Tense and aspect in Swahili

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Contents

Abbreviations

1	First person
2	Second person
3	Third person
*	Ungrammatical example
APPL	Applicative
CAUS	Causative
COP	Copula
DEM	Demonstrative
ET	Event Time
FUT	Future
HAB	Habitual aspect
IMP	Imperative
IND	Indicative
INF	Infinitive
IO	Indirect Object
LOC	Locative
NC	Noun Class
NEG	Negative
NPX	Noun Prefix
OBL	Oblique
OC	Object Concord
PASS	Passive voice
PAST	Past tense
PFCT	Perfect
PL	Plural
PLA	Plural Addressee
POSS	Possessive
PRES	Present tense
PROG	Progressive aspect
REC	Reciprocal
REF	Referential
REFL	Reflexive
RP	Reference Point
SC	Subject Concord
SG	Singular
ST	Speech Time
STAT	Stative
SU	Subject
SUBJ	Subjunctive
SUFF	Suffix
SVO	Subject-Verb-Object
TA	Tense-Aspect
TAM	Tense-Aspect-Mood
VB	Verb Base

1. Introduction

There have been several grammars written since the 1870s which cover tense and aspect in Swahili, a Bantu language. However, these grammars reveal a lack of consensus as concerns the classification of temporal and aspectual morphemes which occur in the language. This paper attempts to systematically investigate the tense and aspect system in Swahili. The study is mainly synchronic, but it will be shown that an understanding of the development of tense and aspect systems may help in accounting for seeming inconsistencies. The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 provides a background for the study by first presenting the Bantu languages, and then discussing the theoretical framework for tense and aspect in general. Special reference will be given here to cross-linguistic diachronic pathways involving tense and aspect. Section 3 is a study of tense and aspect in Swahili, which starts with a review of the major Swahili grammars available. A brief Swahili grammar sketch, with specific focus on the verb-group, is then provided. A synchronic study of the tense and aspect markers follows this sketch. Finally, some notes on the diachronic development within the tense and aspect system will be given, in order to account for the difficulties in the classification of the various markers, to the extent to which this is possible.

2. Background

2.1 The Bantu languages

In this section, we will look at the genetic classification of the Bantu subgroup to which Swahili belongs. There have been several attempts to classify the languages of the African continent since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Due to lack of data, and also due to the linguistic complexity of these languages, the classification is still uncertain. Williamson (1989:3-40) and Watters (1989:402-417) arrive at the classification presented in figure 1 for the Niger Congo language phylum[1] after taking into consideration the major scholarly works[2] of the last two centuries.

   According to one estimate (Grimes 1996), the Niger-Congo language phylum consists of 1436 languages. This makes it the largest phylum in the world (Heine & Nurse 2000:11). The Narrow Bantu subgroup alone consists of about 500 languages spoken by at least 60 million people in sub-Saharan Africa. This subgroup is the largest and the best known among all the Niger-Congo

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[1] Phylum is a term used for postulated yet unproven higher-order and more inclusive families. Some scholars object to this terminology. See e.g. Campbell (1998:166).
[2] These have mainly relied on lexicostatistics, which is a method rejected by many historical linguists. See e.g. Campbell (1998:177ff).

subgroups (Hinnebusch 1989:450f). Swahili, as well as the other Bantu languages referred to in this study, are classified as Narrow Bantu (hereafter "Bantu")[3].

Niger-Congo

Atlantic-Congo

Volta-Congo

Kru   Kwa   Benue-Congo   Dogon (?)   North Volta-Congo

Bantoid

Northern Bantoid   Southern Bantoid

Non-Narrow Bantu   Narrow Bantu

Swahili
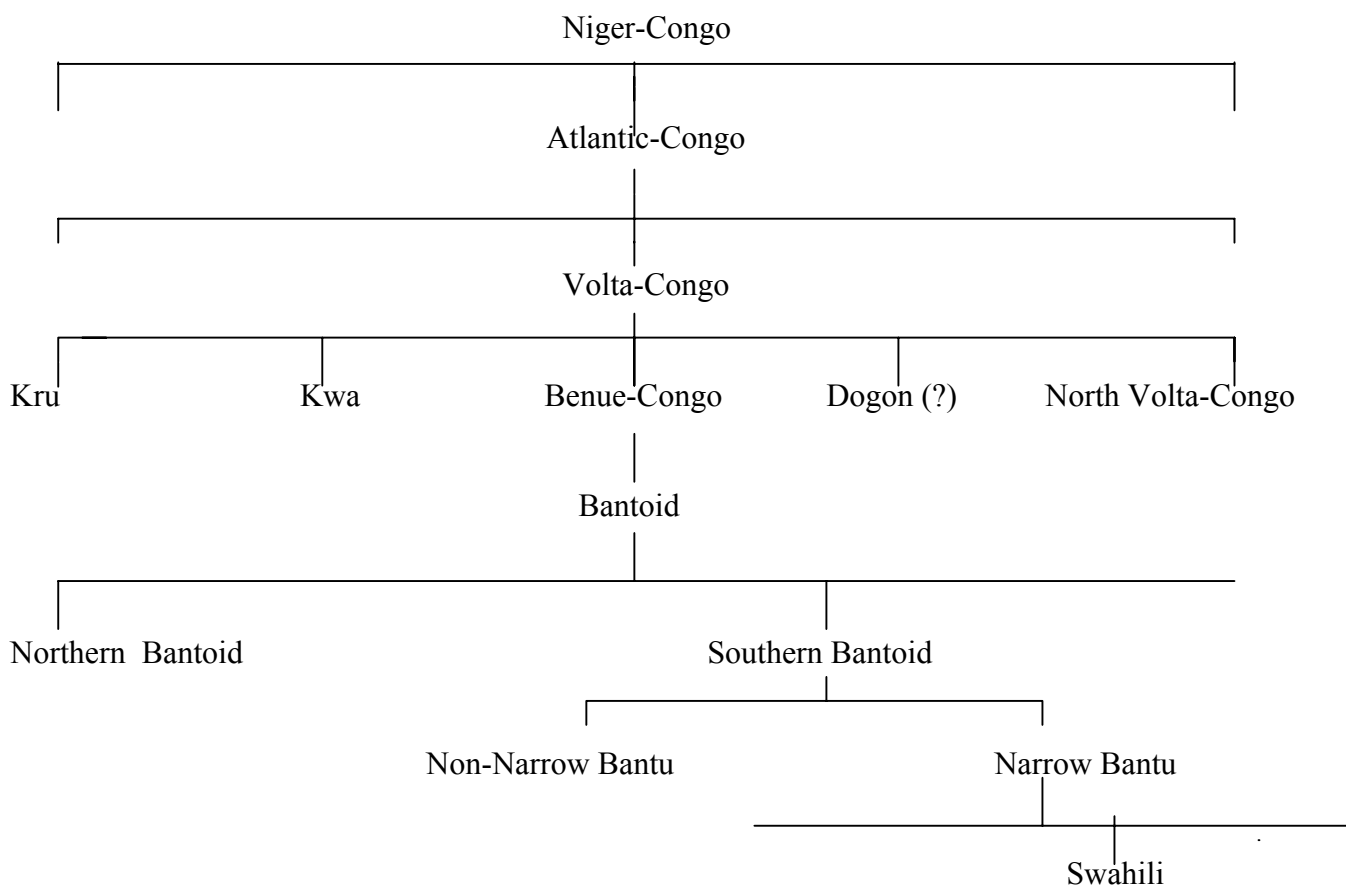
Figure 1: Classification of the Niger-Congo language phylum

2.2 Tense and aspect systems

In this section, a background on the notions of tense and aspect is provided. The theoretical discussion is based mainly on Dahl (1985), Bybee et al (1994) and Givón (2001). Besha (1989), which is a study of tense and aspect in Shambala[4], brings Bantu-specific illustrations to the theoretical discussion.

2.2.1 Tense

Tense is the systematic coding of the relationship between two points along the time axis. Following Reichenbach's theory of tense, the two points are the reference point (RP) and event time

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[3] Narrow Bantu is in the literature commonly called simply "Bantu" (Watters 1989:401).
[4] A Bantu language spoken in North-Eastern Tanzania.

(ET). The default RP that an event is anchored to is the time of speech (ST). These relationships are illustrated in figure 2, adapted from Givón (2001:286).

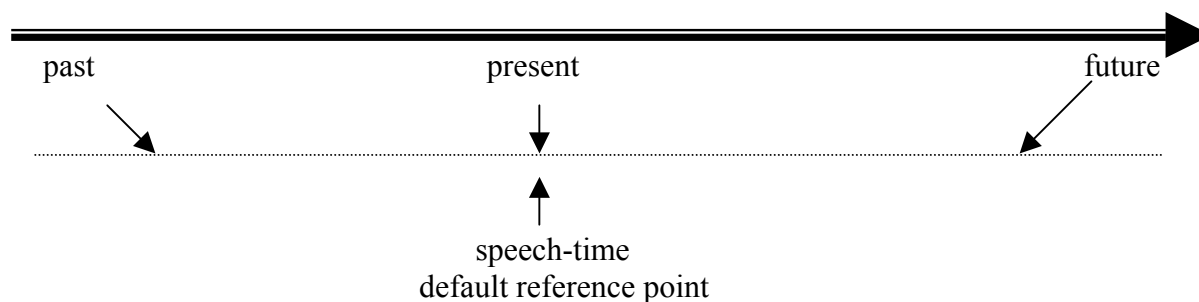The filled black line represents the event time.

Figure 2: Temporal relationships

In figure 2, there are three major tense divisions:
- Past: Event time precedes speech time
- Present: Event time is simultaneous with speech time
- Future: Event time follows speech time

Absolute tense is a term used to describe an event which is anchored to the current speech act. Some linguists, in addition to absolute tense, also refer to relative tense, which is when the tense divisions are anchored to a reference point preceding or following the time of speech (Givón 2001:286). Although Reichenbach's theory of tense is widely used, it has been criticized for not reflecting time accurately. Dahl (1985:29-31), for instance, introduces a fourth notion, namely temporal Frame, in addition to the Speech, Reference and Event notions in order to account for sentences such as: *When I arrived, Peter had tried to phone me twice during the preceding week.* In addition, some scholars (e.g. Bybee et al. 1994) find it difficult to view the so-called present tense as a "tense". This disagreement will be dealt with in section 2.2.1.4, where the properties of the present will be discussed. As regards relative tense, it is easily confused with aspect (see e.g. Dahl 1985:23-26), which is why this notion will not be used in this paper. In the following, the function of temporal notions, and how they may be classified and accounted for, is discussed.

2.2.1.1 Tense vs. event time

When discussing tense it is of importance to note that communication is not always about *when* an event took place, although some sort of temporal marking is often obligatory. Communication is as much about who, what, how etc. Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate between tense as a

grammatical category and the actual event time (Besha 1989:116f). The actual *when* of events is often lexicalised in the form of temporal adverbs, which interact with tense. In addition, there is often shared information between participants that is not stated explicitly. For instance, the RP might be part of this shared information. Tense could thus be said to be more of a discourse feature than a feature of individual sentences (Besha 1989:154).

2.2.1.2 Subjectivity in tense

Languages tend to vary as to how important the objective measurement of time is for the choice of tense marker. Most languages allow some room for the speaker's subjective experience of time (Dahl 1985:123). Besha (1989:288-295) gives an illustrative example of the subjective dimension in the choice of temporal remoteness marking in Shambala. She recounts a historical narrative text[5] where an old chief is asked to tell the ancient story about the founder of the clan. The interviewer (a young man) asks about the event using the distant past tense which, viewed objectively, would be the most natural tense to use here. Nevertheless, the old chief starts his story telling with the first three sentences in the near past tense. According to Besha, a possible interpretation of this has to do with the relationship between the narrator and the narrated events. The narrator, being the chief, is a direct descendant of the founder of the clan. Thus, he regards himself as a part of the history. From his perspective, the distant past events are viewed as being recent, since they have present relevance for him personally. For the young man, on the other hand, the story is just an interesting piece of history. The two participants can be said to have different reference points for anchoring the events. For the interviewer, the RP is his actual ST, which is why he used the distant past tense. For the narrator, the RP is a subjective ST, which is not temporally determined.

2.2.1.3 Imprecision within TAM systems

Not only is there a subjective perspective on an individual's choice of TAM marking, but there is also imprecision in the entire system of tense, aspect and modality (Dahl 1985:20f). Although everyone knows what the prototypical cases of tense, aspect and modality are, it is not always clear how to distinguish the less typical ones. Traditionally, tense, aspect and mood have been defined from a semantic point of view. Dahl (1985:23-26), however, introduces the notion of dominance in distinguishing tense and aspect. According to him, grammatical TAM morphemes typically combine semantic features taken from tense, aspect and modality of which one is usually more dominant. This is because a temporal or aspectual marker must have a basic meaning in order to be

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[5] With this term, Besha (1989:287f) means a narrated historical event which is important to the people's cultural and political history, and which is assumed to have actually taken place.

efficient in communication. In addition to the basic meaning, however, there will often arise extended meanings as a result of interaction with a given context. The basic meaning of a TAM marker is the constant meaning the form has. Context, however, may modify this basic meaning, giving rise to extended meanings (Besha 1989:161ff). Consequently, one TAM marker cannot have more than one basic grammatical function. However, a TAM marker may have, in certain contexts, several meanings. An aspect can thus have temporal notions, although this is not its primary role. For instance, the aspectual perfective is often associated with the temporal past. When dealing with basic and extended meanings of TAM markers, it is helpful to be observant of the diachronic processes affecting the language. It has been shown that aspectual markers may develop into temporal markers, leading to an overlap in usage, and loss of maximal contrast between the markers (Bybee et al 1994:147f). In sections 3.2 and 3.3 on TA in Swahili, we shall see how the theory of basic vs. extended meanings, as well as a diachronic approach to tense and aspect, may help in classifying TA markers in Swahili.

2.2.1.4 Present as tense or aspect?

In this section, the so-called present tense is discussed. As mentioned above, scholars such as Bybee et al (1994) prefer not to call present a tense. This is because one can argue that the present tense is not primarily a deictic temporal reference. What we refer to as present actually covers various types of imperfective situations, with the moment of speech as the reference point. Bybee et al (1994:126) state that present includes:

- Ongoing activities
- Generic situations
- Habitual situations

According to these authors, it can also be shown that present tenses, progressive aspect and imperfective aspect may cross-linguistically originate from the same lexical sources. In accordance with these findings, Bybee et al (1994:140) argue that a present marker expresses the meaning of present imperfective situations. In order to illustrate the problems with categorising the present, let us look at Besha's (1989:215ff) treatment of present in Shambala. Besha admits that it is difficult to characterize the present tense, because present is simultaneous to the ST and there is no other RP to anchor it to. Whereas the past and future tenses in Shambala were classified partly with the help of temporal adverbs, this was not possible for the present, as the present temporal adverbs could also be used for near past or future events. This can be compared with the well-known problem of

defining a temporal present adverb such as "now". It can in fact be any length of time. Instead, Besha defines present tense as a combination of the following two statements:

- Present tense cannot co-occur with past temporal adverbs
- Present tense describes events simultaneous with ST or which include ST

While Besha distinguishes the three present tenses (dependent, simple and progressive present) in Shambala by looking at the distributional constraints, she does not address the question of whether present actually is a tense. She states that in Shambala there are no cases where present specifies time in isolation without the co-occurrence of an adverb (Besha 1989:258). In the section on grammatical descriptions of tense and aspect in Swahili (3.1.1), we shall see that the classification of present has been problematic in Swahili as well. In section 3.3.1, an attempt will be made to discuss the relationship between the present tense and the progressive aspect in Swahili, following Bybee et al's (1994) analysis.

2.2.2 Aspect

In this section, attention will be focused on aspectual notions. In section 2.2.2.1, we will consider the fact that verbs are inherently aspectual, i.e. that they inherently describe different state or event types. In section 2.2.2.2, we will consider grammatical aspects, which tend to contrast in the area of perfectivity. It will also be shown here how inherent aspect interacts with grammatical aspect.

2.2.2.1 Inherent aspect

In order to understand grammatical aspect, we first need to consider inherent aspect, which is a property of lexical verbs. Givón (2001:287) divides verbs into four major categories, depending on their inherent aspectuality, as follows:

- Compact (short duration) verbs: e.g. spit, shoot, jump, hit
- Accomplishment-completion verbs: e.g. arrive/come, obtain/get, die, be born, finish
- Activity-process verbs: e.g. break, bend, step, walk, work, read
- Stative verbs: e.g. be sad, be cold, know, want, be tall, be red

As shown above, inherent aspect can thus be said to encode the typology of states and events in a given language (Saeed 1997:107). The inherent aspectuality closely interacts with the morphological or grammatical aspectuality. It is also often difficult to separate the inherent aspect from contextual influence (Dahl 1985:26f). Grammatical aspect adds a communicative perspective to the events or states described by the inherently aspectual verbs. Aspectuality can thus best be investigated by observing the interaction between inherent and grammatical aspect. Aspectuality

may also be derived, which will be described as regards Swahili in section 3.1.2. The inherent and derived aspectuality of verbs will be taken into account in section 3.2, where an attempt will be made to classify tense and aspect in Swahili.

In this study, the following terminology from Bybee et al (1994:55) will be used. A *situation* denotes an action or state as described by the lexical predicate. The term *stative* describes an unchanging situation, whereas *dynamic* involves some sort of change. A dynamic situation can be either *telic* (built-in end point) or *atelic* (no end point). A *process* denotes a change of state.

2.2.2.2 Perfective vs. imperfective aspects

Perfectivity is connected with temporal boundedness and duration. A situation can be regarded as sharply or diffusely bounded in time, and as of being of short or long duration. There are primarily two aspectual notions involved in describing perfectivity: the perfective aspect and the imperfective aspect. In the perfective aspect, the focus is on termination and boundedness, and there is a strong association with the past tense. Compact verbs often occur in the perfective aspect. Should a verb from the other end of the scale, e.g. a stative verb, occur in the perfective aspect, it may be interpreted as an event. In the imperfective aspect, on the other hand, the focus is no longer on termination and boundedness. Stative verbs often occur in the imperfective aspect. Should an inherently compact verb occur in the imperfective aspect, it is usually interpreted as repetitive. As a result, combinations of inherent and grammatical aspects produce new shades of meaning. The imperfective aspect has traditionally been subdivided into two subgroups: the progressive-durative-continuous aspect, which describes ongoing activity, and the habitual-repetitive aspect, which describes repeated events (Givón 2001:288ff). In section 3.1.1, it will be noted that some scholars have argued that there is a perfective/imperfective contrast in Swahili. However, this will be questioned in section 3.2.3. In the following paragraphs, we shall look at progressive and habitual aspects in more detail.

The progressive aspect describes activity which is ongoing at reference time. Progressive is typically used with dynamic predicates rather than stative ones. It may co-occur with all temporal reference points. Bybee et al (1994:126ff) have found that progressives occur early in the grammaticalization process, and may develop into the more general meanings of imperfective and present as discussed in section 2.2.1.4. In languages with two grammatical morphemes encoding present situations, one of them is often more grammaticalized or even zero-marked. This is often

the older one of the two. The younger and developing present often originates from a former progressive aspect. Bybee et al (1994:144ff) furthermore found that when a progressive aspect begins to function as the present, the older present seems to retain its use in generic statements. The characteristic property of generic sentences is their regulatory function. Therefore, they typically describe the characteristic properties of a species, a kind or an individual. In most languages this is expressed by the most unmarked TAM marker (Dahl 1985:98-100). In section 3.3.1, we shall see how this finding helps to account for the two grammatical morphemes traditionally labeled "present" in Swahili.

Habitual is an aspect which expresses actions that take place habitually or repeatedly. It does not refer to any particular event, and is therefore not about any particular event-time. Consequently, it lacks one of the crucial features of tense (Givón 2001:286). Therefore, habitual in this paper is treated as an imperfective aspect, rather than a tense. Dahl (1985:95-100) defines the habitual by what it is not. Habitual is not the same as iterative (denoting something that happens more than once), and it is not used in generic sentences. Habitual typically seems to be replaceable with the English equivalent of "usually". As discussed in section 2.2.1.4, habitual is diachronically related to the progressive, imperfective and present. In section 3.2.4.1, we will examine the habitual marker in Swahili.

2.2.3 The perfect

In this section, we shall look at the perfect[6] by considering its four major features (Givón 2001:293-297):

- Anteriority
- Perfectivity
- Counter sequentiality
- Lingering relevance

The perfect is best contrasted with the perfective past, with which it has both similarities and differences. The perfect is similar to the perfective past in that both place the situation initiation before the time of reference (anteriority). However, whereas past can only have one absolute reference point, (prior to the time of speech), perfect can have as a reference point the actual time of speech as well as a point before or after the time of speech, as exemplified in the sentences below:

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[6] Perfect is termed anterior by some linguists, so as not to confuse it with perfective (see e.g. Bybee et al 1994).

- Present perfect: (As I am speaking now,) "She **has** already be**en** here."
- Past perfect: (When he arrived,) "She **had** already be**en** here."
- Future perfect: (When he arrives,) "She **will have** already be**en** here"

Perfect is furthermore similar to the perfective past in that it involves a feature of completion and accomplishment before the reference time (perfectivity). However, in the perfect-marked sentence, the terminal boundary can be moved near to or even up to the reference time, when used together with an inherently stative verb. A sentence such as *I have admired him for ages* implies that one still admires the person referred to. The third characteristic feature often associated with perfects, counter-sequentiality, implies the contrast between events, which are told in their natural temporal order, as opposed to events, which are told out of sequence. The unmarked way of telling a story is to tell it in the chronological order in which events occurred: 1,2,3,4. This is mostly encoded with the perfective past in languages, which mark this distinction morphologically. Alternatively, if the perfect is used, the same story can be told with a different order of events such as 1,3,2,4. In order to observe this feature of the perfect, one has to study the use and distribution of the perfect in connected discourse. Lastly, the perfect aspect is characterized by lingering relevance. This is one of the perfect's main points of contrast with the perfective. In the perfective, events are judged as relevant at event time, just when they occur, whereas in the perfect, events are relevant to some subsequent reference time. Unlike the perfective past, the perfect-marked event may be relevant to a point in the present, or in the future, as well as to a point in the past.

In preparation for the analysis of aspect in Swahili, we also need to consider the diachronic processes that involve the perfect cross-linguistically. Bybee et al (1994:51-62) note that the completive, perfect, perfective and simple past are diachronically related. According to them, there is a five-step development:

- Stage 1: Completive
- Stage 2: Young perfects (one usage)
- Stage 3: Old perfects (several uses)
- Stage 4: Perfectives
- Stage 5: Simple pasts

These aspectual and temporal notions all describe a situation that is completed prior to some reference point, but differ in what other functions they have. In reference to the category of completive, Bybee et al (1994:53) mean, "to do something thoroughly and to completion" for instance, eating up one's food. According to them, perfect differs from completive only by it being relational. Perfect signals that the situation occurs prior to the reference time and is relevant to the situation at the reference time. It is of interest to note that completive aspects may develop from

dynamic verbs such as *finish*. The completives, in turn, may develop into perfects. (For stative verbs, the development is different.) Perfects cross-linguistically are seldom used with stative verbs. However, perfects which have developed from the verb finish can co-occur with stative verbs. In section 3.3.2, we will see how this is realized in the Swahili TA system, where it will be shown that the perfect has developed from the lexical word for finish.

3. The tense and aspect system in Swahili

In this section, we will look at the Swahili tense and aspect system in more detail. The organization of this section is as follows. After the introduction, a brief overview of the three major Swahili grammars (Ashton (1944), Loogman (1965) and Polomé (1967)) is presented in section 3.1.1. A Swahili grammar sketch, including a more in-depth treatment of the verb-group, follows next in section 3.1.2. In section 3.2, an attempt is made to describe and analyse tense and aspect in Swahili from a synchronic point of view. Finally, some features of the diachronic development within the Swahili TA system are discussed in section 3.3.

3.1 Introduction and background

It has been said that the Bantu languages contain some of the most complex TAM systems in the world. They have a considerably larger number of TAM markers than the Indo-European languages, and aspectual markers are especially numerous (Polomé 1967:18). For example, Dahl's (1985) investigation of the tense and aspect systems of the world shows that the average number of "major TAM categories" is 6.5. According to him, the corresponding average for the Bantu languages is as many as 11. Dahl (1985:185f) suggests that this complexity might be because Bantu languages are generally prefixing rather than suffixing. In addition to the prefixes, Bantu languages abound in periphrastic constructions. The borderline between bound and free grammatical morphemes, however, is not always clear-cut. Prefixing languages would thus allow more variation in which categories are morphologically expressed, because the borderline between syntactically or periphrastically marked categories is less clearly defined. This results in a more open system of inflectional categories.

As Dahl (1985:2), among others, has pointed out, no standard terminology exists for classifying tense, aspect and modality systems. The grammatical descriptions of Bantu languages are no exception. Neither is the principle that one form has one underlying meaning always adhered to in Bantu linguistics (Besha 1989). This has given rise to numerous so-called tenses with different

interpretations, both temporal and aspectual. For example, Whiteley & Muli (1962:73) talk about the "present continuous or immediate future tense" in Kamba[7] illustrated by (3).

(3) Kamba (Whiteley & Muli 1962:73)
nĩnũkoota

nĩ-	n-	**ũ-**	koot-	**a**
PPX-	1SG.SU-	**TAM-**	pull-	**TAM**

"I am pulling, I am about to pull"

Swahili grammatical descriptions display a similar pattern of vagueness as regards temporal and aspectual notions, as we shall see in section 3.1.1.

3.1.1 Existing Swahili grammatical descriptions

In this section, a brief overview of the three major Swahili grammars, Ashton (1944), Loogman (1965) and Polomé (1967) is provided. Special reference is made to their treatment of the tense and aspect system in Swahili. First, we shall look at Ashton's *Swahili Grammar including intonation* (1944), which is considered one of the pioneering works of Swahili grammar, and is still used as a standard reference on the language. Ashton follows her own "idea approach" to Swahili in her analysis of the language. According to Besha (1989:125), this approach was pioneering in that it did not rely too much on producing English equivalents. Instead, Ashton (1944) includes a wealth of examples from vernacular literature and many aphorisms to illustrate the various points, some of which are not easily translatable into English. As for tense and aspect, Ashton (1944:35) states that one cannot equate Swahili tenses with English tenses, as some of these do not specifically refer to time, but rather to some aspect of the action or state. Swahili tenses, in Ashton's own words, refer to a specific "idea". Ashton does not distinguish between tense and aspect. In her analysis, one form can have many functions, both temporal and aspectual (see e.g. Ashton 1944:247). This is because in Ashton's (1944:8) view, within Bantu languages function is more important than form. Ashton (1944:35) classifies the Swahili TA system into six primary tenses (*li-, ta-, na-, a-, me-, hu*). Of these six tenses, according to her, three can also have an aspectual meaning (*a-, na-, me*). In addition to the primary tenses, Ashton also addresses the compound tenses, whose distribution is largely dependent on the discourse context. These compound tenses bring out details that the simple tense cannot express (Ashton 1944: 249, 253).

Loogman's *Swahili Grammar and Syntax* (1965) aims at analysing the Swahili grammar from what the author considers to be a genuinely Swahili viewpoint. According to him, the existing grammars

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[7] A Bantu language spoken in Eastern Kenya.

at the time were not adequate, as they did not adequately reflect the Swahili idiom. In Loogman's view, the grammatical categories of European languages had been forced on the Swahili language (Loogman 1965:v – vi). To remedy this, the author even insists on using Swahili names for the different grammatical terms, such as *kiima* for nouns, and *kitendo* for verbs. Loogman (1965:119f) begins his chapter on TAM in Swahili with a description of the Bantu temporal point of view, which he states is fundamentally different from the European view. In European descriptions of tense, time is usually illustrated by a straight line, with present tense in the middle. The Bantu point of view, according to Loogman, is better illustrated by a triangle where the base describes life passing on from the past to the future. The Bantu speaker is thought to be looking down on this stretch of life from a distant imaginary point. In his view, "now" could be any point on this stretch separating the past from the future. This is how Loogman accounts for the use of the present tense for past events. According to him, a Swahili "verb which is present in form can have the force of the past" (Loogman 1965:119). Furthermore, Loogman (1965:190) divides the TA markers in Swahili into three temporal systems: the present system, the past system and the future system. This is illustrated in table 1. In addition to these systems, he mentions the participial form *ki-*.

Table 1: The present, past and future systems in Swahili according to Loogman (1965)

The present system	*The past system*	*The future system*
Simple present *a-*	Simple past *li-*	Future *ta-*
Progressive present *na-*	Historical past *ka-*	
Affirmative present-perfect *me-*		

By keeping to a vague terminology, e.g. "form" and "system", Loogman thus avoids the question of temporal vs. aspectual distinctions. In his analysis, there seems to be no need to distinguish the two. When analysing the compound verb forms, Loogman (1965:209f) does not account for the difference between *na-* and *ki-* when these are used in compound forms. Although he indicates that his predecessors forced European grammatical categories on Swahili, Loogman (1965:202) nevertheless does not hesitate to compare the Swahili *ki-*form with the English present participle, partly because sentences with the *ki-*marker may be translated with the English *ing-*form.

Polomé's *Swahili Language Handbook* (1967) is part of a series of language handbooks, intended to provide an outline of the most important features of the major languages of Asia and Africa. In accordance with the policy of the series, the *Swahili Language Handbook* is aimed at linguists and advanced students, but is not designed to serve as instructional material in Swahili. Nor is it

intended to give an exhaustive description of the Swahili language. It instead presents the most characteristic synchronic features of Swahili, supported by diachronic insights whenever possible. The data was taken from existing literature and grammatical descriptions (e.g. Ashton (1944)) as well as the author's own field notes (Polomé 1967:v-xi). Tense in Swahili, according to Polomé (1967:115), describes "the time/aspect dimension in the verbal process". The author does make a distinction between tense and aspect. However, he makes the aspectual categories a subgroup of tense. According to him, time in Swahili is conceived as linear in both directions, both past and future, in reference to the present. His tense markers are *na-, li-* and *ta-*, which describe time in reference to a fixed reference point, which is the moment of speaking. The *ka-*marker, "subsecutive", describes time as relative to another process, namely an action, which is subsequent to another. As for the aspectual distinctions in Swahili, they mark "the various ways in which the verbal action is visualized" (Polomé 1967:116). According to this analysis, there is a perfective vs. imperfective distinction in Swahili, which is marked as *ku-* and *ja-* in the negative, and as *me-* and *ki-*, respectively, in the affirmative. Among his aspectual markers, there are also the conditional markers (*japo-, nga-, nge-, ngali-*), and the habitual and recurrent marker (*hu-*). Further, the *a-*marker is, according to this author, unmarked for both tense and aspect (Polomé 1967:115-118).

This overview of Swahili grammars clearly shows that there is no consensus among scholars concerning tense and aspect in Swahili. Section 3.2 presents an attempt to analyze the TA system in Swahili based on the theoretical framework discussed in section 2.2.

3.1.2 Swahili grammar sketch

Swahili, like other Bantu languages, is agglutinative. This means that most words consist of a root and one or more affixes. The basic word order in Swahili is SVO. One characteristic feature of the Bantu languages is their noun classes (NC), which are usually numbered in singular/plural pairs (such as 1/2, 5/6 etc) as illustrated in table 2 below.

Table 2: Some Swahili noun classes

NC number	Noun Prefix (NPX)	Example	Gloss
1	m-	mtu	man
2	wa-	watu	men
5	ji-, Ø	jicho	eye
6	ma-	macho	eyes
9	n-	nyumba	house
10	n-	nyumba	houses

The noun classes are identified by the noun prefixes (NPX) and/or by the so-called concord or grammatical agreement their nouns take[8]. Many scholars believe that this classification was originally made on semantic grounds, although there are only traces of this earlier system left in modern Swahili. In Bantu languages, the concord system implies that the noun determines the concord affix on other constituents (such as on adjectives, demonstratives and quantifiers) of a sentence. The verb also agrees with its subject (SC) and/or object (OC). The Bantu verb furthermore typically takes verbal derivational suffixes whereby for instance causative, applicative and stative are formed. Example (4) illustrates how the demonstrative, the quantifier, the adjective as well as the relative affix agree with the NC of the subject. (5) exemplifies how the object also agrees with the NC of the object. This example also shows a verbal derivational suffix (-*iz*), which here expresses causation.

(4) Swahili (Ashton 1944:209)
Visiwa vyote vile vilivyomo katika ziwa kubwa

vi-	siwa	**vy-**	ote	**vile**	**vi-**	li-	**vyo-**	mo	katika	ziwa	kubwa
NPX8	island	**SC8-**	all	**SC8.DEM**	**SC.8-**	be-	**SUBO-**	LOC	in	NPX.Ø[9]-lake	SC.Ø-big

"All the islands that are in the great lake."

(5) Swahili (Ashton 1944:233)
Ng'ombe mkali alimkimbiza mtoto

ng-	ombe	m[10]-	kali	a-	li-	**m-**	kimb-	**iz-**	a	m-	toto
NPX9-	cow	SC1-	fierce	SC1-	PAST-	**OC1-**	run-	**CAUS-**	IND	SC1-	child

"A fierce cow chased the child away (made the child run away)"

TAM markers are cross-linguistically most likely to grammaticalize on the verb, where it interacts with other inflectional subsystems (Givón 2001:285). This is also the case in Bantu languages where the verb root carries many different markers such as negation, number, person, and tense and aspect distinctions. These markers are affixed to an invariable verbal root (*ondok-* in (6) for instance). Root + affixes will be referred to here as a verb-group[11]. The verb-group also carries the noun class prefixes in the form of subject and object concords as shown in (4) and (5) above.

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[8] Traditionally in Bantu languages, the concordial prefixes of a noun determine to which class it belongs (Guthrie 1967:13).
[9] Note that some NPXs are realized as zero.
[10] Note that animals take NPX 1 (animate) irrespective of the NC it belongs to.
[11] The verb root can never stand alone. Morphologically it therefore feels more accurate to speak about the verb-group (see e.g. Besha 1989:60)

(6) Ashton (1944:250)

Hawakuondoka

ha-	wa-	ku-	ondok-	a
NEG-	3PL.SU-	PAST.NEG-	leave-	**IND**

"They did not leave."

 Table 3 illustrates the order of the different affixes. Following the table is a description of the different slots (along with examples). Parentheses in this table indicate that the item is not obligatory.

Table 3: The Swahili verb-group

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
(PreIn)	(In)	(PoIn)	(Fo)	(Fo2)	(PreR)	VB	(PreF)	F	(PoF)
NEG1 *ha-* (Mutually exclusive with NEG2)	**SC**	**NEG2** *si-* (Mutually exclusive with NEG1)	**TAM**	**SUBO**	**OC** Obj + IO + Reflexive pronominal particle *ji-*	**BASE**	**SUFF** Verbal derivational suffixes	**TAM** *-e* (subjunctive) *-a* (indicative) *-i* (neg. pres. indicative)	**PLA** *-ni* only in 2PL in a) imperative & adhortative b) with OC *wa-* **REF** Particle *-o*

1	PreIn = Pre-Initial	Negative Marker *ha-* (NEG1)
2	In = Initial	Subject Concord (SC)
3	PoIn = Post-initial	Negative Marker *si-* (NEG2)
4	Fo = Formative	TAM marking (TAM)
5	Fo2 = Formative 2	Subordinator (SUBO)
6	PreR = Pre-Radical	Object or indirect object marker (OC), reflexive marker *ji-*
7	VB = Verbal Base	Lexical base of verb stem
8	PreF = Pre-Final	Verbal derivational suffixes (SUFF)
9	F = Final	TAM marking (TAM)
10	PoF = Post-Final	Plural addressee marker (PLA), Reference marker *–o* (REF)

Let us first consider how the affixes in the verb-group in table 3 often interact with one another and overlap in a cumulative way. Each affix may add a semantic connotation to the basic meaning of the verbal root as shown in (7), where, by adding verbal extensions such as the causative, applicative and passive suffixes, the VB *see* receives the interpretation of *have (something) shown to (someone)*.

(7) Polomé (1967:17)
onyeshewa

on-	**y-**	**esh-**	**e-**	**w-**	**a**
see-	**CAUS-**	**CAUS-**	**APPL-**	**PASS-**	**IND**

"have (something) shown to (someone)"

In a Swahili verb-group, there are pre-base morphemes and post-base morphemes, both of which are affixed to the verb base. There are six possible pre-base slots, and three possible post-base slots. The various slots are referred to according to the names given in the second row in table 3. The various morphemes in the verb-group as shown in table 3 will now briefly be described starting with the pre-initial and the post-initial, both of which are pre-base slots. The pre-initial (*ha-*) and the post-initial (*si-*) are mutually exclusive negativizers. The pre-initial occurs in the indicative and the post-initial occurs in the subjunctive and the relative. This is shown in (8) and (9) (Polomé 1967:111).

(8) *Hatusemi*

ha-	tu-	sem-	i
NEG1-	1PL.SU-	say-	NEG.PRES.IND

"We do not say."

(9) *Usiseme*

u-	**si-**	sem-	e
2SG-	**NEG2-**	say-	SUBJ

"Don't say!"

The initial slot is obligatorily filled by an SC, as exemplified by (10), except in the imperative and the habitual constructions (see (11) with habitual).

(10) *Anasema*

a-	na-	sem-	a
3SG.SU-	PROG-	say-	IND

"He is saying"

(11) *Yeye husema*

yeye	hu-	sem-	a
he/she	HAB-	say-	IND

"He/she usually says"

The formative 2 slot contains the subordinators. These morphemes consist of the SC plus the referential particle *o-*[12] (Polomé 1967:123). The relative subordinator (12) and one of the adverbial subordinators (place) (13) are exemplified below.

(12) Ashton (1944:111)
Kengele zinazolia

kengele	zi-	na-	**zo-**	li-	a
bell	SC10-	PROG-	**SUBO-**	ring-	IND

"Bells which are ringing"

(13) Ashton (1944:168)
Ko kote tulikotazama, tukaona watu

k-	o	k-	ote	tu-	li-	**ko-**	tazam-	a	...
SC15-	REF	SC15-	all	2PL.SU-	PAST-	**SUBO-**	look-	IND	

"In every direction where we looked we saw people"

The pre-radical contains the object concord markers, which are obligatory for animate direct or indirect objects as shown in (14) and (15). However, the pre-radical is optional with inanimate nouns functioning as direct objects as shown in (16)[13]. The pre-radical may also contain the reflexive, as illustrated in (17) (Polomé 1967:112).

(14) *nimemwambia Juma*

ni-	me-	**mw-**	amb-	i-	a	Juma
1SG.SU-	PFCT-	**OC-**	say-	APPL-	IND	name

"I have told Juma"

(15) Ashton (1944:218)
Watoto walituimbia

wa-	toto	wa-	li-	**tu-**	imb-	i-	a
NPX2-	child	SC2-	PAST-	**1PL.IO**	sing-	APPL-	IND

"The children sang to us"

(16) Ashton (1944:45)
Nime(ki)leta kisu

ni-	me-	**(ki-)**	let-	a	ki-	su
1SG.SU-	PFCT-	**(NPX7.OBJ-)**	bring-	IND	NPX7-	knife

"I have brought (the) knife"

---

[12] In NC1 it appears as *ye-* , in NC2 as *o-* (Polomé 1967:123).

[13] This issue, which is quite complex, has not received much attention in the literature.

(17) Ashton (1944:43)

Nilijificha

ni-	li-	**ji-**	fich-	a
1SG.SU-	PAST-	**REFL-**	hide-	IND

"I hid myself"

The first post-base morpheme slot, the pre-final, contains the verbal derivational suffixes, of which the stative is of relevance for this study. The stative is formed by adding the suffix *–ik*, as shown in (18) and (19), whereby an inherently dynamic verb becomes stative. This suffix indicates state without reference to agency. It may also indicate potentiality as shown in (19) (Ashton 1944:227f).

(18) Ashton (1944:228)

Kikombe kimevunjika

ki-	kombe	ki-	me-	vunj-	**ik-**	a
NPX7-	cup	SC7-	PFCT-	break-	**STAT-**	IND

"The cup is broken"

(19) Ashton (1944:228)

Kazi hii yafanyika

kazi	hi-	i	y-	a-	fany-	**ik-**	a
work	DEM-	SC9-	SC9	PRES-	do-	**STAT-**	IND

"This work can be done"

The final slot in the chart (slot 9) contains the TAM markers *-e* (subjunctive) *-a* (indicative) *-i* (neg. pres. indicative) as shown in (20), (21) and (22). Non-Bantu loanwords, which are not *a*-final, do not follow this pattern, as illustrated by the Arabic loanword *jibu* "answer" in (23) (Polomé 1967:111).

(20) *Tusome*

tu-	som-	**e**
1PL.SU-	read-	**SUBJ**

"Let us read!"

(21) *Tunasema*

tu-	na-	sem-	**a**
1PL.SU-	PROG-	say-	**IND**

"We say"

(22) *Hatusemi*

ha-	tu-	sem-	**i**
NEG1-	1PL.SU-	say-	**IND.PRES.NEG**

"We do not say"

(23) *Hatujibu*

ha-	tu-	jibu
NEG1-	1PL.SU-	answer

"We do not answer"

The post-final *ini-* occurs in the imperative to indicate plurality. See example (24). It also occurs in verb-groups with the pre-radical *wa-* (which refers to both second and third person plural) to specify second person, as shown in (25) (Polomé 1967:113).

(24) Ashton (1944:25)

Pikeni

pik-	**eni**[14]
cook-	**PLA**

"Cook! (pl.)

(25) Lodhi (1974:9)

Ninawapeni kitabu

ni-	na-	**wa-**	p-	**eni**	ki-	tabu
1SG.SU-	PROG-	**2PL.OBJ/3PL.OBJ**	give-	**PLA**	NPX7-	book

"I give you (pl) a book."

The post-final referential particle *–o* occurs in some relative forms, which are unmarked for tense and aspect, as illustrated in (26) (Polomé 1967:123).

(26) Polomé (1967:113,123)

Kazi itufaayo

kazi	i-	tu-	fa-	a	y-	**o**
work	NPX9.SU-	1PL.OBJ-	suit-	IND-	NPX9-	**REF**

"Work which suits us"

The formative slot, number 4, contains the tense and aspect markers, which will be dealt with in the following section.

3.2 Tense and aspect in Swahili

3.2.1 Introduction and background

The organization of this section is as follows. First, the definitions underlying the description of tense and aspect in this study are provided. Section 3.2.2 discusses the three tenses of past, future and present in Swahili. Section 3.2.3 describes the perfect. Finally, section 3.2.4 provides a description of the two imperfective sub-aspects, progressive and habitual.

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[14] a + i → e, *therefore* –*eni* (Polomé 1967:59).

As mentioned in section 2, the classification of natural categories tends to display an inherent imprecision. Some categories are simply placed in between the more prototypical ones. TA systems, too, seem to be organized around dominant and peripheral categories. The various sub-groups of TA systems, such as e.g. imperfective aspects, are also imprecise, which is why it is seldom useful to describe them with binary features (Dahl 1985:16ff). The present study follows Dahl (1985) in describing the TA system as well as the various TA markers by means of prototypical properties. Not all properties have equal status. Some are clearly more dominant. A dominant property, which we will call a basic property, is one that is in focus. A peripheral property, on the other hand, is one that is less in focus. Regardless of the inherent imprecision in TA systems, it is nevertheless necessary to define what the prototypical cases of tense and aspect are. Tense is defined here as "the systematic coding of the relation between two points along the ordered linear dimension of *time*" (Givón 2001:285). The two points are the reference time and the event time, as was described in section 2. Aspect is defined here as "the internal temporal shape of events or states" (Payne 1997:238). In order to decide whether to classify a morpheme as tense or aspect, its basic and peripheral properties will be examined. If it can be shown that one of the definitions above is more relevant for the morpheme in question, that will be the basis for its classification, although the morpheme may also have peripheral properties, falling under the other definition.

It is suggested here that tense and aspect in Swahili are essentially expressed by means of grammatical morphemes occurring in the verb-group. Both tense and aspect in Swahili are expressed by grammatical morphemes occurring in slot number 4 of the verb-group. (See examples (27) for tense and (28) for aspect.) A tense or aspect marker is obligatory in slot number 4, except in the imperative or subjunctive.

(27) *Hatakayekisoma*

1	2	3	**4**	5	6	7	8	9	10
PreIn	In	PoIn	**Fo**	Fo2	PreR	VB	PreF	F	PoF
NEG1	SC	NEG2	**TAM**	SUBO-	OC	BASE	SUFF	TAM	PLA,REF
h-	a-		**taka-**	ye-	ki-	som-		a	
NEG-	3SG.SU-		**FUT-**	SUBO-	OC7-	read-		IND	

"He/she who will not read it (the book e.g.)"

(28) *Anayekisoma*

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
PreIn	In	PoIn	**Fo**	Fo2	PreR	VB	PreF	F	PoF
NEG1	SC	NEG2	**TAM**	SUBO	OC	BASE	SUFF	TAM	PLA,REF
	a-		**na-**	ye-	ki-	som-		a	
	3SG.SU-		**PROG-**	SUBO-	OC7-	read-		IND	

"He/she who is reading it (the book e.g.)"

Further, the morphemes expressing tense are distinct from the temporal adverbs, as illustrated in (29a,b), where the past tense meaning is encoded independent of the adverb *jana* "yesterday". Likewise, the aspectual morphemes are independent of aspectual adverbs, as illustrated in (30a,b) with the habitual aspect marker.

(29a) Ashton (1944:37)
Nilisoma jana

ni-	**li-**	som-	a	**jana**
1SG.SU-	**PAST-**	read-	IND	**yesterday**

"I read yesterday"

(29b) Ashton (1944:37)
Nilisoma

ni-	**li-**	som-	a
1SG.SU-	**PAST-**	read-	IND

"I read (PAST)"

(30a) A.Y Lodhi (p.c.)
Yeye huja hapa mara kwa mara

yeye	**hu-**	j-	a	hapa	**mara**	**kwa**	**mara**
he/she	**HAB-**	come-	IND	here	**time**	**of**	**time**

He frequently comes here"

(30b) A.Y Lodhi (p.c.)
Yeye huja hapa

yeye	**hu-**	j-	a	hapa
he/she	**HAB-**	come-	IND	here

"He has the habit of coming / usually comes here"

For the classification of tense and aspect markers in Swahili, simple indicative sentences are used here. A simple indicative sentence in Swahili is one that has only one verb-group, and therefore does not contain any coordinators or subordinators. The sentences are of the type SV, SVO, SVO_1O_2 (where O_1 is the indirect object), SV OBL and SVO OBL.[15] The following sections present a descriptive account of the TA system in Swahili.

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[15] The data used in the study have mainly been taken from the existing Swahili grammars reviewed in section 3.1.1. One native Swahili speaker, Abdulaziz Y. Lodhi, was also consulted.

3.2.2 Tense

In this section, the tense markers in Swahili are analysed. After examining the basic vs. extended meanings of the morphemes occurring in slot number 4 in the verb-group, it is suggested here that there are two explicit tense markers in Swahili. These are the *li*-marker, which functions as the past tense, and the *ta*-marker, which functions as the future tense marker. In addition, there is the present tense marker, *a*-, which, in line with traditional descriptions, is defined here as a tense, although it does have imperfective properties (see section 2.2.1.4 for details). The tense system in Swahili is described in figure 3.

Past (*li-*)	Present (*a*-)	Future (*ta*-)
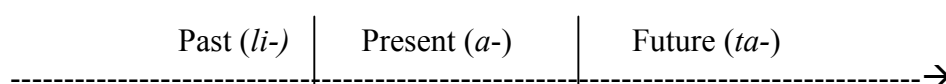
Figure 3. The tense system in Swahili

3.2.2.1 Past tense

The past tense is defined here as follows. The past tense marker occurs in slot number 4 in simple declarative sentences. It indicates that the event described by the verb-group precedes ST. It can also co-occur with a past temporal adverb. It is shown in this section that the basic properties of the *li*-marker in Swahili correspond to this characterization of a past tense.

The *li*-marker in Swahili refers to a situation that occurred before the moment of speech (ST). It can also co-occur with *jana* "yesterday" (see example (31)). The occurrence of an adverb is not essential in order to describe this temporal reference (See example 32). The *li*-marker can co-occur with the imperfective progressive aspect *na*-, as shown in (33). This suggests that *li*- is a simple past tense rather than a perfective aspect, as a perfective aspect would not co-occur with an imperfective aspect (Bybee 1994:51)[16]. The negative past tense is expressed by the *ku*-marker[17] (see (34)).

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[16] The *li*-marker is frequently followed by the *ka*-marker. The *ka*-marker in Swahili seems to not be a prototypical TA marker, which is why it has not been dealt with in this study. It is by Ashton (1944:133) referred to as a marker expressing action or state, which follows another action. Others refer to it as historical past (Loogman 1965:190), or subsecutive (Polome 1967:116). The function of the *ka*-marker and its relation to the subordinators needs further investigation.

[17] For a study of the diachronic development of the *ku*-marker, see Lindfors (2003).

(31) Ashton (1944:37)

Nilisoma jana

ni-	li-	som-	a	jana
1SG.SU-	**PAST-**	read-	IND	**yesterday**

"I read yesterday"

(32) Ashton (1944:37)

Nilisoma

ni-	li-	som-	a
1SG.SU-	**PAST-**	read-	IND

"I read (PAST)"

(33) Ashton (1944:250)

Tulipokuwa tunatazama

tu-	li-	po-	ku-	w-	a	tu-	na-	tazam-	a
1PL.SU-	**PAST-**	SUBO-	NPX15-	be-	IND	1PL.SU	**PROG-**	look-	IND

"While we were looking"

(34) Ashton (1944:72)

Q: Alirudi?   *A: Hakurudi*

a-	li-	rudi		h-	a-	ku-	rudi
3SG.SU-	**PAST-**	return		NEG1-	3SG.SU-	**PAST.NEG-**	return

"Did he return?"   "He did not return"

3.2.2.2 Future tense

The future tense marker occurs in slot number 4 in simple declarative sentences. It describes events that are assumed to follow ST. Further, it does not co-occur with past temporal adverbs. It is shown in this section that the basic properties of the *ta*-marker in Swahili correspond to this characterization of a future tense.

The *ta*-marker refers to a situation that follows ST. See (35) with the adverb *kesho* "tomorrow". *ta*-cannot co-occur with the past temporal adverb *jana* "yesterday" as shown by the ungrammatical (36). The *ta*-marker is the only grammatical morpheme that indicates future tense in a simple declarative sentence, independently of temporal adverbs, as exemplified by (37).

(35) Ashton (1944:37)

Nitasoma kesho

ni-	ta-	som-	a	kesho
1SG.SU-	**FUT-**	read-	IND	**tomorrow**

"I shall read tomorrow"

(36) *Nitasoma jana

ni-	ta-	som-	a	jana
1SG.SU-	FUT-	read-	IND	yesterday

"*I shall read yesterday"

(37) Ashton (1944:36)

ni-	ta-	tak-	a
1SG.SU-	FUT-	want-	IND

"I shall want"

3.2.2.3 Present tense

In this section, the present tense in Swahili is examined. As discussed in section 2.2.1.4, the present is difficult to classify due to the nature of present situations. Although the present tense is not primarily a deictic temporal reference, it has traditionally been classified as a tense. Therefore, it is classified as a tense even in this study.

The present tense is defined here as follows. The present tense marker occurs in slot number 4 in simple declarative sentences. It covers imperfective situations, such as generic ones, with the moment of speech as reference point. However, the present tense does not cover habitual or ongoing situations. Evidence is presented below suggesting that the *a*-marker in Swahili be classified as the present tense.

The *a*-marker (zero-marked in third person singular and plural), is a relatively highly grammaticalized marker, as shown in (38), where it is realized as *a*- and in (39), where it is realized as Ø-. The *a*-marker is used for generic statements, i.e. it describes the regulatory characteristic properties of a species or an individual as shown in (39). This marker cannot co-occur with past temporal adverbs as shown by the ungrammatical example (40). By contrasting the *a*-marker with the progressive *na*-marker (for details on this marker, see section 3.2.4.2) it is shown that the basic function of the *a*- marker is not temporal reference, as illustrated by the following examples. In (41) both verb-groups *asema* and *ataka* state facts without reference to time. In (42), however, the verb-group *anataka* states that the cook is in immediate need of sugar for his work (Ashton 1944:37f).

(38) Ashton (1944:40)
Nataka viazi

n-	a-	tak-	a	vi-	azi
1SG.SU-	PRES-	want-	IND	NPX8-	potato

"I want potatoes"

31

(39) A.Y. Lodhi (p.c)
Ng'ombe wala majani

ng'-	ombe	wa-	Ø-	l-	a	ma-	jani
NPX10-	cow	SC2	PRES-	eat-	IND	NPX6-	leaf

"Cows (in general) eat leaves"

(40)*Wapishi wasema jana*

wa-	pishi	wa-	Ø-	sem-	a	jana
NPX2-	cook	SC2-	PRES	say-	IND	yesterday

"*The cooks say yesterday"

(41) Ashton (1944:37)
Mpishi asema ataka sukari

m-	pishi	a-	Ø-	sem-	a-	a-	Ø-	tak-	a	sukari
NPX1-	cook	3SG.SU-	PRES -	say-	IND	3SG.SU-	PRES-	want	IND	sugar

"The cook says he wants some sugar"

(42) Ashton (1944:37)
Mpishi asema anataka sukari

m-	pishi	a-	Ø-	sem-	a-	a-	na-	tak-	a	sukari
NPX1-	cook	3SG.SU-	PRES-	say-	IND	3SG.SU-	PROG-	want	IND	sugar

"The cook says he wants some sugar"

To summarize, it has been suggested here that the *li*-marker functions as the past tense marker, the *ta*-marker functions as the future tense marker, and that the *a*-marker functions as the present tense marker in Swahili.

3.2.3 The perfect

In this section, the *me*-marker in Swahili is examined. Data is presented here to suggest that the *me*-marker is a perfect marker in accordance with the discussion in section 2.2.3, where it was suggested that the most salient features of a perfect marker are anteriority, perfectivity and lingering relevance[18].

The perfect is defined here as follows. A perfect marker occurs in slot number 4 in simple declarative sentences. It indicates that the situation described by the verb form was initiated before the time of reference, and that it has relevance to the present. The perfect marker can have as reference point the actual time of speech as well as a point before or after the time of speech. It is shown in this section that the basic properties of the *me*-marker in Swahili correspond to this characterization of a perfect.

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[18] The fourth property of the perfect, counter-sequentiality, has not been examined. Discourse analysis was considered beyond the scope of this paper.

The *me*-marker in Swahili expresses an action initiated before the time of speech, which at the same time has a lingering relevance to the present as shown by (43). The *me*-marker occurs also together with past and future tense markers, as illustrated in (44) and (45). Perfect often occurs cross-linguistically with adverbs such as "already" or "just" (Bybee et al 1994:54). This is the case even with the *me*-marker as shown in (46). Polomé (1967:116) argues that the *me*-marker is a perfective aspect. It is suggested here that this is not the case. Perfective aspect is cross-linguistically often restricted to past time, whereas the perfect aspect in most languages can be used in the future as well (Dahl 1985:78, Bybee 1994:54). The *me*-marker can be used in the future (see (45)). Further, perfect, contrary to perfective, is not marked on several verbs in succession when reporting a sequence of events such as in a narrative context (Bybee et al 1994:54, Dahl 1985:139). This is true of *me-* in Swahili, too. In such cases, the *ka*-marker (see footnote 16) is used. Ashton (1944:247) argues that the *me*-marker is both tense and aspect (immediate past tense and completive aspect). The *me*-marker does describe the notion of immediate past as shown in (47). It also has a sense of completive as illustrated by (48) and (49). However, these notions seem to belong to the *me*-marker's peripheral properties, which are immediate past and completive. (See section 3.3.2 for a diachronic discussion of these features.) The negative opposition of the *me*-marker is the "not yet" marker *ja-*, which indicates that the action or state has not yet occurred (Ashton 1944:272), though it implies that it will ultimately take place (Polomé 1967:117). See example (50).

(43) Polomé (1967:394)
Nakurudishia kitabu hiki, nimekwisha kusoma

n-	a-	ku-	rudi-	sh-	i-	a	ki-	tabu	hi-	ki
1SG.SU-	PRES-	2SG.OBJ-	return-	CAUS-	APPL-	IND	NPX7-	book	DEM-	OC7

ni-	**me-**	kw-	ish-	a	ku-	som-	a
1SG.SU-	**PFCT-**	NPX15-	finish-	IND	INF-	read-	IND

"I bring this book back to you, I have just finished reading it."

(44) Ashton (1944:249)
Alikuwa amelala

a-	**li-**	ku-	w-	a	a-	**me-**	lal-	a
3SG.SU-	**PAST-**	NPX15-	be-	IND	3SG.SU-	**PFCT-**	sleep-	IND

"He was asleep"

(45) Ashton (1944:251)
Nitakuwa nimelala

ni-	**ta-**	ku-	w-	a	ni-	**me-**	lal-	a
1SG.SU-	**FUT-**	NPX15-	be-	IND	1SG.SU-	**PFCT-**	sleep-	IND

"I shall be asleep"

(46) Lodhi & Otterbrandt (1987:22)

Nimesha fanya

ni-	**me-**	**sh[19]-**	a	fany-	a
1.SG.SU-	**PFCT-**	**already-**	IND	do-	IND

"I have already done"

(47) Lodhi p.c.

Amekuja nani?

a-	**me-**	ku-	j-	a	nani
3SG.SU-	**PFCT-**	NPX.15-	come-	IND	who

"Who came just now?"

(48) Polomé (1967:116)

Nimesikia

ni-	**me-**	siki-	a
1SG.SU-	**PFCT-**	hear-	IND

"I have heard" → "I understand"

(49) Ashton (1944:37)

Amesimama

a-	**me-**	simam-	a
3SG.SU-	**PFCT-**	stand-	IND

"He has stood up" → "He is standing"

(50) Ashton (1944:72)

Q: Amerudi?   *A: Hajarudi*

a-	**me-**	rudi		h-	a-	**ja-**	rudi
3SG.SU-	**PFCT-**	return		NEG1-	3SG.SU-	**NOT.YET-**	return

"Has he returned?"   "He has not yet returned"

In this section, evidence was provided to suggest that the *me*-marker in Swahili is a perfect marker.

3.2.4 The imperfective aspects

In this section, we will examine the *hu-* and *na*-markers in line with the discussion in section 2.2.2.2. The basic characterization of the two markers is provided below in order to show how these markers relate to one another, and to the present tense *a-*. This description of their similarities and differences, it is hoped, will clarify some of the conflicting statements made in the existing Swahili grammars. It will be suggested here that the *hu-* and *na*-markers are distinct imperfective aspects, whose basic meanings are the habitual and progressive, respectively. In the following, the two aspects are dealt with one by one, starting with *hu-*, the habitual marker.

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[19] [19] This auxiliary has in the Swahili dialect Kimvita grammaticalized into a kind of "already-perfect" marker, which functions alongside the perfect *me*-marker (A.Y. Lodhi p.c.)

3.2.4.1 The habitual

Habitual is defined here as follows. The habitual marker occurs in slot number 4 in simple declarative sentences. It describes an action that takes place habitually or repeatedly. Furthermore, the habitual marker is not used in generic sentences. It is shown below that the basic properties of the *hu*-marker in Swahili correspond to this characterization of a habitual.

The verb-group marked with *hu-* does not take an SC, contrary to the other TA markers. The basic property of the *hu*-marker in Swahili is to present "the verbal process as habitual or recurrent" (Polomé 1967:118). *Hu-* occurs in contexts where it is usually translated into English as "usually, "always" and "generally" (Ashton 1944:38) (see example (51)). Following Givón (2001:286), the habitual *hu*-marker is treated here as a sub-aspect of the imperfective, not as a tense, as it does not refer to any particular event-time. The *hu*-marker is the only grammatical morpheme that can specify the action expressed by the verb-group as habitual or recurrent without co-occurrence of aspectual adverbs, as illustrated in (52a,b). However, it cannot be used with the past tense (Ashton 1944:257), as illustrated by the ungrammatical (53)[20]. Further, the function of the *hu*-marker is distinct from present tense *a-*, in that the *hu*-marker only expresses a habitual meaning (see (54a,b) and (55)), not a generic sense. The latter is one of the functions of the *a*-marker (56a,b) (Ashton 1944:38).

(51) adapted from Ashton (1944:38)
Mayai hupatikana sokoni

ma-	yai	**hu-**	pat-	ika-	na	soko-	ni
NPX6-	egg	**HAB-**	get-	STAT-	REC	market-	LOC

"Eggs are **usually** to be got in the market"

(52a) A.Y Lodhi (p.c.)
Yeye huja hapa mara kwa mara

yeye	**hu-**	j-	a	hapa	**mara**	**kwa**	**mara**
he/she	**HAB-**	come-	IND	here	**time**	**of**	**time**

He frequently comes here"

---

[20] To express habitual aspect in the past tense, the *ki*-marker is used (Ashton 1944:257). The *ki*-marker in Swahili seems not to be a prototypical TA marker, which is why it has not been dealt with in this study. Ashton (1944:138) refers to it as a marker expressing imperfect, continous and incomplete action. Others refer to the *ki*-marker as a participial form (Loogman 1965:190), or the imperfective (Polome 1967:116). The function of the *ki*-marker and its relation to the adverbial subordinators needs further investigation.

(52b) A.Y Lodhi (p.c.)

Yeye huja hapa

yeye	**hu-**	j-	a	hapa
he/she	**HAB-**	come-	IND	here

"He has the habit of coming / usually comes here"

(53) * *Alikuwa hufanya*

a-	**li-**	ku-	w	a	**hu-**	fany-	a
3SG.SU-	**PAST-**	NPX15-	be-	IND	**HAB-**	do-	IND

*"He used to do"

(54a) Ashton (1944:38)

Ng'ombe hula chakula gani?

ng'-	**ombe**	**hu-**	l-	a	chakula	gani
NPX10-	**cow**	**HAB-**	eat-	IND	food	what

"What sort of food do cows eat **as their staple food**?"

(54b) Ashton (1944:38)

hula nyasi

hu-	l-	a	n-	yasi
HAB-	eat-	IND	NPX9-	grass

"They eat grass"

 (55) A.Y. Lodhi (p.c.)

Ng'ombe zangu hula mahindi

ng'	**ombe**	**z-**	**angu**	**hu-**	l-	a	ma-	hindi
NPX10-	**cow**	**SC10-**	**1SG.POSS-**	**HAB-**	eat-	IND	NPX6-	maize

"My cows (usually) eat maize"

(56a) Ashton (1944:38)

Ng'ombe wala chakula gani?

ng'-	**ombe**	wa-	**Ø-**	l-	a	chakula	gani
NPX10-	**cow**	SC2	**PRES-**	eat-	IND	food	what

"What sort of food do cows eat?"

(56b) Ashton (1944:38)

Wala nyasi

wa-	**Ø-**	l-	a	n-	yasi
NPX2-	**PRES-**	eat-	IND	NPX9-	grass

"They eat grass"

3.2.4.2 The progressive

The progressive aspect is defined here as follows. The progressive aspect marker occurs in slot number 4 in simple declarative sentences. It describes an activity which is ongoing at the reference time. In addition, it can occur with the past and future tense markers. It is shown below that the

basic properties of the *na*-marker in Swahili correspond to this characterization of progressive aspect.

The *na*-marker refers to an ongoing activity at the present time (see example (57)). The *na*-marker may also occur with both past and future reference points, as illustrated in (58) and (59). It is used with both dynamic (57) and stative verbs (60). However, its use with stative verbs gives rise to irregularities. E.g., when the stative verbal expression *kuwa mzee* "to be old" is used with the *na*-marker, it describes the process "to become old", as shown in (61)."To be old" in the present is instead expressed with a copula construction, as in (62). It has been noted that the *na*-marker is increasingly used as the present tense marker instead of the *a*-marker (Polomé 1967:115, Loogman 1965:384). The *na*-marker, however, cannot be used in generic statements as illustrated by (63). This distinguishes the *na*-marker from the *a*-marker[21].

(57) Polomé (1967:115)
Watoto wanacheza kiwanjani

wa-	toto	wa-	**na-**	chez-	a	ki-	wanja-	ni
NPX2-	child	NC2-	**PROG-**	play-	IND	NPX7-	plot-	LOC

"Children are playing on the plot of ground"

(58) Ashton (1944:250)
Tulipokuwa tunatazama

tu-	**li-**	po-	ku-	w-	a	tu-	**na-**	tazam-	a
1PL.SU-	**PAST-**	SUBO-	NPX15-	be-	IND	1PL.SU	**PROG-**	look-	IND

"While we were looking"

(59) Ashton (1944:251)
Elimu…itakuwa inaanza nyumbani

elimu	i-	**ta-**	ku-	w-	a	i-	**na-**	anz-	a	nyumba-	ni
education	SC9-	**FUT-**	NPX.15-	be-	IND	SC9-	**PROG-**	begin-	IND	house-	LOC

"Education will begin in the home"

(60) Polomé (1967:385)
Koti langu linachafuka

koti	l-	angu	li-	**na-**	chafu-	**ka**
coat	NC5-	POSS.1SG-	SC5-	**PROG-**	make.dirty-	**STAT**

My coat is getting dirty"

---

[21]As regards the progressive *na*-marker in dependent clauses, the distinction between this and the *ki*-marker (see footnote 19) is not always clear in the existing grammars. This issue needs further investigation.

(61) Lodhi (1974:99)

Anakuwa mzee

a-	**na-**	ku-	w-	a	m-	zee
3SG.SU-	**PROG-**	NPX15-	be-	IND	NPX1-	old

"He **is becoming** old / an old man" *"He/she is old"

(62) Lodhi (1974:99)

Yeye ni mzee

yeye	**ni**	m-	zee
he/she	**COP**	NPX1-	old

"He is old / he is an old man"

(63) *Ng'ombe wanakula majani*

ng'-	ombe	wa-	**na-**	ku-	l-	a	ma-	jani
NPX10-	cow	NPX2-	**PROG-**	NPX15-	eat-	IND	NPX6-	leaf

"The cows eat / are eating leaves" *"Cows (in general) eat leaves"

It was shown in this section that there are two distinct imperfective sub-aspects occurring in simple sentences in Swahili. These are the habitual (*hu-*) and the progressive (*na-*). These were shown to be distinct from the present tense *a-*.

3.3 Diachronic developments of modern TA markers

In this section, we will attempt to understand the synchronic patterns in the Swahili TA system by examining the diachronic processes working on the language. For this purpose, we will follow the theoretical discussion in section 2.2. This section, it is hoped, will show that the Swahili TA system develops along the diachronic pathways, which are commonly occurring in the languages of the world. In section 3.3.1, it will be shown that the overlap in usage between the present tense and the progressive aspect in Swahili reflects a diachronic development. In section 3.3.2, a description of the development of the perfect is provided in order to account for its distribution.

3.3.1 Progressive aspect and present tense

In this section, the distribution of the present tense *a-* and the progressive aspect *na-* is presented in order to suggest the following pathway for the Swahili TA markers discussed in this section:

"with", "and" → progressive aspect → present tense

The grammaticalization path for the progressive aspect *na-* is presented by Dammann (1975), who suggests that *na-* originates from modern Swahili *na* "with, and". He gives the following reconstruction (64a,b):

(64a) Hypothetical Old Swahili (Dammann 1975)
Nina kusoma

ni-	**na**	**ku-**	som-	a
1SG.SU-	**with**	**INF-**	read-	IND

"I am reading (lit. I am with the process of reading)"

(64b) Modern Swahili (Ashton 1944:37)
ninasoma

ni-	**na-**	som-	a
1SG.SU-	**TAM-**	read-	IND

"I am reading (now)"

Now let us consider how the progressive aspect *na-* relates to the present tense *a-*. It has been found cross-linguistically that a progressive may develop into the more general meaning present tense. This seems to be the case with the Swahili progressive *na-*. The *na-*marker overlaps in function with the present tense marker *a-*. This development also accounts for the fact that the progressive *na-* may also be used with stative verbs. In modern Swahili, consequently, two grammatical morphemes may function as a present tense marker. The older one (the present tense *a-*), which is more grammaticalized and in some instances even zero-marked, is still used in generic statements.

3.3.2 The perfect

Now we will examine the perfect, and how its basic and peripheral properties may be accounted for diachronically. The following pathway for the Swahili perfect is suggested here:

"finish" → completive → perfect

It has been shown earlier (e.g. Heine & Reh 1984:74) that the *me-*marker has developed from the ancient Swahili lexical word *meele* "finish". As discussed in section 2.2.3, the diachronic pathway of perfects developed from dynamic verbs such as "finish" commonly goes through a stage of usage as completives. A remnant of this completive sense still exists in the usage of the *me-*marker (see examples (48) and (49)). Furthermore, perfects developed from dynamic verbs may co-occur with stative verbs, and as was shown above (44), is the case even in Swahili. Additionally, the *me-* marker may function as immediate past (see (47)) (Ashton 1944:247). The perfect in Swahili thus seems to correspond to Bybee et al's (1995:105) developmental stage "old perfect", as it has several uses. The diachronic pathway described above can thus account for the different peripheral properties of the perfect in Swahili.

In this section, Swahili linguistic data has been discussed in support of the diachronic pathways considered in section 2.2. Arguments were presented here to suggest that an understanding of cross-linguistic diachronic pathways might help in accounting for the synchronic inconsistencies within the Swahili TA system.

4. Summary

In this paper, an attempt has been made to investigate the tense and aspect system in Swahili. A background in Bantu languages in general and Swahili in particular was provided. In the background section on tense and aspect systems, the various issues relevant for the synchronic description of the tense and aspect markers were discussed. It was emphasized there that tense and aspect systems tend to be imprecise. In addition, the diachronic processes, which cross-linguistically involve tense and aspect systems, were highlighted.

In the section on tense and aspect in Swahili, the existing Swahili grammatical descriptions were presented with special reference to their treatment of tense and aspect. It was noted that there is little agreement among scholars as regards the classification of tense and aspect markers in Swahili. The aim of the present study was therefore to discuss some of the ambiguities in the Swahili TA system. In order to classify the tense and aspect markers in this paper, the dominant and peripheral properties of the markers were first examined. It was suggested that there is a three-way tense system in Swahili. The tenses are the past tense *li-*, the future tense *ta-* and the present tense *a-*. Although the nature of the present was considered to be more consistent with the imperfective notion, it was decided here to treat the *a*-marker as a tense in order to maintain the traditional way of describing the present in Swahili. Further, evidence was presented to suggest that the *me*-marker be classified as a perfect marker. Lastly, the descriptive account of the *na*-marker and the *hu*-marker suggested they be classified as progressive aspect and habitual aspect, respectively.

Finally, some factors concerning the diachronic processes involved in the Swahili TA system were discussed in order to account for the distribution of some TA markers. Arguments were presented there in support of the diachronic pathways presented in section 2.2. It was suggested that the progressive aspect interacts with the present tense. Further, the description of the development of the perfect marker provided an account of its peripheral properties.

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