Perfective and prospective aspects: Novel evidence for Akan as a tenseless language

Claim: Drawing on the interpretation of some tense-aspect markers in complex clauses, we provide novel evidence in favor of the analysis in Osam (2008) that Akan is not a tense-based, but an aspect-based language. The novel data confirm the presence of a major two-way distinction between future and non-future, as established by Osam, but we argue that this is again an aspect-modality distinction, and not a tense distinction.

Perfective, not past: Osam (2008) is the first to argue that Akan is an aspect-based rather than a tense-based language, and especially that L-tone plus lengthening of the final vowel in (1a) is a marker for *perfective* (or completive) rather than for *past*. The H-tone counterpart in (1b) expresses present habitual, by contrast.

(1) a. Kofi dzidz**ì-ì**   b.   Kofi dzidzí
        Kofi eat-**PFV**   Kofi eat
        'Kofi ate.'   'Kofi eats (regularly).'

Osam's main argument for this claim is that it is not possible to find L + vowel gemination in contexts with imperfective marking (e.g with progressive or habitual markers): they are strictly incompatible. Although L + lengthening is the only verbal affix implying a past Reference Time (RT) by default (instead of present RTs), this implication comes after the aspectual distinction. Osam concludes that L + lengthening should be considered an aspectual marker.

Novel data: Some contexts can trigger other RTs (present or future) without being incompatible with L + lengthening, as shown in (2): one of the interpretations of the sentence is that the cake is not baked at the Utterance Time (UT), but that it will be baked by the (future) RT. Here, L + lengthening clearly does not express *past* as locating RT < UT (Klein 1994). Second, we find ambiguities in the interpretation of the Event Time (ET) in embedded clauses since the RT is provided either by the general context or by the embedding clause. For instance, in (2), the other possible interpretation of the sentence is that the cake is already baked by UT: this ambiguity would not have been possible if L + lengthening was a tense marker, and not an aspect marker.

(2) ɔkyena anwumerɛ   Mary bɛ́-di   cake no a ɔ-tõ-**õ̃ɛ**   no.
     tomorrow evening   Mary FUT-eat   cake NO A 3SG-bake-**PFV**   NO
     'Tomorrow evening, Mary will eat a cake that she baked.'

L + lengthening also shows up in translations of Kratzer's (1998) seminal church building example featuring an out-of-the-blue question about the past. On the PFV-analysis, this is expected because aspect does not require an anaphoric RT in the preceding context, and since PFV-marking emphasizes the fact that the building event has been completed.

(3) Hwan na   o   s**i-i**   asɔre dan   wei?
     who   NA   3.SG.SUBJ   build-**PFV** church building   this
     'Who built this church?'

Future and non-future: Osam establishes the existence of a two-way tense distinction between non-future (zero marking in (4a)), and future (marked via the prefix bɛ́-, with H tone, as in (4b)). This marker should not be confused with the ingressive L-tone prefix bɛ̀- (see 4,c), which expresses a motion towards the realization of an event.

(4) a. Ben tõ   nwom
        Ben sing   song
        'Ben sings.'

   b. Ben **bɛ́**-tõ   nwom
        Ben **FUT**-sing   song
        'Ben will sing.'

    c. Ben   **bὲ**-tó   nwom
       Ben   **INGR**-sing   song
       'Ben comes to sing.'

Our analysis of negative sentences supports the claim of a major future vs non-future distinction in Akan: negation is expressed through a verbal prefix in Akan, which blocks all other aspectual verbal prefixes, except for the bέ- and bὲ- prefix. Blocking of the other markers neutralizes the temporal interpretation of Akan clauses, and the only remaining distinction is between future and non-future. In (5a), what is negated is the possibility that the event may be completed by the RT (which is the present by default), so the sentence could either refer to the past, the present, or both, but not to the future. In (5b) and (5c) on the contrary, it is clear that the negation is applied to the future completion of the event.

(5) a. John   **n**-siesie   ne   lɔre
       John   **NEG**-clean   3SG.POSS   car
       'J. is not cleaning his car.'/ 'J. has not cleaned it yet.'/ 'J. usually does not clean it.' …
    b. Ben   **an-bέ**-to   nwom.
       Ben   **NEG-FUT**-sing   song
       'Ben will not sing.'
    c. Ben   **an-bὲ**-to   nwom.
       Ben   **NEG-INGR**-sing   song
       'Ben does not come to sing.'

Future as aspect, not tense: Contrary to Osam, we claim that the future marker is an aspectual and modal marker, and not a tense marker; see Mucha (2013, 2017) on comparable findings for Hausa and Medumba. One reading of (6) allows for the singing event to have already taken place in the past: the bέ-prefix is justified by the fact that the singing is posterior to the RT, which is the time of telling. The possibility of past orientation with *bέ-* shows that this prefix marks posteriority rather than future (Matthewson, 2006).

(6) Ansa   na   Mary   bɛ-tõ   cake   no,   Ben   kakyersɛ-ɛ   no
     before   NA   Mary   FUT-bake   cake   DET,   Ben   tell-PFV   3.SG.OBJ
     sɛ   ɔ   **bέ**-to   nwom.
     COMP   3.SG.SUBJ   **FUT**-sing   song
     'Before Mary baked (would bake) a cake, Ben told her that he would sing a song.'

We also find the bέ-prefix in sentences implying anteriority: in (7), the need for a bέ- prefix is triggered by some semantic property of *ansa* 'before', and prospective *bέ* expresses again that the RT is located before the ET of Mary's baking a cake (and after Ben's singing).

(7) **Ansa** na   Mary   **bɛ**-tõ   cake   no,
    before NA   Mary   **FUT**-bake   cake   DET
    na   Ben   a-to   nwom.
    NA   Ben   PERF-sing   song
    'Before Mary baked (would bake) a cake, Ben had sang a song.'

One or two futures? In our eventual analysis of bɛ, we raise the hypothesis that the two bɛ-prefixes may actually be the same one (conveying a wide range of prospective-associated meanings), with tone inducing a modal distinction: this is based on the fact that bὲ- can be combined with every other aspectual affix (thereby forming a new meaning), except for bέ-.

(8) a. Ben   **bὲ-tó-o**   nwom.   b.   Ben   **a-bὲ**-to   nwom.
       Ben   **INGR**-sing-**PFV**   song   Ben   **PERF-INGR**-sing song
       'Ben came to sing.'   'Ben has come to sing.'
    c. Ben   **re-bὲ**-tó   nwom.   d.   *Ben   **bέ-bὲ**-tó   nwom.
       Ben   **PROG-INGR**-sing   song   Ben   **FUT-INGR**-sing song
       'Ben is coming to sing.'   'Ben will come to sing.'

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Abbreviations:

3SG	Third person singular
COMP	Complementizer
DET	Determiner
FUT	Future
INGR	Ingressive
NEG	Negation
OBJ	Object
PERF	Perfect
PFV	Perfective
POSS	Possessive
SUBJ	Subject