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Totela: a group study of tense-aspect in the field**

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# **Narrative structuring (and restructuring) in Totela: a group study of tense-aspect in the field**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Narrative and other discourse data often differ significantly from data obtained through traditional elicitation; both types of data are crucial for adequate linguistic analysis. This paper discusses a method, as used with field research on Totela, a highly endangered Bantu language, that combines text analysis and elicitation methods and yields considerable insight into the pragmatic and discourse-structuring (DS) functions of a tense, aspect, and mood (TAM) marking system. In addition to its theoretical value, the method discussed contributes to language revitalization efforts, as younger speakers are active participants and become intimately familiar with stories that might otherwise have been lost.

It has long been recognized (e.g. Longacre & Levinsohn 1978, Hopper 1979, and Fleischman 1985) that tense and aspect marking, in addition to its time-specifying functions, plays an organizational role in discourse, marking parts of a text as more or less salient within a narrative. Hopper goes so far as to argue that tense and aspect categories only become ‘intelligible’ when examined from a discourse perspective, and that their temporal roles are secondary features ‘superimposed’ on the markers (Hopper 1979:238).

Whatever the precise status of the discourse and temporal functions of tense and aspect markers, it is clear that close examination of the markers as used in discourse is key to a fuller understanding of their meanings and uses. However, discourse uses of tense and aspect markers are often given sparse treatment in language descriptions. Analysis of oral language data is often complicated by the fact that speech is rarely fluent, and when transcribed may contain ungrammatical constructions and forms, code switching, and may even lack sense. Also, in sparsely documented languages, the number of texts available is often far from adequate for producing a sound grammatical description. Thus, elicitation is generally acknowledged to be a necessary counterpart to text analysis.

This paper outlines a method for combining elicitation and the analysis of texts and its implementation in the study of Totela in a Zambian community.<sup>1</sup> After

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Cecilia Namasiku Namuyumba, Gertrude Sibeso, Violet Bumba, and other storytelling participants, to the three main revisers, Phineas Simwaga Sishau, Gift Mwakamwi Sishau, and Kelvin Sishau, and to headman Sishau White Maketu for their extremely generous contributions to all aspects of the research. This paper is dedicated to Kelvin Sishau (1984-2009). This material is based upon work supported under a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

transcribing folk narratives, a team of speakers worked with the language investigator to revise the raw transcriptions with the goal of creating a short anthology. Revision involved the removal of speech errors and code switching, the clarification of details, and the occasional reordering of events so that a reader unfamiliar with the story would be able to follow the plotline.

Totela does not have a written tradition, but storytelling is a highly developed art; the revision process aimed at preserving as far as possible the form and style of the originals. Nevertheless, the revision team sometimes suggested TAM markings that deviated from the original; the end result was a set of valuable comparative documents. When revisions are examined alongside the original versions, generalizable patterns emerge, shedding light on DS properties of TAM markers as well as speaker conceptions of their functions, helping to clarify the performance/competence divide. The group-based revision process was also useful in sorting out individual speech patterns from more general uses.

## 2. DESCRIPTION OF STUDY

### *2.1. Totela: a brief sociolinguistic overview*

Totela is cited by Welmers 1971 (in Lewis 2009) as having 14,000 speakers in Zambia and Namibia. Rough estimates based on census data from the year 2000 indicate that the current number of speakers may be about half that. Totela is rapidly being supplanted by Lozi, the regional lingua franca and language of education. Lozi is closely related to Sesotho and other South African languages, and is significantly different from other Bantu languages spoken in Zambia. Even in most conservative Totela-speaking communities, the language is used regularly only by older generations, with the current childbearing generation rarely speaking Totela in their day-to-day lives, despite often having a functional fluency. Many children and teenagers do not know Totela at all, or have only a passive understanding. Instead, they use Lozi in all of their interactions. Some of Totela's younger speakers express interest in preserving their language.

### *2.2. Study procedure*

In this study, stories were recorded in natural settings (typically around a fire after the evening meal) before a village audience, most of whom participated by singing the songs interwoven throughout the texts. Totela speakers of all generations contributed stories. A selection of the stories were then transcribed by a team consisting of a linguist-investigator and three speakers, who were generally present at the original tellings as well. The speakers belonged to the younger generation described above, having functional proficiency but little current use of Totela. All had some degree of formal schooling and literacy.

The most interesting and proficiently told stories were then selected from the collection of raw transcription for revision and inclusion in a compilation. The original storytellers were also often present during the transcription and revision

processes and made frequent contributions and occasional corrections, in addition to answering content questions.

The team read the stories line by line and wrote out a new version, making changes as needed. The process was collaborative, with a good deal of discussion and some argument to ensure that details were correct and the stories made sense. The investigator, as a non-native speaker, asked frequent questions about plot details and who was doing what in the narrative – storytellers often switched between characters with no (obvious) overt indication – but attempted to refrain from influencing choice of verb form.

The initial revisions were rewritten and translated into Lozi by one of the speakers, and later checked once again by the entire team. The stories analyzed in this paper were all told by speakers from older generations (age 45+) who speak Totela on a regular basis.

### *2.3. Issues and challenges*

A large challenge in the revision of the stories was the lack of a written tradition in Totela, which made the delineation of sentences quite problematic; some sentences in the revised versions do not match with the intonation patterns of the original recordings. In addition, Totela and the regional lingua franca Lozi have influenced each other heavily for many years in the area, and there was sometimes disagreement about which words were Lozi borrowings. In some cases, the younger revisers attempted to introduce constructions from Lozi. Fortunately, these issues could often be resolved by asking members of the older generation. Because these questions came up sporadically and were resolved by older speakers, while other changes to the narratives were far more consistent and were accepted by the original storytellers, it is reasonable to treat the revisions as accurate and authentic documents of Totela as it is spoken today. The lack of written Totela also had some advantages: although some general prescriptive language rules were known to the speakers through their schooling, work with the texts can be considered largely oral to oral revisions, an effect that might be difficult to reproduce in a language with a long-standing written tradition.

## 3. SUMMARY OF RESULTS

### *3.1. Types of changes made*

Many of the changes seen between the originals and the revised versions served to clarify or ‘polish’ the texts. Such changes included the removal of extraneous material ((1a) vs. (1b)) and code switching, the removal of interjections ((2a) vs. (2b)), overt character specification ((2a) vs. (2b)), direct/indirect object specification, and the amendment of plot details.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The abbreviations used in this paper are 1=1<sup>st</sup> person, 3 = 3<sup>rd</sup> person, CL5 = noun class 5, COM = comitative, DEM = demonstrative, DIST = distal marker, DS = discourse structure(ing), INF = infinitive, INTERJ = interjection, IPFV = imperfective, PL = plural, PREHOD = prehodiernal (before

- (1) (a) *kwizà kù-wààná àbà ká-bà-chítà bá-sìmpùkùtá*  
 INF.come INF-find 3PL.DEM IPFV-3PL-do.RC 3PL.smith  
 ‘then he found those who were doing...the smiths (lit: those of the bellows).’  
 Sedimwe transcription, line 4
- (b) *kwiza ku-waana ba-simapukuta*  
 INF.come INF-find 3PL-smith  
 ‘then he found the smiths.’  
 Sedimwe revision, line 4

Repetitions were sometimes removed, although reduplication was almost always kept, and was sometimes added, indicating strong semantic functions of reduplication. In addition, more overt temporal structure was added, as can be seen in ((2a) vs. (2b)).

- (2) (a) *Mm! Bà-yá kù-mpìli kù-kà-limà~limà.*  
 INTERJ 3PL.PST-go to-field INF-DIST-cultivate~REDUP  
 ‘Mm! They went to the field and busied themselves cultivating there.’  
 Nyawi-Nyawi transcription, line 8
- (b) *Abanakazi noku-ya ku-mpìli.*  
 women COM.INF-go to-field
- Ku-ka-sika-ko noku-ka-lima~lima*  
 INF-DIST-arrive-there COM.INF-DIST-cultivate-REDUP  
 ‘Then the women went to the field. Upon arriving there, they busied themselves cultivating there.’  
 Nyawi-Nyawi revision, line 8

The addition/formalization of temporal structure in the revised version had significant – and enlightening – effects on verb forms, and is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

### 3.2. Comparison of verb forms

Totela narratives employ verbs inflected for tense/aspect/mood as well as a special ‘narrative’ infinitive form, the latter of which is used after the narrative time frame has been established to depict subsequent (‘consecutive’) events (see Nurse 2006, 2008 for more details on the consecutive in Bantu).

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today), PRES = present, PST = past, RC = relative clause, REDUP = reduplication, REFL = reflexive, SG = singular, TAM = tense/aspect/mood

**Table 1**  
Important verbal constructions in Totela narratives

		SECTION
Verbs inflected for TAM	<i>ku-</i> ; <i>noku-</i>	3.2.1
Narrative-specific ‘consecutive’ forms	IPFV; PST; PRES, etc.	3.2.2
Series of infinitive verbs	<i>kwiza kusika ku...</i>	3.2.3
Class 14 (abstract) nominal marking	<i>bu-</i>	3.2.4

Some of these consecutive forms occur as ‘bare’ infinitives, while others occur with the comitative proclitic *na=* (which coalesces with the class 15 infinitive ‘augment’ *o-* to become *noku-*):

- (3) *nòkù-ìndá*      *lì-mwí*      *ìtèndè*      *kù-nyùkùlà*      *kù-sòwà...*  
COM.INF-take      CL5-other      CL5.leg      INF-yank.out      INF-throw

*Bà-mwí*      *kà-bèná*      *mù-chítùngù*  
3PL-other      IPFV-3PL.be      in-hut

‘Then he took his other leg, yanked it out and threw it away...Some others [other people] were in a hut’

Fumako transcription, lines 42-43

Verbs also appear in fairly conventionalized series involving verbs such as *iza* (‘come’), *sika* (‘arrive’), and *waana* (‘find’); these verbs often co-occur in such constructions, generally, although not always, in the order given above.

- (4) *À-lì-kwá-ìndá*      *nà-yé*      *àmázi*      *kù-sìkà*      *kwìzà*  
3SG-BE-INF.CL5.take      COM-3SG      CL5.manure      INF-arrive      INF.come

*kú-twà~twà*  
INF-pound~redup

‘Meanwhile, [the other one] is also gathering manure. She gets back and busies herself pounding it.’

Nyawí-Nyawí transcription, line 166

A final major verb form is a class 14 nominalization (*bu-V*) used, roughly speaking, to describe manner of motion or action, depicting the action as an attribute of the agent.<sup>3</sup> It often co-occurs with the verb *-ya* (‘go’).

<sup>3</sup> Noun class 14 is the class most often used for abstract nouns.

- (5) *Kù-yá*                      *bù-mínà*                      *àbàntù*  
 INF-go                      CL14-swallow                      CL2.people  
 ‘He went along swallowing people.’  
 Sedimwe transcription, line 3

These four kinds of verb constructions are now considered briefly and in turn, with attention both the original transcriptions and the revised versions.

### 3.2.1. *Inflected verbs*

In the stories examined, tensed verbs outside of direct quotes account for approximately 30% of the verbs; the overwhelming percentage of untensed verbs appear with (infinitive) narrative marking. Almost all of the verbs inside quoted speech are marked for tense/aspect, as they would be in regular non-narrative conversation. Stories almost uniformly begin with an imperfective verb, used to introduce the main character and set the time frame to past:

- (6) *Áwò*                      *kà-lì*                      *mú!kwámè*                      *á-sèsú*                      *àbànàkází*  
 CL16.DEM                      IPFV-BE                      CL1.man                      CL1-marry                      CL2.women  
  
*bò-bilè*  
 CL2-two  
 ‘There once was a man, he married two women.’  
 Nyawi-Nyawi transcription, lines 2-3

Nearly all other inflected forms occur at the beginning of major episodes (or when resuming a major episode) or when the action shifts to a different character. Somewhat like the English historical present, use of the recent past or present tenses may convey a sense of immediacy and liveliness, as well. For example, in (7) it is a surprising turn of events that the man’s new wife fails to cultivate competently. The vivid portrayal may represent a shift from the narrator’s perspective to that of the dismayed husband:

- (7) *Kù-mú-twààlá*                      *kù-mpilì.*                      *Á-lá-kàngwà.*  
 INF-3SG-take                      TO-field                      3SG-PRES-be.unable  
 ‘Then he took her to the field. She’s unable [to cultivate].’  
 Lobwa-Lobwa transcription, line 4

Many inflected verbs were retained in the revisions. Sometimes, however, they were revised to match with the general time frame of the story ((8), cf. (6)) or were changed to a consecutive form (seen above in (2a) vs. (2b); see 3.2.2 for discussion of consecutive forms).

- (8) *Awo*                      *ka-li*                      *mukwame*                      *a-ka-sesa*  
 CL16.DEM                      IPFV-BE                      CL1.man                      CL1-PREHOD.PST-marry
- abanakazi*                      *bo-bile*  
 CL2.women                      CL2-two
- ‘There once was a man who married two women.’  
 Nyawi-Nyawi transcription, line 3

Retention of inflected verb forms demonstrates their importance in marking major episodic and character shifts. Cases where the forms are changed to consecutive forms may be attributed to the non-spontaneity of the revision process, with the framing and flow of the entire story taking precedence over the highlighting of particular events. Virtually no examples are found of non-inflected forms in the original versions being changed to inflected verbs in the revisions.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.2.2. Consecutive forms (*ku-* and *noku-*)

By far, the most common change in verb form in the revised versions was from the simple *ku-* infinitive to the comitative + infinitive *noku-* form. In both versions, *noku-* (which might be literally translated as ‘and to V’) occurs after temporal clauses (as in (9)) or at major events in event sequences (10). The latter generalization is more robust in the revisions.

- (9) *Ku-mana*                      *ku-twa,*                      *noku-taya*                      *insima*  
 INF-finish                      INF-pound                      COM.INF-scoop.out                      nshima
- ‘When she finished pounding, she scooped the mealie-pap [from the pot and put it on a plate].’  
 Nyawi-Nyawi revision, line 12

- (10) *Nokwingila-mo*                      *kwiza*                      *ku-waana*                      *yu-mwi*                      *omwanakazi*  
 COM.INF.enter-in                      INF-come                      INF-find                      CL1-other                      CL1.woman
- a-chi-fwafwabika.*                      *Noku-ka-boola*                      *ku-munzi*                      *bu-lila*  
 CL1.PST-CL7-destroy                      COM.INF-DIST-return                      TO-village                      CL14-cry
- ‘Then she entered and discovered the other woman had destroyed it. Then she returned home crying.’  
 Nyawi-Nyawi revision, line 172

In addition, the original transcriptions are peppered with interjections, which are almost always followed by a *noku-* verb (11).

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, similar results occurred when the revisers themselves told stories that were later revised. (These stories were not analyzed for this paper.) That is, they often changed their own inflected verbs to the narrative forms during revision, giving evidence that the more frequent use of the narrative form in the revisions is not a result of reduced proficiency.



- (11) *A!*            *Nòkwí-bòòzà*            *kwìzà*            *kú-lyà*            *òmwíni*  
 INTERJ        COM.INF.CL9-return        INF.come        INF-eat        3SG.SELF  
 ‘A! Then she returned it [the mealie pap she'd prepared] and went and ate it herself.’  
 Nyawi-Nyawi transcription, line 55

In revisions, *noku-* also always appears in (uninflected) verbs adjacent to character references; in the originals, characters are rarely specified overtly (specification of subject and *noku-* appear together in the revision in (12b), but not in the original in (12a)).

- (12) (a) ***Kwìndá***    *!ínsimà*        *kú-lyà*        *kú-lyà*            *kú-lyà*  
**INF.take**        nshima        INF-eat        INF-eat            INF-eat  
  
*kù-mànà*  
 INF-finish  
 ‘He took the food and ate and ate and ate and finished it.’  
 Nyawi-Nyawi transcription, line 29

- (b) ***Omukwame***    ***nokwinda***        *insima.*        *Ku-lyà*        *ku-lyà*  
**CL1.MAN**        **COM.INF.take**        nshima        INF-eat        INF-eat  
  
*ku-lyà*        *ku-mana*  
 INF-eat        INF-finish  
 ‘The man took the food. He ate and ate and ate and finished it.’  
 Nyawi-Nyawi revision, line 29

Comparing the tendencies seen in the originals and revisions allows us to posit that at least one function of the *noku-* consecutive is to mark minor episodic shifts (including major events during episodes). Its appearance after interjections, which occur at major and minor episodic shifts, may be epiphenomenal; also, since interjections mark episodic shifts, the use of inflected verbs in these cases may serve less of a function. Similarly, character specification in the revised versions was inserted to clarify the source of the action being described, at points where there was a shift from one character to another, generally also an episodic shift. However, there may also be a stronger requirement for the *noku-* form to be used with character specification. Verbs following temporal clauses (which usually involve verbs such as *mana* (‘finish’) and *sika* (‘arrive’)) also tend to depict major events in the storyline, rather than series of smaller events; the temporal clauses serve to connect them with the temporal flow of the story. Temporal clauses appear more frequently in the revised versions, which in general show more overt structuring.

### 3.2.3. 'Serial' constructions

Sequences of verbs including highly frequent verbs such as 'come' and 'arrive' occur frequently in both the originals and the revisions, used to move along the action within an episode and when shifting character locations. They are more frequently used and show a greater degree of conventionalization in the revisions, indicating preferred orderings:

- (13) (a) *kwìzà kú-li-biìkà mù-Nándà*  
 INF.come INF-REFL-hide IN-house  
 '[and] she got there and hid in the house.'  
 Chibize transcription, line 12

- (b) *kwiza ku-sika ku-li-biika mu-Nanda*  
 INF.come INF-arrive INF-REFL-hide IN-house  
 'she reached [the village] and hid in the house.'  
 Chibize revision, line 12

### 3.2.4. Nominalized (class 14) verbs

Nominalized class 14 verbs (*bu-*) nearly always retained their form in the revisions, suggesting that their function is not to structure the narrative temporally, but to emphasize character attributes, manner, and reactions to events, rather than the events themselves. (See (7) and (12) above for examples of class 14 nominalizations.)

### 3.2.5. Summary

In general, all of the revisions serve a general function: to clarify, in one way or another, the original telling. In addition to obvious repairs and the insertion of information, clarification resulted in regularization of narrative structures through changes to verb forms. The major results are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
Summary of TAM use in narratives and their revisions

FORM / (TYPICAL) FUNCTION	ORIGINALS	REVISIONS
(a) <b>Verbs inflected for TAM</b> (i) set general time frame/give background (IPFV) (ii) mark major episodic shifts/ give more immediacy (REC.PST/ PRES/ PROG)	common; illustrate DS functions of TAM	sometimes changed to the narrative forms discussed in (a)
(b) <b>Narrative-specific ‘consecutive’ forms</b> indicate successive events: <i>noku-</i> forms used with a change of character or location, or a minor episodic shift/ major event within an episode	general trend but variable; subject change not always clearly marked	more consistent uses of <i>noku-</i> forms and the bare infinitive
(c) <b>Series of infinitive verbs</b> used to narrate change of location; often conventionalized in word choice and order	common; some word- order variation	conventionalized; ordering consistent
(d) <b>Class 14 (abstract) nominal marking</b> on verbs emphasizing, e.g., manner of action and character attributes		generally unchanged from original

### 3.3. Positive results for language revitalization

Speaker participation in this study appeared to have positive effects on the use of Totela in the community. The younger speakers involved in revisions, who spoke Totela only occasionally before the study, had intense daily exposure to the language, and began to think about it and ask their own linguistic questions. They became intimately familiar with the stories and could often be heard laughing as they quoted amusing lines from them. Because the younger speakers – despite their high linguistic proficiency – did not actively use Totela and were stronger speakers of Lozi, they took little part in more traditional elicitation sessions with older community members who spoke the language regularly. Through their involvement with the revision making, they gained an active stake in the documentation and revitalization process and appeared to feel some ownership in it. Additionally, revising the stories with the group allowed for the creation of a lasting document of stories traditionally told in Totela (and surrounding) communities.

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