# The Compromised Tense-Aspect Distinction in Bantu Languages: The Case of Nyakyusa

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## Abstract

This article examined the compromised tense-aspect distinction in Bantu languages, using Nyakyusa as a case study. The review of scholarly works indicates that, in Bantu languages, the changing nature of tense-aspect systems remains to be the source of the problem for tense-aspect distinction. The paper investigates the source of the problem and a way in which Nyakyusa can describe tense-aspect distinction. The study was conducted in Kyela District in Mbeya Region where many native speakers live. Data were collected through narrative stories, interviews and written texts. The findings reveal that although the -ile suffix is the source of the compromised tense-aspect distinction as it assumes different roles; it remains a good candidate for testing tense-aspect distinction. When the -ile suffix co-occurs with the pre-root formative, -a- it marks the past tense whereas the suffix -ile occurring alone marks aspect categories. Also, when the negative marker -ka- is introduced the -ile suffix disappears for aspect and remains for tense.

**Keywords**: Compromised tense-aspect distinction, Bantu languages, Nyakyusa, Morphology.

## Introduction

This article describes the compromised distinction between tense and aspect[1] in Bantu languages, using Nyakyusa as a case study. The term compromised distinction in the context of this study implies that the distinction is challenging, problematic and confusing. Felberg (1996) describes Nyakyusa as a language spoken by approximately one million people and stretches geographically from the north Rukuru River near Kalonga in Malawi[2] to Mbeya town in Tanzania but the majority of the speakers live in Tanzania. The language is coded M31 in the list of Bantu languages. According to LOT (2009), Nyakyusa is one of the ten big languages in Tanzania with 740,020 speakers. Majority of the speakers approximately 682,539 live in Mbeya Region, particularly in the three Districts, namely Kyela (with 138,869 speakers), Rungwe (258,441), and Mbeya Urban (145,007).

Nyakyusa is appropriate for this description because is one of the Bantu languages found in zone M and coded M31 (Maho, 2009). Also, the preliminary survey through the data presented by Lusekelo (2007), and Robinson (2015; 2021) create questions on how tense and aspect are to be distinguished and why the distinction is compromised. This paper forms part of the description of Nyakyusa grammar, particularly, in the realm of morphology. Grammar has three main parts, namely, phonology, morphology and syntax.  Also, morphology has two main parts, namely, noun and verb morphology but the study of tense and aspect constitutes verb morphology. By covering the verb morphology, this paper supplements Robinson (2016) who covered the noun morphology in Nyakyusa. Although compared to other Bantu languages in zone M, Nyakyusa has relatively many publications, however, its description remains so sketchy (Persohn, 2017) that a lot is needed to document the language in all realms such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

A survey of previous scholarly works indicates that in natural languages, tense and aspect distinction is confusing. This confusion is earmarked in the semantics of tense and/or aspect categories leading to the failure to draw a clear demarcation of these categories. Before presenting this confusion, it is worth highlighting how tense and aspect are defined by scholars. To start with the term tense, Lyons (1968) points

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[1]    Tense and aspect form the sub-discipline of morphology which is interesting and broad (Mreta, 1998).

[2]    In Malawi the language is called Ngonde

out that the term 'tense' is derived from a Latin translation of the Greek word for 'time'. Comrie (1976) defines tense as the grammaticalized expression of location in time. Also, Spencer and Zwicky (1998) delineate it in the same way that tense is an inflectional category of morph-syntactic properties distinguishing a finite verb's temporal reference. The essential characteristic of the category tense is that it relates the time of the action, event, or state of affairs referred to in a sentence to the time of utterance. This definition of tense; holds that tense has to do with time relations denoting events or situations that move from past, present and future.

Contrary to tense, aspect refers to an inflectional category of the verb that indicates whether an event, state, process, or action denoted by the verb is completed or in progress (Katamba, 1993). The term aspect was translated from a Russian word *vid* referring to the distinction between perfective and imperfective (Lyons, 1968). Therefore, the main categories of an aspect according to Lyons are perfective and imperfective. The tree diagram in figure 1 has been modified by Comrie (1976) to illustrate different aspect categories.
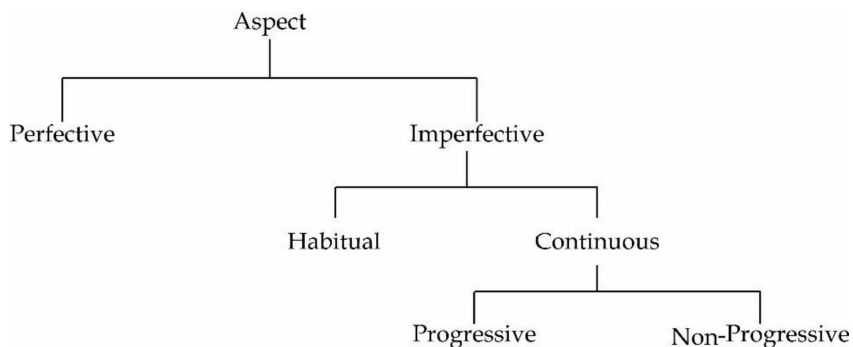


**Figure: 1: Aspect Categories**
**Source:** Comrie (1976)

From figure 1, the aspect is divided into perfective-imperfective distinction but the imperfective is further subdivided into habitual and continuous aspects. The continuous aspect is further subdivided into progressive and non-progressive. According to Lyons (1968), non-progressive involves verbs that do not normally occur with the progressive aspect, even in those contexts in which the majority of verbs necessarily take progressive forms. Lyons demonstrates the non-progressive aspect using English stative verbs such as *think, love, know,*

*understand, hate, see, taste, feel, possess* and *own*. It has been pointed out earlier that the problem of tense-aspect distinction emanates right from the semantics (meaning) of their categories. For instance, regarding the meaning of perfective, the aspect category (Comrie, 1976), Nurse (2008) points out that perfective is defined semantically as representing a situation as complete, as a single bounded whole, regardless of its internal structure or its constituent phrase.

In this regard, according to Nurse, perfective answers wh-questions such as 'when did you see X? Or 'when will you see X? To the answers 'I saw her this morning/yesterday' or 'we will see her next week' that is presenting the seeing as a single event. For this reason, the definition of perfective is not restricted to the past event but is used to refer to the future as well as the present which are tense categories although Lyons regards perfective as one of the categories of aspect. Also, the meaning of perfective presented by Lyons (1968) foregrounds the confusion in distinguishing between tense and aspect. For instance, Lyons points out that the term perfective is somewhat similar to the notion of 'completion' found in Greek. The definition of Lyons referring to the notion of completion of an action carried out by the term perfective is controversial as it overlaps with the definition of tense. Spencer and Zwicky (1998) highlight this controversy by pointing out that, semantically, a conceptual overlap exists between the categories of aspect and tense; for instance, an event that is described in aspectual terms as having come to completion by a particular time (perfective) can likewise be described in temporal terms as a past event relative to that time.

Another problem for tense-aspect distinction has its roots in the historical changes involving these systems of the verb. Morphologically, languages differ in the way they inflect tense and aspect. For instance, Spencer and Zwicky (1998) point out that Latin verbs inflect for three tenses, namely past (*laudābam* 'I praised'), present (*laudō* 'I praise') and future (*laudābō* 'I will praise'). However, English verbs inflect for two tenses which are past and non-past (Lyons, 1968). The fact that tense is a morphological property inflected in the verb renders tense and time in the English language to have a slight difference. In this language, there are three-time distinctions, namely past time, present time and future time. The past and present time are denoted by the past tense and present tense respectively. The difference between tense and time is manifested in the future which is not the property of tense rather it is the property of time. The English future time is not always morphologically inflected in the

verb. There are different ways in which the future in English is expressed. These ways include the simple present, the use of model verbs such as *will* and *shall*, and the continuous and *be going to* as exemplified in (1).

(1)    a.      The president arrives next week
          b.      The president is going to make a public speech
          c.      I will visit my uncle next week
          d.       It is going to rain

Regarding the encoding of different aspect categories, Nurse (2003) points out that the Latinate terms such as continuous, progressive, habitual, iterative, imperfect, imperfective, generic, performative, persistive/perstitive, perfect, perfective, completive, conclusive, anterior, retrospective, resultative, aorist, etc., are confusing and less transparent than simple terms such as past, present, or future. According to Nurse (ibid), a survey of the literature on languages worldwide suggests three widespread aspectual categories: imperfective, contrasting with perfective, and anterior. Also, progressive and habitual are widespread worldwide, but less so. These five categories also occur widely across Bantu languages although they are less transparent. To make them more transparent, Nurse suggests reducing aspects to a few major categories (and labels!). In this view, the anterior is treated in the same way as perfective, retrospective and perfect (Kiango, 2000; Beaudoin-Lietz, 1999).

In Bantu linguistics, the term perfective is confusing as it has given different labels such as anterior, perfect, and retrospective. For instance, in Swahili the aspect marker, *-me-* has been referred to differently by different scholars. While Beaudoin-Lietz (1999) uses the term retrospective to refer to the marker *-me-*, Kiango (2000) uses the term perfective. Although these authors use different terms, they all provide the same meaning and/or the same role played by this marker in Swahili. For instance, while Beaudoin-Lietz defines retrospective as an aspectual category expressing an event from the point of view of its result phrase, from where it may be seen either as a complete event or an event having further consequences, but influencing the present; similar to anterior, Kiango points out that the pre-root formative *-me-* marks perfective as it indicates that the action expressed by the verb is completed at the time under reference, and its effect or result is still present. This kind of definition of the perfective aspect is similar to that of the anterior. For this

view, the term perfective which is associated with the *-me-* marker, in Swahili, is the same as anterior or perfect.

Regarding the *-ile* suffix, different scholarly works on Bantu linguistics associate it with perfective, retrospective, and anterior. While scholars such as Oden (1996) and Kahigi (1989) use the term perfective to refer to the role of *-ile* suffix, others use different terms. For instance, Kula (2001), (2003) and Bostoen (2008) use the term perfect over perfective to refer to the role of *-ile* suffix. In Turamyomwe (2011), the terms perfective and perfect have been used interchangeably. Muzale (1998), and Hewson, Nurse and Muzale (2000) use the term retrospective to refer to the Rutara aspect marker *-ire.* Also, Nurse (2003) points out that the anterior which is also called perfect or retrospective is primarily expressed by reflexes of the Proto-Bantu *-ide*. This creates a terminological bifurcation as far as the traditional label for the suffix *-ile* is concerned.

The changing nature of tense and aspect in terms of their encoding and prominence earmarks another challenge against tense-aspect distinction across Bantu languages. Generally, the notion of tense and aspect in Bantu languages is different from other languages found elsewhere. Studies indicate that Bantu languages have a larger number of TAM markers than Indo-European languages (Polome, 1967; Lyons, 1968). Nurse (2008) stresses the complexity of TAM in Bantu languages by pointing out that it is possible to compare the number of aspects found in Bantu languages to that found elsewhere, but the number of distinctive tenses across Bantu languages is unusual. This unusual number of distinctive tenses across Bantu languages is caused by a change in Tense-aspect prominence. Nurse (2008) maintains that, originally, Bantu languages were aspect prominent. However, many languages according to Nurse have multiple tenses as a result of speakers' innovations exerted on the past tense and the future tense.

Nurse (2008) illustrates tense complexity and innovation made across Bantu languages by pointing out that over 80 per cent of the matrix languages (the selected Bantu languages) have more than one division of past tense. Over 70 per cent have two or three past tenses, 10 per cent have four past tenses and only 17 per cent have a single past. The innovations made on future tenses according to the author are different; 56 per cent have a single or no future, 41 per cent have two or three and very few languages have four future tenses. It should be noted that the multiple tenses in Bantu languages resulted from a historical change deviating from the Proto-Bantu. Specifically, some languages such as Swahili identify

three tenses (Whiteley, 1972; Kiango, 2000), whereas others such as Kikuyu (Spencer & Zwicky (1998) and Runyambo (Rugemalira, 2005) have up to six tenses, namely far past, yesterday past, today past, present, near future, and far future. All these tenses involve inflectional morphemes morphologically inflected in the verb.

Also, Nurse and Phillippson (2006) demonstrate the change in the way tense and aspect are encoded across Bantu languages. The authors point out that, originally, Bantu languages encoded tense by pre-root morphemes (prefixes) and aspect by post-root morphemes (suffixes). With this tense-aspect encoding system distinguishing tense from aspect was easier. However, today there are variations in how tense and aspect are encoded across Bantu languages. The authors maintain that while some languages have maintained the Pro-Bantu encoding system, others have changed thus they encode both tense and aspect using pre-root morphemes (prefixes). Also, there are Bantu languages that encode tense and aspect by a combination of morphemes appearing before and after the verb root leading to a challenge in distinguishing between tense and aspect.

The change in tense/aspect prominence and encoding system across Bantu languages has affected the role of *-ile* suffix which originally was an aspect marker. For instance, the languages that encode both tense and aspect using the pre-root morphemes, have discarded the *-ile* suffix, Swahili being a good example. Also, the languages that encode tense and aspect by a combination of morphemes appearing before and after the root affects the roles of the *-ile* suffix, since the role of the suffix is now not clear whether or not it is an aspect, tense or both tense and aspect marker. Therefore, the current paper argues that the change involving tense and aspect systems are the source of the challenge of tense-aspect distinction in natural languages, including Bantu languages.

Generally, both tense and aspect are grammatical categories inflected in the verb in relation to time but they offer different slants on time. While tense allows speakers to relate situations relatively to some points in time, most likely the time of speaking, aspect is not associated with the location of an event in time, but with temporal distribution (Dahl, 1985; Saeed, 2003). In this view, the notion of anterior which coincides with that of perfective or perfect implies that the completive situation occurs closer to the time of speaking in a simple sentence otherwise a compound or complex construction would apply. In English the present perfect is

independent but the past perfect and the future perfect cannot stand alone. Lyons (1968) illustrates this argument through examples in (2).

(2)    a.    *I have read the book*
       b.    *I had read the book*
       c.    *I will have read the book*

The second and third sentences in (2) denote past perfect and future perfect respectively. These sentences require another sentence to complete their senses. But the first sentence denotes present perfect and can stand alone in English to complete its sense. This sentence occurs closer to the time of speaking and so it implies an anterior aspect. According to Comrie (1976), the anterior/perfect denotes a situation that started in the past but continues to the present. In this regard, the English anterior/perfect and simple past can be symbolically distinguished as in figure 2a versus figure 2b.

*He has run*



E                                                                R, S

**Figure 2a: Simple past**

He ran



E, R                                                              S

**Figure 2b: Anterior /present perfect**

The present perfect/anterior may thus be contrasted with a simple past tense, in that with anterior, the reference-time and speech-time have the same relative positions whereas, in the simple past, reference-time has the same position with the time of the event. So far, the main assumption based on the reviewed literature is that there is an instance when both the past tense and perfective aspect can stand alone across Bantu languages.

To the timeline, the perfective aspect stands alone when it is placed closer to the time of speaking (anterior) but the posterior is somewhat connected to tense categories. Michaelis (2006) provides examples in (3) to illustrate this argument.

(3)     a.     *The crowd has moved to plaza*
        b.     *The crowd had moved to the plaza when the police showed up.*

The sentence in (3a) denotes present perfect and it is independent whereas the sentence in (3b) has two clauses in which the first clause carries the past perfect form and it cannot stand alone unless the second clause is made. Generally, the conception of tense and aspect presented in this subsection has been done by referring to some Indo-European languages (Latin, Russia and English) and a general look at Bantu languages. In these languages, it has been noticed that there is a significant variation in the tense and aspect distinctions across these languages. For instance, while Latin inflects for three tenses, English has two tense distinctions. This observation suggests that the meaning of tense and aspect is language-specific. Therefore, the meaning of tense and aspect should not be over-generalized across natural languages; instead, the concepts should be treated accordingly, especially when dealing with different languages. The following subsection presents the meaning of tense and aspect with attention to specific Bantu languages.

Muzale (1998) carried out a descriptive study of tense and aspect systems in eight Bantu languages selected from the Rutara sub-family (the East African Bantu languages spoken by communities located between Lakes Victoria, Kyoga, Albert and Edward). Rutara languages display complex TAM systems as Muzale identified the maximum of five tense divisions from the sample of eight Rutara languages[3]. These include; remote past, near past, memorial present, near future, and remote future. In distinguishing tense from aspect, the work by Muzale (1998) identifies two separate levels of forms for tense and aspect as indicated in (4).

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[3]     The selected languages are Runyoro, Rutooro, Runyankore, Rukiga, Runyambo, Ruhaya, Ruzinza and Rukerebe

(4)        Level I: {-$\theta$-…-a}

                                 {-aa-…-a}

                                 {-$\theta$-…-ire}

                                 {-aa-…-ire}

                                 {-kiaa-…-a}

Level II:{-ka-...a-}, {-a(a)-…-a}, {-raa-…-a}, {-ri(a)-…-a}

From the forms presented in (4), Level I is made up of aspect forms and level II involves tense forms. Concerning *-ire* suffix, out of the five forms in Level I, two of them contain *-ire* suffix but in the first form *-ire* occurs alone as in *tu-$\theta$-guz-ire* 'We have bought' (Runyoro/ Rutooro/ Runyankore/ Rukiga). In the second one, *-ire* co-occurs with pre-root formative *-aa-* as in *tu-aa-guz-ire* 'We have already bought' (Runyankore, Rukiga, Runyambo, Ruhaya, Ruzinza, Rukerebe). However, all Level II forms in Rutara languages do not have *-ire* suffix. This implies that *-ire* suffix, in these languages, is originally an aspect marker.

Also, Hewson, Nurse and Muzale (2000) carried out a study on tense in Ruhaya; one of the Bantu languages forming the Rutara sub-family. The study reveals a complex tense system in the language as it exhibits up to six tenses which are far past/before yesterday (*tú-**ka**-gura* 'We bought), Near past/yesterday (*tu-$\theta$-guz-**ire*** 'we bought', Memorial present/earlier today (*tu-**áá**-gura* 'We bought'), experiential present (*tu-$\theta$-gúra* 'we buy'), near future/later today and tomorrow (*tu-**raa**-gúra* 'We will buy') and far future (*tu-**ri**-gúra* 'we will buy). The authors have brought in terms related to tenses which are slightly different from the commonly used ones across Bantu languages. For instance, the term memorial present which is marked by *-áá-* in Ruhaya has been used as an anterior.

Also, the term experiential present resembles a simple present tense in other literature. The authors maintain that in Ruhaya, *-ire* suffix marks both perfective and retrospective. However, these authors admit that the distinction between perfective and retrospective is very slight. Kikuyu language represents Bantu languages with complex TAM systems as it has up to six tense distinctions (Johnson, 1977). This complexity of tense systems is a result of speakers' innovation where the past tense is divided into three and the future into two. The author adopts the terms; hodienal past, hesternal past and pre-hesternal past in the place of today past, yesterday past and remote past as exemplified in (5).

(5)    a.    **Hodiernal Past:** *Mwangi nĩainire.*
             *Mwangi nĩ-a- θ -in-ire*
             Mwangi ASRT-3sgS-HOD-dance-PST.PRV
             Mwangi danced (today).

       b.    **Hesternal Past:** *Mwangi nĩarainire.*
             *Mwangi nĩ-a-ra-in-ire.*
             Mwangi ASRT-3sgS-HEST-dance- PST.PRV
             Mwangi danced (yesterday).

       c.    **Pre-Hesternal Past:** *Mwangi nĩaĩnire.*
             *Mwangi nĩ-a-a-in-ire.*
             Mwangi ASRT-3sgS-PHEST-dance- PST.PRV
             Mwangi danced (some time before yesterday).

In all the past categories presented in (5), *-ile* (*-ire*) suffix is the main candidate. In marking today past, the suffix occurs alone whereas in marking yesterday past, the suffix co-occurs with the pre-root formative *-ra-* and the remote past is marked by the suffix co-occuring with the formative *-a-* appearing before the root. However, the author specifies the role of the suffix *-ire* as marking perfective and thus the constructions; *- θ -…-ire* (today past), *-ra-…-ire* (yesterday past) and *-a-…-ire* (remote past) stand for past perfective. In this view, the term perfective is restricted to the categories of past tense in Kikuyu. This conception of the term perfective is narrower than that given by Nurse (2008) as it includes even the future.

Besha (1985), (1989) studied tense and aspect in Shambala, a Bantu language in zone G. The study aimed at distinguishing tense from aspect markers. Applying Reichenbach's theory respectively, entailing that tense and aspect are morphological properties of the verb *-ile* suffix, the original perfective marker in Bantu languages, has disappeared in Shambala, and it has been replaced by morpheme *-i-* occurring before the root. Also, Mreta (1998) conducted a study on tense and aspect in Chasu, a Bantu language in zone G and coded G 22. Mreta admitted the challenge in distinguishing tense from aspect and for this reason did not clearly pinpoint how the perfective aspect differs from the category of tense. However, the data presented indicate that *-ile* suffix has been reduced to *-ie* to mark a completive action. The anterior and perfective are different concepts in Chasu, as the anterior is marked by *-á* form with the high tone (but the same form with a low tone expresses present or progressive in

Chasu) and the perfective by *-ie*. Examples in (6) demonstrate uses of the Chasu *-á*, *-a* and *-ie* forms.

(6)    a.    *eim-á*    she has already cultivated
       b.    *eim-a*    s/he cultivates or s/he is cultivating
       c.    *eim-ie*   s/he cultivated

Based on the examples in (6 a & b) with their English glosses, it is convincing to conclude that the role of the suffix *-ie* (*-ile*) is changing from being an aspect marker to being a tense marker (marking past tense) as the example in (22c) indicates. Swahili (G 42) has undergone remarkable changes as far as tense and aspect are concerned. In this language, both tense (past, present and future) and aspect (habitual, perfective and imperfective) are marked by morphemes appearing before the verb root (Kiango, 2000; Lusekelo, 2016). Polome (1967) demonstrates the three tense distinctions in Swahili. According to this author, formative *-li-* indicates the verbal process in the past versus time reference, *-na-* is used when the action is taking place at the effective moment of speaking, and *-ta-* situates the verbal process in the future versus time reference as exemplified in (7).

(7)    a.    *ni-li-lim-a*              *shamba langu jana*
             1s-PST-cultivate-FV field       my       yesterday
             'I cultivated my field yesterday'

       b.    *watoto*        *wa-na-chez-a*            *kiwanjani*
             Children        3p-Pres-play-FV          playground
             'children are playing in the playground'

       c.    *ni-ta-lim-a*             *shamba langu kesho*
             FUT-cultivate-FV       field    my    tomorrow
             'I will hoe my field tomorrow'

Two issues can be noted from the examples provided in (7). First, it is noted that different tenses (past, present and future) are expressed by individual markers occupying the same position, particularly, slot 4 of the Swahili verb template. Second, it is noted that temporal adverbials such as *jana* 'yesterday' and *kesho* 'tomorrow', play a vital role in Swahili to supplement the tense markers. Despite the fact that tense and aspect are hard to distinguish that many Bantuists choose to use tense as the cover

term (Mreta, 1998), Kiango (2000) identified tense categories as separate from aspect categories in Swahili. The tense categories are present, past and future whereas the aspect categories are perfective, habitual and indefinite conditional aspects. Kiango points out that *-me-* is the marker for perfective in Swahili and it indicates that the action is completed at the time under reference, but its result is effectively present. For example, the sentences; *ni-me-sikia* 'I have heard' and *msafiri a-me-fika* 'The traveller has arrived' denote perfective aspect in Swahili. Also, to distinguish tense from aspect, Hewson, Nurse and Muzale (2000) identified aspect markers different from tense markers in Swahili. Level I markers, *hu, me* and *ka* (habitual and perfective) are for aspect and Level II markers *li, na* and *ta* are for tense marking past, present and future respectively. Nurse (2008) points out that the past tense marker *-li-* and perfective marker *-me-* cannot co-occur in a single verb, otherwise, a compound construction is needed, and the past tense is marked in the first word and perfect(ive) aspect is marked in the second word, as exemplified in (8).

(8)    a.    *a-me-fariki*
             3s-has-die
             'He has died, is dead'

       b.    *a-li-kuwa*        *a-me-fariki*
             3s-PAST-be 3s-has-die
             'He had died'

       c.    *a-ta-kuwa*        *a-me-fariki*
             3s-FUT-be 3s-has-died = He will be he has died
             'He'll have died/be dead'

From the Swahili examples in (8), the co-occurrence of tense and aspect involves compound construction of two words, where the first word in (8b) carries a tense marker *-li-* for past and second word carries an aspect marker *-me-* for perfect(ive) aspect. The same applies to future perfect (ive) in (8c) where the first word carries the tense marker *-ta-* and the second word carries an aspect marker *-me-* which according to Nurse (2008) it marks perfect in Swahili. The fact that 'tense' and 'aspect' markers in Swahili cannot co-occur in a single verb is a good example of the merger of tense and aspect; that for many Bantu languages, even if we accept the claim that tense and aspect were originally distinct, they have progressively merged and become indistinguishable.

In Nyakyusa, a Bantu language in zone M, Lusekelo (2007), (2013), Robinson (2015) and Persohn (2017) studied tense and aspect systems in the language with different approaches and focus. For instance, the first study conducted by Lusekelo in 2007 sought to describe the Nyakyusa tense/aspect systems with the focus of specifying the meaning of tense/aspect formatives. Persohn (2017) sought to present the Nyakyusa verb and the study regards the *ø-…-ile* construction as not denoting anterior rather it denotes perfective in Nyakyusa. For this case, according to him, the Nyakyusa perfective aspect ranges from past perfective (*-a-…-ile*) as well as present perfective. Also, it shows that tense (past tense) and aspect (perfective) markers can co-occur in a single Nyakyusa verb, however, this analysis contradicts with the analysis made by Lusekelo (2007) and Robinson (2015) who regard the same construction as marking past tense. In Ndali, a Bantu language in zone M, Swilla (1998) conducted a study on tenses in Chindali. Kershner (2002) conducted a study on tenses of Sukwa a language related to Ndali. Sukwa represents Bantu languages with complex TAM systems. The language has multiple tenses following speakers' innovation on the past tense and future tense. Kershner suggests modifying the linear model that suits the Sukwa paradigms of past tenses as illustrated in figure 3
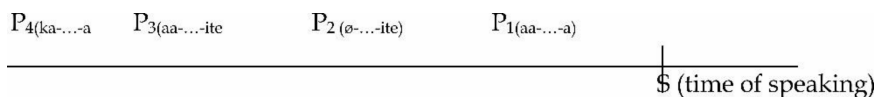
$P_{4(ka-…-a)}$     $P_{3(aa-…-ite)}$          $P_{2\ (ø-…-ite)}$          $P_{1(aa-…-a)}$

$ (time of speaking)

**Figure 3:          Sukwa paradigms of past tenses**
**Source:** Kershner (2002).

The Sukwa paradigm of past reference (using P model) suggested by Kershener (2002) becomes influential in Bantu linguistics, particularly when presenting tense systems for languages with multiples past tenses. However, the model regards tense as a cover term for tense and aspect following the challenge in making demarcation between tense and aspect. One of the key differences between the previous studies conducted in corridor languages and this study is that the current study is comparative. It applies a comparative method to investigate historical evolution of *-ile* suffix in the realm of inflectional morphology and phonology across four Bantu languages forming the Nyasa-Tanganyika corridor. Generally, this section has presented a review about the compromised distinction between tense and aspect. The reviewed studies show that Bantu

languages have complex TAM systems compared to the Indo-European languages such as English and Latin. This complexity is mainly caused by changes these languages have undergone on the prominence and encoding of tense, aspect and mood. Some Bantu languages such as Rutara languages (Muzale, 1998) encode up to six tenses. These innovations on the prominence and encoding remain to be the major source of the challenge to distinguish between tense and aspect. In this regard, some aspect markers such as *-ile* which originally were aspect markers are now regarded as both tense and aspect markers (see Robinson, 2021).

**Theories**

This paper is guided by Reichenbach's linear and Guillaume's Cognitive theories. The Reichenbach's Linear Theory provides a framework for the understanding of the concepts; tense and aspect. Reichenbach (1947) associates tense and aspect in natural language with systems of time reference, distinguishing three distinct temporal reference points in an utterance; the "point of speech" (S) , the "point of reference" (R), and the "point of the event" (E). Therefore, tense as a morphological property of the verb, can be defined using a point of reference illustrating the points into three major tense divisions as illustrated in figure 4.
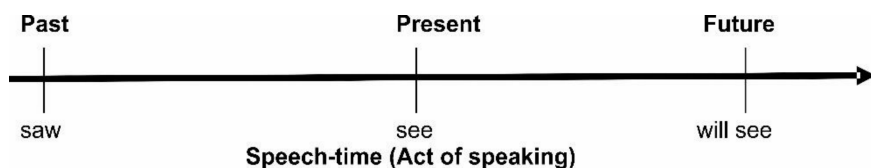
| **Past** | **Present** | **Future** |
|---|---|---|
| saw | see | will see |

**Speech-time (Act of speaking)**

**Figure 4: Three major tense divisions**
**Source: Saeed (2003).**

From figure 4 and with reference to the three points of reference defining tenses, each of the tense division can symbolically be represented in figure 5.
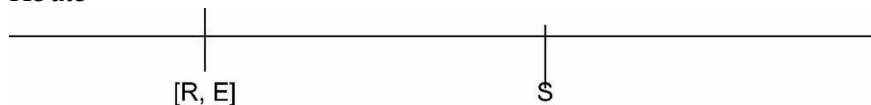
He ate

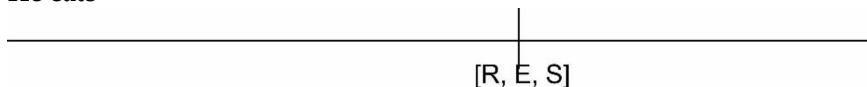[R, E]                                              S

**Figure 5: Past tense**

**He eats**

[R, E, S]

**Figure 6: Present tense**

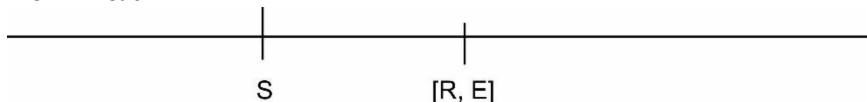**He will eat**

S          [R, E]

**Figure 7: Future tense**

From the figures presented in (5), (6) and (7), the past is symbolically -[R, E]-S implying that both reference point and event time occur before (precede) speech moment whereas the future tense is symbolically represented as S-[R, E] implying that both reference point and event time occur after speech moment. Finally, the present tense represented as [R, E, S] implies that reference point, event time and speech moment occur together. The theory is deemed relevant to this study because it provides a framework for the analysis of the distinction between tense and aspect. One of the usefulness of the theory is that it clears the contradictions in the view of English tense distinctions. If one was taught grammar in school, s/he may have been told about numerous tenses such as present tense, past tense, future tense, present continuous tense, present perfect tense and the same for past and future. But using this theory that revolves around the fact that tense is a morphological property of the verb, it is possible to identify morphemes inflected for two tenses, past and present. In English the future is not a property of tense since no morphemes are morphologically inflected for future like in many Bantu languages.

The relevance of the theory has been emphasized by Ranamane (2009) who points out that Reichenbach's (1947) analysis is, in general, very strong because it accommodates tense structures that do not exist in English and despite disadvantages that the model has, its formalization of tense in terms of speech time, reference time and event time has exerted a huge influence on subsequent analyses of tense and aspect and still enjoys wide support today. To analyze tense-aspect distinction, the theory sensitizes the researcher to pay attention to morphological forms that denote tense categories such as past, present and future separate from the

aspect categories in the selected language. However, in some instances, there are morphemes which might have more than one function in the verb. Sometimes there might be no any explicitly tense marker in the verb (Muzale, 1998), unless the speakers are conscious of the context in which the verb has been used. By relying on explicit morphemes for tense and aspect, it is difficult for this theory to address circumstances where in a particular verb no morpheme marks tense at the same time the verb indicates a particular grammatical time as speakers may be aware of. Also, in some instances, it is difficult for the Reichenbach's linear theory to address the ambiguity of some morphemes that may be seen to be marking either tense or aspect. For instance, the English morpheme, -ed is ambiguous as can be attached to the verb base to denote both tense and aspect. For these reasons, the need for a cognitive theory arises.

The cognitive theory originates from the work by Guillaume in 1984 (Muzale, 1998). The underlying thesis of the theory (as modified by Muzale), is that a language develops tense formatives depending on the speaker's mind in making time partition in the universe. Therefore, tense and aspect are cognitive properties. Tense divisions are constructed in the speaker's mind and they are elements of time in relation to events and actions which are cognitively based; thus, they depend solely on cognitive processes in the mind under human consciousness. This claim is supported by Nurse (2008) who points out that tense and aspect systems are cognitively based, not direct representations of events in the real world. According to this author, various verbal categories do not directly reflect the events or objects of this world, but they rather reflect human organization, human categorization of these objects and events. These categories have a strong cognitive component. Regardless of their morphological exponence, tenses and aspects have certain common semantic features across human languages. While they may not be quite universal, they are certainly widespread.

Muzale (1998) applied the cognitive approach to the study of tense systems of Rutara languages. He points out that cognitive approach refers to cognition, the mental process that is involved in utilizing the mind to perceive, retain and (re) organize ideas about the material world, to understand it, and to develop abstractions about it. In this view, according to him cognition can be said to have a close relationship with consciousness and, at certain levels, it is believed to have a direct relationship with language. Using the cognitive model, the author tried to show that the continuum of time of the Rutara T'/A system by

foregrounding two basic tense contrasts, namely, Past and Non-Past. In describing the mental representation of these tense categories, Muzale points out that the event that has already been recorded to memory belongs to Past and that which has not belongs to Non-Past. In this view, the present and the future is assigned to non-past. However, the precise boundaries of these categories depend on the language, the linguistic context, and the context of situation of the utterance, hence T/A pragmatics.

This theory is relevant to the current study, simply because it offers a broader view of the meaning of tense/aspect that helps in the analysis the distinction between tense and aspect. The theory gives a precaution that although tense and aspect are morphological properties of the verb, they are not always morphologically inflected in the verb. This implies that we may not see an explicit form for tense/aspect yet speakers can decipher the time in which the sentence denotes. Also, we have a particular T/A form having more than one meanings or functions but disambiguating the forms depends on speakers' consciousness. Muzale (1988) provides Ruhaya examples to illustrate the tense form with more than one interpretation as in (9).

(9)    n-áá-ku-tééra
       1s(SM)-T/A-2s (OM)-beat        i).  I have beaten you
                                      (ii) I beat you (earlier today)'
                                      (iii) I am just about to beat you

Muzale (1998), therefore, points out that a cognitive approach addresses these morpho-semantic problems better than other approaches and it is for this reason that it is adopted in this study. In this view, in the course of data collection and analysis it is worth going beyond verbal structures with explicit tense markers. To achieve this, Besha (1985) advocates the importance of using temporal adverbials in the course of data collection for tense and aspect.

**Methodology**
The data for this paper were collected in Kyela District, in Mbeya Region, mainly, in Ipinda and Talatala wards. This area of the study was selected because many native speakers live and therefore, it is obvious to collect data enough to answer the main question of the study. Data were collected through observation, written texts, narrative stories and interviews to

ascertain the acceptability of words and sentences to be analysed and exemplified. With observation, the researcher, as a native speaker, used his introspective knowledge to note down a lot of data from naturally occurring spoken texts. Also, the paper depended on the data from the available written texts, mainly Robinson (2015; 2021) and the Nyakyusa Dictionary by Felberg (1996).

## Results and Discussion

In distinguishing tense from aspect in Nyakyusa, the analysis of data involved identifying tense categories as separate from that of aspect under the framework of Reichenbach's linear theory. However, the establishment of the context in which the forms are being used to denote tense or aspect in Nyakyusa has been done under the framework of the cognitive theory under the aid of temporal adverbials. The findings show that, in Nyakyusa, the distinction between tense and aspect is also problematic. The problem revolves around the ambiguity of the *-ile* suffix which was originally an aspect marker across Bantu languages but currently the suffix is both an aspect and tense marker. However, *-ile* acts as a candidate for testing tense-aspect distinction. In this regard, two tests have been identified, namely co-occurrence and negation tests as have been further described in the following subsections.

## The co-occurrence test

With this test, the *-ile* suffix, as well as other tense/aspect morphemes, co-occurs with pre-root formatives to mark different tense/aspect categories. By considering the two aforementioned theories, the findings show that the *-ile* suffix marks different tense and aspect categories in Nyakyusa as presented in the following sections.

## The *-ile* suffix in marking tense

Nyakyusa is one of the Bantu languages that has three tense categories, namely past, present and future. Following the time of speaking, past tense forms indicate that the action or event took place before the reference time. The findings show that the past tense is encoded by a combination of pre-root and post-root formatives. Examples in (10) demonstrate how the past tense is encoded in Nyakyusa to see the position of *-ile* suffix as the main candidate to distinguish tense from aspect.

(10)    (a)    *na  -a  -lim  -ile    ifilombe*
               1s  -PST  -cultivate    -PST  maize
               'I cultivated maize'

        (b)    *tu  -a  -lim  -ile    ifilombe*
               1p  -PST  -cultvate    -PST    maize
               'We cultivated maize'

As indicated in examples (10), the pre-root formative *-a-* in slot 4 co occurs with the *-ile* suffix, the post-root formative in slot 8 of the Nyakyusa verb (see Robinson, 2015). Since Nyakyusa has three tenses, remoteness in the past is aided by temporal adverbial namely; *lululu* 'very near today' *mmajolo* 'yesterday' *pakijolo* 'before yesterday and *ijolo* 'long time ago' (remote past) in co-occurrence with past tense formative *-a-…..-ile* as exemplified. The examples in (11) demonstrate the remoteness in the past using temporal adverbials.

(11) a.        *ja  -a  -tim  -ile    fiijo    pakijolo*
               3s ( it)  -PST  rain  -PST    very    before yesterday
               'It rained heavily before yesterday'

      b.       *ijolo  a  -a  -syuk  -ile    mbafwe*
               ago  3S    -PAST  -rise    -PAST  dead
               'Long time ago he rose up from the dead'

As shown in the examples in (11), temporal adverbials are mobile, that is they can appear at the beginning or at the end of a sentence. Examples in (12a) and (12b) demonstrate how the present and future tenses are encoded in Nyakyusa.

(12) a.    *tu  ku    -byal  -a    amajabhu*
           1P    -TA (Prsnt)    -plant  -FV    cassava
           'We plant cassava'

    b.    *a  -tu  -ku  -byal  -a    amajabhu*
          TA  -1p  -TA  -plant  -FV    cassava
          'We will plant cassava'

As shown in (12a), the present tense is marked by morpheme *-ku-* which occurs in slot 4 and denotes the action or event that takes place at the moment of speech time (ST). The future is marked by a combination of

a pre-root marker, *a-* occurring before the subject marker, and the formative *-ku-* occurring in slot 4 in the verb group. The future tense markers denote a situation that follows speech time (ST). For future remoteness, the markers co-occur with temporal adverbials, namely *piitasi* 'later' *kilabho* 'tomorrow' and *ukulinda kilabho* 'after tomorrow'.

**The -*ile* suffix in marking aspect**

The findings show that in Nyakyusa *-ile* suffix, the main candidate to test tense-aspect distinction, is inflected for three aspect categories, namely anterior, marking non-progressive and indefinite conditional aspects. To start with anterior, following the conceptual overlap between the terms perfective and tense, this paper adopts the term anterior to have the same meaning as perfective, perfect or retrospective. This is in line with scholars such as Kiango (2000) and Bostoen (2008) who treat perfective in the same way as anterior[4]. Also, Bybee and Dahl (1989) regard perfect as similar to anterior. The term generally refers to the completion of an action or event expressed by the verb but influencing the present. Coming to non-progressive aspect, Lyons (1968) points out that it is denoted by stative[5] verbs. These verbs do not take a progressive form and, in Nyakyusa, the verbs are such as *gana* 'love', and *bhina* 'get sick'. According to Kiango (2000) indefinite conditional aspect is common in Bantu languages. This observation has been supported by the findings of this study in that across the selected languages the forms used for the anterior and non-progressive aspect are also used to express the indefinite conditional aspect, as shown in (13a-c).

(13a)  *ummanyisi*     *a-bha-kyap-ile*        *abhasukulu abha bhakyeliigwe*
       The teacher      3s-3p-cane-ANT       pupils   who have come late
       'The teacher has just caned pupils who have come late

(13b)  *u-mu-ana (umwana) a  - $\theta$  -bhin  -ile*
       Aug-3p-child             3p-zero-sick  -ANT
       'The child is sick'

---

4    Also, Nurse (2003) supports this view by suggesting the reduction of the Latinate terms for aspect categories which are numerous to make them more transparent. In this view, the anterior (ANT) is treated in the same way as perfect or retrospective.

5    In the classification of the Bantu verbs, Lusekelo (2007) points out that with stative verbs, it is difficult to realize the beginning, the continuation and the ending of the situation encoded by the verbs.

(13c)    *linga u-kwel-ile,        a  -tu-ku  -kuul –il  -a     injinga*
         If    2p-pass-ANT, FUT-1p-FUT-buy-Appl-FV   bicycle
         'If you pass the exam, we will buy you a bicycle'

The examples provided in (13a), (13b) and (13c) indicate the forms for anterior (ANT), non-progressive aspect and indefinite conditional aspect respectively. In all these three aspect categories *-ile* suffix is involved and it occurs alone with the *-$\theta$-…-ile* construction. Generally, the data presented show that *-ile* suffix marks both tense and aspect in Nyakyusa. Table 1 provides a summary of different tense categories and aspect categories to illustrate the co-occurrence of *-ile* with other formatives from which we can judge the distinction between tense and aspect.

**Table 1: Forms for tense and aspect categories based on *-ile* suffix**

| Categories | forms |
|---|---|
| Past tense | *-a-…-ile* |
| Anterior | *-$\theta$-…-ile* |
| non-progressive | *-$\theta$-…-ile* |
| indefinite conditional aspect | *-$\theta$-…-ile* |

The forms presented in Table 1 show that *-ile* suffix co-occurs with the slot 4 formative *-a-* when marking the past tense which is the category for tense in Nyakyusa. However, the suffix does not co-occur with any pre-root formative when the suffix marks anterior, non-progressive aspect and indefinite conditional aspect, the aspect categories. In this view, when the *-ile* suffix co-occurs with slot 4 formative it marks tense and when it occurs alone it marks aspect. The analysis of the encoding of different tense and aspect categories in Nyakyusa reveals a significant change from the traditional one. It has been pointed out by Nurse and Philippson (2006) that although tense is traditionally marked by pre-root morphemes and aspect by post-root morphemes, a change has occurred across Bantu languages. Synchronically, some languages encode tense and aspect by pre-root morphemes while other languages encode both tense and aspect by a combination between pre-root morphemes and post-root morphemes. Therefore, Nyakyusa is one of Bantu languages where tense is marked by both, the pre-root formatives and *-ile* suffix and aspect is marked by *-ile* alone, the post-root formative. This change in the encoding

of tense in Nyakyusa has led to the dependence of a number of tense and aspect formatives including *-ile* suffix. For instance, the pre-root formative, *-a-* is dependent on *-ile* suffix and vice versa, as the two formatives co-occur to mark past tense in the language.

**Negation test**
The negation test seeks to test and see what happens to *-ile* suffix when it marks tense, particularly, past tense (PST) and when it marks aspect, particularly, anterior (ANT). Examples in (14 a & b) illustrated illustrate the negative test for tense-aspect distinction in Nyakyusa.

(14a)  **Affirmative**                                    **Negative**
       a- lim   **-ile**    ifilombe          tu-**ka** -lim    -a   ifilombe
       1p-cultivate-ANT    maize              1p-Neg-cultivate-FV maize
       'We have cultivated maize'             'We have not cultivated maize'

(14b) **Affirmative**                                     **Negative**
      tu -**a** -lim   **-ile**  ifilombe            tu-ka -**a**   -lim    -**ile**  ifilombe
      1p-PST-cultivate-PST maize                 1p-Neg-PST-cultivate-PST  maize
      'We cultivated maize'                      'We did not cultivate maize'

        As the examples in (14) indicate, when the negative marker *-ka-* is introduced in a sentence and the *-ile* suffix appears alone to mark aspect categories it disappears. However, the negative marker *-ka-* does not cause the *-ile* suffix to disappear when the suffix co-occurs with a pre-root formative, *-a* to express the past tense, one of the tense categories in Nyakyusa. However, according to Robinson (2021), in Malila, Nyiha and Ndali in any construction with *-ile* suffix that is *á-* $\theta$ *-…-ile, -a-…-ile,* and - $\theta$ *-…-ile,* the negative marker does not cause the disappearance of the suffix.

**Conclusion**
This article sought to describe the compromised tense-aspect distinction in Nyakyusa. The findings show that, in Nyakyusa, tense-aspect distinction is compromised (problematic and confusing). The *ile* suffix is the source of this problem and confusion due to its changing morphological properties. Although the suffix, originally, was an aspect marker in many Bantu languages, it is now amenable to tense and aspect marking in Nyakyusa. However, the suffix remains a good candidate for testing tense-aspect distinction in Nyakyusa. Two tests have been presented regarding tense-aspect distinction in *-ile* suffix and they include

co-occurrence and the negation tests. The findings show that when *-ile* marks the past tense (one of tense categories), it co-occurs with the pre-root formative *-a-,* whereas when it marks anterior, non-progressive and indefinite conditional aspects (aspect categories it occurs alone. Regarding the negation test, the negative marker *-ka-* causes the *-ile* suffix to disappear when it marks aspect categories and it remains when the suffix marks past tense. Given the focus of the current study, this paper recommends a further study that will merit the current one. The comparative study should be conducted to describe tense-aspect distinction using more data from many selected Bantu languages which are genetically related.

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