it is the imperfective aspect and the irrealis mood that blend and associate.

The basic question here is that if aspectual forms can be used for modal meanings, is there any real distinction between mood and aspect?

NOTES

¹This paper was presented at the 16th Congress of the West African Linguistics Society, March 25-29, Yaoundé, Cameroon.

²Dényá is commonly known as Anyang (Westermann 1952:114, Crabb 1965). The name used in this paper is what the native speakers call our language. There are four main dialects: Takamenda (the dialect described here), Bitieko, Kendem and Basho. The dialect described here has 8 vowel phonemes (i, e, ɛ, a, o, ɔ, u,) and 23 consonants.

The following special symbols are used in place of IPA ones:

c = tʃ
j = dz
sh = ʃ
ny = ŋ

³The {-ge} suffix has the following allomorphs:

Monosyllabic stems: -le
-me ne
-v

The selectional rules for these forms are not yet clear.

Disyllabic stems: gé

⁴Event-line refers to what some discourse analysts (e.g. Grimes, Hopper, etc.) have called the foreground in discourse. Included here are the more important events of a narrative, the more important steps of procedure etc.

⁵Hortatory refers to the discourse type in which the speaker commands or advises someone to perform an activity or to watch or improve his behaviour.

⁶Injunctions. The term is used here in the non-legal sense of it. It is used in a broad sense of order to do or not to do something. It also includes suggestions.

⁷Background material in discourse is opposed to foreground. It usually includes events of lesser importance, descriptions, digression, etc.

⁸Realis and irrealis moods; Wallace (1982:201-223) refers to the same type of distinction as eventive modality and noneventive modality respectively.

REFERENCES

- Abangma, S. N. 1981. The Use of Modes in Dényá Discourse: A Study in Discourse Analysis, Doctorat de 3e cycle Thesis, University of Yaoundé.
- _____. 1984. The {-ge} suffix in Dényá verbal system in Cahiers du département des langues et linguistique, 3:129-145, University of Yaoundé.

- Anderson, S. C. 1979. Aghem Verb Structure in Aghem Grammatical Structure, 73-81, edited by Larry Hyman, Southern California Occasional papers in Linguistics 7.
- Chia, E. N. 1976. Kom Tenses and Aspects. Ph.D. Dissertation, George Town University.
- Comrie, B. 1976. Aspect. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Ezikeojiaju, P. A. 1979. Tense or Aspect in Igbo: A preliminary study in Kiàbàrà, 113-126, Journal of the Humanities, University of Port Harcourt: Special Issue on Nigerian languages.
- Forsyth, J. 1970. A Grammar of Aspect. Usage and Meaning in the Russian Verb, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Friedrich, P. 1974. An Aspect theory and Homeric Aspect: In International Journal of American Linguistics Memoir 28, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Hopper, P. J. 1979. Aspect and Foregrounding in Discourse in Discourse and Syntax, 213-60, edited by Taimy Givon, Syntax and Semantics 12, Academic Press, New York.
- Leech, G. N. 1971. Meaning and the English Verb. Longman, London.
- Lyons, J. 1977. Semantics Vol. 2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Marchese, L. 1982. Basic Aspectual Categories in Proto-Kru in the Journal of West African Languages, 12, 1:3-23.
- Quirk, R. and Greenbaum, S. 1973. A University Grammar of English, Longman, London.
- Palmer, F. R. 1965. A Linguistic Study of the English Verb, Longman, London.
- Vendler, Z. 1967. Verbs and times in Linguistics in Philosophy, 97-121. Cornell University Press, Ithica, New York.
- Wallace, S. 1982. Figure and Ground: The Interrelationships of Linguistic Categories in Tense-Aspect Between Semantics and Pragmatics, 201-223.
- Watters, J. R. 1981. A Phonology and Morphology of Ejagham--with notes on dialect variation. Ph.D. Dissertation at the University of California, Los Angeles.
- Waugh, L. R. 1979. The Context-sensitive meaning of the French subjunctive in Waugh and Van Coetsem (eds.) 1979, 179-238.
- Welmers, W. 1973. African Language Structures. University of California Press, California.
- Wiesemann, U. 1984. Aspect and Mood as a Nine-cell Matrix, prepublication draft.