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On the Genesis of Aspect in African Languages: The Proximative

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1. Introduction

Studies carried out in the course of the last decade have revealed a number of regularities in the evolution of linguistic categories in African languages, especially for categories belonging to such domains as tense and aspect. For example, there are essentially only six different sources for progressives (Heine 1994:269). In a similar way, other aspectual notions, such as perfect, perfective, or habitual, each have a limited range of conceptual sources (cf. Heine et al. 1993; Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994). Observations like these allow us to propose a number of probabilistic predictions (where "prediction" not only refers to conceivable future situations but also to unknown synchronic states, as well as to reconstructed past events), such as the following: (i) If we find a progressive construction in a given African language, then most likely it is derived from a locative or comitative schema; (ii) If we find a perfect construction then it is likely to involve a verb meaning 'finish' or 'end'.

In the present paper, an aspectual notion is looked at that does not figure in standard grammars of African languages although in many of these languages there exists a conventionalized expression for it.

2. The Proximative

In a number of African languages there is a grammatical construction involving a marker that is "homophonous" with a verb meaning 'want', 'desire', 'seek', or 'look for'. The following are a few examples.

(1) Swahili (Bantu, Niger-Congo)

- a. *Ni-li-taka ku-m- piga.*
I-PAST-want INF-him-hit
'I wanted to hit him.'

- b. *Mvua i-li-taka ku-nyesha.*
rain it-PAST-want INF-rain
'It was about to rain.'

(2) Ewe (Kwa, Niger-Congo; Ameka 1990:145)

- a. *Kofi dɛ be ye-a kpɔ wò.*
Kofi want that LOG-IRR see you
'Kofi wants to see you.'

- b. *tsi dí bé ye-a dza.*
 water want that LOG-IRR fall
 'It is about to rain.' (Lit.: 'Water wants to fall.')

(3) Chamus (Maa, Nilo-Saharan; Heine 1992)

- a. *k-e-yyéú m-partút.*
 k-3.SG-want F-woman
 'He wants a woman/wife.'
- b. *k-é-yyéú l-cáni n-éuróri.*
 k-3.SG-want M-tree NAR-fall
 'The tree almost fell.'

While in the (a) examples we are dealing with a verb of volition, the 'homonymous' counterpart in the (b) sentences expresses a grammatical function. This function is described in various ways by the authors concerned. In most works on languages having a similar distinction, the meaning of the corresponding item in the (b) sentences is rendered as either 'nearly' or 'almost'. Doke (1930:212) observes that the Zulu 'deficient verb' *-cisha* is used of past time to indicate 'being nearly but never quite', while another deficient Zulu verb, *-funa*, indicates 'to be about', 'to be on the point of'. Similarly, Cole notes that the Tswana verb *-batla* 'want, look for, desire', when used deficiently, expresses 'almost', 'nearly', or 'on the point of, but never quite doing' (Cole 1955:292), and Brown (1875:17) says that the Tswana verb *-batla* 'want', when 'used adverbially', expresses 'the nearness to completion of an action, hence, nearly; almost; about.' In more general terms, the function concerned may be said to **define a temporal phase located close to the initial boundary of the situation described by the main verb**. We are dealing essentially with an aspectual notion, one that is referred to as the **ALMOST-aspect** by Heine (1992:339). König (1993:85) proposes the term proximative instead and I will adopt this term here. In the present paper, some regularities to be observed in the behavior of proximative patterns in African languages are highlighted.

3. Models

How is this case of 'homonymy' between verbs of volition and proximative markers to be accounted for? There is an obvious answer: The two are diachronically related in that the proximative marker is historically derived from a verb meaning 'want, desire'. The process is one of auxiliatation: The verb comes to serve as an auxiliary and acquires a grammatical function. But this does not explain the process.

One way of accounting for the process is by using a metaphor model: The shift from a proposition like (4a) below to (4b) can be described as being metaphorically structured, for the following reasons. First, one might say that the propositional meaning *X wanted to do Y* provides a structural template, or a vehicle, for expressing the meaning *X nearly did Y*. Second, the shift can be understood as involving a transfer between two domains of conceptualization: (4a) is suggestive of a domain of willful human beings who act, and who have wishes: The subject in (4a) is typically human. In (4b) on the other hand, the subject is

inanimate and the proposition implies a domain where human categories are irrelevant. One may thus interpret the process involved as an instance of what Lakoff and Johnson (1980:134) refer to as personification, or Heine, Claudi and Hünemeyer (1991:169ff.) as the Person-to-Object metaphor. Third, metaphor is frequently described as 'deviant behavior' which conflicts with our expectations and has to do with a violation of existing rules, or that metaphor involves a statement that, if taken literally, is false (Heine, Claudi & Hünemeyer 1991:207-8). If we assume that a proposition like (4a) provided the template for developing a structure like (4b) then one may say that the latter is a 'literally false' proposition since the concept 'want' is not normally compatible with inanimate subjects. Fourth, metaphor typically has to do with a transfer from concrete to less concrete expressions. Now, it is obvious that a grammatical function as expressed by *wants* in (4b) is more abstract than the lexical use of *want* in (4a). To summarize, there are good reasons to argue that the metaphor model is adequate to account for the shift from (4a) to (4b).

- (4) a Person X wanted to do Y
 b ('Object X wanted to do Y' >) Object X was about to enter situation Y

There are, however, also observations that suggest that the metaphor model does not take care of all the facts that have to be considered. One instance of a proximative marker has been discussed in Heine (1992), where this marker is described as being part of a grammaticalization chain and, in fact, the use patterns of proximative constructions in other languages as well are suggestive of a chain-like structure or a continuum, rather than of discrete and segmentable categories. Along this continuum, a number of salient points or stages can be distinguished. I will now briefly look at these stages in turn.

At Stage 0, there is a verb of volition where the subject is a human being and the object some concrete item, as in (5).

- (5) Southern Sotho (Bantu, Niger-Congo; Doke & Mofokeng 1957:292; Guma 1971:188)

Ke-batla nama.
 'I want meat.'

At Stage I, instead of a concrete item, the object refers to a dynamic situation, typically encoded as a verb in a nominalized/infinitival form, as in (6).

- (6) Swahili (Bantu, Niger-Congo)

Wa-na-taka ku- lima.
 3.PL-PRES-want INF-farm
 'They want to farm.'

In the following sentences of (7), a different situation emerges.

(7) Swahili (Bantu, Niger-Congo; Hassan Adam, p.c.)

Ni-li-taka ku-fa.

I- PAST-want INF-die

'I nearly died; I narrowly escaped death.'

Tswana (Bantu, Niger-Congo; Cole 1955:292-3)

Kenê ka-batla goikgaola monwana kathipa.

'I nearly cut off my finger with a knife.'

Chamus (Maa, Nilo-Saharan; Heine 1992:338)

k-é-yyéú l-páyyan n-é-rridá.

k-3.SG.-want M-elder NAR-3.SG-fall

'The old man nearly fell.'

The item *-batla* in (7) is a manifestation of the lexical verb 'want' in Sotho and the closely related Tswana language.

The sentences in (7) are compatible with both (4a) and (4b): They have a human subject and, hence, imply a world of typically human experiences; at the same time, the content of the sentences is at variance with this interpretation: One does not normally expect, as a native speaker of English, Tswana, or Chamus, that dying or falling are situations that one really wants to happen. Thus, (7) can be interpreted both with reference to the lexical and the aspectual meaning of 'want'. The Chamus sentence in (7), for example, can be interpreted alternatively as meaning 'The old man wanted to fall' or 'The old man nearly fell'. What this suggests is that these sentences are ambiguous. I will refer to such situations as Stage II-situations, in contrast with Stage I-situations, where 'want' functions exclusively as a verb of volition, being associated with meanings such as 'want', 'desire', 'search', 'seek', or 'look for'.

A different stage is reached when instead of a human subject, an inanimate one is used. In this case, the lexical meaning of volition is ruled out and the aspectual meaning survives. This stage, which I will call the Stage III-situation, is exemplified in (8).

(8) Swahili (Bantu, Niger-Congo; Hassan Adam, p.c.)

Gari li-li-taka ku-pinduka.

car it-PAST-want INF-overturn

'The car nearly overturned.'

Chamus (Eastern Nilotic, Nilo-Saharan; Heine 1992)

k-é-yyéú l-cáni n-é-uróri

k-3.SG-want M-tree.NOMIN NAR-3.SG-fall

'The tree almost fell.' (Lit.: 'The tree wanted to fall.')

A new stage, called Stage IV, is reached when instead of inanimate subjects, animate ones may be used, as in (9). What distinguishes this stage from Stage II is the fact that a lexical interpretation is no longer possible, that is, in spite

of the fact that (9) has a human subject, a volitional meaning appears to be ruled out.

(9) Zulu (Bantu, Niger-Congo; Doke 1930:203, 212)

Ba:cishe bangibulala.

.want.

'They nearly killed me.'

West African Pidgin English (Agheyisi 1971:144, 149)

Tif wan tek wi moni.

thief want take our money

'A thief is/was about to take our money.'

As we will see below, this stage tends to be associated with a reanalysis of the morphosyntactic structure involved.

Another stage, let us call it Stage V, is reached when the complement of the erstwhile verb of volition refers to a quality or quantity, rather than to a dynamic situation, as in (10).

(10) West African Pidgin English (Agheyisi 1971:144, 149)

Dis pikin wan tol pas dat wan.

this child want tall surpass that one

'This child is almost taller than that one.'

Southern Sotho (Bantu, Niger-Congo; Doke & Mofokeng 1957:292; Guma 1971:188)

khomu tse-batlang hu-ba lishume

-want.

'about ten cattle'

Finally, at Stage VI, the use of the erstwhile verb of volition refers to past events, where the meaning 'having almost reached the situation described by the main verb' triggers a context-induced reinterpretation to the effect that that situation is actually not reached, that is, where the proximative marker primarily expresses negation, as in the following example.

(11) Chamus (Eastern Nilotic, Nilo-Saharan; Heine 1992:340)

i-túm-o m-partút? (k)éyyeu a-túm.

2.SG-get-PFV F-woman almost 1.SG-get

'Did you get a wife?' 'No (but I almost did).'

To summarize, rather than with a discrete jump from a lexical to a grammatical/schematic semantics, we are dealing with a continuous transition. The main semantic stages that may be distinguished in the course of this transition are sketched in Table 1.

Table 1. Some stages in the semantic transition from volition to proximative.

Stage	Type of event schema	Contextual attributes
0	Person X wants item Y	[Y refers to a concrete item]
I	Person X wants to do Y	[Y refers to a dynamic situation]
II	Person X is about to undergo Y	[X can be assumed not to want Y]
III	Object X is about to become Y	[X is close to entering situation Y]
IV	Object/Person X is about to become Y	[Instead of an inanimate X, X may now be human]
V	X is only a little less than Y	[Instead of a dynamic situation Y is a quantity or quality]
VI	X has not attained state Y	[X has not reached situation Y]

4. Grammaticalization

In Swati (Swazi), the proximative items *-ciske* and *-phoshe*, which appear to be used interchangeably and whose meaning is rendered as 'nearly', are described as 'verbs with an infinitive complement,' even though they 'have no corresponding independent verbs' (Ziervogel & Mabuza 1985:151, 158). The proximative markers *-ciske* and *-funa* of Zulu (see 2 above) are called 'deficient verbs followed by the infinitive' by Doke (1930:211-12). In Venda, the proximative marker *-thodhou-* ('almost, nearly') has developed into a verbal aspect prefix (Poulos 1990:354).

The problems that students of African languages have when dealing with the categorial status of proximative markers are reflected in inconsistent taxonomic treatments of these markers. The proximative marker *-ciske* of Zulu, for example, is described by Doke (1930:211-12) as a verb but by Taljaard and Bosch (1988:160) as an auxiliary. The morphosyntactic process involved in the development of proximatives is essentially the same as that observed in other kinds of auxiliiation (see Heine 1993:55ff.), it involves on the one hand the decategorialization of the verb 'want, desire', 'choose', 'look for', or 'seek', and on the other hand the shift from a verbal morphosyntax to that of a verbal affix. The main stages to be distinguished are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Some stages in the morphosyntactic transition from volition to proximative

- 0 The verb exhibits a fully verbal morphosyntax and the complement has a noun phrase or a subordinate clause as its nucleus.
- I Instead of a noun, the complement consists of a nominalized/non-finite verb.
- II The verb loses verbal properties, and the nominalized verb in nominal properties.
- III The verb becomes a clitic and loses the ability to be negated separately, and the complement loses nominal properties.
- IV The verb loses virtually all remaining verbal properties and becomes a verbal affix, and the complement acquires the morphosyntax of a main verb.

This scenario is a simplified account of what is likely to happen (for example, I have conflated Heine's parameters of decategorialization and cliticization; for a more detailed treatment, see Heine 1993). A few examples may suffice to illustrate the process concerned. An example of Stage II is found e.g. in Chamus, where the verb *-yyéú* 'want' became an invariable grammatical marker when used as a proximative marker: It may no longer be inflected for person and number.

An example of Stage III, which tends to coincide with the semantic Stage IV (see above), is also provided by the Chamus verb form *k-é-yyéú* 's/he wants', which has given rise to a clitic (*(k-)eyyéú* 'nearly, almost', as illustrated in (12).

(12) Chamus (Maa, Nilo-Saharan; Heine 1992:339)

(k-)eyyéú a-ók nānu kulé.
 PROX INF-drink I milk
 'I was about to drink milk.'

Stage IV appears to have been reached in Venda, where the verb *thodha* (the graphs *th* and *dh* stand for dental stops) 'want' has been grammaticalized to a verbal prefix *-thodhou-* (Poulos 1990:332). I will return to the morphosyntactic process concerned below. Poulos observes, for example, that, while both verbs and auxiliaries are followed by 'full complements,' this is not so in the case of the prefix *-thodhou-*.

Finally, the grammaticalization of the erstwhile verb to a grammatical element also involves an erosion of the phonetic substance employed for the expression of the proximative. Part of this process is what Heine and Reh (1984) call adaptation, that is, the phonetic assimilation of the verb to its complement. We may illustrate this process with the following example from Venda. Compare the following examples:

(13) Venda (Bantu, Niger-Congo; Poulos 1990:332)

- a. *Ndo thodha u mu rwa.* b. *Ndo thodhou mu rwa.*
 I want INF him hit I almost him hit
 'I wanted to hit him.' 'I nearly hit him.'

Example (13a) represents Stage II of both the semantic and the morphosyntactic chains: the verb *thodha* exhibits a largely verbal behavior and the complement is an infinitival (INF) verb having an object prefix. (13b) is characteristic of Stage IV of the morphosyntactic chain: *-thodhou-* is a verbal prefix (even if Venda orthography treats it as a separate word). The change from *thodha + u* to *thodhou* is due to the merger of the verb *thodha* 'want' with the infinitive marker into a grammatical item, whereby the infinitive marker *u-* became part of the preceding item, whose final vowel *a* assimilated in vowel height to *o*. Thus, a kind of 'reanalysis' or 'boundary shift' took place, in that the infinitive marker was detached from the complement and became part of the erstwhile main verb, which now has the status of a verbal prefix.

5. Proximate vs. Future

The proximate exhibits a number of structural similarities with another grammatical category, the future tense, to the extent that the two are considered the same by some authors. The similarities are in particular the following:

(a) Both correspond to the notion of 'irrealis' markers: They refer to situations that may be expected to occur but have not yet occurred (Givón 1984:285). The following example from Zulu, involving the 'deficient verb' *-cishe* ('nearly') illustrates this property of proximatives.

(14) Zulu (Bantu, Niger-Congo; Doke 1930:203)

Wa:-cishe wafa, wabuye wabangcono.

'He was on the point of death when he recovered.'

(b) Not infrequently, both are similar in form. In Maasai, for example, both have the form *-un* (König 1993).

(c) The fact that the two are similar in form can be explained with reference to their diachronic development. Thus, both the proximate and the future markers of Swahili are historically derived from the verb *-taka* 'want,' and both the proximate and the future functions of the Maasai suffix *-un* can be traced back to the verb **-buon* 'come' (Heine & Claudi 1986:72).

(d) As these observations indicate, proximate and future markers are derived from the same pool of source concepts, i.e., from verbs of volition and verbs of motion.

(e) Furthermore, the grammaticalization of both proximate and future markers involves the same general process, which can be sketched like this: Originally, the verb of volition is confined to human subjects. In the course of grammaticalization, the use of the verb is extended to inanimate subjects and the verb assumes the function of an auxiliary while the verbal complement turns into the main verb.

Nevertheless, there are also a number of differences, such as the following:

(a) The proximative is an aspect while future is a tense. This means, for example, that proximatives are not sensitive to deictic time: they may refer to past, present, or future situations, as example (15) from Zulu, involving the 'deficient verb' *-ciske* ('nearly'), indicates.

(15) Zulu (Bantu, Niger-Congo; Doke 1930:203)

<i>Nga:ciske ngawa .</i>	'I nearly fell.'
<i>Ngiciske ngiwe .</i>	'I almost fall.'
<i>Ngiyokuciske ngifike.</i>	'I shall be on the point of arriving.'

Future tenses on the other hand, are incompatible with present or past situations.

(b) While futures have to do with prediction, in that the speaker predicts that the situation in the proposition will hold (Bybee, Pagliuca & Perkins 1991:54), proximatives do not involve prediction.

(c) While the cognitive domains giving rise to both kinds of categories are essentially the same, the salience patterns are different: Proximative markers are mostly derived from verbs of volition, whereas future tenses are more likely to have verbs of motion as their source.

The following question arises in this connection: Why does one and the same source, say, a verb of volition, give rise to two contrasting grammatical notions? One way of looking for an answer is by reference to the metaphor model mentioned earlier: One might say that one and the same event schema (*X wants to do Y*) may serve as a vehicle for two contrasting metaphors, roughly as conceived in (16).

(16)	X wants to do Y	> (a) X is about to do Y (b) X can be predicted to do Y	[Proximative] [Future]
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This raises the following question: Is it possible to determine under what conditions (16a), as opposed to (16b), is chosen? For example, what was responsible the development of English *will* into a future marker rather than a proximative marker?

It would seem that an answer is not possible without reference to the contextual background in which new grammatical meanings arise. As the work of Bybee, Pagliuca and Perkins (1991) suggests, the development from volition to future involves an intermediate stage where volition (e.g. *X wants to do Y*) is reinterpreted as denoting intention (*X intends to do Y*). Thus, this development requires that 'want' be used in contexts that induce an inferential reasoning of the following kind: *Since X wants to do Y s/he also has the intention to do it*. Note that such an intermediate stage is not confined to the Volition Schema (Heine 1993), that is, to the development from volition to future; it can also be observed in the case of the Motion Schema, that is, when the directional verbs 'go to' or 'come to' are involved (cf. Bybee, Pagliuca & Perkins 1991; Pérez 1990).

The rise of proximative markers on the other hand, appears to involve an inferential mechanism that has to do with what I referred to earlier as Stage

II-situations: The verb of volition is employed in contexts which are not in accordance with normal expectations of volition: If someone says: 'The old man "wants" to die', then one reasonable inference would be that 'The old man is close to death'. Such an inference is even more obvious when the subject is inanimate, e.g., when I say 'The tree *wants* to fall', where perhaps the most immediate interpretation would be that the tree is about to fall. To summarize, it is the specific contextual frame and the expectations associated with it that appear to be responsible for the fact that the Volition Schema gives rise to proximative constructions in some cases but to futures in others.

6. Conclusions

What this would seem to suggest is that the metaphor model provides a useful descriptive device but does not explain the process concerned. In addition, another model is required, one that I have referred to elsewhere as the context model. This model accounts for conceptual reinterpretation with reference to a mechanism of contextual expansion, roughly as outlined above.

The dynamics of the process from verb to proximative marker is manifested in the fact that in some languages, the process has happened repeatedly. Thus, we observed that in Tswana, three different verbs, *-batla* 'want, look for, desire', *-rata* 'love, like, want', and *-senka* 'seek, look for', are used for this purpose. Similarly, in Zulu the verb *-cish-* was grammaticalized to a proximative category: The 'deficient verb' *-ciske* expresses the aspectual notion 'to be on the point of doing, but never quite doing' (Doke 1930:203, 212). At the same time, the verb *-funa* 'want, look for' has also entered the pathway of becoming a proximative marker: While its behavior is still more verb-like than that of *-ciske*, its meaning is already largely that of a grammatical marker ('to be about to, to be on the point of').

As I observed in the introduction with reference to other aspectual notions, there is usually a pool of different conceptual sources that serve as structural templates for a given grammatical category. The same applies to the proximative. In addition to verbs of volition, proximatives may be derived from verbs of motion, and perhaps an even more common source is provided by a locative schema of the form *X is near to Y*. At the present stage of research, no generalizations on the various conceptual sources seem possible. What is obvious, however, is that it is the same general range of propositional structures employed for other aspectual categories that is also recruited for the development of proximatives.

Abbreviations

ABS absolute case
F feminine gender
INF infinitive marker
IRR irrealis marker
LOG logophoric pronoun
M masculine gender
NAR narrative marker
NOMIN nominative case
PAST past tense
PFV perfective

PL plural
PRES present tense
PROX proximative
SG singular
1 first person
2 second person
3 third person

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