

## Introduction

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The idea that aspect is more important in some languages than in others has been around for some time (e.g. Comrie 1976, Bhatt 1999). Nevertheless, linguistic theory and description continue to be influenced by the tense-aspect systems in “Standard Average European” languages, and especially by the notions of traditional grammar, in which tense is given particular prominence. In many languages, however, and specifically in those known as Kwa, tense is not grammatically prominent, being expressed by adjuncts or interpreted entirely through the pragmatic context. In consequence, many descriptions of African languages have failed to capture the "genius" of these languages in the tense-aspect domain. This volume is intended to correct the situation.

This volume explores the thesis that in the group of West African languages known as “Kwa”, Aspect and Modality are far more central to the grammar of the verb and the clause than Tense. We deal here particularly with systems of grammatical morphemes attached to the verb stem – the languages discussed elaborate their verb morphology to different degrees, but overall it is fair to say that the primary grammatical contrasts are aspectual, especially perfective versus imperfective, and that tense distinctions are secondary if indeed they are made grammatically at all. Where tense marking has most clearly emerged, it is invariably in the expression of the future, and therefore concerned with the impending actualization or potentiality of an event, hence with modality, rather than the purely temporal sequencing associated with tense. Our knowledge of these languages has deepened considerably during the past decade or so and ideas about their structure have changed. The volume is therefore offered as a contribution to the ongoing, intercontinental discussion of the cross-linguistic typology of verb grammar, especially in respect of aspect and modality.

The term “aspect” has been used in several senses. In a recent review, Sasse (2002) divides usage into two basic types: lexical aspect or what is sometimes called *Aktionsart*, concerned with temporal values intrinsic in the verb stem, and aspectual viewpoint or temporal perspective related to the circumstances of the utterance, often expressed in morphological paradigms. In this volume the concern is mainly with the latter: all the papers examine the verb paradigm and

attempt to interpret it, with relatively little attention to features inherent in the verb itself, or the effects of interaction between the two kinds of meaning. However lexical aspect is not and indeed cannot be entirely ignored, for example in the problem of stative vs. habitual vs. progressive in Akan, as discussed in different ways by both Boadi and Osam; of the habitual vs. the recurrent in Dangme as discussed by Ameka and Dakubu; and in the deictic pre-verbs, discussed for all the languages examined here, that inhabit a space somewhere between lexical semantics and pure accidentence.

The functional load that a language accords to tense and aspect has been shown, in recent times, to correlate with certain typological properties of that language. For instance, Stassen (1997) shows that whether a language is tensed or not has a bearing on strategies that the language uses for intransitive predication or more specifically, adjectival predication. Similarly, Bhat (1999) suggests a typology of languages according to the relative prominence that the language gives to tense, aspect or mood. Exciting as these typological claims are, they need to be buttressed with more empirical data. If the descriptions that exist are not adequate, the predictions from the typologies will be shaky. Despite more than a hundred years of descriptive tradition for some of the Kwa languages, the papers presented here represent a quantum leap towards providing the kind of data and analysis needed.

The interaction of modality with both aspect and tense is another area of considerable typological interest. As de Haan (2006: 48) has pointed out, "There are clear interactions between tense and modality. An obvious candidate for such interaction is the future." Traugott (2006) writing in the same volume shows that deontic modality, or to put it very generally an expression intended to bring about or impel the occurrence of an act or an event, that by implication has not yet been carried out or happened, has not infrequently been grammaticalized to epistemic modality, which can include the knowledge or belief that an event will indeed happen. (With particular reference to African languages on this point, see also Heine, Claudi and Hünnemeyer 1991:174.) The languages discussed here support these contentions: there is a particular connection between deontic modality and expression of the future, which wherever it occurs is clearly a secondary development. Typically, the verb form is built up with an aspectual marker or a modality marker, and may also carry a negation marker. These may combine with a marker of deixis, which may (but need not, depending on the other markers) give a future reading. Dedicated markers of tense are notably few.

Throughout the twentieth century the Kwa languages have been considered to be fairly closely related in genetic terms. The best known by far are Akan (Twi), Ga and Ewe. In the current literature they and their neighbors, another twenty languages at least, are classified as a grouping within Niger-Congo

called “New Kwa” (Stewart 1989) or simply “Kwa” (Williamson and Blench 2000: 18) see Figure 1.<sup>1</sup> The present geographical distributions of these language groups, converging as they do along the lower reaches of the Volta River, are probably due to relatively recent migrations and internal expansions. However there is no doubt that over the past several hundred years, contact among Akan, Ga and Ewe, and of each of these with other, smaller languages, some of them certainly closely related, has been particularly intense.

The lower Volta basin is therefore a region that can be expected to show typologically interesting interrelationships. Apart from the verb paradigm to which this volume is dedicated, there are other linguistic domains in which typological conformity is more immediately obvious. It appears to be the case, for example, that whether nominalization of a verb is shown morphologically by a prefix or by a suffix, a nominalized verb is everywhere preceded by its Object. This has important implications for the discussion by Ameka and Dakubu in this volume of the imperfective periphrastic construction in those languages that have it (Ewe, Dangme, Tuvuli). The basic functional syntax of the Nominal Phrase can be summarized for all the languages (as far as we know) in the following schema. The noun head of the structure is underlined:

Identifier Possessor Noun-Qualifier Noun Adjective Numeral Determiner  
Quantifier Intensifier

On the other hand, there is an interesting division as far as plural formation and nominal classes are concerned. Akan and its Tano relatives each have several pairs of singular and plural prefixes, but while there is usually number concord, there is in general no class concord (anaphors and modifiers do not show agreement with a head noun), while Ewe with the rest of Gbe and Ga-Dangme use the bare noun stem in the singular and a generalized suffix or clitic for the plural. Many of the Ghana-Togo-Mountain languages (The Na-Togo and Ka-Togo groups in Figure 1), have prefixes and also in almost all cases nominal class concord systems (see Heine 1968 for a comprehensive account of these systems).

The aim of this volume is thus to present theoretically informed and detailed descriptions of the tense-aspect-modality systems of some of the best-known Kwa languages of Ghana, namely Akan, Ewe (with attention to the rest of the Gbe cluster), and the two-member cluster that consists of Ga and Dangme. Also included is an examination of Tuvuli (also known in the literature as Bowili or Bowiri), a relatively poorly known language that is traditionally classified genetically as most closely related to the Gbe cluster (Stewart 1989).

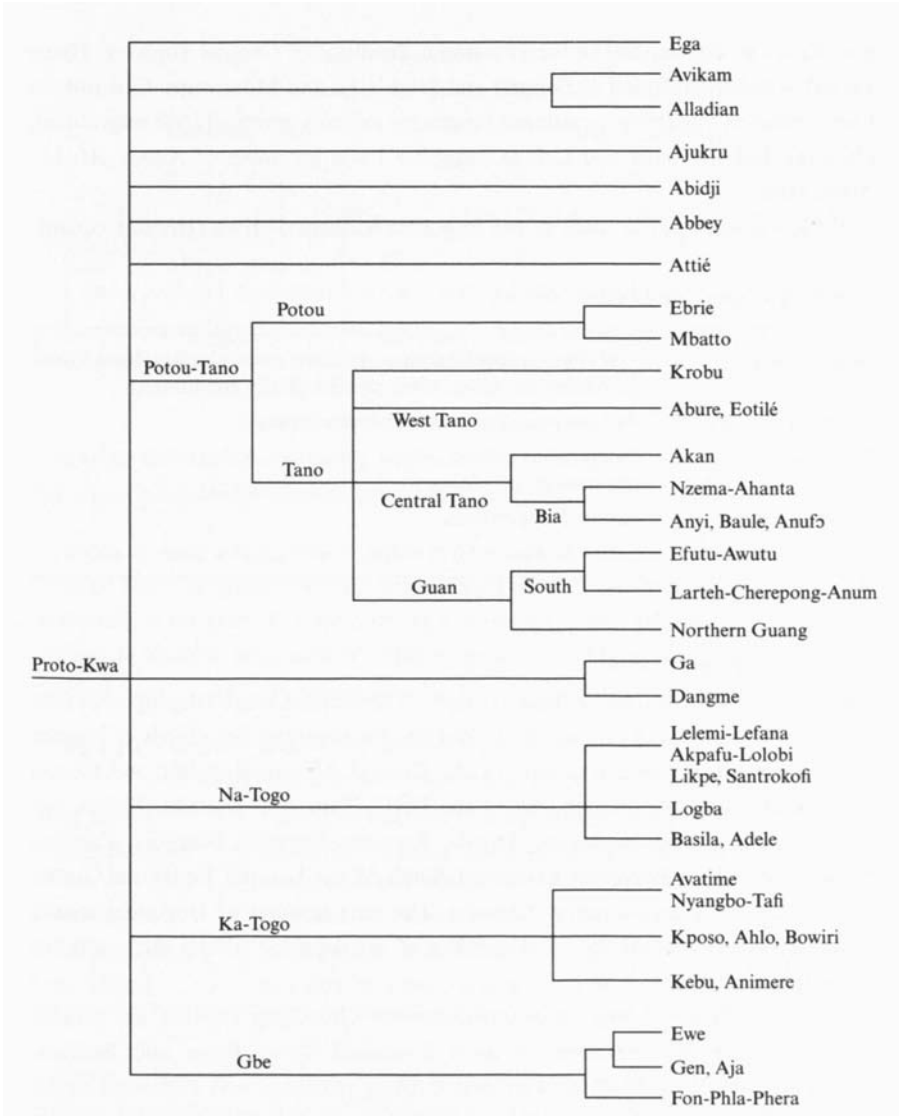


Figure 1: Classification of Kwa languages  
(Adapted from Williamson and Blench 2000: 18)

A major theme addressed is, therefore, whether the languages are primarily tense languages or whether aspect and/or mood is/are more prominent. One dimension that has not previously been thoroughly explored is the extent to which modal expressions such as potential or irrealis relate to tense prominent, aspect prominent or mood prominent typology. Several of the contributions relate to this topic. Concerning Ewe, Essegbey argues that the form (*l*)*a* that has been analyzed in some descriptions as a future tense marker is a potential marker, and thus a modal and not a tense operator, while Dakubu writing on Ga as well as Ameka and Dakubu on Dangme show that in those languages the “future” is a composite form based on a combination of modality and deixis. Modality in Akan is treated differently by Boadi and Osam, but both specifically place the “infinitive” (Boadi) or “consecutive” (Osam) form outside the aspectual system. Overall in these languages it seems that the expression of modality is closely intertwined with the expression of aspect, often belonging to the same paradigmatic system.

The nature of tense in Akan is a particularly vexed question. Focusing on different dialect areas, Akyem and Fante respectively, Boadi and Osam again come to different conclusions regarding the relevance of past tense, while agreeing on the primacy of aspect. In all the languages it is determined that contrary to some early analyses, pre-verbs or auxiliaries are distinct from the strictly paradigmatic TAMP markers, introduce different kinds of semantic features, and often appear to be the relics of grammaticized verbs. This seems to be another area where Akan is different from the rest; both Boadi and Osam recognize only two such elements in that language, the deictics. However there are four in Ga (Dakubu), and several more in Dangme (Ameka and Dakubu) and Ewe (Ameka).

Many languages of Africa have a periphrastic imperfective construction in which a verb, usually one of a small set or even unique, carrying TAMP features takes a complement consisting of a non-finite form of the event verb preceded by its Object (Heine and Claudi 2001, *inter alia*). The “Kwa” area is divided according to whether or not this construction is present; it is generally not present in Akan and other Tano languages, and it is also absent from Ga, but present in Dangme, Ewe and other Gbe varieties, and certain of the Ghana-Togo-Mountain languages, including Tuwuli and Likpe. Ewe indeed appears in the literature as a classic illustration of the construction, and the supposed inversion of the standard VO order (all Kwa area languages are basically SVO languages) has been regarded as a major typological and historical problem. Taking the recent characterization by Heine and Claudi (2001) as a point of departure, Ameka and Dakubu provide a close examination of the construction in Ewe and Dangme, to argue that in both cases the AMP bearing element is a true verb, and that since VO throughout the area is nominalized as OV<sub>NOM</sub>, its

complement is a kind of nominalization and therefore there is in fact no word order change at clause level. They also show that in the languages examined, "progressive" is not an adequate semantic label for all sub-types of this construction, which are more consistently "prospective".

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Most recently, however, the late J.M. Stewart voiced strong doubts as to the validity of this classification (Stewart 2002: 205). We suspect his doubts are justified, but that is not our present concern.

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