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Some considerations when teaching the tenses of Northern Sotho

ABSTRACT

A shortcoming in standard grammars and other discussions of tense in Northern Sotho (and the other Bantu languages) is that very little or no attention is given to the role that temporal adverbials play in the interpretation of time reference. No discussion on tense in Northern Sotho is complete without a proper account of the role that temporal adverbials play in the interpretation of time and tense yet a systematic account of this influence of temporal adverbials is absent in all treatment of tense in Northern Sotho. The aim of this article is to disclose the importance of temporal adverbials in the interpretation of time reference in Northern Sotho. Every scholar of Northern Sotho (or any other Bantu language) should take proper cognisance of the prominent role that temporal adverbials play in establishing time reference. A clear distinction is drawn between tense and time. While tense is defined as the verb form that marks the relation between event time and speech/coding time, time is defined as an expression of the relation between event time and coding time which is superimposed on tense. The factors that have an influence on time interpretation are temporal adverbials, the semantic verb phrase categorization, tense, aspect and the text and/or context. The major time-establishing device is the interrelation between tense forms and time adverbials.

OPSOMMING

'n Tekortkoming in die standaard grammatikas en ander besprekings van grammatiese tyd in Noord-Sotho (en die ander Bantutale) is dat geen of weinig aandag gegee word aan die rol wat temporeel adverbiale bepalings speel in die interpretasie van tyd. Geen bespreking van tyd in Noord-Sotho is volledig sonder 'n behoorlike verantwoording van die rol wat temporeel adverbiale bepalings speel in die interpretasie van (grammatiese) tyd en tempus nie. Nogtans ontbreek 'n sistematiese analise van die invloed van temporele adverbiale bepalings op tyd en tempus in alle besprekings van tyd in Noord-Sotho. Elkeen wat Noord-Sotho (of enige ander Bantutaal) bestudeer, behoort deeglik kennis te neem van die belangrike rol wat temporele adverbiale bepalings speel met betrekking tot tydverwysing. Die doel van hierdie artikel is om die belangrike rol te ondersoek wat die temporele adverbiale bepalings ten opsigte van tydinterpretasie in Noord-Sotho speel. 'n Duidelike onderskeid word getref tussen grammatiese tyd en tempus. Grammatiese tyd word gedefinieer as die werkwoordvorm wat die verhouding tussen gebeuretyd en spreek-/koderingstyd markeer terwyl tempus gedefinieer word as die uitdrukking van die verhouding tussen gebeuretyd en spreek-/koderingstyd ongeag die vorm van die werkwoord. Die faktore wat 'n invloed uitoefen op die interpretasie van tyd is: temporele adverbiale bepalings, die semantiese kategorisering van die werkwoordstuk, grammatiese tyd, aspek en die teks/konteks. Die deurslaggewende tempus-bepalende faktor is die interrelasie tussen tydvorme en temporele adverbiale bepalings.

Keywords: Time reference; time interpretation; temporal adverbials; tense and time

Introduction

A disregard of the category of time in Northern Sotho (and the other Bantu languages) necessitates a study of this grammatical category. No scholar of a Bantu language (mother tongue or non-mother tongue) can gain a proper understanding of time reference in this language without taking due cognisance of the role that temporal adverbials play in this regard.

In this paper a distinction is drawn between tense and time as the two major types of strategies used to mark the location of events in time. Tense and time are differentiated on the grounds that tense is grammatically marked in the verb, whereas time is the logical interpretation of events, which is superimposed on tense. Posthumus (1983:121) notes:

Tempus word teenoor tyd gestel as die logiese tydinterpretasie teenoor die vormlike tydsbepaling wat deur grammatiese opposisies in die werkwoord weergegee word in die taal.

While tense oppositions reveal the relation between event time, coding time and reference time, time on the other hand is very often determined by factors outside the verb and may even be inter-sentential.

A number of African language grammarians (notably Du Plessis (1986) and Van Rooyen (1977)) note that the verbal form which determines a certain tense form, does not always reveal the same time interpretation. However, since they do not distinguish between tense and time they regard the tense analysis as being inadequate. Van Rooyen (1977:172) says in this regard:

Dit is daarom jammer dat daar soms van die teenwoordige tyds-vormelement gepraat word. Dit skep die indruk dat die handeling net in die teenwoordige tyd plaasvind terwyl dit in werklikheid nie altyd so is nie.

In sentence (1) below the time interpretation of the participial verb is simultative while this verb is in the present tense form. In sentence (2), however, the time interpretation is anterior in spite of the fact that this verb is also in the present tense form.

- (1) Mošemane o kitima a bitša bagwera.
'The boy is running calling his friends.'
- (2) Mošemane o kitimile a bitša bagwera.
'The boy ran calling his friends.'

Welmers (1973:353) also notes the discrepancy when treating the tense paradigms of the African languages. Referring to this problem and drawing an analogy with English, he asserts:

It should also be noted that we sometimes use the present to express future action in English, particularly with the verb 'go' (he's going tomorrow), often with 'come', and occasionally with other verbs.

There are two issues that need to be addressed. The first is to determine the factors responsible for the discrepancies between the tense and time interpretation in a sentence. The second problem is to categorize these factors in order to try and account for the discrepancies.

Factors that influence time interpretation

The impact of time adverbials on time interpretation has been the subject of study in at least some languages in recent years.

The fact that the location of events in time in sentence (2) above does not coincide with the

tense analysis should be attributed to the influence of time interpretation and not to an inadequate tense analysis of Northern Sotho.

The referential semantic value of time adverbials is one of the factors that influences time interpretation. The factors that influence time interpretation, according to Posthumus (1990:22), are:

- (i) temporal adverbials;
- (ii) the semantic verb phrase categorization;
- (iii) tense;
- (iv) aspect; and
- (v) the text and context.

Classification of temporal adverbials

Gabbay and Rohrer (1978:99) conclude that it is impossible to describe the tense forms of natural languages without a theory of temporal adverbials and of how temporal adverbs and tense forms interact. The function of the temporal adverbials is often to restrict the tense form and to specify the time-spatial parameters within which the event denoted by the verb, occurs.

The temporal adverbials are assigned consistent relational values. According to their relational reference, they may be subcategorised as anterior (event time occurs before reference time), simultative (event time coincides with reference time), posterior (event time occurs after reference time) and iterative (event time occurs repeatedly with particular intervals).

When the reference point is taken as criterion, the temporal adverbials can be subcategorized into three types, namely those that have coding time as the reference point (they are called deictic), those that have coding time or another point as the reference point (they are called dualistic) and those that always take another point as the reference point (they are called relative). The table below is a representation of the sub categorization and temporal adverbials in terms of two sets of criteria, namely the anchoring point and their relational reference.

Table 1: Sub categorization of temporal adverbials in terms of anchoring point and relational reference

		ANCHORING POINT		
		1. Deictic	2. Relative	3. Dualistic
R E L A T I O N A L		(anchor to coding time)	(anchor to another reference point)	(anchor to coding time or another reference point)
	(a) anterior	maabane 'yesterday'	maabane a ntshe 'the previous day'	ka Labone 'Thursday'
		ngwagola 'last year'	pele ga mola 'before that'	ka iri ya bone 'at four o'clock'

R E F E R E N C E	(b) simultative	bjale 'now' lehono 'today'	ka nako yela 'at that time' tšatši lela 'on that day' mohla wola 'at that time'	
	(c) posterior	gosasa 'tomorrow' kgwedi ye e tlago 'next month'	kgwedi ye e latelago 'the following month'	ka matena 'at noon' ka Labohlano 'Friday'

Temporal adverbials that anchor to coding time

At first, it was thought that the solution to the problem of classifying adverbials would involve semantic subcategorizing of temporal adverbials into past, present and future categories, each of which would then be grouped along with the appropriate tense. However, even though lehono (today), lenyaga (this year) and bjale (now) are classified as simulatative, these adverbials indicate a time-span rather than a point in time and can thus be used together with present tense, past tense and verbs expressing future events. Study the examples below:

- (3) Matome o tla lehono.
'Matome comes today.'
- (4) Matome o tlike lehono.
'Matome came today.'
- (5) Matome o tlo tla lehono.
'Matome will come today.'

The adverbials 'lehono' and 'bjale' superficially appear to associate a sentence with a time interval rather than a point in time.

Different combinations of tense and time adverbials are possible. These combinations are determined by their relational value. Examples (6) to (15) illustrate the combination of the various types of deictic temporal adverbials with the different tense forms as listed in table 2 below.

Table 2: Time interpretation as a result of the interaction between temporal adverbials and tense forms

Combination	Tense	Temporal adverbial	Actual temporal reference
1	present	anterior	anterior
2	past	anterior	anterior
3	present	simultative	simultative/ iterative/a-temporal
4	past	simultative	simultative/anterior
5	present	posterior	posterior
6	past	posterior

Examples (6) to (15) illustrate the temporal reference brought about by the combination of a particular tense form with a particular temporal adverbial as listed in table 2 (1 to 6). The illustrative examples are tense forms of the indicative mood. These tense forms can also realize in the participial (situative) and relative moods.

The combination of a present tense verb and an anterior temporal adverbial

Generally, the combination of a present tense verb and an anterior temporal adverbial is not possible in the indicative mood. However, this combination is possible if the temporal adverbial is in sentence initial position. Such a combination yields an anterior temporal reference (as indicated in 1 of table 2). Consider example (6) below:

- (6) **Maabane ke fihla** gae, ke hwetša bana ba robetše, ya ba gona ke lemogago gore ke bošego.
'Yesterday I arrive home, I find the children asleep, then I realize it is late.'

The combination of a past tense verb and an anterior temporal adverbial

The combination of a past tense with an anterior temporal adverbial yields an anterior time reference, consider example (7) and (8) below:

- (7) Bana **ba hlatšwitše** diaparo **maabane**.
'The children washed the clothes yesterday.'
- (8) Bana **ba thunthile** lewatleng **mohlang wola**.
'The children swam in the sea that day.'

The combination of a present tense verb and a simultative temporal adverbial

A combination of a present tense and a simultative temporal adverbial can yield a simultative or iterative time reference as is evident in examples (9) and (10):

- (9) Mpša še **e a bogola bjale**.
'Here is a dog, it is barking now.'
- (10) Bana **ba bolela** ka thuto **lehono**.
'The children are talking about education today.'

Example (10) may mean that at the moment of speech the topic is education or that the current topic among children is education. The time interpretation of example (10) is thus either simultative or iterative.

An utterance may also be interpreted as a-temporal if it contains a present tense verb form as in (11) This time interpretation is, however, not due to the use of a temporal adverbial but to the speech participant's knowledge of the world:

- (11) Letšatši **le hlaba ka mehla**.
'The sun always rises.'

Lyons (1977:679) refers to utterances such as the one above as 'omni temporal'. These are propositions that are time bound but temporally unrestricted. These utterances are generally expressed by verbs in the present tense. According to Lyons sentences such as those in (12) to (14) are not omni temporal, but timeless. This is due to the fact that, even though the adverbial **bjale**

primarily refers to a simultative time interpretation it does not denote a point, but rather a period which includes the point that is the moment of speech.

(12) **Mošemane o a lapa bjale.**
'The boy is getting tired now.'

(13) **Re boletše le yena bjale.**
'We spoke to him now.'

(14) **Ke tlo mmona bjale.**
'I will see him now.'

The combination of a present tense verb and a posterior temporal adverbial

The combination of a present tense form and a posterior temporal adverbial results in a posterior time interpretation as is evident in example (15):

(15) **O hwetša moputso gosasa.**
'He is getting a reward tomorrow.'

Example (15) demonstrates that the decisive time establishing factor is the temporal adverbial and not the tense form.

Temporal adverbials that anchor to a point other than coding time

There are adverbials with all three types of relational values that occur as deictic and relative. Deictic adverbials are those adverbials that anchor to coding time, while temporal adverbials that are not anchored to coding time but to another reference point are called adverbials with relative time reference. They are called relative temporal adverbials because their semantic interpretation is not made from coding time but from another reference point. This type of semantic reference is illustrated by the adverbial 'go hlwa maabane' in example (16) below:

(16) **Re fihlile maabane mola bana ba fihlile go hlwa maabane.**
'We arrived yesterday whereas the children arrived the day before yesterday.'

(17) **Matome o tlo fetša ka moleko ka Mokibelo mola Malose o tlo fetša ka wo o latelago.**
'Matome will finish the examination on Saturday whereas Malose will finish the Saturday thereafter.'

In example (16) 'go hlwa maabane' is a relative temporal adverbial whereas 'maabane' is the dominant temporal adverbial, which is anchored to code time.

In (17) the phrase 'ka wo o latelago' is relative while 'Mokibelo' is the dominant temporal adverbial which is anchored to coding time and which serves as the reference point for the temporal interpretation of the former adverbial phrase.

Restrictions are placed upon the usage of the relative temporal adverbials. The first restriction is that relative temporal adverbial reference cannot take place across the deictic centre. Study example *(18) which is pragmatically unacceptable due to this consideration.

*(18) **Morwa kgoši o tlo e hwetša gosasa puku, mola ke hweditše ya ka maloba a ntshe/gona.**
'The prince will get his book tomorrow, whereas I got mine two days before.'

Secondly, the use of a pure deictic adverbial pre-empts the use of a relative adverbial. Example *(19) is thus also pragmatically unacceptable in Northern Sotho.

- *(19) Morwa kgoši o fihlile maabane nna ke fihlile **maabane a ntshe**.
‘The prince arrived yesterday, I arrived yesterday of that day.’
‘The prince arrived yesterday, I arrived the previous day.’

Example *(19) is ungrammatical because the speaker should use the diurnal deictic adverb ‘maloba’ instead of ‘maabane a ntshe’.

Thirdly, the unit specified in the relative temporal adverbial must be of the same magnitude as that contained in the dominant temporal adverbial. (Both adverbials must for instance refer to days, weeks or months.) *(20) is therefore pragmatically unacceptable since this precondition is abrogated.

- *(20) Mokete o tlo ba ka Agostose, rena re tlo ya Polokwane maabane a ntshe.
‘The reception will be in August, we will go to Pietersburg the day before then.’

Temporal adverbials that anchor to coding time or another reference point

Temporal adverbials that anchor to coding time or another reference point are called dualistic adverbials. This means they can be used deictically or non-deictically as is evident in examples (21) and (22) respectively. They can furthermore have an anterior or posterior referential value as illustrated in examples (23) and (24) respectively.

- (21) Ke tlo go bona **ka Labone**.
‘I will see you on Thursday.’
- (22) Matome o tla **ka Labone**.
‘Matome comes on Thursdays.’
- (23) Re sepetše **ka Labone**.
‘We left on Thursday.’
- (24) Re tlo goroga **ka Labone**.
‘We will arrive on Thursday.’

Time reference through temporal adverbials

Verbal forms are used to denote the time at which events take place. This type of temporal marking is generally referred to as tense. Temporal adverbials can also refer to a period located in the past, in the future or at the point of utterance. In order to distinguish clearly between tense and time reference the terms anterior, simultative and posterior are used to refer to adverbs that indicate past, present and future time reference respectively. In some languages there are a variety of combinations of tense, aspect and temporal adverbials that make a number of temporal references possible.

Time may be expressed in different ways. Time may firstly be expressed in relation to some important event (such as our year measure which is calculated in relation to the birth of Christ). The year in which one was born, is expressed in relation to the birth of Christ. This implies that an event may be located in relation to another event. The example below is a typical demonstration of this type of temporal reference where it is indirectly stated that the subject was born 1940 years after the birth of Christ.

- (25) O belegwe **ka 1940**.
 ‘He was born in 1940.’

Secondly, time may also be expressed in terms of cyclic units such as days, weeks and months as is evident in example (26).

- (26) O tlwaetše go fihla **ka Labohlano**.
 ‘He usually comes on Friday.’

In Northern Sotho time may be linked to the different stages of the sun during the course of the day, consider example (27) below:

- (27) Ke fihlile gae **ka mahube**.
 ‘I arrived home at dawn.’

‘Mahube’ in example (27) above can in turn be divided into different stages of the morning, as illustrated in examples (28a) and (28b).

- (28a) Ke fihlile **ka mahube a banna/a thekwane**.
 ‘I arrived at early dawn.’

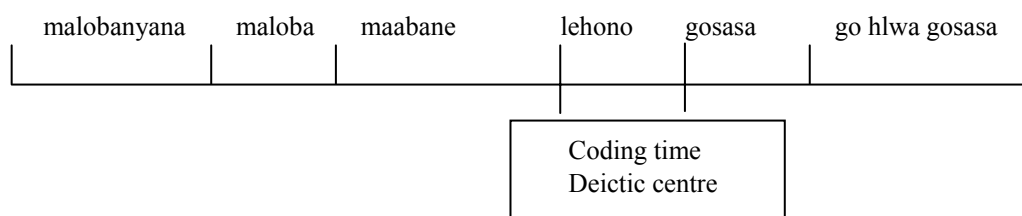
- (28b) Ke fihlile **ka mahube a basadi**.
 ‘I arrived relatively late at dawn (just before the sun rose).’

To refer to a period shortly after sunset the term ‘sothwane’ is used as illustrated in example (28c).

- (28c) O fihlile ka **sothwane**.
 ‘He arrived at dusk.’

Coding time (often referred to as speech time by various grammarians) is the primary reference point that is regarded as the implicit centre established by the context and accepted as *a priori* for any spatial-temporal interpretation of language. Time, like tense, is then interpreted as being anterior to, simultaneous with, or posterior to, this anchoring point. Time reference that is anchored to the time of utterance and measured in day-units is commonly grammaticalized in the form of diurnal deictic adverbials. The deictic diurnals of Northern Sotho are exemplified diagrammatically in figure 3:

Figure 3: The deictic diurnal units of Northern Sotho



Languages differ in their distinction of terms that are purely deictic diurnal. Afrikaans for instance has terms for two lexical units either side of today ‘gister’ and ‘eergister’; and ‘môre’ ‘oormôre’; English has one either side of today ‘yesterday’ and ‘tomorrow’; while South Sotho has the diurnal temporal adverbials: ‘maobane’, (yesterday), ‘kajeno’ (today), ‘hosane’ (tomorrow) and ‘ka moso’ (the day after tomorrow). Note, however, that in both South Sotho and Northern Sotho the reference to the day after tomorrow is not a diurnal *lexical* unit. Zulu has two diurnal terms before today and two subsequent to today, namely: ‘kuthangi’ (the day before yesterday), ‘izolo’

(yesterday), ‘namhlanje’ (today), ‘kusasa’ (tomorrow) and ‘ngomhlomunye’ (the day after tomorrow).

Diurnal adverbials can either refer to a point within a time-span as in (29) or to the entire point within the relevant span as in (30) below.

(29) Ke bone malome **maabane**.
‘I saw my uncle yesterday.’

(30) **Maabane** ke be ke lapile.
‘Yesterday I was hungry.’

In example (30) the diurnal adverb ‘maabane’ has undergone a semantic shift and does not mean ‘yesterday’ as such, but rather ‘to/in the past’.

With regard to an example such as (31) below Aqvist (1978:37) remarks:

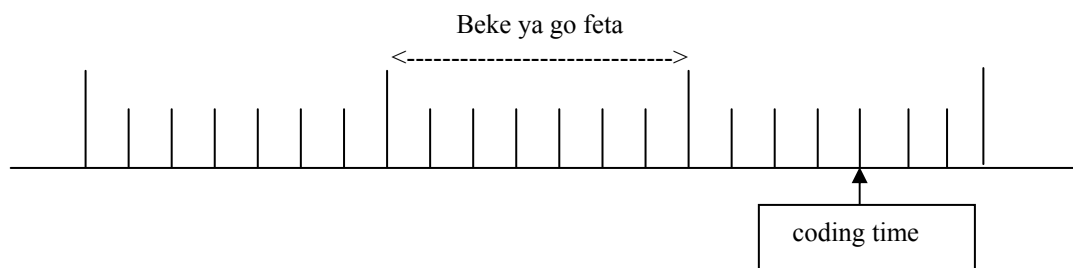
... certain temporal adverbs as well as tense forms serve to situate an action in time with respect to the speech point and possibly another reference point.

(31) Baeng ba tlo fihla ka Mokibelo wo o tlogo.
‘The visitors will arrive the coming Saturday.’
‘The visitors will arrive next Saturday.’

If it were Friday, an utterance such as (31) above would not be interpreted as ‘tomorrow’ but as ‘Saturday next week’. ‘Ka Mokibelo wo o tlogo’ refers to the Saturday of the week that succeeds the week that includes C.T. (coding time). It may however, refer to the Saturday which first follows C.T. if the relation between C.T. and the time referred to cannot be expressed by using a diurnal deictic term.

A schematic representation of time measured in terms of cyclic units relative to coding time is given in figure 4 below:

Figure 4: Time measured in terms of cyclic units relative to coding time

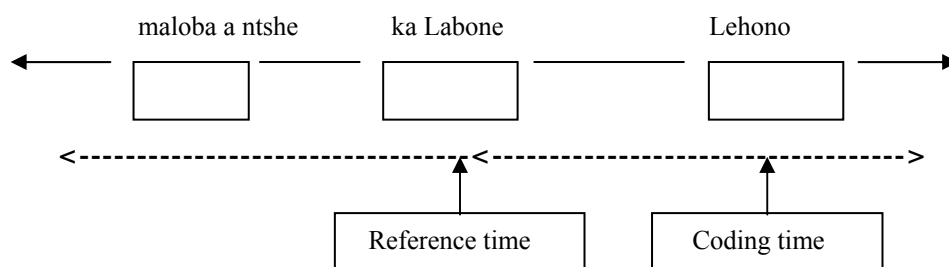


Time reference can be made to a point within a cyclic or calendrical time span (or to the entire time-span as illustrated in example (32)). (Also compare example (29) with (30) in this regard.)

(32) Re šomile **beke ka moka** ya go feta.
‘We worked the whole of last week.’

Time reference is greatly complicated if it deviates from the deictic simultaneity assumption or by the interaction between deictic and non-deictic coordinates. Figure 5 is a schematic representation of relative time reference. In this case ‘maloba’ is not interpreted in relation to C.T. but in relation to the newly established reference time ‘ka Labone’, as can be seen from the illustrative example (33).

Figure 5: Time adverbials measured relative to reference time which is in turn relative to coding time



- (33) Re feditše mošomo ka Labone. Re o thomile maloba a ntshe.
 ‘We finished the work on Thursday. We had started the work two days prior to that.’

Interrelation between tense and time

The most common way in which time reference is established is through the interaction between tense forms and temporal adverbials. Time is superimposed on the category of tense.

Generally the temporal adverbials have the same relational referential value as the tense forms they combine with and thus seem to be unimportant for time reckoning. Compare examples (34) and (35):

- (34) Monna o sepela **lehono**.
 ‘The man goes away today.’

The combination of a present tense verb with a simultative temporal adverbial yields simultative time reference. The time interpretation in example (35), which is a result of the interaction between the temporal adverbial ‘lehono’ and the present tense form ‘o sepela’, is the same, in this case the present or simultative.

Consider example (35), which illustrates the combination of a past tense verb and an anterior temporal adverbial yielding an anterior time interpretation (past).

- (35) Monna o sepetše maabane.
 ‘The man went away yesterday.’

Some possible combinations of temporal adverbials and tense forms yield opposing relational values. This is evident in table 2 and the elucidating examples (6) and (15).

The deduction one can make from these and other similar examples, is that the temporal adverbials play a more decisive role in time establishing than the tense forms as such.

Conclusion

Time is an expression of the relation between event time and coding time and is superimposed on tense. Although the tense form contributes to the establishment of time, the appropriate time interpretation is often constituted by factors outside the verb.

In order to distinguish clearly between tense and time the terms anterior, simultative and posterior are introduced to refer to an adverbial which expresses a time prior to, simultaneous with, or subsequent to coding time respectively, while the same relational referential values are expressed by the terms past, present and future with reference to tense.

The temporal adverbials are assigned consistent relational values. Their relational reference makes it possible to subcategorize them into the categories anterior, simultative, posterior and iterative.

Time reference can deviate from the deictic simultaneity assumption. Like tense forms, time interpretation can also be deictic (absolute) or non-deictic (relative).

The major time establishing device in Northern Sotho is the interaction between tense forms and time adverbials.

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