

Exploring the category perfect in Greater East Ruvu Bantu languages

The category perfect is used to express past events that “have an effect on or are in some way still relevant” at reference time (Dahl and Velupillai 2013). Typological categorizations of the perfect are typically viewed through the lens of the English present perfect (e.g., *I have lost my keys*). However, as Dahl (2022:278) notes, “[t]o find the proper place for perfects, we have to go beyond English”.

In Bantu languages, the category perfect (or anterior) is commonly associated with the suffix *-ile* (also *-ire*, *-ite*, *-ide* or *-i*) (Nurse 2008:24) which is often used to express present state readings with inchoative verbs (1):

- (1) Southern Ndebele (Crane and Persohn 2019: 315)

Ikomo i-non-ile
9.cow SP9-become_fat-PFV.DJ
'The cow is fat.'

This suffix can appear with activity-like verbs and can be rendered in English simple past or present perfect (2):

- (2) Southern Ndebele (Crane and Persohn 2019: 305)

uSipho u-cul-ile
1A.Sipho SP1-sing-PFV.DJ
'Sipho sang.' or 'Sipho has sung.'

However, the analysis of *-ile* as a perfect is controversial. For example, exploring the use of *-ile* in four zone JE languages (Lusaamia, Luwanga, Runyoro, and Rutooro), Botne (2010) argues that, despite English present perfect translations, *-ile* in these languages is perfective. Botne claims that these languages distinguish between perfective, perfect, anterior past, and remote past, but English must rely on the present perfect as a translation equivalent for several of these meanings.

Likewise, Kanijo (2019) proposes another analysis of *-ile*. He argues that in Nyamwezi, the construction *-Ø-...-ile* serves as a stativizer (following Crane 2013), that is, it asserts a state or property of the subject, resulting from the referenced situation/event. Kanijo shows that the *-Ø-...-ile* construction gives rise to different readings (resultative, general present time, progressive-like, contradiction/emphasis) depending on the aspectual class with which it co-occurs.

In contrast to many Bantu languages, Greater East Ruvu (GER) Bantu languages (Kami, Kagulu, Kutu, Kwere, Luguru, Zalamo) exhibit a reduced set of tense-aspect morphology. Of particular note is that these languages do not use *-ile* in simple constructions (see Petzell 2008). However, similar to the readings associated with *-ile* in other Bantu languages, the past/perfective (which is not overtly encoded in GER languages; see Bar-el and Petzell 2021) of inchoative verbs is translated into English as a present stative (3):

(3) Kagulu

Ku+onel-a

SM.2SG+be/get_happy-FV

‘You are happy.’

Furthermore, the past/perfective of an activity-like verb in GER languages is rendered in English as either simple past (4) or perfect (5):

(4) Kutu

Amina ka-kimbil-a jana

Amina SM1-run-FV yesterday

‘Amina ran yesterday.’

(5) Luguru

Amina ka-gend-a sambi

Amina SM1-leave-FV now

‘Amina has left now.’

These GER data further illustrate that there is no unified understanding of the category perfect in Bantu. This paper aims to (i) investigate whether GER languages can be said to have a perfect construction, and (ii) determine the ways in which GER languages convey meanings typically associated with the perfect cross-linguistically. The results of this study will broaden our typological understanding of the perfect both within Bantu languages and beyond.

References

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