# On the homophony of "paste tense" and imperative morphology in Kisongo Maasai.

Hilda Koopman
Department of Linguistics, UCLA
koopman@protos.lifesci.ucla.edu
September 2000.

## 1. Introduction

Kisongo Maasai[1] uses the same verbal forms [2] for " imperatives" and "past tense" or "perfectives".

(1) a. *imperative*
tá- nàp- à
ta- carry -a
'Carry him/it/them'

b. *past tense/perfective*
á- tá-náp- à
1SA -ta-carry -a
'I carried him'

Although the two environments differ tonologically and syntactically, it can be shown that imperatives and past tense/perfective verbs are constructed out of identical building blocks: a prefix *tV* (whether this prefix is present or not depends on the class of the verb), a verbal root, and a suffix (a/o) which agrees in ATR with the verbal stem. The question I would like to address here is how

[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. I would like to thank Doris Payne for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

[2] This form also occurs in optative and subjunctives contexts, as well as in certain "infinitival" forms with a singular agreement prefix. We leave these forms out of the discussion for the purposes of this paper (only high tones indicated)

(i). m- a- ta- náp- a (optative /subjunctive)
subj 1SA-ta-carry-a
'that I carry him'

(ii) infinitivals with a singular agreement suffix (iia), but not with a plural agreement prefix (iib):

a. a- ndima- ta-nap-á
1SA- able a.sg –ta-carry-a

the same form can give ultimately give rise to such different semantic interpretations as past tense[3] and imperative. I will suggest that the different puzzle pieces fit together if these 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 imperatives and past tensed clauses will provide insight into the syntactic and interpretative properties of past tense/perfective and imperatives.

## 1 The imperative and past tense/perfective morphology.

There are two analyses possible for the homophony of the morphology of imperatives and past tense/perfective forms. Either the homophony is accidental, and therefore uninteresting, or it is not: imperatives and past tensed/perfective forms look the same because they are identical. Stated more precisely, imperative or past tensed/perfective verbs would be identical because imperative CPs and past tensed CPs contain the same verb forms somewhere in their structure.
There are (at least) three distributional arguments that support the latter point of view. These arguments are all based on the fact that imperatives and past tensed forms systematically pattern together. Were these forms accidentally homophonous, this systematic patterning would be unexplained.

### 1.1 The ta-prefix.

The first argument is based on the fact that imperative and past tense forms have a tV-prefix for Class 1 verbs but no prefix for Class 2 verbs. 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/ɨ in the infinitival form, the form used after verbs like 'go', or in the 1st person singular. The choice of i/ɨ is determined by the ATR specification of the verbal root:

(2) a. á ló à-isúd
1SA-go a-wash
'I'll go wash'

[3] I assume that Maasai has both Tense and Aspect, even though König (1993) argues that Maasai is an aspect, not a tense language. In particular, I assume that overt morphology expresses aspectual categories, and tense morphology is silent, a position that is consistent with König's arguments.

b. á- ipòt
1SA-call
'I'll call him

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 (2). This yields the following representations for class 1 and class 2 verbs:

(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*[4] (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 him/it/her/them'

b. ɛ́- tá-náp- á tórèt
3SA-ta-carry-a Toret(nom)
'Toret carried him/it/her'

---

'I am able to carry it'

b. kɨ- n-dɨm áà- ta-nap
1plSA- able a.pl –ta-carry
'We are able to carry it'

[4] The situation is in fact more complex. With complex verbs or applicative verbs, past tense and the imperative endings differ. These need to be discussed on a case by case basis, and are not considered in this paper.

(i) ta-nap-ak-ɨ ta-nap-iʃɔ
ta-carry-appl ta-carry-do[-ATR]
'Carry for him' 'Do carrying'

(ii) a- ta- nap-ak-a a-ta-nap-iʃe
1SA ta-carry-applied-past 1sA-ta-carry-[do-past+ATR]

(5) *Imperatives and past tense/perfective: class 2 verbs*

a. ḿbòt-ò
call- o
'Call him'

b. kí- mbòt-ò
1plSA- call-o
we called him

(6)

| | *Imperatives* | *Past tense/perfective* |
|---|---|---|
| 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 pattern together in this respect.

The distribution of the *ta* prefix recalls the distribution of the *ge*-prefix in participles in Dutch and German, and should probably receive a similar explanation. In Dutch or German, the participle consists of three parts: a *ge*-prefix, the verbal root, and a suffix. The ge-prefix is absent in a number of cases, in particular when the verb has an incorporated P or a prefix, i.e. the structure of these verbs is presumably [P[V], which seems to correspond to the structure of class 2 verbs in Maasai:

(7) ge-kom-en 'came' (*ge)-over-kom-en 'happened'
ge-come-ed over-come-ed

## 1.2 Incompatibility of imperative and past tense morphology with negation

A second argument that reveals the identity of past tense morphology and imperative morphology is based on their incompatibility with negation. Neither the past tensed form, nor the imperative form can cooccur with negation.

(8) *m- a- ta- nap-a
Neg 1SA- ta-carry-a
'I did not carry it'

(9) * mɨ- ta- nap- a
neg -ta- nap-a
'Don't carry it'

Past tense is negated by means of an impersonal negative past tense auxiliary, which is followed by the finite verb form that yield present or future tense interpretation:

(10) ɛ- ɨtʊ́ a- náp
3SA-neg.past 1SA-carry
'I did not carry it' (lit:*it was not the case that I carry it*)

Negative imperatives are identical to negative subjunctives, which have neither a final *-a*, nor a *ta-* prefix.

(11) m- ɨ́- nap
neg- 2SA- carry
'Don't carry it'

Although past tense forms and imperatives are negated differently, the important observation is that neither past tense morphology nor imperative morphology can cooccur with negation. The behavior of past tense and imperatives is identical in this respect, and supports the hypothesis that these forms are identical at some level.

1.3 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 form *ʃɔm.* Crucially, past tense and imperative systematically[5] 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:

[5] 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 (-ɨsho (do) etc). See also foonote 3.

(12) ʃɔ́m-ɔ̀
go-a
'go!' (*ʃɔm* stem)

(13) à- ʃɔ́m-ɔ̀
1SA-go-a
'I went' (*ʃɔm* stem)

(14) ɛ- ɪtú à- ló
3SA. neg.past 1SA-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 is what this verbal form is and why this should be the case.

## 2 Imperatives.

Crosslinguistically, imperatives typically are the most impoverished verbal form, and occur only in root contexts. Let's call these imperatives "true" imperatives, to distinguish them from other verbal forms that can be used with the illocutionary 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 'Carry it'
ta-V- a

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| non-past | kɨ- | náp |
| | 1plSA- | V |
| | 'We carry it' | |

Maasai imperatives are maybe not restricted to root environments: they have been reported as being able to occur in embedded subjunctive-like contexts[6]:

(16) ɛ- buaḵ-ɨta to-niŋ-o (Tucker and Mpaayei, 1955, p.64)
3SA-shout-progr ta-hear-a
'He is shouting so that you may hear him'

Given these criteria, the imperative morphology in Maasai should not be equated with a "true" imperative, but rather looks like some dependent form. If it is, this dependent form must depend on some head. What exactly is the categorial status of this dependent form? I cannot answer this question at this stage of my understanding of the properties 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 t- part (which is also the only light P in Maasai), and some vowel part: t- shows up in many other contexts ('be' -like contexts, and causatives). I will assume that it is some participle-like form.

2.1 Characteristics of the imperative construction.

Although the overt morphological form does not express imperative force directly, the entire construction shows some characteristic behavior of "true" imperative constructions. First, the second person singular is obligatorily silent:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (17) | ta-nap-a | *not* | *ɨ- ta-nap-a |
| | ta-carry-a | | 2SA-ta-carry-a! |
| | 'Carry' | | 'you carry' |

Secondly, the imperative verb form occupies a different position with respect to "clitics" than tensed verbal forms. Maasai uses (very

[6] I have been unable to elicitate this form, or any imperative in non-root contexts.

intriguing) portmanteau morphemes that spell out combinations of subject agreement features, and 1st or 2nd person pronominal objects[7].

| | *subject* | *object* | |
|---|---|---|---|
| (18) | I | you | áá |
| | he/they | you | kɨ |
| | | | |
| | you | me | kɨ |
| | he/they | me | áà |

Some of the forms above have distinct tonal patterns, which in all likelihood are an expression of Case morphemes. (Maasai expresses Case through tonal prefixes and suffixes). The portmanteau forms cannot precede infinitival verbs.
The portemanteau clitic precedes the verb in all tensed forms:

(19) *non-past*:

a. áa - náp
I.you-carry
'I will carry you'

*pas/perfective*

b. kɨ- tá-náp- a
He.you ta-carry-a
'He carried you'

In the imperative, however, the verbal form must immediately precede the (*you-me*) clitic kɨ.

(20) tá-nàp- á kɨ̌
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 similar, clitics must precede.

---

[7] These portmanteau morphemes are referred to as "contained objects" in Tucker and Mpaayei (1955). Payne, Hamaya, and Jacobs (1994) analyze *ki* as an "inverse" suffix.

In sum: the visible *ta-V-a* morphology is some dependent verb form. 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 subject agreement *i* must remain silent. We can 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 a imperative C head.

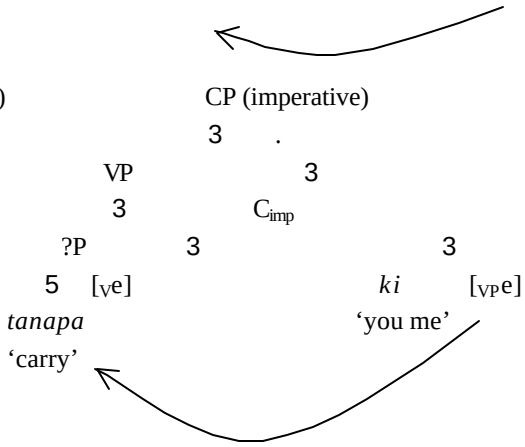
(21) $[_{C}$Imp$]$ … $[_{V}$ e$]$ $[_{?P}$ ta-nap-a$]$

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

(22) $[[_{?P}$ ta-nap-a$]$ $[_{V}$e$]]$

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$]$ $[_{V}$e$]]_{i}$ $[_{C}$ *imp*$]$ [[ki] [e]$_{i}$]]]




The tonal pattern characteristic of imperatives can be directly mapped onto this structure: more specifically, it seems that a HL pattern is associated with the left boundary of CP with an imperative head; (some tone seems to be associated to the right Spec, CP boundary as well; we leave this out of the discussion):

(25) assign HL to left boundary of Spec, $C_{imp}$P

A HL (hl(l)* pattern will follow from left to right association, until other boundary tones are encountered.

(26)

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| [HL | | H L |
| [$_{CPim}$ tanapa ] | → | \| \| \ |
| | | [ta nap a |

To sum up, all imperatives in Maasai contain at least the following pieces of syntactic structure:

(27) [$_{C}$Imp] … [$_{V}$ e] [$_{?P}$ (ta)-V-a]

It now becomes natural to pursue the idea that all constructions containing the overt morphology have the underlined structure in common.

(28) a. imp ..[$_{V}$ e] [$_{?P}$ ta-nap-a]
b. past ..[$_{V}$ e] [$_{?P}$ ta-nap-a]

We can now rephrase our original question as follows. What is the meaning of V, the selector of the morphology, such that it yields an imperative interpretation in imperative CPs and a past tense interpretation in past tense clauses?

***3*** The puzzle of past tense/perfective morphology**.**

Stative verbs with past tensed morphology receive a rather suprising interpretation (Tucker and Mpaayei (1955), König (1993) among others). Instead of a past tensed or perfective reading, they receive an inceptive reading. The past tense reading is expressed by the non-past form of the verb in conjunction with a temporal adverbial, which is positioned right after the complex verb and before the nominative subject:

(29) a. ɛ- tɔ́- rɔ́k- a èŋ-kàrɛ́
3SA ta- black-a sg.f.-water(nom)
'The water became black'
*and not: *the water was black*

b. ɛ- tɔ́ ápà èn- kàrɛ́
3SA black ago sg.f-water
'the water was black a long time ago'

(30) a. á- tɔ-nyór-à
1SA-ta love-a
'I fell in love' (*and not*: *I loved)

b. ɛ́- tá- yéw- ɔ̀
3rd-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 realize past tense, as we already concluded from the fact that these forms are dependent verb forms. 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]

## 4 Covert V equals "*get*"

In order to find an answer to the question why *ta*-morphology yields different interpretations in different environments, we need to 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

How does the imperative reading emerges from the hypothesis that the silent verb is *get*? Again, writing out the imperative structure and substituting 'get' for [$_V$e] yields interpretations close to imperative interpretation:

(33) imp *get* [go] → get going
imp *get* [carry him] → get (on with) carrying him/get him
carried → carry him
etc.

## 5 Conclusion and remaining problems

In conclusion, the properties of imperative and past tense/prefective 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/perefctive forms occur in both imperatives and past tensed sentences since this form is selected by the same selector: 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 ((29b)).

There are remaining problems, like 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) which will have to be left for future research. For the data under discussion, the most pressing problem is the following: how to account for the fact that the *ta-V-a* forms cannot cooccur under negation (see section 1.2)? These facts are part of a family of general problems like do-support in negative contexts in English, as well as the impossibility of having imperative morphology cooccur with negation in so many languages. Some explanation must be found why the following configurations are blocked, regardless of whether negation occurs between T and VP, or above T:

(34) 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]

If the silent verb is blocked from appearing in these contexts, then its complement will be blocked as well. Right now, it is unclear how to derive this result in any principle fashion.

*References*


Hamaya, M, P. Jacobs and D. Payne (1994). "Active, passive, and inverse in Maasai." *Voice in Discourse*, ed by T. Givón. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Hollis, A. C (1905). *The Maasai, their Language and Folklore*. [reprinted in 1971 in The Black Heritage Library Collection. Books for Libraries Press, Freeport, New York, 1971. New York]

König, C (1993) Aspect in Maa. Afrikanistische Mongraphien. Cologne: Institut für Afrikanistik.

Koopman, H. and A. Szabolsci (2000) Verbal complexes. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Master Maasai 1: http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/linguistics/people/koopman/maasai/master_maasai_1.doc

Master Maasai 2: http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/linguistics/people/koopman/maasai/master_maasai_2.doc..

Tucker, A. N and J. Tompo Ole Mpaayei (1955) *A Maasai Grammar with Vocabulary*. London: Longmans, Green and Co


.