

ON THE HOMOPHONY OF PAST TENSE AND
IMPERATIVES IN KISONGO MAASAI.

HILDA KOOPMAN
koopman@ucla.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

Kisongo Maasai¹ uses the same verbal forms for “imperatives” and “past tense”²:

- (1) a. *imperative*
 tá- nàp- à
 ta- carry- a
 ‘Carry him/it/them’
- b. *past tense*
 á- tá-náp- à
 1sg- ta-carry- a
 ‘I carried him’

Although the two forms differ tonologically and syntactically, it can be shown that imperatives and past tense verbs are constructed out of identical building blocks, a prefix *tV* depending on the class of the verb, a verbal stem, and a suffix (a/o) which covaries with the ATR value of the verbal stem. The puzzle then is how the same form can give rise to such different semantic interpretations as past tense and imperative. I will suggest that a proper decomposition of the forms in their component parts, will allow us to progress in putting the puzzle together. More specifically, I will argue that the verbal forms are in fact dependent, participle-like, forms selected by a silent verb with a meaning close to “get”. Standard assumptions about the syntactic representations of

¹ The data reported here have been gathered during a two quarter field methods course at UCLA in 1999/2000, and are well described in the Hollis (1905) and Tucker and Mpaayei (1955). I would like to thank our language consultant Saningó Milliary Ngidongi, and the members of the class: Andy Bye, Mary Baltazani, Ivano Caponigro, Melissa Epstein, Robin Huffstutter, Masangu D.Matondo, Kristie McCrary, Gianluca Storto, and Emily Tucker. Data from this class can be found in master_maasai_1 and master_maasai_2.

² This form also occurs in optative and subjunctive contexts, as well as in certain “infinitival” forms with a singular agreement prefix, but not with a plural agreement prefix. I will leave these forms out of the discussion.

imperatives and past tensed clauses will provide insight into the syntactic and interpretative properties of past tense and imperatives.

2. THE IMPERATIVE AND PAST TENSE MORPHOLOGY

The morphological homophony of imperatives and past tense forms, is either accidental, and therefore uninteresting, or it is not. Let's pursue the latter: imperatives and past tensed forms look the same because they are "the same". More precisely, the shared properties of imperatives and past tensed verbs follow from their sharing the same (syntactic) substructure that feeds the spellout. Imperative or past tensed verbs in Maasai are homophonous because imperative CPs and past tensed CPs contain the same stretch of syntactic structure. The different properties are to be attributed to the difference in syntactic environments.

There are (at least) three distributional arguments that support the morphological identity of imperatives and past tensed verbs. These arguments are based on the fact that imperatives and past tensed forms systematically pattern together. This systematic patterning would be left unexplained under accidental homophony.

2.1. *The ta-prefix*

The first argument is based on the cooccurrence of the *tV*-prefix depending on verb class.

Verbs in Maasai fall into two basic classes: Class 1 verbs, which contain verbs of all shapes (CVC, VC, ..) , and Class 2 verbs, which start with *i/i* in the infinitival form, the form used after verbs like 'go', or in the 1st person singular. The choice of *i/i* is determined by the ATR specification of the verbal root.

- (2) a. á ló anáp / aisúd
 1sg-go inf-carry/inf-wash
 'I'll go carry (him)/wash'
- b. anáp /á-ipòt
 1sg-carry /1sg-call
 'I'll carry / I'll call'

Class 1 verbs can be analyzed as monomorphemic (containing a single overt head), and class 2 verbs as bimorphemic, consisting of a morpheme /*i(n)*/ followed by a verbal root. Deletion of the nasal segment, which is widely attested in Maasai, accounts for the contexts in which this morpheme surfaces as *i*, as in the environments in (3):

- (3) Class 1: [v]
Class 2: [i (n) [v]]

Imperatives and past tensed forms of class 1 and class 2 verbs have a final suffix vowel *o/a*³ (where the choice of *a* versus *o* is determined by the ATR value of the verb). In addition, class 1 verbs have a *tV* prefix in imperatives and past tensed forms (the vowel *V* is predictable from the vowel quality and the ATR specification of the verbal stem, we refer to the prefix as *ta*):

- (4) Imperatives and past tense: class 1 verbs:

- a. tá-nàp-à
ta-carry-a
'carry !'
- b. é- tá-náp-á tórèt
3sg-ta-carry-a Toret(nom)
'Toret carried him/her'

- (5) Imperatives and past tense: class 2 verbs

- a. nìbòt-ò
call- o
'Call him'
- b. kí-mbòt-ò
1pl-call-o
'we called him'

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------|
| (6) Imperatives | Past tense |
| Class 1: tV-[v]-o/a | tV-[v]-o/a |
| Class 2: [i(n)] [v ...]-o/a | [i(n) [v ...]-o/a |

The *ta* prefix is absent with both past tensed forms and imperatives in class 2 verbs. Past tense and imperative forms thus pattern together across verbal classes.

The distribution of the *ta* prefix recalls the distribution of the *ge-* prefix in participles in Dutch or in German, and should receive a

³ The situation is in fact more complex. With complex verbs or applicative verbs, past tense and the imperative endings differ. We will not consider these cases in this paper.

(i) ta-nap-ak-i	ta-nap-ijò	(ii) a- ta- nap-ak-a	a-ta-nap-ijè
ta-carry-appl	ta-carry-do	1sg-ta-carry-appl-past	1sg-ta-carry-do
	(ijò = do[-ATR])		(ijè = do-past[+ATR])
'Carry for him!'	'Do carrying!'	'I carried for him'	'I did carrying'

2.2. Suppletion

A third argument comes from suppletion. Some highly frequently used Maasai verbs use more than one stem in their paradigms. The verb ‘to go’ for example uses the (singular) stem *lo* and (plural) stem *puo* for present, progressive and infinitives. Past tense and imperative (as well as subjunctive, and infinitive) are based on the stem *ʃɔm*. What is crucial for our point is that past tense and imperative systematically⁴ use the same stems, and hence look identical. Moreover, these stems are excluded in past negative contexts, where the present tense stem must be used (see section 2.1.):

(12) ʃɔmɔ
go-V-a
'go!' (*ʃɔm* stem)

(13) à- ʃɔmɔ
1sg-go-a
'I went' (*ʃɔm* stem)

(14) ε- itú a- ló
3sg.neg-past 1sg-go
'I did not go' (*lo* stem)

Examples like *ʃɔmɔ* are interesting in yet another respect. *ʃɔmɔ* does not take *ta* in either the past tense or the imperative, which is a property of class 2 verbs. *ʃɔmɔ* lacks the overt property that identifies class 2 verbs: it does not start with the prefix i(n). I assume that these verbs stems are class 2 verbs with a phonologically covert in- prefix, which is instrumental in blocking *ta*. What is relevant here is the absence of *ta* with both past tensed verbs and imperatives, showing again that the two forms pattern together.

In sum: the forms of imperatives and past tense not only look alike, but they systematically pattern together. This strongly supports the idea that the homophony is not accidental: clauses containing imperatives and past tense verbs contain the same verbal form. The questions we address next is what this verbal form is and why this should be the case.

⁴ See Mpaayei and Tucker (1955 p 86-89. Two verbs in T&MP do not follow this pattern: a-wo ‘to bleed’ and a-daa ‘to feed’, have different forms for past, and imperatives. The past forms of these verbs are exceptional in other respects as well, since they have plural past forms, a property that they share with past tense of many derived verbs (-isho (do) etc). See also footnote 3.

2.3 Imperatives

Crosslinguistically, imperatives are typically the most impoverished verbal form, and are restricted to root contexts. Let's call these imperatives "true" imperatives, to distinguish them from other verbal forms that can be used with the elocutionary force of an imperative. Maasai imperatives are quite complex morphologically, and do not qualify as the most impoverished verbal form, which probably is the non-past tensed form:

- (15) imperative: tá-nàp-à
ta-V- a
- non-past ki- náp
1pl- V

Tucker and Mpaayei (1955) report that imperatives can occur in embedded subjunctive-like contexts:

- (16) ε - buak- ita to-niŋo
3sg-shout-progr ta-hear-a
'He is shouting so that you may hear him'
(Tucker and Mpaayei, 1955, p.64)

However, we have been unable to elicit any imperative forms in non-root contexts. It is thus unclear if Maasai imperatives are generally restricted to root environments or not: for our speaker this appeared to be the case.

Given these criteria, the imperative morphology in Maasai should not be equated with a "true" imperative, but rather with some dependent form. Dependent forms are selected by particular heads: the imperative construction thus is a periphrastic construction, with some head selecting the dependent verb form. What exactly the categorial status of this dependent form is difficult to determine at this stage of our understanding of Maasai. It will require a better understanding of the tonal patterns and the general distribution of *ta*, which might be further decomposable into a vowel part, and a t- part. t- shows up in many other contexts ('be'-like contexts, and causatives), and is also the only P in Maasai). I will assume that it is some participle-like form for now.

2.1. Characteristics of the imperative construction

Although the overt morphological form does not express the imperative feature directly, the entire construction does show some characteristic

behavior of “true imperative” constructions. First, the second person singular is obligatorily silent:

- (17) ta-nap-a not *i- ta-nap-a
 ta-carry-a 2sg-ta-carry-a!

Secondly, the imperative verb form occupies a different position with respect to “clitics” than tensed verbal forms. Maasai uses (very intriguing) portmanteau morphemes that spell out combinations of subject agreement, which expresses person features, and 1st or 2nd person pronominal objects. These portmanteau morphemes are referred to as “contained objects” in the linguistics literature on Maasai.

- | | <i>subject</i> | <i>object</i> | |
|------|----------------|---------------|----|
| (18) | I | you | áa |
| | he/they | you | ki |
| | you | me | ki |
| | he/they | me | áà |

Some of the forms above have distinct tonal patterns, which in all likelihood are an expression of Case. (Maasai expresses Case through tonal prefixes and suffixes). These portmanteau forms cannot occur within infinitival CPs.

The portemanteau clitic precedes the verb in all tensed forms:

- (19) non-past:
 a. áá - náp
 I-you-carry
 ‘I will carry you’
- past:
 b. ki- tá-náp- a
 He-you ta-carry-a
 ‘He carried you’

In the imperative, however, the verbal form precedes the (*you-me*) clitic *ki*.

- (20) tánàp- á ki
 ta-carry-a you-me

Maasai resembles Romance languages in this respect (cf French *fais-le* ('do-it')). In standard analytical terms, imperatives are CPs, with imperative force expressed in C. Some projection containing the verb must move to C, stranding the clitic. This movement is a property of root imperatives: although subjunctives look alike, clitics must precede.

Let's take stock. The visible *ta-V-a* morphology represents some dependent verb form that consists at least of three heads. The construction as a whole behaves like an imperative, in the sense that the dependent morphological form ends up in some C like position preceding the clitic, and the second person pronoun must remain silent. We translate this into the following analysis: the imperative is basically a periphrastic construction with "a silent" V selecting for the visible morphological form. Imperatives are CPs, with an imperative C head.

(21) [_CImp] ... [_Ve] [_{?P} ta-nap-a]

This *ta-nap-a* form "incorporates" into the silent V, and forms a complex predicate (by phrasal movement a la Koopman and Szabolsci, 2000).

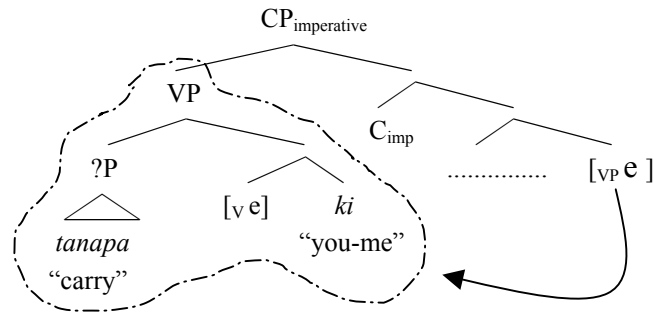
(22) [[_{?P} ta-nap-a] [_{ve}]

The complex predicate satisfies the demands of the imperative clause by moving to C to check the imperative feature, stranding the clitic:

(23) [_{CP} [[_{?P} ta-nap-a] [_{ve}]_i] [_C imp] [[ki] [_e]_i]]



(24)



- b. ε-τὸ ἀπὰ ἐν- κὰρέ
 3sg black ago sg.f-water
 ‘the water was black a long time ago’
- (30) a. ἄ- τὸ-νυόρ-ἄ
 1sg-ta-love-a
 ‘I fell in love’ *and not: *I loved*
- b. ἐ- τὰ- γέω- ὀ
 3sg-ta- want- a
 ‘He has come to want it’ *and not: *he wanted it*

If the morphology expressed past tense, these examples should get a past tensed interpretation. Since they don’t, the *ta*-forms do not spell-out past tense. Why then does a verb carrying the particular *ta*-morphology get an inceptive reading in the following context?

- (31) past ..[_V e] [_{?P} ta-V_{state}-a]

5. COVERT V EQUALS “GET”

In order to answer the question why *ta*-morphology yields different interpretations in different environments, we must find out what covert verb selects for the *ta*-forms. If we substitute an overt verb form for the silent verb and see which paraphrases yield the desired interpretations, we see that a causative verb with the meaning of “get” comes close to the readings in the different contexts:

- (32) *With stative verbs:*
- a. it past *get* black → it got black = it became black
 b. I past *get* want → I got to want; I got wanting, I came to want
 c. I past *get* love → I got to love, loving → I fell in love

With non-stative verbs:

- d. I past *get* read the book
 → *I got to read the book/ I got the book read → I read the book*
- e. I past *get* carry him → *I got to carry him/ I got him carried*
 → *I carried him*
- f. I past *get* go → *I got to go--> I went*

6. CONCLUSION AND REMAINING PROBLEMS

It seems clear that the properties of imperative and past tense constructions fall out from complex representations, with each piece of structure contributing to the properties of the constructions themselves. I have suggested that imperative and past tensed forms occur in both imperatives and past tensed sentences since this form is selected by a silent verb “get”. The particular readings arise when the silent *get* combines with the (silent) past tense operator, or with the imperative operator. *Get* in this respect is no different from any overt tensed verb which can in fact combine with the past tense operator, if the context is clear (32b)).

I have not been able to complete the puzzle. There are remaining problems that will have to be left for future research: what is the categorial status of the ta-V-a form, and general selectional properties of verbs (the ta-form can also occur inside an inflected infinitive which is selected by certain modals), the exact semantic properties of the postulated silent *get* verb. For the data under discussion, the most pressing problem is maybe the following: what explains the fact that the ta-V-a forms cannot cooccur with the normal m-negation (see section 2.2.). A different way of phrasing the problem is why the following configurations are blocked (regardless of whether negation occurs between T and VP, or above T)

- (36) m-negation higher than Past:
- a. *(Imp) Neg [_v*get*] [ta-V-a]
 - b. * Neg Past [*get*] [ta-V-a]

m-negation lower than T:

- c. *T Neg *get* [ta-V-a]
- d. *Imp Neg [_v*get*] [ta-V-a]

Indeed, if the silent verb is blocked from appearing in these contexts, then its complement will be blocked as well. This might be somewhat easier to achieve if the hierarchy is as in (36c and d), since Neg and the silent V are in a selectional relationship. The challenge here is that the problem gets resolved differently in past tensed contexts (with basically a negative auxiliary and a different verbal form cooccurring), and in imperatives (with a negative subjunctive form). It is unclear at this point how exactly this can be achieved.

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