

Present and perfect in Bantu: The case of Lingála¹

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Abstract

In the study of tense-aspect systems in the Bantu languages, there appears to be a lack of agreement over basic issues in analyzing different inflectional classes. In this paper, we address forms of temporal predication in Lingála's present-time verbal paradigm. Presenting an analysis along the lines of Cognitive Grammar, we challenge the received interpretation of a verb form with -í in Lingála, as well as of its cognates in other Bantu languages, traditionally taken to mark past tense, notably with dynamic verbs. We claim that the perfect/anterior meaning of this -í form with dynamic verbs should be treated in terms of the cognitive strategies speakers have available for dealing with the "epistemic problem" inherent in observing and reporting nonstative events simultaneously. Accordingly, dynamic verbs taking the -í form should be analyzed together with its use with statives, instead of seeing both types as semantically unrelated. We therefore argue for, and develop, an integrated analysis, which can single-handedly account for both dynamic verbs and stative ones. In schematic terms, we propose that the temporal reference of the -í form, whose aspect is perfect, is present rather than past, even if notions of pastness may be involved in the background conceptualization.

1. Introduction

In their overview of Bantu verbal categories, Rose et al. (2002) mention that 64 of the 85 Bantu languages they reviewed (or 75 %) have a specific verb form²

1. We wish to thank Andreas Ammann and Ceyhan Temürçü for providing useful comments on an earlier version of this text.

2. We will use the expression "the form" or a close variant to refer to the various relevant cognates and noncognates in the languages discussed, whatever their exact appearance may be. When

to convey the meaning of perfect, which they choose to name “anterior” and define as referring “to a past action with current relevance [...] or to a state that started in the past and continues into the present” (Rose et al. 2002: 8). In 36 out of these 64 languages, the verb form is synthetic, while the other 28 use a two-word periphrastic construction. Exactly half of the same 64 languages are identified as using a reflex of the Proto-Bantu morpheme **-ile* for the inflectional marking of the perfect/anterior category.³

When discussing the temporal reference of this form – whether it is etymologically cognate or not, synthetic or periphrastic –, descriptive and comparative Bantu linguists more often than not view it as part of the past paradigm in the verb system of (a) Bantu (language). We will argue that this interpretation results from privileging verbs that are dynamic, at the expense of stative ones,⁴ and from an additional undersophistication in the analysis of the meaning of perfect (aspect) in general, confusing it with past tense. As for the first matter, many Bantuists implicitly or explicitly treat the use of the perfect/anterior form with stative verbs as exceptional or problematic. Moreover, in quite a number of cases such analyses appear to be guided by perceived problems with translations into Indo-European languages. Focusing on the use of the perfect/anterior form with dynamic verbs, most analyses are in fact led to conclude that the form’s meaning (or its translation) motivates its classification as a verb form with past-time reference, i.e., as a past tense. In response to this, we

we specifically deal with Lingála, our label “the *-í*-form” refers to the postradical combination of the morphemes *-Ø-* and *-í-*, unless indicated otherwise. Our discussion of the separability of tense-aspect morphemes in Section 4 will include an attempt to clarify this matter of the phonologically unrealized *-Ø-* morpheme.

3. Nurse, who is one of the coauthors of the overview, qualifies this statement somewhat (2003: 96): the perfect/anterior aspect value is said to be “primarily” expressed by a Proto-Bantu reflex, and the proto-form in question is identified as **-ide*, not **-ile*.
4. In this article, we use the terms “(dynamic) event” and “(nondynamic) state”, respectively, or “dynamic verb” and “stative verb”, to indicate types of lexical aspect. “Situation” is used as a general term to cover both events and states. Within the category of dynamic verbs, we do not distinguish between telic (“achievement”/“accomplishment”) and atelic (“activity”) events, as these distinctions do not affect our analysis. In this, we follow the practice adopted in Cognitive Grammar analyses of tense and aspect categories, where the terms “perfective” and “imperfective” are used to refer to the same lexical-aspectual contrast. Still with regard to lexical verb types, we also wish to underline from the outset that our identification of Lingála verbs as being either “dynamic” or “stative” is established on several language-internal criteria. One of them is the well-known impossibility for stative verbs to take the progressive without changing their meaning (aspectual coercion). Another is that, in past narratives, a series of simple statives can convey only simultaneous, never sequential, states (see also Mufwene 1984 for a discussion). The Lingála examples we offer will include the following stative-verb radicals: *-zal-* ‘be’, *-yéb-* ‘know’, and *-ling-* ‘want’, ‘like’. When used in past narratives, the referents of these verbs are necessarily simultaneous: **bazalákí míbalé, bangó míbalé bayébákí esíká bazalákí té kási balingákí kotika ndako té** ‘They were two, neither of them knew where they were, but they didn’t want to leave the house’.

want to offer an alternative analysis, not to privilege stative verbs over dynamic ones, but to account in a fully balanced and integrated way for the single, basic meaning of the so-called perfect/anterior. We will refer to Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1991) to spell out the details of our analysis, invoking cognitively motivated mechanisms for background-foreground organization and alluding to the “epistemic problem”, which is claimed to arise as a matter of course in the expression of events concurrent with the time of speaking. The solution suggested by this approach solidly anchors the form under discussion within the present-time paradigm of a language’s verb system.

The case we want to elaborate is that of Lingála. The verb system of Lingála (C36d, according to Maho 2003) features a form conveying the above-mentioned meaning of perfect/anterior aspect and using a reflex of the Proto-Bantu morpheme *-ile, namely -í. Our analysis purports to show, as one of us also suggested in earlier publications (Meeuwis 1998: 28–30; 2001: 162–164), that the temporal value expressed by the -í form in Lingála, and by extension by semantically equivalent forms (cognate or noncognate) in other Bantu languages, does not justify an interpretation in terms of reference to the past, but that we are dealing here with what is essentially a present tense.⁵

2. Anterior, perfect, and past in Bantu

The use of the -í form in the inflectional verb system of Lingála is exemplified in (1a) and (1b):

- (1) a. **a-pés-í ngái mokandá**
 3SG-give-í 1SG letter⁶
 ‘She has given me a letter.’
 b. **a-yéb-í ngái**
 3SG-know-í 1SG
 ‘She knows me.’

5. There are, in fact, some preliminary, surface-level indications of the basic presentness of the form, namely its use with dynamic verbs in such special contexts as explicit performatives, conditionals, instructional language, live reporting, and others. In all these contexts, speakers of Lingála use the -í form. The reason why these uses are to be considered present is that reference is made to a situation which, crucially, is mentally available at the time of speaking, even if “objectively” the clausal referent at issue is not necessarily present in all of these contexts. The unifying feature in such special uses is rather that the speaker construes the situation as virtually given within some discursively relevant space or world, regardless of whether or not it corresponds with a counterpart in actual reality.

6. In this and following examples, we deliberately leave -í, and some related morphemes, un-glossed, so as not to invoke any assumptions about their meanings prior to the actual discussion.

One of the Bantu languages that has a form (making use of the affix **-ma-**) with similar semantic values is Yisangu (zone B). Ondo-Mebiame (1988, 2000) and Idiata (1998) offer the following examples:

- (2) from Idiata (1998: 140)
má-ma-búl-é **tsuβə**
 1SG-PRÉS.ACC-break-FIN calabash
 'I have broken the calabash.'
- (3) from Ondo-Mebiame (2000: 202)
bânə **bá-ma-vyos-a**
 children 3PL-PASSÉ.RÉCENT-pass-FIN
 'Children have (just) passed.'

The two authors disagree on the interpretation of this form with dynamic verbs, as in (2) and (3). For Ondo-Mebiame it is to be understood as a “*passé récent*” (2000: 202), while Idiata chooses to see it as a “*présent accompli*” (PRÉS.ACC) (1998: 139–140). This is not just a matter of labeling. Ondo-Mebiame’s understanding of the form is that it “*exprime le passé d’il n’y a pas très longtemps*” (2000: 202). Referring to Ondo-Mebiame (1988), Idiata mentions that his own analyses reveal a different picture:

Il [Ondo-Mebiame] l’appelle “passé récent” alors que d’après nos données ce morphème marque plutôt le présent accompli. [...] Le formatif **-ma-** indique que à l’instant présent, l’action exprimée par le verbe est déjà accomplie. [...] ce formatif ne situe pas l’action du verbe dans un passé (fût-il proche), mais présente une situation dans laquelle l’action exprimée par le verbe est accomplie juste au moment où l’on parle. (Idiata 1998: 139–140)

Idiata’s understanding of this form as fundamentally present does not only differ from Ondo-Mebiame’s account, it is also at variance with the majority of Bantuists describing corresponding forms in other Bantu languages. Exceptions in line with Idiata include Mbula Paluku’s description of Kitalinga (zone J), where it is observed that, although “*le procès est présenté comme accompli*”, the relevant form situates “*le procès à un moment déterminé au présent*” (1998: 241–242). Another exception is Bentley and Kulemeka’s account of Chichewa (zone N), who interpret the form as a “present perfect” (2001: 31), placed in functional opposition with this language’s true past forms. In general, however, Bantu linguistics tends to view forms like these as belonging to the past paradigm in the tense-aspect system. It is our conviction that the relatively marginal set of dissonant analyses just cited comes closer to a plausible account of the issues involved than the dominant interpretation in terms of past reference. Given the mainstream status of a past-tense analysis, however, we will first review a number of descriptions representative of this position.

In his description of Babole (zone C), Leitch states that the form in question indicates “near past tense/completive aspect” (CMPL) (2003: 404):

- (4) **bá-ás-í** **byeka**
 3PL-steal-CMPL food
 ‘They stole the food.’ or ‘They have stolen the food.’

It is Leitch himself who provides the two alternative translations. He mentions that, apart from its use with “psychological or experiencer predicates”, with “all other verbs” the form conveys a meaning of “recent past” (Leitch 2003: 404). Analyzing Lega (zone D), Botne (2003) goes one step further in privileging dynamic verb types for assessing the corresponding form’s basic function, and also situates the form within the past paradigm of the verb system: referring only to its use with dynamic verbs, the cognate **-ile** in this language is identified as a (tense) marker indicating “near past” (2003: 440) or “approximal past” (2003: 440–441) events.

Many Bantuists link up the alleged past reference of the form with some notion of perfect aspect. Poulos and Bosch (1997: 22) refer to the cognate morpheme **-ile** (with allomorphs **-e** and **-i**) in Zulu (zone S) as the “perfect or past tense”, not only treating perfect unconventionally as a category of tense, rather than aspect, but also presenting perfect and past as synonymous labels. Moreover, Poulos and Bosch observe that the same form is used with stative verbs. However, as translations of the latter into English do not involve any notion of pastness, they feel compelled to ascribe this use to a separate entry in the Zulu verb system, which they then call the “stative tense” (Poulos and Bosch 1997: 22–23).

In another publication on Zulu (Poulos and Msimang 1998), past is not used as a synonym of perfect when the form is discussed. Yet these authors call the same form a “perfect *tense*” (1998: 265; our emphasis), also insisting on the interpretation of “perfect” as a category of tense in the rest of the book (1998: 271). The temporal reference is past, as this form is said “to denote immediate past tense in Zulu” (Poulos and Msimang 1998: 271).

Some authors are more ambiguous when it comes to equating perfect and past. For Bila (zone D), Kutsch Lojenga (2003: 468–469) also identifies forms with the suffix **-í** as “perfect”. Her discussion suggests that both this perfect and the form of the “remote past” constitute one paradigm in the language’s verb system, distinct from and on a par with such forms as “the future” and “the present continuous”. The perfect is thus, at least implicitly, presented as part of the past-tense paradigm.

In their comparative publications on tense and aspect in Bantu languages, mentioned above, Rose et al. (2002) and Nurse (2003) devote considerable attention to the form in terms of Bantu in general, discussing the applicability

of the notion of perfect aspect. Because of a potential terminological confusion between perfect and perfective aspect (the latter being about an event's bounded temporal profile), they propose to use the label "anterior" instead, making it fully overlap with one of the received definitions of perfect: "an earlier action which produced a state which either lives on, or whose consequences or relevance live on" (Nurse 2003: 96). This aspectual category is then said to be in "close connection" with the expression of "near/recent past" (Rose et al. 2002: 8), allowing for several manifestations of this connection, depending on the language. In languages in which the relevant morphemes can be analytically separated, the "close connection" between anterior aspect and past tense is understood in terms of their co-occurrence. In languages where they are not analytically separable, the connection is understood diachronically. Some of these languages have a past tense which "doubles as an anterior" (Nurse 2003: 96), through a process of reinterpretation: "[b]y loosening and then losing the requirement that it have present relevance", the anterior verb form in some languages "becomes past" (2003: 96). Although a semantic shift from perfect to past is widely attested, including in languages outside Africa (see Comrie 1995: 1249 and Bybee et al. 1994: Ch. 3), this in itself does not constitute sufficient evidence to view the given verb form in a specific Bantu language, at any moment in history, as conceptually entailing a notion of pastness (see also Section 4). Note, in addition, that such a shift would have to presume that its starting point, the value of perfect aspect, applies without any discrimination of lexical verb class, a situation which appears not to be the case in many Bantu languages.

Let us finally return to the bias in observing and discussing dynamic versus stative verbs in Bantu linguistics. Botne's description of Lega (2003) and Ondo-Mebiame's of Yisangu (2000) are examples of a tendency to neglect the use of the form at issue with stative verbs, providing no examples or discussion. Most other authors do take statives into account when discussing the form, yet few propose a common denominator for both usage types. Instead of a unified semantic analysis, we usually find a disjunctive treatment and an analytical emphasis on dynamic verbs, which adds to the observation that the form tends to be translated differently into European languages for the two verb types. Poulos and Bosch's (1997) above-mentioned description of Zulu is an extreme instance of this: for the use with stative verbs of what they recognize to be morphologically the same form, they distinguish an entirely homonymous slot in the Zulu verb system. It is difficult to find many other examples of Bantu description going as far as this in consolidating the dynamic-stative divide, but the tendency to favor dynamic verbs in the analysis prevails. Leitch recognizes that with "psychological or experiencer predicates [...] the meaning is present", but on the basis of his analysis of dynamic verbs he nevertheless sees the form as an instance of "the near past tense/completive aspect" (2003: 404).

Kutsch Lojenga's analysis of Bila is also minimally integrated and partly based on translation differences. For the Bila perfect, she specifies that:

[w]ith verbs of action, this paradigm marks a completed action in the recent past, with emphasis on the present relevance. The most common translation for verbs of action is: 'he has ...' [...] With verbs of state, the Perfect marks the result of a process getting to the present state. (Kutsch Lojenga 2003: 468)

Likewise, Motingea Mangulu limits his discussion of the "*parfait*" in Mpundza (zone C) to the following observation: "*ce parfait se réfère à une situation récemment (aujourd'hui) achevée et se traduit quelques fois par un présent*" (1996: 220; our emphasis). In the discussion of the anterior by Rose et al. (2002: 8), finally, the nonintegrated character of the analysis is manifested as follows: "In recent years it [anterior] has come to be used as similar or synonymous with perfect, that is, it refers to a past action with current relevance [...] or to a state that started in the past and continues into the present." We agree that relevance with respect to a temporal reference point and continuation into that same reference point are indeed the key elements in understanding perfect verb forms, the former as applied to events (dynamic verbs) and the latter to states (statives). But nowhere do we learn about how these two notions can be brought together insightfully and in full consideration of both dynamic and stative verbs, and the general tendency is to assume that if the aspect is perfect, then the associated temporal reference must be past.

3. The -í form in Lingála: Observations

We now take up the empirical description of the range of usage types that can be specifically distinguished for Lingála's -í form, including those that have not previously entered the debate. Let us first go back to our examples (1a) and (1b), repeated below as (5a) and (5b), featuring the expression of an event and a state, respectively:

- (5) a. **a-pés-í ngái mokandá**
 3SG-give-í 1SG letter
 'She has given me a letter.'
- b. **a-yéb-í ngái**
 3SG-know-í 1SG
 'She knows me.'

Example (5b) says something about the subject's real state at the time of speaking, but given the stable character of this situation, the predication's temporal reach extends beyond the scope of the actual time of speaking in some conceptual background. The presentation in the remainder of this section goes as

follows. First, we observe that the *-í* form is also used for making general-validity statements (with stative verbs), which share with statives as in (5b) the notion of temporal stability. Then we contrast this use with another Lingála form, *-aka*, dedicated to a specific, discontinuous type of general-validity statement. We note, to end this section with, that for all the different usage types that can be distinguished with dynamic and stative verbs taking the *-í* form, none of them involves a notion of pastness as a necessary and central (in the sense of defining a form's actual temporal reference) semantic ingredient.

The defining property of stative situations as in (5b), which are stable and thus inherently valid over some temporal interval, brings us to the distinct but related notion of *general* validity. "General-validity statements" is used here as a cover term for habituals, expressions of generic truths, and other structural statements, i.e., utterances that do not focus on issues of temporal location but that predicate of an event or state that it holds in a structural, temporally unidentified, reality. If anything, general-validity statements may be said to construe a backgrounded conceptual link with the actual present, at which time the state may also be held true (but only as an inference, because it is *always* true), yet there is certainly no relevant notion of time that is involved in their primary semantics. Statements as in (5b) do involve a relevant, nonstructural notion of time and are therefore not general-validity statements, but they come close to them conceptually – it is only the limited scope of the relevant interval ("now") and, especially, its focal status that differentiates (5b) from general-validity statements. It is therefore not surprising that in Lingála, general-validity statements may also take the *-í* form, as witnessed in the stative expression in (6):

- (6) **moto nyónso a-zal-í na mabé na yé**
 person each 3SG-be-í with badness of 3SG
 'Everyone has (literally: is with) their failings.'

Our second set of observations concerns the construction of general-validity statements in Lingála other than by means of the *-í* form. In (7), featuring a dynamic verb, the expression of a habit is marked by a form with *-aka*:⁷

- (7) **Pierre a-kom-aka mikandá ya kitóko**
 Pierre 3SG-write-HAB letters of beauty
 'Pierre writes beautiful letters.'

Stative verbs, too, may take *-aka*. When this occurs, as in (8a), an iterative interpretation is triggered, whereby context usually provides a clue as to which

7. See Meeuwis (1995: 105–106) for a description of the *-aka* form as designating habits that are not restricted to a specific time portion, but that convey structural information on the grammatical subject: in the case of (7), Pierre is not just said to have a habit, he is above all said to be the kind of person who writes beautiful letters.

specific interval, or set of intervals, is to be chosen as relevant to the utterance at hand (as in the comment given here between brackets):

- (8) a. **na-ling-aka musique na yé míngi**
 1SG-like-HAB music of 3SG much
 'I like/enjoy her music.' (e.g., every time I go to her show)
- b. **na-ling-í musique na yé míngi**
 1SG-like-í music of 3SG much
 'I like/enjoy her music.' (i.e., generally)

With **-aka** in (8a), a state's discontinuously iterative occurrence is expressed, i.e., the fact that there are intervals where the utterance need not be true or, more precisely, where its truth is not treated as relevant. It is only in cases of *continuous* general validity, then, that an expression will sanction the **-í** form, as in example (8b) as well as (6). For dynamic verbs, which exclusively take the **-aka** form for the expression of general validity (as in 7), this distinction does not apply, since dynamic general-validity statements can conceptually only refer to a discontinuous state anyhow.

The resulting picture for the distribution of **-í** and **-aka** forms in the expression of a number of seemingly unrelated semantic categories looks as presented in Table 1.

For dynamic verbs, the **-í** form is only used to express a present perfect (**apésí**). For the expression of a nonperfect present meaning, dynamic verbs take a compound marking, featuring an **-í**-inflected form of **kozala** ('be'), i.e., **azalí**, in auxiliary position, followed by the dynamic verb in the infini-

Table 1. **-í** and **-aka** in the Lingála verb system

Dynamic verbs	Stative verbs
a-pés-í 3SG-give-í 'she has given'	a-yéb-í 3SG-know-í 'she knows'
a-zal-í ko-pés-a 3SG-be-í to_give 'she is giving'	na-ling-í musique na yé 1SG-like-í music of 3SG 'I like her music' (generally)
a-kom-aka 3SG-write-HAB 'she writes' (professionally, habitually, ...)	na-ling-aka musique na yé 1SG-like-HAB music of 3SG 'I like/enjoy her music' (whenever I go to her show)

tive (**kopésa**). For statives, in contrast, the **-í** form canonically indicates a state that holds at the time of speaking (**ayébí**). The same form may also be used to refer to states that hold structurally, because, as we suggested, if a person is construed as knowing something right now, this state is at the same time construed as extending significantly beyond the current time of speaking, and as at least holding in a time frame that precedes, if slightly, the time of its description (that is, the description of states hardly ever coincides with the point of their emergence). The same stability typically also extends in the other direction, into the future. Thus, by themselves states as expressed in (8b) seem to invite the inference that their very stability, even if only *local* (i.e., extending minimally beyond the time of speaking), justifies seeing them as distinctive or typical properties of an entity or group of entities. This structural property instantiates the notion of continuous validity we invoked above. The **-aka** form, in contrast, is restricted to cases of discontinuous general validity.⁸ This is so for both dynamic and stative verb types. With statives, the availability of a separate, explicitly *discontinuous* type of general validity is motivated by the **-í** form's meaning naturally extending into the realm of continuous validity, as just noted. With dynamic verbs, the notion of discontinuity can be assumed to follow from the definition of this type of lexical aspect: general-validity statements about events usually convey discontinuous iteration, i.e., the repeated, iterative occurrence of the event with in-between gaps in which the event need not hold.

We now have a configuration in which the main functions of the Lingála **-í** form can be clearly distributed over lexical type: with dynamic verbs it expresses perfect aspect, and with statives it indicates present time *and* continuous validity. None of these functions suggests that the **-í** form has anything like an element of pastness that would be a necessary or invariant component of its meaning profile. Even in the case of a perfect reading with dynamic verbs, involving the notion of a past/completed event, the *tense* that is understood is nevertheless present. Before proceeding to our argumentation in the next section in favor of such a genuine present-tense interpretation of the **-í** form in Lingála, it should be made clear that, as in Cognitive Grammar, we define a tense in an orthodox way as indicating a temporal relation between a designated/profiled situation (the clausal referent) and the time of speaking ("ground", see below). If the profile coincides with the ground, a present tense (be it a simple present, a present perfect, a present progressive, or another type) is involved, while a past tense (again involving various possible formal realiza-

8. At the level of conceptual representation, discontinuous general-validity statements can be seen as expressing higher-order states consisting of a series of token events of the same type. The stability associated with the notion of general validity applies to these cases as well, but only at the noted higher-order level of organization.

tions) relates a profile preceding the time of speaking to the ground. That a present profile may, in the background, include notions of a prior process leading up to it does not in itself alter the nature of that profile, and thus does not alter the relevant tense relation involved. A past tense needs to *refer* directly to a situation preceding the ground, not just include or evoke an idea of pastness somewhere in conceiving of the situation.

4. The -í form in Lingála: Analysis

4.1. *The epistemic problem*

Cognitive Grammar, through its so-called “grounding” model⁹ (Langacker 1991, Brisard (ed.) 2002), offers a unified account of tense meaning on the basis of simple temporal notions like (non)simultaneity, the (un)boundedness of situations, and, not unimportantly, the extended nature of the time of speaking (the present as an interval). Furthermore, Cognitive Grammar specifically adds to these tools the idea that meaning in natural language, which is conceptual, is also essentially perspectivized, so that different types of construal can be expressed for the same objective situation. This is well worked out in the context of tense analysis, where viewpoint serves as a key element in the characterization of tense meanings, but also in the notion that the speaker inevitably makes certain meaning elements in a given semantic constellation more prominent than others, which is exactly what is referred to as conceptual designation or “profiling”.

Cognitive Grammar starts from a characterization of dynamic and stative verbs as, respectively, temporally bounded and unbounded intervals, whose meanings feature a profiled part contained within what is called a predication’s “immediate scope” (IS) and an unprofiled part further making up the expression’s “maximal scope” (MS). This is represented in Figure 1.

For dynamic verbs, the profile (in bold) is wholly contained within the immediate scope, representing an event that is viewed as a whole. Statives have an unbounded profile, meaning that the immediate scope zooms in on a subpart of a state, which is treated as continuing into the predication’s maximal scope.

9. Grounding refers to the final step a speaker makes/must make when forming a full nominal or finite clause. Grounding predications are grammatical markers with basic epistemic meanings that allow the identification of single instances from a type specified by a bare noun or verb. In the nominal domain, they comprise a.o. determiners and quantifiers, and in the verbal domain, tense (and mood) markers are typically included. The temporal information provided by tenses is an instance of the schematic epistemic meaning characterizing all grounding predications, as it allows the identification of a temporal process vis-à-vis the ground (i.e., the time of speaking).

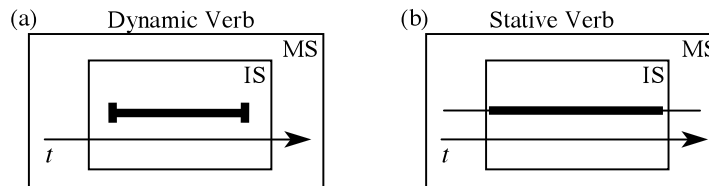


Figure 1. (a) Dynamic and (b) stative verbs in Cognitive Grammar

This is a way of representing the internal viewpoint that a stative construal conjures up, where what is focused upon suggests the relevance of additional semantic material that is out of focus, i.e., the notion that the stative process goes on beyond the profile interval, possibly indefinitely. Generally, dynamic verbs are described as typically referring to dynamic events changing in time, while statives are said to denote states that are stable through time. This description accords with the treatment of dynamic and stative verbs in Cognitive Grammar, where the feature of “contractibility” (cf. below) is assigned to states as a direct implication of their stable profile. (The change-of-state character of dynamic events is not specifically addressed in Figure 1a.)

On the working assumption, maintained in Cognitive Grammar, that any present tense designates a situation that exhibits full temporal overlap with the time of speaking, the use of dynamic verbs runs into the so-called epistemic problem (Langacker 2001: 263) within the paradigm of present-time reference. This epistemic problem refers to the conceptual difficulty of observing and *at the same time* linguistically reporting, or even merely identifying, punctual or very short (i.e., typically dynamic) events in the present. Identifying and/or reporting an event such as kicking a ball simultaneously with its occurrence is problematic, because by the time the conceptualizer recognizes/knows which event is being observed, it must have already started (and, less crucially, may also already have ended), and thus the event and the time of its identification or report can in principle not coincide. Put differently, an event such as kicking a ball involves qualitatively distinct phases (changes of state), of which any individual one is not representative of the entire kicking event: since such dynamic events involve changes from one moment to the next, one point in time (or a very short interval like the time of speaking, for that matter) does generally not suffice to determine the kind of event observed, i.e., to identify it while it is going on, and if it does, this means that the event in question must have ended with it and thus cannot in principle overlap with its subsequent identification/report. This is not the case with states, as we will see.

The epistemic problem with dynamic events overlapping with the present can be diagrammed as follows.

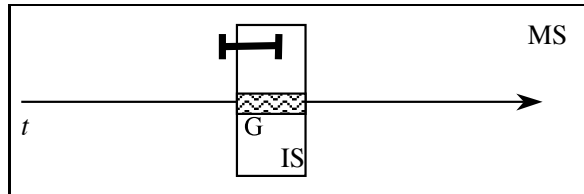


Figure 2. The epistemic problem with dynamic events

The lower box with wavy lines, situated on the timeline, represents the time of speaking (ground or *G*). The time of speaking is made up of the time it takes to begin and complete a full utterance containing a finite clause – in this sense, it too is a dynamic and bounded event. The profile of a dynamic event is represented by the bold interval. The event contains two boundaries delimiting its starting and end points. In this figure, the conceptual implausibility of having an event overlap completely with the time of speaking (the epistemic problem) is represented by having the profile begin before the actual starting point of the ground. The actual duration of the event interval is immaterial to the epistemic problem and is only schematically rendered in this diagram. In the case of a punctual event, it should also precede the starting point of the ground or, in a limiting case, coincide with it, in which case there is still no full overlap.

With statives in the present, the epistemic problem is not bound to arise (Figure 3): it is possible to select exactly that subpart of the conception of a state that coincides fully with the time of speaking, with the profiled subpart representing a valid instance, holding right now, of the relevant state in its entirety. Since every conceivable portion of a continuous state (say, knowing something) is identifiable as representing that same state, which is said to be internally homogeneous, any arbitrary selection of an instance whose borders are made to coincide with those of the time of speaking (*G*) will also be a valid instance of the general state from which it is mentally extracted. This is referred to in Cognitive Grammar as the contractibility of states (Langacker 1991: 20–22; it is what states have in common, conceptually, with mass nouns). In nontechnical terms, it is obvious that if the state of a person knowing something is “cut up” into different instances, each of these is qualitatively similar to and representative of the same token of knowing that something. In Figure 3, the (dotted) line representing the entire state extends into the conceptual background, containing those elements in the meaning configuration that are not profiled (i.e., the stable continuation of the same instance of knowing, into an indefinite past and future). The profile itself is completely contained by the borders imposed by the ground.

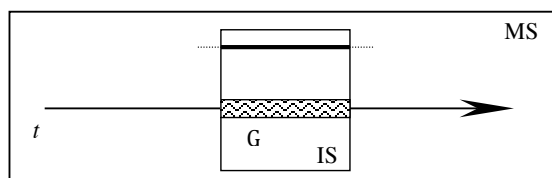


Figure 3. No epistemic problem with statives

4.2. *The -í form as marking present*

Different languages respond differently to the epistemic problem. Within their respective grammatical paradigms of present-time reference, speakers of English and Lingála are led by the problem to treat dynamic verbs in a formally distinct fashion as compared to statives. Each of them applies different strategies in this regard. In English, as in Lingála, the use of the simple present with statives offers a straightforward interpretation of simultaneity with the time of speaking (see 9a) or of general validity. English does not allow the use of the simple present for the expression of dynamic events situated in the present, but relegates this function to the present progressive (see 9b). Dynamic verbs may take the simple present to refer to structural situations, as in (9c):

- (9) English
- a. Stative
I know the answer (right now).
She likes orange juice.
 - b. Dynamic
***I write this letter right now.**
I'm writing this letter right now.
 - c. Dynamic (general-validity reading)
She writes beautiful letters.

By default, English dynamic verbs taking the present tense denote a structural property of the grammatical subject. In an example like (9c), the speaker profiles a full instance of a dynamic event as located in a structural plane of representation (and thus removed from the domain of actual events situated in real time), which at once eliminates the conceptual difficulty of aligning the time of speaking with an actually occurring event.

As with the English simple present, the use of the *-í* form in Lingála with stative verbs (Figure 4a) results in a reading of simultaneity with the time of speaking (example 10) or of continuous general validity (examples 11 and 12).

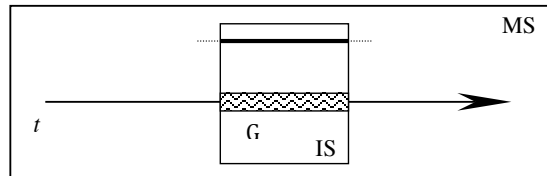


Figure 4a. The Lingála *-í* form with stative verbs

- (10) **a-yéb-í ngái**
 3SG-know-í 1SG
 'She knows me.'
- (11) **moto nyónso a-zal-í na mabé na yé**
 person each 3SG-be-í with badness of 3SG
 'Everyone has (literally: is with) their failings.'
- (12) **na-ling-í musique na yé míngi**
 1SG-like-í music of 3SG much
 'I like/enjoy her music a lot.'

With dynamic verbs, however, the *-í* form is interpreted as a present perfect (example 13). Lastly, as we have seen, with dynamic verbs general-validity statements are made by means of a separate verb form, using *-aka* (example 14):

- (13) Dynamic verb, perfect reading
a-pés-í ngái mokandá
 3SG-give-í 1SG letter
 'She has given me a letter.'
- (14) Dynamic verb, general-validity reading
Pierre a-kom-aka mikandá ya kitóko
 Pierre 3SG-write-HAB letters of beauty
 'Pierre writes beautiful letters.'

Now what happens conceptually when the *-í* form with dynamic verbs triggers a perfect interpretation? It seems that in Lingála, a different strategy is resorted to than what we have seen for English, and this is depicted in Figures 4b and 4c.

In these diagrams, the squiggly lines in the box indicate a past dynamic event that involves a change of state over time. Applying this to example (13), we can say that the dynamic verb *-pés-* denotes a change in the relation between an object and its former and new owner. The epistemic problem, then, is addressed in Lingála by construing this *entire event* as preceding the ground, except its

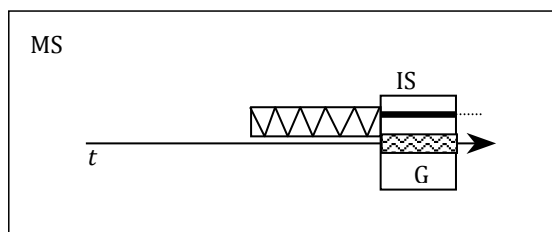


Figure 4b. The Lingála *-i* form with dynamic verbs (abuttal)

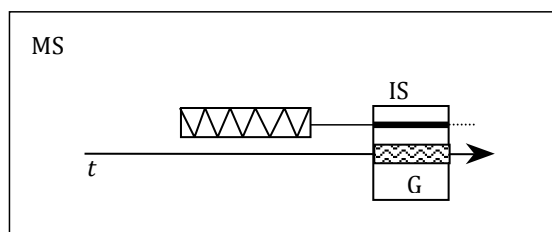


Figure 4c. The Lingála *-i* form with dynamic verbs (no abuttal)

resulting end state. It is in fact this end state only that is profiled by the *-í* form (i.e., conceptually designated, as represented by the bold line), with the remainder of the conceptual material involved situated in the background (MS). The shift implicated by this strategy is not as strange as it may look: in simultaneously observing and reporting an ongoing event like giving, it is the present ground that moves with time as time passes. The designated event does not move with time, though, but develops in time. The difference between the temporal status of the ground and that of the backgrounded event is that, once the event reaches its endpoint, it has a stationary (extended) location in time. That is to say that it is permanently paired with a definite interval (or point) in time. Typically, the act of speaking, once initiated, will very rapidly reach the endpoint of the event and overlap with the resulting end state for a significantly longer portion of time. Put differently: one cannot start saying that something is being given before the giving has started, yet when it has started, it is typically over before its description, and the description effectively coincides with the state of having given, rather than with the giving proper. This means that the strategy adopted in Lingála to solve the epistemic problem is motivated, from a cognitive point of view.

We might term the conceptual operation whose outcome is depicted in Figures 4b and 4c one of “end-state focus”, whereby the profile of a predication shifts from the internally heterogeneous collection of phases that make up an

event to the relatively steady situation resulting from that event.¹⁰ This situation is a real, homogeneous, and continuous state, and a representative subpart of it can be made to coincide with the time of speaking. It is helpful to think of the operation of end-state focus as “blowing up” the right-hand boundary of a dynamic event, such that the inherently stative quality of this endpoint – as the state to which a change-of-state predication eventually leads – is focused upon and designated. An example like Lingála **apésí** is accordingly best glossed as ‘she is in a state of having given (something)’, stressing the stable present state rather than the ephemeral antecedent event.

To sum up our argumentation so far, the present-perfect meaning of the **-í** form constitutes its solution to the epistemic problem with dynamic verb types, while with English dynamic verbs the preferred solution resides in attributing an interpretation of general validity. Lingála’s verb system already contains a specialized form, **-aka**, for indicating the general validity of events. We hypothesize that the existence of such a separate form for the meaning of general validity tends to block this very same interpretation with the **-í** form in combination with a dynamic verb. That is, instead of creating the double coverage of one function by two forms, the Lingála verb system has the perfect reading itself as a valid alternative for confronting the epistemic problem with dynamic verbs. We could say that in Lingála, this perfect reading is a strategy that is paradigmatically available, as it is not covered by any of the other forms in the verb system of the language.

4.3. *Related forms in the Lingála verb system*

Nothing in our description suggests that the endpoint of an event needs to abut, or be immediately adjacent to, the ground: both Figures 4b and 4c apply to the use of the **-í** form with dynamic verbs. This means that with **-í**, the speaker does not indicate the time distance that separates the accomplished event from the ground. It only conveys **that** a present state holds as the result of an antecedent event, not how long ago that event took place. In fact, the **-í** form can be used to refer to events that, strictly speaking, occurred months, years, and even longer ago; the speaker actually chooses to indicate that time depth does not matter (as also recognized by Mufwene 1978: 100). This indeed invalidates analyses of the **-í** form as *specifically* indicating temporal proximity or immediacy

10. Precisely because it is the present end-state that is focused on, and not the past event itself, the **-í** form does not combine with temporal adverbials pairing events with some *definite* past location in time (**lóbí** ‘yesterday’, **mbúla elekí** ‘last year’). Adverbials like **leló** ‘today’ or **póso/mbúla óyo** ‘this week/year’ are possible with the **-í** form, because the adverbial reference includes the ground, and the event is thereby itself included in an interval ranging to the time of speaking.

(Dzokanga 1979: 260, Guthrie and Carrington 1988: 44, Nurse 2000, and, in fact, Meeuwis 1995).

In this respect, it is useful to compare the meaning of the **-í** form with that of a seemingly related form, exemplified in (15):

- (15) a. **a-pés-á ngái mokandá**
 3SG-give-á 1SG letter
 'She has given me a letter.' (long ago)
- b. **a-yéb-á ngái**
 3SG-know-á 1SG
 'She knows me.' (since long)

Both the **-í** form and the **-á** form focus on a stable situation in the present, whether that is the endpoint of a prior dynamic event or simply the continuation of an existing state. We just saw that, in the case of dynamic verbs, **-í** makes no commitment as to the contiguity of the prior event's endpoint and the current profile. In contrast, with **-á** there is indeed such a commitment, viz., that the (endpoint of the) prior dynamic event is situated at a distance from the present, and that the speaker wants to treat this temporal distance as significant. With regard to statives, the speaker again indicates with **-á**, unlike with **-í**, that there is a relevant time depth during which the state at issue has been holding, and that consequently this state has considerable temporal extension (in the *background* conception; the *profile proper* still, as with the **-í** form, coincides with the time of speaking). Note that the notion of time depth has to be construed differently for the two basic verb types. With dynamic verbs, it is about the distance between the end of the prior event and the ground, while with statives it is the designated state itself that extends into the past (and future).

Finally, the two other suffixes to consider relative to the paradigmatic position of the **-í** form are **-ákí** and **-áká**. As discussed in Meeuwis (1995) and (1998), verbs inflected with these suffixes indicate past tense, i.e., in contrast to the **-í** and the **-á** forms they profile states and events, including their endpoints, as entirely preceding the ground:

- (16) a. **a-pés-ákí ngái mokandá**
 3SG-give-ákí 1SG letter
 'She gave me a letter.'
- b. **a-yéb-ákí ngái**
 3SG-know-ákí 1SG
 'She knew me.'
- c. **a-pés-áká ngái mokandá**
 3SG-give-áká 1SG letter
 'She gave me a letter.' (long ago)

- d. **a-yé**b**-áká ngái**
 3SG-know-áká 1SG
 ‘She knew me.’ (long ago)

The difference between **-ákí** and **-áká** is analogous to the one between **-í** and **-á**: either the speaker chooses, as part of the background conception, not to make the time depth relevant (**-í** and **-ákí**), or she does and construes it as having significant extension (**-á** and **-áká**). One could therefore be tempted to advance an analysis that contrasts the morphemes **-Ø-** and **-ák-** on the one hand and **-í** and **-á** on the other, as suggested by Nurse (2000). Yet such an itemized, matrix arrangement, predicated on the assumption that each morpheme is a distinguishable marker of either aspect or tense, runs the risk of oversimplifying matters. An overview of the different possibilities will show why.

In his 2000 publication, Nurse proposed to interpret **-Ø-** and **-ák-** as markers of grammatical aspect, i.e., “anterior” (his label for “perfect”, see Section 2) and “perfective”, respectively (2000: 141–142), and **-í** and **-á** as markers of tense, i.e., “recent past” (or “P1”) and “remote past” (or “P2”), respectively (2000: 142–143). In a later comparative study, Nurse and colleagues (Rose et al. 2002: 8) at least implicitly came to the opposite conclusion, namely that the reflexes of ***-ile** in Bantu languages (which includes the Lingála **-í** morpheme) indicate aspect, not tense. Various Bantuist accounts offering morpheme-by-morpheme discussions of tense and aspect also attribute the tense meaning to the zero (or another, language-dependent) morpheme and the aspectual meaning to the reflex of ***-ile**. See for example Leitch’s (2003: 404) analysis of Babole and Ngonyani’s (2003: 57–60) of Chingoni.

Let us first discuss the former option, i.e., with **-Ø-** and **-ák-** as aspect markers and **-í** and **-á** as tense markers. In Nurse’s analysis of Lingála, both “anterior” (**-Ø-**) and “perfective” (**-ák-**) fall within the larger category of “Non-Imperfective” (2000: 141), imperfective aspect being reserved for the marker of general validity **-aka** and for the compound progressive (all discussed in the previous section). If we were to approach our own data and analysis in terms of a morpheme-by-morpheme analysis, we could in principle concur with Nurse in the identification of the **-Ø-** morpheme as a marker of such “anterior aspect” (but not of **-í** as a marker of recent past tense). However, the identification of **-ák-** as another marker of *perfective* grammatical aspect (Nurse’s “Non-Imperfective”) is not in agreement with the data. Verb forms with **-ák-** can also be used to convey imperfective meaning, i.e., highlighting the internal temporal structure of an event or state rather than construing it as temporally bounded. It is used, for instance, to situate habits in the past, as in (17) (compare with example (7)):

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- (17) **Pierre a-kom-ákí mikandá ya kitóko**
 Pierre 3SG-write-ákí letters of beauty
 'Pierre wrote beautiful letters.' or 'Pierre used to write beautiful letters.'

Furthermore, (17) is a perfectly felicitous past rendering of present progressive sentences like (18), again expressing an imperfective meaning typically occurring in the discursive background, even if (19), which is formally the past pendant of (18), is also possible:

- (18) **Pierre a-zal-í ko-kom-a mikandá ya kitóko**
 Pierre 3SG-be-í INF-write-FIN letters of beauty
 'Pierre is writing beautiful letters.'
- (19) **Pierre a-zal-ákí ko-kom-a mikandá ya kitóko**
 Pierre 3SG-be-ákí INF-write-FIN letters of beauty
 'Pierre was writing beautiful letters.'

Thus, a matrix arrangement of the morphemes, with a strict division of labor for tense and aspect, cannot subsume both **-Ø-** and **-ák-** under "Non-Imperfective". Rather, **-ák-** appears to be used for both perfective and imperfective past situations and, thus, is not *per se* a marker of aspect at all. Moreover, where would such an arrangement take us for the attribution of tense? First of all, our analysis has demonstrated that the temporal reference, i.e., the foreground or profile, of both dynamic and stative verb forms combining **-í** or **-á** with **-Ø-** is present, not (near or remote) past as Nurse suggested. Secondly, as our discussion of (15) and (16) shows, the distinguishing feature between the morphemes **-í** and **-á** is one of relevance of time depth: with **-í**, the speaker wishes not to commit herself as to the time depth, while with **-á** she does, and additionally, conveys that the time depth is considerable. This contrast is not a matter of tense, but of the relevance of temporal distance in the background conception (as opposed to the profile) of a tensed proposition. In this sense, and only when considered in isolation, **-í** and **-á** (as opposed to **-Ø-** and **-ák-**) could not be considered true grounding forms.

The second option to rescue the itemized approach, implied by Rose et al. (2002) and chosen in the other analyses of Bantu languages, conversely considers **-Ø-** and **-ák-** as tense and **-í** and **-á** as aspect markers. Our findings would in principle validate the characterization of **-Ø-** as a marker of present tense, and **-ák-** as a marker of past tense. Compare, in this respect, examples (10), (13), and (15) on the one hand with the sentences in example (16) on the other. Still, that leaves the exact identification of the semantic contribution of **-í** and **-á**, for which it is impossible to distinguish a separate (standard) aspectual meaning, e.g., one of (im)perfectivity, and which we instead propose to express a background notion of time depth.

In conclusion, although the temporal reference of any verb form, *as a whole*, that makes use of **-í** or **-á** in combination with **-Ø-** is present, we find it may be tenuous to insist on attributing this tense feature to one specific morpheme in the verb form. Throughout this paper, we have preferred to look for the temporal reference of an undivided verb form, i.e., the one combining **-Ø-** and **-í**, both with stative and with dynamic verbs, and have found that this temporal reference is consistently present. The complexity of this **-í** form is explicitly reflected in the semantic configuration proposed here, which includes fore- and backgrounded temporal elements at once, something not typically provided for in other tense formulations.

Now, it is probably true that our insistence on (what we view as) correct terminology and proper attention to the actual reference of a tense form (i.e., to what is in the conceptual foreground) has in turn oversimplified certain related matters, such as the notoriously complex and somewhat blurred historical relationship between present-perfect and past uses of one and the same marker. It is not excluded that the **-í** form may (be) develop(ing) to undergo the same diachronic processes as comparable markers in many other languages, i.e., that it might evolve to a genuine marker of past tense, even if this would (initially) be restricted to dynamic verb types. Even so, the crux of our argument remains, viz., that an explanation is needed for the use of this verb form with both dynamic and stative verbs, and that such an explanation necessarily evokes the semantic configuration of a genuine present-perfect marker.

5. Conclusion

We have proposed that the Lingála **-í** form is a nonperiphrastic tense marker that is genuinely present in its time reference, i.e., the form conjures up the representation of a full instantiation of a situation precisely coinciding with the time of speaking. In our analysis of this form, we have referred to the epistemic problem in observing and simultaneously reporting an ongoing event (but not a state) to explain the varying grammatical behaviors of lexically dynamic and stative verbs when taking the **-í** form. The same problem arises and is attended to in other languages, which may resort to different strategies to overcome the conceptual challenges involved. In Lingála, dynamic verbs taking the **-í** form typically indicate a present-perfect construal, whereby it is the current end state of an antecedent event that is actually profiled. Stative verbs with the **-í** form express a present-time meaning or one of general validity. In putting forward the above analysis, we feel we have avoided the pitfall of assuming to be able to get at the core meaning of a given form in grammar on the basis of a skewed investigation which only accounts for one type of lexical aspect.

The credit of obtaining a unified treatment of dynamic and stative verbs for the -í form, in itself an obvious bonus, goes to Cognitive Grammar. The division of labor between a predication's maximal and immediate scope reflects the theory's commitment to a conceptualist semantics that construes all instances of linguistic meaning as perspectival and governed by attention mechanisms. It offers important advantages in the analysis of tense meaning, by stipulating what tenses refer to (profile) and what is relegated to the background of their semantic makeup. In the case of a present tense, whether simple or perfect, the reference is to a present situation, even if that situation can be naturally linked to the additional, backgrounded, conception of a prior event leading up to or causing it. In other words, perfect aspect and past tense may share an interest in the pastness of a situation, but they frame it differently, in terms of how the situation is "viewed" and in terms of what is foregrounded and backgrounded: the causing event or the resulting state?

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