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## Interactional functions as part of the grammar: the suffix *-ba* in Cha'palaa

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Barbacoan language Cha'palaa, spoken by the Chachi people in northwest Ecuador, is a highly agglutinative language with rich and complex verbal morphology. Particularly challenging for linguistic description is the set of verb-final morphemes that create finite predicates. Data from field recordings show that finite verbs feature a number of structurally exclusive morphemes in final position, but whose meanings are difficult to identify because the markers do not show clear semantic oppositions to each other. In contrast to typical paradigmatic oppositions seen in tense or person systems, alternating these morphemes in an elicitation context does not clearly yield distinct readings. Cha'palaa does not display obligatory tense or person marking, but rather marks a number of distinct values that become bleached outside of usage contexts.

Instead of giving clear meaning distinctions corresponding to morphological alternations, consultants generally judge similar sentences varying only in finite morphology as fully equivalent. The following four examples differ only in their finite verbal morphology, but speaker interpretations do not show a regular variation of their meanings linked to the morphological variation<sup>1</sup>.

- (1) (a) *Kailla tsala-sha aike-n-de-tsu-we*  
children beach-LOC play-NMLZ-PL-PROG-WE  
'The children are playing on the beach.'
- (b) *Kailla tsala-sha aike-n-de-tsu-mi*  
children beach-LOC play-NMLZ-PL-PROG-MI  
'The children are playing on the beach.'
- (c) *Kailla tsala-sha aike-n-de-tsu-shee*  
children beach-LOC play-NMLZ-PL-PROG-SHEE  
'The children are playing on the beach.'

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<sup>1</sup> AFF = affirmative, AG.NMLZ = agentive nominalizer, CAUS = causative, COL = collective, COM = comitative, CONJ = conjectural, CTR.ASR = counter-assertive, DM.DST = distal demonstrative, DM.PRX = proximal demonstrative, EGO = egophoric, IDEO = ideophone, INF = infinitive, INFER = inferential, INTS = intensifier, IRR = irrealis, LOC = locative, NEG = negation, NMLZ = nominalizer, PL = plural, POS = positional, POSS = possessive, PROG = progressive, Q = interrogative, SEM = semblative, TOP = topic.

- (d) *ailla*      *tsala-sha*      *aike-n-de-tsu-ba*  
 children    beach-LOC    play-NMLZ-PL-PROG-BA  
 ‘The children are playing on the beach.’

The final suffixes illustrated in the examples above show typical features of grammatical elements, as they are instances of bound verbal morphology that form finite predicates. However, although the final morphology on the verb *aikenu*, ‘to play’, changes across sentences, consultants consistently give the same translation for all of them and emphasize that there is no meaning difference. In addition, none of these morphemes are obligatory, and it is possible to have a bare finite verb, which also shares the same translation.

Interestingly, while the propositional content seemed to remain the same for all the examples, consultants would sometimes provide detailed contexts for their usage. In the case of the suffix *-ba* speakers were particularly consistent about the kinds of contexts where it could be used, describing cases when one would counter a statement or assumed intention of an interlocutor, such as when declining an invitation or pointing out an inaccuracy. We propose that these usage contexts should be somehow incorporated into a definition of the meaning of this suffix, but conjecture whether these kinds of interactional functions could be encoded by grammatical morphology in a similar way to values like person or tense.

In this paper we will address this question by focusing on the verb-final suffix *-ba*. In Section 2, we will review some ways of conceptualizing the distinction between grammatical and lexical elements. Then in Section 3 we will describe the suffix *-ba* in terms of its usage functions. In Section 4, we will provide examples of usage from natural speech recordings. Finally, Section 5 will conclude by revisiting the question of *-ba*’s status with respect to core grammatical elements.

## 2. WHAT MAKES MORPHOLOGY GRAMMATICAL?

Bound finite verb morphology is generally considered to be a core area of grammar, but our peculiar elicitation results do not point to values commonly encoded by verbal inflection like tense, person or number. There are several different criteria for determining whether features of a language are best described as grammatical elements, as opposed to lexical, suprasegmental or pragmatic.

Two commonly-cited features of grammatical elements are obligatoriness and paradigmaticity. The concept of paradigmatic opposition goes back to Saussure ([1916] 1966) and was elaborated on by Jakobson (1959:235-236), here in reference to the work of Boas, and in opposition to the concept of the lexicality:

As Boas neatly observed, the grammatical pattern of a language (as opposed to its lexical stock) determines those aspects that must be expressed in the given language: ‘we have to choose between these aspects and one or the other must be chosen.’

It is possible to think about paradigmaticity in both structural and semantic terms. Structurally, Cha’palaa verbal morphology appears paradigmatic because the set of

morphemes occupy a single structural position at the right edge of the verb complex, where only one of the set can occur. Since two or more of these morphemes cannot be stacked, this forces speakers to choose only one suffix. Semantically, however, because of the difficulties in describing their meanings, it is unclear whether the different morphemes exist in opposition to each other. Additionally, the values of paradigms are generally thought to be obligatorily marked, whereas the possibility of unmarked verbs in Cha'palaa raises the question of whether these morphemes are optional or whether they exist in opposition to each other in a paradigm that includes a zero marker.

Another way of thinking about grammatical versus lexical elements from the literature on grammaticalization is in terms of boundedness and abstractness. When lexical items become grammaticalized, they tend to become more phonologically bound and semantically abstract over time along a 'cline' or 'chain' or 'path' (Givón 1979, Heine 1991, Hopper & Traugott 2003). If we take boundedness and abstractness as two criteria for grammatical elements, verb-final morphology in Cha'palaa satisfies both of them. With respect to boundedness, these morphemes are all phonologically bound to the predicate and cannot occur as free forms. With respect to abstractness, they do not appear to have concrete meanings like other lexical items but instead convey highly abstract meanings that are difficult for speakers to define.

Under the criteria of paradigmaticity, obligatoriness, boundedness and abstractness, Cha'palaa verb-final morphology such as *-ba* fulfilled virtually all expectations for core grammatical elements. However, the meaning of *-ba* does not correspond to any well-known grammatical category, and instead only became clear when its usage was situated in specific interactive contexts.

### 3. THE MEANING OF *-BA*

During initial elicitation we only found that the meaning of *-ba* does not fit any well-known grammatical value for verbal morphology, and an account of its semantics was elusive. Only when the consultants started providing consistent contexts in elicitation did we start to form a coherent account of the morpheme. For example, we asked consultants when would be an appropriate time to utter *-ba* constructions like:

- (2) *Lala beesa-n-ki-n-de-tsu-ba*  
 1COL sing-do-NMLZ-PL-PROG-BA  
 'We are singing.'

Consultants agreed that a proper usage of the example would be immediately following a statement that we were *not* singing. In scenarios like this, *-ba* appeared to be used for contradicting statements. However, in most cases the contradiction did not target explicit assertions like in the 'singing' example, but rather dealt with implicit or presupposed information. For example, if Juan's friends came looking for him to go fishing and said 'Let's go. Where is Juan?', someone could answer:

- (3) *Juan panda fi-n-tsu-ba*  
 Juan banana eat-NMLZ-PROG-**BA**  
 ‘Juan is eating.’

In this case the *-ba* does not contradict any explicit statement, but rather addresses the implicit idea that Juan would be available to accompany his friends. The account of *-ba* that emerged from these usages might be captured by the term ‘counter-assertive’, in that it conveys the meaning that the speaker is countering a previous explicit assertion or an implicit or presupposed idea from a previous conversational turn or sequence. Palmer (2001) discusses counter-assertion as a kind of modality that conveys meaning at the discourse level, and that can be formally marked in some languages, citing the example of the Australian language Ngiyambaa, as described by Donaldson. This language has a clitic whose use ‘either contradicts a previous statement or is intended to counter some presupposition the speaker suspects his addressee of attaining’ (Donaldson 1980, cited in Palmer 2001:59). This description more or less corresponds with the meaning of *-ba* in Cha’palaa, and with similar types of counter-assertive marking cross-linguistically.

The counter-assertive use of *-ba* has some similarities with the use of the Dutch discourse particles *wel* and *hoor* that are also used in counter-assertive contexts. The use of the combination of the affirmative particle *wel* and the final particle *hoor* counters more explicit assertions while the use of *hoor* alone is a format for countering more implicit assertions. The following examples in Dutch are translations of the Cha’palaa examples above, and would be used in similar contexts.

- (4) *We zijn wel aan het zingen hoor.*  
 1PL are AFF PROG sing.INF **HOOR**  
 ‘We are singing.’ (someone said that we weren’t)
- (5) *Jan is aan het eten hoor.*  
 Jan is PROG eat.INF **HOOR**  
 ‘Actually, John is eating.’ (someone invited John to go fishing)

Research on Dutch discourse particles, such as *hoor*, has pointed out that, as with *-ba* in Cha’palaa, turns ending in *hoor* link back to previous turns and deal with their assertions in specific ways (Mazeland 2010, 2011).

Research on the English discourse particle *actually* shows that it can be used in similar counter-assertive ways that are perhaps even closer to uses of *-ba*. Clift (2001: 258-260) describes the use of *actually* in ‘counter-informings’ that contradict previous statements or implications with new information. This example shows a relatively explicit case of this usage (Clift 2001: 258, with adapted transcription):

- (6) 1 G Lee is a- a- um, a Chinese friend, um who was born  
 2 here in Engla [nd I believe an-  
 3 A [No she was born in Hong Kong **actually**

While the counter-assertive is expressed through a bound verbal suffix in Cha'palaa (and some other languages, like Ngiyambaa) this verbal morphology seems to have a rather similar use as the discourse particles *hoor* and *actually*. The suffix also has many of the features that Levinson ([1983] 1989) describes for items with primarily discursive roles such as the particle *actually* and other similar English words and phrases. In elicitation we found that the meaning of *-ba*, like such elements, 'resists truth-conditional treatment'. In usage, like *-ba*, these elements can 'indicate, often in very complex ways, just how the utterance that contains them is a response to (...) some portion of the prior discourse' (Levinson [1983] 1989: 87-88). One difference between *-ba* and discourse particles such as *actually* is that the latter are free phonological words whose syntactic position has some degree of flexibility (Quirk et al. 1985, Aijmer 1986, Clift 2001) while the former is a bound morpheme. Moving discourse particles into different syntactic positions can alter their meaning and scope, while *-ba* is structurally restricted to a single position bound to the end of finite predicates.

Another resource of linguistic structure that is used for discursive meanings like 'counter-informing' is prosody. The literature on intonation and information structure has described specific kinds of 'counter-assertive' focus, especially the work of Gussenhoven on English and Dutch (1983, 2007). A range of terminology has been applied to this phenomenon, but Gussenhoven (2007) makes a particularly useful distinction between 'corrective' focus, which revises a previous proposition, and 'counter-presuppositional' focus, which does not counter an explicit proposition but rather some assumption or implication that follows from a statement (2007). In a counter-assertion, as described by Gussenhoven (2007:189), 'the speaker prevents the proposition from being added to the mutual knowledge base'. This example illustrates a correction of a previous statement through its repetition as an explicit and prosodically-focused negation construction:

- (7) A: We're in France  
 B: We're [NOT]FOC in France

By comparison, counter-presupposition does not counter a literal proposition, but rather some presupposition generated by the proposition. For example, if a first speaker *wishes* they were in France, this presupposes that they are not currently there. However, if this assumption is false, speakers of English and Dutch can counter it with similar replies, using similar intonation patterns in both languages (Gussenhoven 1983:413).

- (8) A: I wish we were in FRANCE!  
 B: We ARE in France/We're IN France!  
 We ZIJN in Frankrijk  
 we are in France

The different resources used for expressing counter-assertive and related meanings include particles, intonation patterns, and, in Cha'palaa, bound morphology. This

variety of resources shows that no single linguistic feature can be exclusively associated with counter-assertiveness across languages. The next section will show further examples of how Cha'palaa handles counter-assertion morphologically.

#### 4. THE USAGE OF *-BA*

Turning to natural speech examples from a video corpus confirmed and extended the understanding of the suffix *-ba* that we had developed in elicitation. The idea of counter-assertion satisfactorily captured all of the uses observed in the data, but these varied between more narrow and more general senses of counter-assertion. Some usages of *-ba* were explicit corrections of assertions in previous turns, repeating the main verb with reversed polarity. For example, in (9) one girl states in a negative construction that there are no more of a certain type of bananas, and in the next turn her sister counters by stating that there are indeed still some bananas in her bowl, repeating the verb *ju*, 'to be/exist', in an affirmative construction with *-ba*.

- (9) L: *Ju-tyu-shee chinkiña-a ju-tyu, ju-tyu.*  
 be-NEG-INTS banana.type-TOP be-NEG be-NEG  
 'There is no *chinkiña* bananas, there are none, there are none.'
- B: *In-che-e ju-ba jee Leti.*  
 1-POSS-TOP be-CTR.ASR yes Leti  
 'Mine is (still) there, yes Leti.'

In other cases the counter-assertion does not counter a proposition but rather attends to assumptions about the first speakers' intentions or beliefs. In (10) the negation question 'Doesn't he have a wife?' has a strong implication that J believes that the person in question does have a wife, and the response with *-ba* counters this assumption.

- (10) J: *Supu miya-jtu-u jun-tsa.*  
 female have.kin-NEG-Q DM.DST-SEM  
 'Doesn't he have a wife, that one?'
- L: *Miya-tju-ba, uma-a tsa-i-' de-ji.*  
 have.kin-NEG-CTR.ASR now-FOC SEM-become-SR PL-go  
 'He doesn't have (a wife), (we) recently went (and saw) like that.'

While some cases of *-ba* clearly deal with explicit predicates from previous turns by repeating them, others counter them by providing new information. For example, in (11) G's half-serious speculation that the noises upstairs are being caused by a monster is countered by S's statement that it is actually their sister who is making the noise.

- (11) G: *Ura bu'-chu-lla jun-tsa kai'-sha ne pu-di-*  
 good mountain-live-COL DM.DST above-LOC just put-come.into.POS-SR  
*ne tsan-tsa-i-shee.*  
 just SEM-SEM-become-INTS  
 'It is a monster that is upstairs stepping around (noisily) like that.'  
 S: *Miirian-yaa punkaa punkaa ki-ñu-ba.*  
 Mirian-TOP IDEO IDEO do-INFER-CTR.ASR  
 'It is Mirian that seems to be doing *punkaa punkaa*.'

In other cases *-ba* can be a resource for countering proposed courses of action by providing information about potential negative effects, as in (12):

- (12) V: *Ka-laa-tyu Mimi.*  
 get-CAUS-NEG Mimi  
 'Don't take it (camera equipment) out Mimi.'  
 N: *Entsa entsa.*  
 DM.PRX-SEM DM.PRX-SEM  
 'This this.' (pointing)  
 V: *aa*  
 'huh'  
 N: *En-tsa en-tsa ka-laa-na-a apa.*  
 DM.PRX-SEM DM.PRX-SEM get-CAUS-INF-Q father  
 'This, taking this out father?'  
 V: *Tsen-mala musha-i-mu-ba.*  
 SEM-when damage-become-AG.NMLZ-CTR.ASR  
 'But when (that happens) it gets damaged.'

The relationship between the counter-asserted element and the statement that incites it can be causally more immediate or more removed or indirect, as in (13) where T counters V's suggestion that she go and check on the crops by counter-asserting that if she goes alone this will lead to the indirect effect of her feeling scared.

- (13) V: *Kepe-n-tyu jei ji-nu-u-shu tsa-na-nu-u.*  
 night-NMLZ-NEG yes go-INF-be-IRR SEM-be.in.POS-INF-Q  
 'It's not dark yet, hey, (someone) should go (before) then.'  
 T: *Mu-n.*  
 who-Q  
 'Who?'  
 V: *Ñu-aa.*  
 2-TOP  
 'You.'



T: *Mu-ba-a*                      *ji-na-ñanka,*                      *maali jee-ten-ba.*  
 who-COM-TOP                      go-INF-EGO-CONJ                      alone fear-feel-CTR.ASR  
 ‘Who could I go with, alone I’m afraid.’

The suffix *-ba* covers all of the different uses illustrated above, which are all counter-assertive in a broad sense. Some counter a more explicitly stated idea, whereas others counter ideas that are not explicitly stated, but are rather assumed by counter-assertors, who often make previously-unstated assumptions explicit through counter-assertion. In fact, in the corpus countering assumptions is more frequent than countering explicit statements. If the term ‘counter-assertive’ is taken here as a broad term that spans this full range of meaning, it works well as a cross-linguistic category that covers the range of uses observed for *-ba* in Cha’palaa conversation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The above description of the finite verb suffix *-ba* as a counter-assertive marker provides interesting theoretical insights about the relationship between pragmatics and grammatical values. First of all, the meaning of this suffix is best described in terms of its interactive function, but, at the same time, the suffix is structurally part of a mutually-exclusive set of finite verb morphemes; this suggests that counter-assertiveness is indeed a grammatical value of Cha’palaa. It is possible that this value could exist in something like a paradigmatic relationship with the other suffixes that can occupy the same position, opposing different kinds of interactional values to each other. As we develop our account of the other suffixes in the paradigm, the data does seem to point in that direction. For instance, the suffix *-shee* seems to strengthen the proposition, when compared to an equivalent but unmarked proposition.

(14) *Isha*  
 be.cold  
 ‘It’s cold.’

(15) *Isha-shee*  
 be.cold-INTS  
 ‘It’s really cold.’

The suffix *-shee* might be characterized as having to do with interactive meanings like informing or introducing new information, which could be considered to be in semantic opposition to other interactive meanings like making counter-assertions.

Could this system be considered a kind of semantic paradigm similar to those encoded with finite verb morphology in other languages? One complicating factor is that it is possible to form a finite predicate with a bare verb with no further morphology, suggesting that these markers are not obligatory in the way other paradigms are usually considered to be. However, one way to look at it would be to consider unmarked predicates as zero-marked in opposition to marked predicates, as the absence of any morphology may be meaningful in itself. Schiffrin (1988: 64)

raises this same question with respect to the apparent non-obligatoriness of discourse markers, asking to what extent utterances without discourse markers are really the same as utterances with markers. At some level of propositional content, marked and unmarked utterances may be the same, but not at the level of selecting a value that is best suited to a specific interactive context.

The interactive meanings encoded with finite verb morphology in Cha'palaa, such as the counter-assertive *-ba*, are in other languages often conveyed through other means such as phonologically free discourse markers or suprasegmental elements like intonation. In contrast to these kinds of linguistic strategies, bound verbal morphology is generally thought to be more central to the core grammar, but in Cha'palaa the meanings of verbal morphemes are very similar to the meanings of discourse-sensitive elements in other languages. In Cha'palaa it is fair to say that such meanings are more deeply embedded in the basic morpho-syntax, and in that sense are more central to the grammar. This analysis of Cha'palaa shows how descriptive linguistic methodology should not neglect pragmatic and interactive aspects as these may be crucial for an accurate account of a language's grammar.

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