On the Bantu "imperfective" morpheme *-ag*

Leora Bar-el (University of Montana)

Malin Petzell (University of Gothenburg)

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Tense & aspect in Bantu

- Bantu languages are known for their abundance of tense, aspect and mood categories (Dahl 1985:176).

- The East Ruvu (ER) languages are unique within the Bantu family in that they exhibit a decidedly reduced set of temporal/aspectual morphemes.

- The goal of this talk is to describe the behavior of the imperfective morpheme *-ag* in ER and to explain its function with respect to the temporal/aspectual systems of these languages.

Roadmap for the talk

- Some background on East Ruvu Bantu languages

- The behavior of imperfective *-ag* in East Ruvu

- Proposal: why the function of *-ag* has narrowed to habitual

- Implications for TA systems

East Ruvu (ER) Bantu
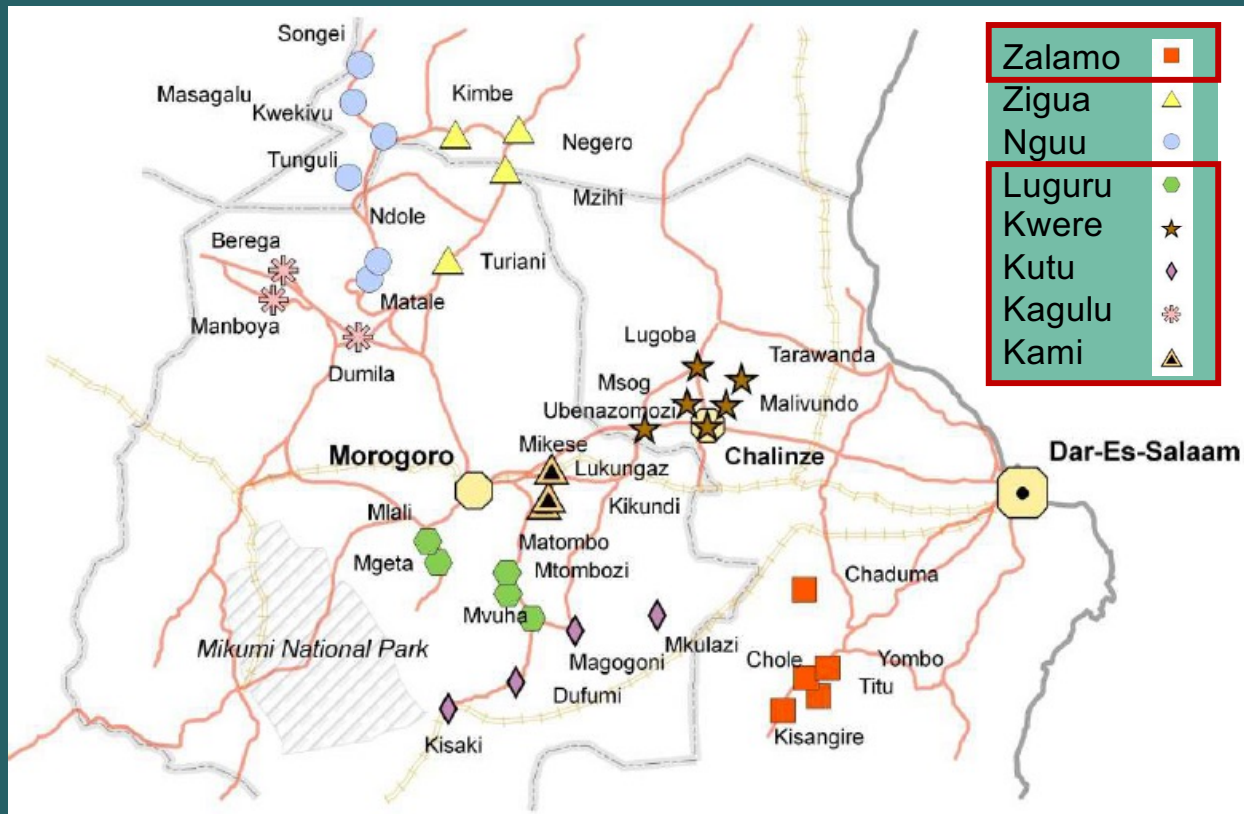
Petzell & Hammarstrom 2013

- The Greater East Ruvu languages are spoken in the Morogoro region of Tanzania.

- This study focuses on the six East Ruvu (ER) languages.

- All are classified as G-languages:
  - Kagulu [G12]
  - Kami [G36]
  - Kutu [G37]
  - Kwere [G32]
  - Luguru [G35]
  - Zalamo [G33]

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Imperfective *-ag* in Bantu

- The morpheme **-ag* (and its reflexes) is "largely attested in Bantu" (Meeussen 1967:110) and most commonly encodes imperfective (Nurse 2008).

- As an imperfective maker, *-ag* typically yields progressive and habitual interpretations.

- In some Bantu languages *-ag* encodes habitual only, and in fewer languages *-ag* encodes progressive only (Nurse 2008).

- In ER languages, we observe progressive and habitual interpretations of *-ag*, both in contemporary data, as well as in older sources (e.g., Kami: Velten (1900); Kagulu: Last (1886); Luguru: Mkude (1974) and Seidel (1898)).

Progressive interpretations of *-ag* in ER

Kagulu	Ha-ni-tung-**ag**-a	salu	fo-ya-ingil-e.
	PST-SM.1SG-bead-**IPFV**-FV	9.bead	TEMP-SM1-enter-FV
	'I was beading beads when she entered.'		

Kagulu	Fo-ni-ingil-ile	Leora	ha-ka-som-**ag**-a
	TEMP-SM.1SG-enter-ILE	Leora	PST-SM1-bead-**IPFV**-FV
	'When I entered Leora was reading.'		

Luguru	Leora	ka+o-seg-**ag**-a	ha-ku-ingil-a	Malin.
	Leora	SM1+PRS-sweep-**IPFV**-FV	TEMP-SM.2SG-enter-FV	Malin
	'Leora is sweeping when you come in Malin.'			

Habitual interpretations of *-ag* in ER

Kwere

Kutu

Rozadina   ka-tung-**ag**-a   u-salu
Rozadina   SM1-bead-**IPFV**-FV   14-bead
'Rozadina (normally) beads.'

Ng'howo   zi+o-ol-**ag**-a
10.banana   SM10+PRS-be/come.rotten-**IPFV**-FV
'The bananas normally get rotten.'

Luguru

Amina   ka+o-fagil-**ag**-a   chila   siku
Amina   SM1+PRS-sweep-**IPFV**-FV   every   9.day
'Amina sweeps every day.'

Ti-gend-**ag**-a   Iringa   (chila   siku)
SM.1PL-go-**IPFV**-FV   Iringa   (every   9.day)
'We used to go to Iringa (every day).'

Kami

Zalamo

Amina   ka-fagil-**ag**-a   mu-lao   u-bit-ile
Amina   SM1-sweep-**IPFV**-FV   3-year   SM3-pass-ILE
'Amina used to sweep last year.'

-ag is not obligatory for progressive readings

- When translating English or Swahili progressive constructions/contexts, speakers rarely offer *-ag* constructions.

Zalamo

Amina	ka-fagil-a	(kibigiti)	vi-ni-vik-ile.
Amina	SM1-sweep-FV	(when)	TEMP-SM.1SG-enter-ILE

'Amina was sweeping when I arrived.'

-ag is not obligatory for progressive readings

- Instead, speakers might offer an auxiliary construction:

Zalamo

Vi-ni-vik-ile	Amina	**ka-kal-a**	ku-som-a	ki-tabu.
TEMP-SM.1SG-enter-ILE	Amina	**SM1-be/remain-FV**	15-read-FV	7-book

'When I arrived, Amina was reading a book.'

- In present contexts, speakers might offer a non-past construction:

Kutu

Amina	**ka+o-som-a**	sambi.
AMINA	**SM1+NON.PST-read-FV**	now

'Amina is reading now.' *[context: I see her reading now as we speak]*

- Or a present construction:

Amina	**ka+o-kimbil-a**	vino	sambi.
AMINA	**SM1+PRS-run-FV**	DEM	now

'Amina is running right now.'

Kwere

-ag is not obligatory for habitual readings

- When translating English or Swahili habitual constructions/contexts, speakers rarely offer *-ag* constructions.

Kwere

Chila	siku	chilugulu	Amina	ka+o-legel-a.
every	9.day	at.6pm	Amina	SM1+PRS-be/get.tired-FV

'Everyday at 6pm Amina becomes tired.'

Luguru

Ni+o-lim-a		m-gunda	gw-angu	chila	siku.
SM.1SG+PRS-cultivate-FV		3-farm	3-POSS	every	9.day

'I cultivate my farm everyday.'

-ag is not obligatory for habitual readings

- Instead, speakers might offer a habitual adverbial/clause:

Kwere

Amina ka+o-dumb-a	**chila**	**ya-ha-on-a**	**umbwa**
Amina SM1+PRS-be/come.scared-FV	**every**	**SM1-TEMP-see-FV**	**dog**

'Amina is/becomes scared whenever she sees a dog.'

- Or an auxiliary construction containing the verb *kuwa*:

Esta	**ye-kuw-a**	ka-manyl-a
Amina	**SM1-be-FV**	SM1-know-FV

Kagulu

'Esta used to know.'

- Or a non-past construction:

Ni+o-chas-a	ki-valo	chi-angu
SM.1SG+NON.PST-lose-FV	7-clothes	7-POSS

Zalamo

'I usually lose my clothes.'

The habitual reading of *-ag* is preferred

- When asked to translate *-ag* sentences, speakers tend to interpret them as habitual rather than progressive

Kwere

> Ni+o-fagil-**ag**-a.
> SM.1SG+PRS-~~sweep~~-**IPFV**-F V
> 'I normally sweep.'; #'I am sweeping.'

Luguru

> Amina   ka+o-fagil-**ag**-a   #sambi.
> Amina   SM1+PRS-sweep-**IPFV**-FV   now
> 'S/he normally sweeps.'; #'S/he is sweeping.'

Proposal

- The fact that *-ag* is more commonly interpreted as a habitual in ER languages is due to two factors:

    1. The lack of a dedicated habitual construction in ER languages

    2. The loss of the perfective morpheme *-ile* in ER languages

No dedicated habitual morphology in ER

- While the Swahili prefix *hu-* marks habitual, there is no corresponding reflex in the ER languages, nor is there an alternate dedicated habitual morpheme/construction.

- The auxiliary *kuwa*, common across Bantu, is used in some of the ER languages (Kagulu and Zalamo) to convey habitual meaning.

Esta **ye-kuw-a** ka-manyl-a   Kagulu
Esta **SM1-be-FV** SM1-know-FV
'Esta used to know.'

Kutu

Tu+o-**kuw-a**   tu-chez-a
SM.1PL+NON.PST-**be-FV** SM.1PL-dance-FV
'We will have danced.'

- However, in none of the ER languages is *kuwa* used to express the habitual alone. In fact, in all ER languages its more common use is to the express future perfect.

Loss of perfective *-ile* in ER

Southern Ndebele
(Crane & Persohn 2019)

- In Bantu languages in which the perfective is morphologically overt, it is typically encoded by the suffix *-ile* (and its associated constructions), and gives rise to simple past/perfective and perfect translations:

uSipho   u-cul-**ile**
Sipho   SM1-sing-**PFV**
'Sipho sang.' / 'Sipho has sung.'

- In ER languages, *-ile* has been lost in simple constructions.

Amina   ka-imb-a
Amina   SM1-sing-FV
'Amina sang.' / 'Amina has sung.'

Kagulu

- *-ile* is only found in more "complex" constructions, such as conditionals, temporal clauses, relative clauses, etc.

Fi-ni-fik-**ile**   Amina   ka-andus-a   ku-som-a.
TEMP-SM.1SG-arrive-**ILE**   Amina   SM1-start-FV 15-read-FV
'When I arrived, Amina started to read.'

Kami

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Narrowing of the function of *-ag*

- The lack of dedicated habitual morphology in ER languages, in addition to the loss of the perfective *-ile* has led to a narrowing of the function of *-ag*.

- As ER languages have lost perfective *-ile*, the morpheme *-ag* is no longer necessary to contrast with *-ile*.

- While *-ag* continues to encode "an unbounded situation that lasts over a period of time" (Nurse & Devos 2019), its function has reduced this encoding to habituality.

-ag in Swahili

- Although *-ag* can be reconstructed for Proto-Bantu, it is not found in "Standard Swahili" (Abe 2009, Rugemalira 2012).

  - "Standard Swahili lost the pref-final *-ag-* at some stage of its history" and developed two alternative ways to express habitual meaning: (i) the prefix *hu-* and (i) the simple present construction combined with an adverbial phrase such as *mara nyingi* 'many times' (Abe 2009: 302).

- However, *-ag* is observed in some dialects of "Colloquial Swahili" and encodes habitual meaning. In fact, its use is increasing (Abe 2009, Rugemalira 2012).

- In some cases, *-ag* is even replacing habitual *hu-* in Standard Swahili (Abe 2009, Kutsukake & Yoneda 2019: 197; see also Rugemalira 2012).

Implications for TA systems

- That -*ag* is not obligatory in ER languages is consistent with features of the TA systems of ER languages, which lack much of the TA morphology typical across Bantu, a language family known for its "extraordinarily rich" TA systems (Dahl 1985:39).

- Our account of the semantic narrowing of -*ag* in ER mirrors the development of English modals (Cowper & Hall 2017).

- The development of -*ag* in ER from an imperfective marker covering both habitual and progressive, towards a narrower habitual use perhaps confirms Nurse's (2008:144) suggestion of a "cognitive connection between imperfective and habitual, excluding progressive".

- This narrowing of the function of -*ag* may also be consistent with a more general development pattern for habituals cross-linguistically.

Thank you!

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