

Absolute tense forms in Tswana

ABSTRACT

The theme of this article is “tense” as category of the verb in Tswana and more specifically the different tenses that can be identified according to the theory of absolute and relative tense forms. Several publications by experts were consulted to shed new light on the previously held view on tense in Tswana. These views were compared in an attempt to put forth an applicable framework for the classification of the tenses in Tswana and to identify the absolute tenses of Tswana.

Keywords:

tense; simple tenses; compound tenses; absolute tenses; relative tenses; aspect; auxiliary verbs; auxiliary verbal groups; Tswana

OPSOMMING

Die tema van hierdie artikel is tyd as kategorie van die werkwoord in Tswana, met spesifieke verwysing na die verskillende tye wat in Tswana geïdentifiseer kan word volgens die teorie van absolute en relatiewe tye. Verskeie publikasies deur kundiges is geraadpleeg en hulle werk is vergelyk. Dit is gedoen om nuwe lig te werp op die tradisionele beskouing van tyd in Tswana en om sodoende 'n toepaslike raamwerk daar te stel vir die klassifikasie van die tye in Tswana. Daarna is die verskillende absolute tye van Tswana geïdentifiseer.

Sleutelwoorde:

tyd; enkelvoudige tye; saamgestelde tye; absolute tye; relatiewe tye; aspek; hulpwerkwoorde; hulpwerkwoordgroepe; Tswana

Introduction

In the teaching of Tswana to non-speakers of the language it has been observed that learners have a problem with interpreting the tenses of Tswana and expressing themselves correctly when using the various tenses. This might be ascribed to the fact that the structure of the verb is more complex in Tswana than what learners are used to in their mother tongue, which in our case is mainly Afrikaans or English. The reason for this complex structure is the concatenation of a range of morphemes to the verbal root. One of the characteristics of the African languages is that they have agreement, which means that the subject and object can be morphologically marked in the verb.

The fact that verbs in Tswana are written disjunctively adds to the problems of many learners as they are used to seeing verbs as single units in their languages.

Tenses in Tswana have in the past been identified according to criteria which were set out differently by theorists and these criteria were sometimes even interpreted differently.

Aim

The aim of this article is to give a more appropriate account of the array of tense forms occurring in Tswana in view of recent theories and approaches developed for tense analysis, both internationally and locally.

Method

Reference will be made to the earlier views of grammarians who have investigated the verbal category of tense in the South African Bantu languages, and specifically in the Sotho languages. Tense forms that were identified for Tswana according to these earlier views will then be put forth.

More recent views of grammarians on tense, and those distinguishing between the categories of absolute and relative tense in particular, shed new light on tense in Tswana. These views will be introduced briefly.

In conclusion an attempt will be made to identify the absolute tenses of Tswana according to the theory of absolute and relative tense.

Tense: essential category of the verb in Tswana

Posthumus (2001: 281) states that:

In order to offer a satisfactory description of tense and to propose appropriate terminology for the individual tense forms of Zulu a synthesis of the general theories on tense needs to be made, taking the nature of the Zulu language into account.

The same would apply to an attempt at describing the Tswana tenses. Tense is the grammaticalised expression of location in time. In Tswana, tense is grammaticalised in the verb. It is therefore imperative to have a sound knowledge of the structure and categories of the verb in Tswana to be able to understand the tenses that are found in Tswana.

Lexically the verb in Tswana has three categories. These categories are independent verbs, copulative verbs and auxiliary verbs.

Grammatically the verb in Tswana has the essential categories of mood, tense, aspect and modality. Time is a category that is superimposed on tense. There has been a difference in opinion regarding the fact that aspect should be one of these essential categories as it is not necessarily inherently present in every verb, regardless of the simplicity or complexity of the verb. Pretorius (1997:166) argues why he includes aspect as one of the essential categories of the verb in Tswana.

Because the categories of tense and time and tense and aspect could easily be confused with each other, it is important to distinguish clearly between them.

Tense contributes to the substantiating of time, and therefore the verbal markedness of time and tense is often identical. The major device in the establishing of time is the interrelation between tense forms and time adverbials, which indicates that time interpretation is primarily constituted by factors outside the verb.

Deduced from the views of different grammarians and put into simple terms, aspect can be

referred to as the “manner of duration” of the action or process indicated in the verb. (See Pretorius 1997:167.)

Actuality refers to the binary opposition of positive as opposed to negative.

Traditional views on tense

The traditional treatment of tense forms in the African languages is based on views which stem mostly from the theories of the classicists (refer to Doke 1947 and Cole 1955), hence the use of the terms ‘perfect’ and ‘imperfect’.

Doke (1947:163) states the following on tense in general in isiZulu:

The Zulu tense division according to time is not so clear and precise as that of many other Bantu languages. Nevertheless, in the main, the general Bantu division holds for isiZulu, viz. remote past, immediate past, present, immediate future and remote future.

Doke (1947:148) identifies tenses for isiZulu. He (1947:163) adds that:

In addition to the above tense system, Zulu employs quite a large number of deficient verbs which form *compound* tenses giving various shades of meaning and additional implications, such as the occasional, persistent, consecutive, etc. [Italics RSP]

Like Doke, Van Eeden (1941) differentiates between simple tense forms and compound tense forms for isiZulu. Taljaard and Bosch (1988) distinguish between a present, past, and future tense for isiZulu.

The work of Wookey and Brown (1949), Sharpe (1952), Sandilands (1953), Doke and Mofokeng (1957), Lombard *et al.* (1985) and Louwrens (1994(a)) give valuable insights into work done on tense in the Sotho languages.

Cole (1975:235), who is generally regarded as the most prominent grammarian of Tswana to date, indicates that Tswana has a wide variety of verb tenses, the conjugation of the verb usually being one of the most complicated aspects of Bantu grammatical structure. He identifies the following types of tenses:

Simple or monoverbal tenses

Only a single verb is used.

Compound tenses

An auxiliary verbal group which consists of a single auxiliary verb as introductory member, and a complementary verb as complement appears in these tenses.

Multiverbal tenses

These tenses are similar to the compound tenses because they include an auxiliary or deficient verb as introductory member, but the complement in this case also consists of an auxiliary verbal group, thus the complement itself is a verbal group.

Stative tenses

What Cole (1975) refers to as stative tense is the perfective form of inchoative verbs. The inchoative verb in the perfect does not predicate a process, but rather a state. (This is not a tense distinction but an aspectual distinction.)

Perfect and past tenses

Here Cole (1975) mistook an aspectual distinction for a tense distinction. (The perfectivity or non-perfectivity, or persistence or non-persistence of an action should not be interpreted as the time of execution of the action.) A further problem with the past tense is that Cole (1975) sees the consecutive mood of the complementary verb as a tense distinction.

The complexity of the verb was the basis that was used by Cole and most of these grammarians to distinguish between the different tenses, hence the distinction between simple tenses and compound tenses. As the verb in Tswana is such a complex phenomenon, this criterion proves to be a problem in many instances.

Modern views on tense

The distinction between simple and compound tenses made by the grammarians above (in what I refer to as the traditional approach to tense), is referred to as absolute and relative tenses in the modern approach. Tense is marked in the morphological and phonological form of the verb.

When the views of grammarians such as Comrie (1985) and Posthumus (1988) are considered, a new paradigm for the classification of tenses for the African languages is introduced. Comrie (1985:12) maintains that tense analysis should be centred in the verb, and I agree with that.

Comrie (1985:9) states that:

Tense is the grammaticalised expression of the location of events in time.

He (1968:305) describes tense as follows:

The essential characteristic of the category of tense is that it relates the time of the action, event or state of affairs referred to in the sentence to the time of utterance (the time of utterance being 'now').

Tense is therefore a deictic category.

Tense, according to Comrie, is therefore the form (morphological/phonological structure) taken by a verb to indicate the time of the action.

On the marking of tense in the African languages Posthumus (1988:140) states:

In the African languages tense is marked by morphologically and phonologically contrasting verb forms.

The theory that absolute and relative tenses are distinguished has not been applied to Setwana. To explicate his theory, reference will be made to the work of grammarians who have used this theory in the African languages. Posthumus (1990) used this theory to discuss tense (absolute and relative tenses) in isiZulu, and Mabule (1993) did the same for Northern Sotho.

Absolute and relative tenses versus simple and compound tenses

Posthumus (1990:23) describes absolute tense forms as follows:

In these tense forms, the reference point from which the temporal semantic interpretations are done, is the deictic centre (coding time). The grammatical tense forms of anteriority, simultaneity and posteriority, are generally referred to as past, present and future tense respectively. A distinction is thus made between present (events coinciding with coding time), past (events prior to coding time) and future (events subsequent to coding time).

Mabule (1993:15) states the following about absolute tenses:

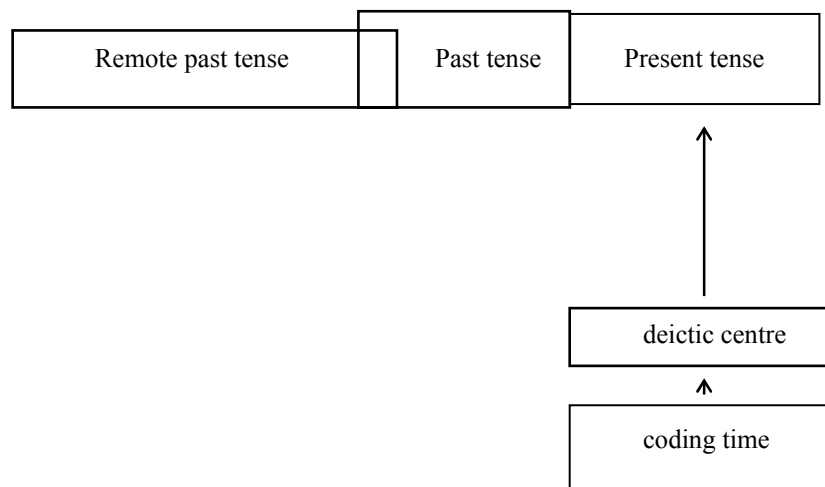
The term absolute tense is a term that is used to refer to tenses which take speech time or coding time as their reference point.

The term absolute tense will be used to refer to a tense which uses the deictic centre or the 'present' as its primary reference point. Note the following examples:

- (1) **Ba bona** mabone a motse.
'They see the lights of the village'.
- (2) **Ba bone** mabone a motse.
'They saw the lights of the village'.

In example (1) event time coincides with coding time, whereas in example (2) the event took place prior to coding time, the deictic centre, the primary reference point, remains the present moment – now.

Posthumus (1990:23) uses the following figure to represent the absolute tense paradigm (those tense forms which have coding time as their reference time):



Regarding the analysis/description of absolute tenses, Posthumus (1988:140) points out that in the case of the *absolute tense forms* R.T. coincides with E.T. and the reference point from which the temporal semantic interpretations are made is the D.C. The abbreviations used here by Posthumus are:

D.C. = the deictic centre – the origo or position from which the reference is made.

R.T. = reference time – the time taken as the point of reference for the interpretation of the event time.

E.T. = event time – the time at which the event takes place.

Thus in the sentence:

- (3) Ntate *o mphile* madi.
'Father gave/has given me money'.

D.C. = now – the time at which the utterance is made.

R.T. = now.

E.T. = some time in the past.

Mabule (like Posthumus) thus uses the term absolute tense to refer to a tense form which uses the moment of speech as its primary reference point. With the term relative tense he refers to tenses which depend on the deictic centre as well as another reference point for its interpretations. He (1993:19) states that:

This point is given by the context or marked by an auxiliary/deficient verb form. In other words we distinguish between two types of relative tense, namely those that are marked by the deficient verb form *-be* and those that are dependent on another sentence (co-structure).

Mabule (1993:20) quotes Comrie (1985:58), who suggests that the present moment is always available as a reference point for relative tenses unless barred by the context.

He comes to the following conclusion:

This implies that a relative tense is strictly one which is interpreted relative to a reference point provided by the context, since the context always provides the present moment.

Thus in the case of the absolute tense forms the DC and the RT coincide; however, the interpretation of tense is not always made from coding time (C.T. – speech time). In the case of the relative tense forms the interpretation of *event time* is made in relation to *reference time*, which is in turn established in relation to *coding time*, which is constituted by the *deictic centre*. In Tswana, the form of the auxiliary verb (in the auxiliary verbal group) expresses the relation between C.T. and a newly established reference time (referred to as R.T.). In this regard Posthumus (1988:140) states that:

This newly established reference point which serves as a primary anchoring point for the semantic interpretation of events may be prior to or subsequent to C.T.

The Tswana auxiliary verbal stems *-ne* and *tlabo*, indicate the shifting of the reference point from coding time to a moment prior to or subsequent to coding time respectively, e.g.

- (4) Mosadimogolo *o ne a tlhatswa* diaparo.
'The old woman was washing the clothes'.
(5) Mosadimogolo *o tlabo a tlhatswa* diaparo.
'The old woman will be washing the clothes'.

From the above examples, it can be deduced that in the relative tense forms, the reference point for the location of event time is a point in time which is not the present moment or speech time.

It is now clear that what Cole (1955:282) refers to as the past tense is, in fact, a relative past tense, e.g.

- (6) *Ke ne ka mmona* kgantele jaana.
'I saw him just a few moments ago'.

This past tense, as conceived by Cole, indicates that the state was achieved in past time and continued for a period, but that something else occurred subsequently and therefore the state does not persist in the present time. Thus

- (7) *Ke ne ka robala*.
'I went to sleep'.
implies that I subsequently awoke.

Attempting to improve on the traditional views, a more modern approach has been propagated by Posthumus (1990). He distinguishes between absolute tense forms, which are structurally monoverbal, and relative tense forms, which are bi- or poli-verbal respectively, i.e. consisting of an auxiliary verb as an introductory member and a complementary verb, which could be either a copulative verb, an independent verb or a verbal group.

According to Posthumus the term that has been used traditionally, viz. compound tense, is inappropriate or unsuitable because it suggests a combination of two or more tenses in one group, which is quite illogical. Posthumus (1988:140) opts for a distinction between absolute and relative tenses and indicates that:

Relative tenses are distinguished by the fact that the reference point from which the temporal semantic interpretations are made, is a point other than coding time.

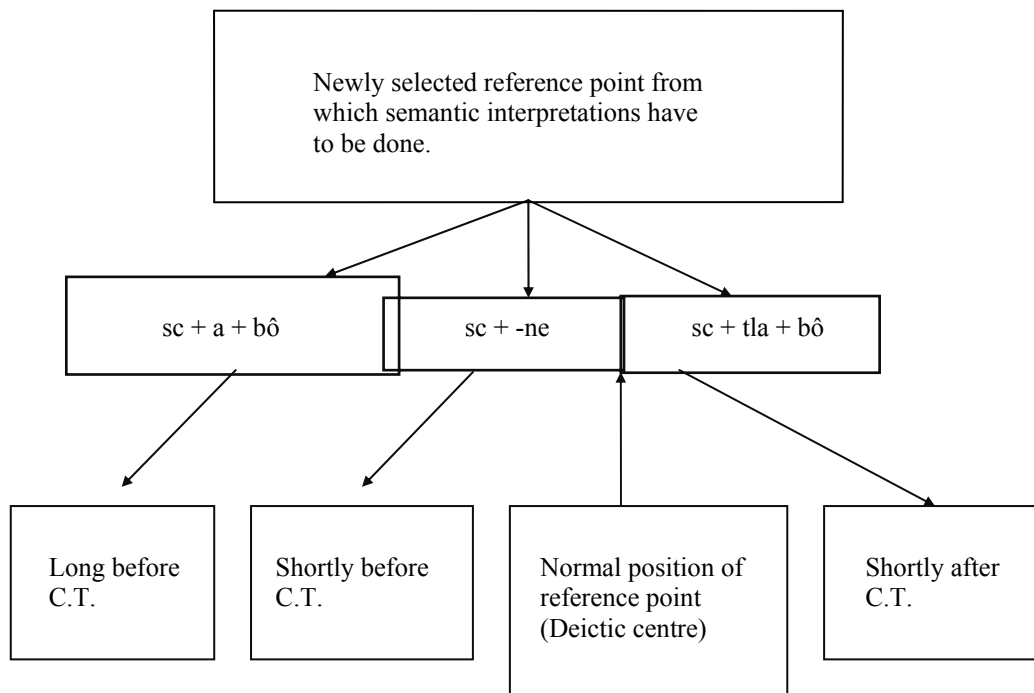
Posthumus (1988:23) describes relative tense as follows:

Tense forms which express a relation between event time, reference time and coding time are called relative tenses.

The interpretation of the relative tenses thus involves the following three points:

- The point of speech, i.e. the time at which the utterance is made, viz. speech time or coding time.
- The point of the event, i.e. the time at which the event (or state) occurred.
- The point of reference, i.e. the temporal standpoint from which the speaker invites his audience to consider the occurrence of the event (or the reaching of the state, viz. reference time).

Posthumus (1988:24) supports his argument with the following tense paradigm for the relative tense forms, i.e. those tense forms which reflect the event time in relation to reference time and coding time. This paradigm which Posthumus gave for isiZulu has been furnished with the Tswana auxiliary verbs for the purposes of this article. (Note *sc* = subject concord.)



According to this exposition by Posthumus, the form and meaning of relative tenses depend primarily on a newly established reference point, which is not the present moment (coding time/the time the utterance was made), e.g.

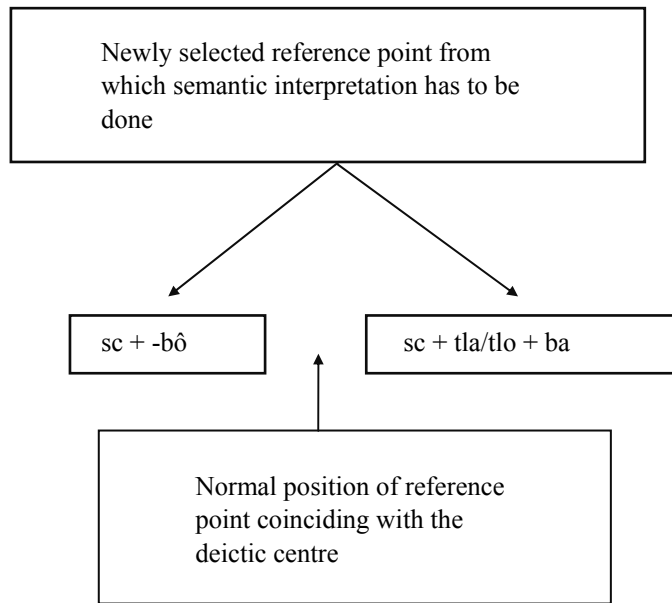
- (8) Ke ne ke ba bona fa ba tswa mo kerekeng.
 ‘I saw/was seeing them when they came out of the church’.

Here the event time (ET – my seeing them) is linked to another point, or rather event (namely their coming out of church) in the past, which now serves as reference time.

If the process is seen as being incomplete (i.e. in progress) with regard to the said point in time in the past, the tense form of the complementary verb conveys an imperfective meaning. Compare (9) and (10) below.

- (9) Maabane ka ura ya bobedi, **ba ne ba ithuta**.
 ‘Yesterday at two o'clock they were studying’.
- (10) Mosimane **o ne a thaisa** ditlhapi.
 ‘The boy was catching fish/fishing’.

Mabule (1993:21) presents the tense paradigm for relative tense as follows:



Like Posthumus, Mabule (1993:21) indicates that in the relative tense forms speech participants have to keep track of the deictic centre even if the events are interpreted primarily from another (shifted) reference point, since that (shifted) reference point is established in relation to the deictic centre.

Mabule does not present a definite list of his “relative tense forms” for Sepedi. He only mentions the relative past tense with *-ne*.

The framework for absolute and relative tenses presented above will now be employed to suggest tenses for Tswana.

Tense forms suggested for Tswana

Absolute tense forms

The following absolute tense forms are distinguished for Tswana:

Present tense

The term present tense is misleading in a sense, since it is not solely used to describe actions that are happening at speech time. It can also be used to refer to general truths, habitual or iterative actions (see Posthumus (1982:88–91)). It is therefore appropriate to name it the present indefinite or the present imperfect tense – see examples (11) and (12) below.

- (11) Tau *e bona* ditholo tse di nwang metsi mo molapong.
‘The lion sees the kudus that are drinking water at the river’.
- (12) Bana *ba tshameka* mo puleng.
‘The children are playing in the rain’.

In the above examples event time coincides with coding time. The seeing and the playing are taking place at speech time (coding time).

There has been a substantial debate in the African languages on the so-called short form of the present tense (as indicated in (11) and (12) above), and the long form where the morpheme *-a* is used (as mentioned in (13) below). (See du Plessis (1978 & 1986); Doke (1965:167;334); Ziervogel *et al.* (1976:47); Louw (1963:39); Van Eeden (1956:245); Kosch (1985))

(13) Bana *ba a tsamaya*.

‘The children are walking’.

The debate on an appropriate term to be used for this morpheme (present tense *-a*) is also still not over. It is not the aim of this article to solve the problem. This morpheme is therefore referred to as the present tense *-a-* morpheme.

Past tense

This tense form was traditionally also known as the perfect tense, or the present perfect tense. It describes an action/event that started in the past, and was completed in the past.

(14) *Re bone* moruti wa kereke ya rona.

‘We saw the preacher of our church’.

(15) Maabane *ke rutila* bana mokgwa wa go dirisa sekere.

‘Yesterday I taught the children the way to use the scissors’.

The events in both (14) and (15) took place prior to coding time (speech time), and have been completed.

Future tense

The views of linguists on this tense differ. Lombard *et al.* (1985:142) state that:

The future tense is characterised by the occurrence of a deficient verb form-*tla*, followed by a basic verb stem.

The deficient verb stem *-tla* indicates that the action will be executed at a given point, some time in the (near) future, e.g.

(16) Baithuti *ba tla tla* kwano fa ba sena go kwala teko ya bone.

‘The students will come here after they have finished writing their test’.

The future with *-tla* indicates that the action will be factual and be executed in the near future, and conveys the idea of either promise or definiteness, e.g.

(17) *Re tla ya* kwa Gauteng ka Lamodimo.

‘We shall go to Johannesburg on Sunday’.

(18) *Re tla reka* nama kgantele.

‘We shall buy meat just now.’.

(19) Bana *ba tla ja* fa ba tshwerwe ke tlala.

‘The children will eat when they are hungry’.

The view adopted here is in accordance with the view held by Lombard *et al's* view (1985:142) where the use of the term future tense is restricted to the semantic conceptualization of the phenomenon where events take place subsequent to coding time.

Sequential/narrative [past] tense.

The consecutive mood distinguishes only one tense – the so-called *sequential* or *narrative* tense. In isiZulu these two forms (mood and tense) are phonologically distinct; however, this is not the case in Tswana. The sequential/narrative tense indicates the chronological succession of processes, i.e. it indicates a process which took place subsequent to a previous process. It is often used in telling stories, or describing events that have taken place. The process that precedes the one mentioned need not be verbally realised if the context is known. For a more elaborate discussion on the consecutive in Sepedi refer to Lombard *et al.* (1985:152), Louwrens (1991:42–46), and Louwrens (1994(a):240 et seq.). Louwrens (1994(b): 123) opts to classify the consecutive and the habitual moods as aspects. Examine the following Tswana example:

- (20) Maloba dintšwa tsa moagisanyi wa rona *di ne tsa tlola* legora *tsa tsena* mo tshingwaneng ya rona *tsa bolaya* dikoko tsa rona di le nne, *tsa tlolela* kwa go bone gape *tsa di ja*. E rile ntate *a boa* kwa tirong, *a bona* tiragalo e, *a gakalla* mo go maswe, mme *a bitsa* mapodisa.
'The other day our neighbour's dogs jumped over the fence into our garden, killed four of our chickens, jumped back over again, and ate them. When my father came home he saw it, got furious and called the police.'

Written evidence that this form of the verb is used with the future tense in Tswana cannot be found at the moment. From several discussions with mother-tongue speakers, it is clear that it can also be used to indicate sequential events in the future. See example (21) below.

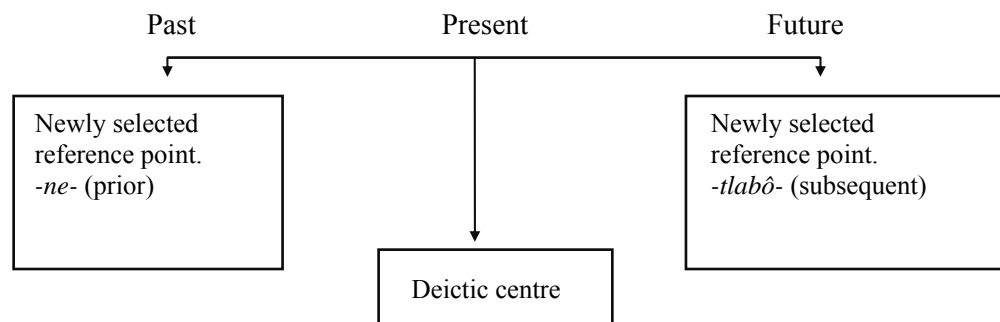
- (21) Kgantele fa re sena go fetsa ka karolo e ya tiro, *re tla ya* kwa toropong, *ra reka* dijo le mašwi, *ra boela* kwano, *ra ja*, mme *ra tswelela* ka tiro ya rona.
'In a while when we have finished this section of work, we shall go to town, buy food and milk, return here, eat, and continue with our work'.

Relative tense forms

Relative tense forms are interpreted according to a reference point other than coding time. Posthumus (1990:23) maintains the following on the relative tenses:

Tense forms which express a relation between event time, reference time and coding time are called relative tenses.

Thus, in the relative tenses the reference point from which the interpretation of an event is made is some point in time which is speech time, i.e. coding time. This point is given by the context or marked by an auxiliary/deficient verb. This reference point, which serves as a primary anchoring point for the semantic interpretation of events, may be prior to coding time or subsequent to coding time. This can be represented schematically as follows:



Relative tense forms are marked by auxiliary verbs (tense auxiliaries) followed by their complementary predicates. The complements of the tense-forming auxiliary verbs may also include other auxiliary verbs which have a temporal semantic value such as *-lala*, *-tloga*, *-dika*, *-jafile* etc., but they do not affect the specific tense forms in question. The naming of the different relative tenses is a difficult task as there are numerous possibilities for the combination of the aforementioned auxiliary verbs.

Conclusion

In this article the distinction between absolute and relative tense forms in Tswana is pointed out. Absolute tense forms refer to tenses which take speech time as their reference point. A distinction is made between the present, the past, the future and sequential (past) tenses.

The following points in the discussion are considered important:

- Tense is morphologically and phonologically marked in the verb structure.
- In the absolute tense forms coding time (deictic centre) coincides with reference time.
- In the relative tenses events are interpreted in relation to a reference point which is not coding time.

Much still has to be done on systemising the description of tense and aspect in the African languages. However, it is hoped that this system will enhance learners' ability to identify and use the absolute tenses in Tswana.

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