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Aspect and Grammaticalization in Guyanese Creole*

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0. Introduction

The purpose of the following is to provide a principled description of aspect marking in contemporary Guyanese English Creole (GC) which can be used, in combination with records of speech from earlier periods, to shed light on the problem of creole formation.¹ The analysis raises several theoretical issues. The most central of these is the status of the stem form of the verb and its relation to the marked options. I will argue that bare verb stems should not be characterized as "marked with Ø" as Bickerton (1975:46) suggests since this necessarily implies that Ø instantiates a specific tense or aspect category with basic semantic content. Perfective-like meanings associated with the stem form of the verb are rather conversational implicatures derived from the interaction of several levels of discourse and semantic structure. The evidence reviewed here further suggests that aspectual distinctions emerged gradually in GC rather than abruptly as Bickerton (1981) claims.

1. A framework for the description of aspect

In the following, I draw on Chung and Timberlake's (1985) framework for the description of aspect but have introduced a number of modifications both substantive and terminological. As suggested in Table 1, if we define aspect in most general terms as "different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (Comrie 1976:3) or as "the relationship of a predicate to the time interval over which it occurs" (Chung and Timberlake 1985:213), we can distinguish (minimally) five levels of discourse and semantic structure which

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¹ In this and other respects I draw on the work of Gibson 1992, Mufwene 1984, Winford 1996, 2000.

contribute to the aspectual value attributed to an event, situation or action in discourse.

Table 1. Levels of semantic and discourse structure relevant to aspect

LEVEL	MANIFESTED AS...	EXAMPLE
Lexical	Verb and verbal particles, Other lexical categories	<i>angry</i> <i>eat-up</i> <i>hit</i>
Grammatical	Grammatical categories (e.g. English progressive)	<i>is eating</i>
Argument	Verb+grammatical markers + core arguments	John ate \emptyset John ate <i>an apple</i> .
Clausal	Adverbials and clausal operators (e.g. if, when, whenever...)	John ate an apple <i>everyday</i> . <i>Whenever</i> John ate an apple...
Discourse	Event sequencing	John ate <i>then drank a beer</i> .

Although, the semantic contribution of, for example, the imperfective marker is stable and regular, the interpretation of a particular event in terms of its aspectual character, in discourse, will always depend upon an interaction between two or more levels of semantic structure (e.g., lexical and grammatical). In the following, I will examine the use of the unmarked verb and the imperfective marker in discourse paying particular attention not only to grammaticalized categories but also to lexical, argument, clausal and discourse levels of meaning.

2. The verb stem

Examples 1-4 illustrate the use of the stem form of the verb in GC.

- (1) *foor yiirz ii \emptyset get*
“He is four years old.”
- (2) *mi \emptyset lef a leedi piknii a Aisha.*
“I left the woman’s children and Isha’s.”
- (3) *dem na \emptyset lak op B? dem \emptyset kech am wee?*
“Didn’t they lock up B? Where did they catch him?”
- (4) *i \emptyset tel mi. i \emptyset tel mi dis marnin se hou i gu tel Beebii bikoZ Mis \emptyset see na wen di piipol dem \emptyset gu awee. Mis \emptyset see da shi na laik di gyal.*
“He told me. He told me this morning how he will tell Baby because Miss said “No.” when the people went away. Miss said that she doesn’t like the girl.”

As Bickerton (1975:28) notes “the stem form exceeds in frequency any of the marked forms.” He attributes this to two factors: the multifunctionality of the

stem form and the operation of a series of deletion rules. Although Bickerton recognizes both the ubiquity of the unmarked verb and the range of functions it serves, he nevertheless maintains that it instantiates one pole of a privative opposition (sensitive to the stativity of the predicate). According to Bickerton, with non-statives, the stem form signifies 'unmarked past.' With stative verbs the stem form signifies non-past. In later work (1981:28) Bickerton writes of a non-punctual category (i.e. imperfective) semantically opposed to a punctual category expressing single, non-durative actions or events. For Bickerton (1980) punctual and non-punctual (perfective and imperfective) are "semantic primes", one aspect of a "natural semantax". The stem form of the verb is understood as "marked with zero" - in Jakobson's (1984 [1938]) terms it is a "zero sign". Within Bickerton's theory of creole genesis, the punctual/non-punctual distinction is claimed to be a reflex of the "language bioprogram" triggered in children, who, faced with inadequate and disorderly pidgin input, create a creole in the process of first language acquisition (for varied criticism of this theory see for example Goodman 1985; Singler 1986)

In her critique of Bickerton's arguments, Sankoff (1990) offers an alternative account in which verbs occurring with no marker are "not marked with zero" but rather constitute the "historical residue of an earlier stage of the language" in which the tense and aspect morphology of the superstrate language had not been transmitted and the creole markers had not yet evolved.

...in creole languages it is much more common to find not privative oppositions but facultative and optional ones. The reason for this seems relatively straightforward. The evolution of privative oppositions can only take place via processes of grammaticalization whereby morphemes that come to mark such oppositions only acquire their compulsory and redundant character over a long period of use as meaningful options. (Sankoff 1990:297)

In a similar vein, Bybee (1994) notes that the grammaticalization of zero depends on the concurrent grammaticalization of some overt morpheme as obligatory. When a gram becomes obligatory for the expression of some meaning, its absence takes on a specific meaning - it conveys the absence of that semantic feature which the now obligatory morpheme has come to specify. Bybee contrasts such "zero meanings" (instantiated by the absence of an obligatory morpheme, e.g. singular in English nominal morphology) with what she calls "open meanings" which are associated with the absence of an optional grammatical morpheme. (Here she usefully contrasts English present progressive which is obligatory in the expression of "event in progress" with the gram *useto* which is optional in the expression of past habitual, so it is possible to convey past habituality by use of the preterit form - e.g., *Everyday I ate an apple and walked to work.*) The question then is whether the stem form of the verb in GC instantiates some unique, specifiable meaning, or on the contrary, is simply unspecified for any

aspectual parameter. The weight of evidence suggests that, in fact, the stem form is not "marked with Ø" and does not instantiate a specific semantic category. Common perfective-like meanings arise in particular contexts as conversational implicatures derived from an interaction of several levels of semantic and discourse structure.

For example, in narrative discourse, the stem form is used to convey the backbone of foregrounded action. Background, incidental and otherwise framing action is usually conveyed by the use of the imperfective marker.

- (5) *Neks marnin wen Shoobai dem Ø gu dongtong dem Ø riich op wid Ma an den dem Ø tel Ma dat hou dee Ø fain Roohan get di jewol an abii Ø hool-op ii an Ø lak am op wid Ramaloo an soo an den abi Ø sen mesaj wid Fat Bai fu tel Talii*

"Next morning, when Show-boy and them went downtown, they met-up with Ma and then they told Ma that they found Rohan had the jewel and we caught him and locked him up with Ramalo and so on and then we sent a message with Fat Boy to tell Tali."

Dynamic unmarked verbs such as *gu* 'go', *riich-op* 'meet-up', *tel* 'tell' are used here to refer to events which fit closely Dahl's description of perfective (1985:78): "A perfective verb will typically denote a single event, seen as an unanalyzed whole, with a well defined result or end-state, located in the past." However, the perfective-like meaning of punctual verbs in this example does not follow immediately from the unmarked form of the verb. Rather this interpretation depends on the contribution of both the inherent aspectual value of the verb and a variety of discourse factors. For instance, the speaker uses explicit sequencing connectives such as *den* 'then' to indicate closure of the actions referred to by *gu* and *riich-op*. Note also that the verb *riich* is also used in GC without the bounder particle *op*, here *riich-op* is used to increase the telicity of the verb. "Bounded event" or "simple past" is thus the default interpretation of the unmarked telic verb in this context of a clear series of sequenced events.

Derived and discourse dependent meanings tend to be defeasible whereas fully grammaticalized meanings are not. It is therefore important to note that, in other discourse contexts, the stem form of the dynamic verb conveys non-perfective meanings. For instance, in proverbs and related genres the unmarked verb is used to convey generic meaning.²

- (6) *Dag wa Ø bark plenti, Ø ron wen taim kom fu fait*
 "A dog that barks a lot, runs when its time to fight."

² There is significant variation in proverbs. In some cases generic meaning is conveyed by the use of the imperfective marker.

- (7) *Wan wan dotii Ø bil dam.*

"Successive pieces of dirt build a dam - i.e. Every little bit adds up."

The stem form is also used in clearly habitual contexts. Once a habitual interpretation is established for a series of events, subsequent predicates may occur without preverbal marking. Example (8) (from Jaganauth 1994) illustrates this.

- (8) *Wel mi heer, lang taim, dat de das kot rais wid haan...wid graas naif. Den... den.. am.. wen dem kot dis rais wid graas naif. dem Ø biit am out. dem Ø biit out a rais wid aam...ageens...pan wan am...pan wan poos...Den wen dem biit am out pan wan poos, dem Ø ful kopl kyerasiin kyan den dem Ø spred am pan aam dem Ø spred am pan bag*

"Well. I hear, long ago that they usually cut rice by hand with grass knives. Then when they cut this rice with the grass knife they beat it out. They beat out the rice with against.. on a post. Then when they beat it out on a post they fill a couple kerosene cans, then they spread it on they spread it on bags."

The passage illustrates the use of the stem form of the verb to convey habitual meaning. The importance of sequencing should not be underestimated. Thus note the way the temporal adverbial *laang taim* 'long ago' is used in the first clause to establish past time reference, while *doz* (realized as *das*) establishes the sense of habituality. Subsequent clauses introduced with *den* 'then' are understood as carrying the same values for tense and aspect. Clearly no one level of semantic or discourse structure is alone responsible for the aspectual value of a given predicate in discourse. It is useful in this respect to compare example 8 with example (5). In both we find a sequence of unmarked dynamic verbs. In one, however, the interpretation is habitual whereas in the other it is perfective-like. The marking of the first verb in the series is clearly crucial to the interpretation of the following ones.

A final use of the stem form of the verb, both stative and non-stative, is in conditional and temporal clauses. Because he sees the unmarked verb as instantiating a specific tense-aspect category (essentially perfective, his "punctual"), Bickerton attributes its occurrence here to the operation of the "main stative rule" which deletes (or non-generates) imperfective *a* in this context (see Mufwene 1984). However, if we see the stem form as simply unanalyzed for tense and aspect it is not necessary to postulate any deletion rules to account for its use in this context. It is, in fact, the neutral temporal character of the stem which allows it to take on the semantics of the clause-level operator (*if, when*) as in examples (9) and (10).

- (9) *wen shi Ø suun sii shii swala enii blak shi Ø spit it out.*
 "When she sees that she has swallowed any black thing she spits it out."
- (10) *if dem Ø relii ignoor mii, mi Ø biit dem.*
 "If they ignore me, then I beat them."

To summarize, the unmarked verb is best understood as unanalyzed for parameters of tense and aspect. It is this absence of specific semantic content which allows the stem form to occur in a broad range of contexts, to carry a variety of semantic interpretations and to serve a number of discourse functions. Its primary use is to refer to simple past events or present states. Secondary uses include reference to past states, open conditionals, habitual events, and generic situations. This range of meaning and function can be understood as an effect of the interaction between different levels of discourse and semantic structure. In narrative, in particular, sequenced events are most often referred to using the stem form of the verb and clause-level semantics of closure emerge as conversational implicatures in this context. Alternatively, where the habitual nature of the events is established in the opening of a narrative sequence, subsequent habitual events are often conveyed by the use of the stem form.

3. Imperfective and habitual

Crosslinguistically, imperfective markers present an event as unbounded or as containing some "explicit reference to the internal temporal structure of a situation" (Comrie 1976:24). An imperfective situation is viewed either as in progress (progressive) or as characteristic of a period of time that includes the reference time (habitual). Examples in (11-14) illustrate the use of the imperfective preverbal particle *a* in past (13) and non-past contexts, with stative (12) and non-stative predicates, to express habitual (11, 12) and progressive (13, 14) meanings:

- (11) *Safii a jraiv kyar wid oman hool dee.*
 "Safi drives around with women all day."
- (12) *Di man dem a de moor in sosaitii.*
 "The men tend to be more in the public sphere."
- (13) *Shi a pik plom, wen mi aks shi yestodee.*
 "She was picking plums when I asked her yesterday."
- (14) *Hiir, Linda a kal yu.*
 "Hear, Linda is calling you."

Speakers of GC alternately convey habituality by the use of the preverbal marker *doz* (this variation is discussed in Rickford 1986; Sidnell frth.). Examples (15) and (16) illustrate this use of *doz*.

- (15) *i doz kyerii meed gu wid am tuu*
 "He takes his maid along with him aswell."
 (16) *da taim abii-diiz doz go a skuul*
 "At that time, we used to go to school."

The imperfective particle and habitual marker interact with the inherent aspectual value of the verb in regular and predictable ways. Although Bickerton (1975:31) claimed that the imperfective marker could not combine with stative predicates, subsequent research by Gibson (1988), Rickford (1987) and Winford (1993), among others, has shown this to be mistaken. We can therefore compare Bickerton's starred example 2.8 (given here as 17) with attested examples such as (18) and (19).

- (17) **dem a gat wan kyar* (Bickerton's 2.8, page 30)
 "They are having [sc. possessing] a car."
 (18) *dem a gat aal mi kotlas de*
 "They always have all my cutlasses there."
 (19) *jos laik da dem man a waan fait bai*
 "The slightest thing and those guys (habitually) want to fight."

The combination of imperfective with stative predicates almost categorically results in either distributive (18) or habitual (19) meaning. The distributive interpretation is an effect of the interaction between predicate stativity, grammaticalized category and plural number marking of either subject or object argument. Compare (18) where it is the plural object which effects distributive meaning with (20) where the subject has a similar function.

- (20) *aal dem baigan a ge siid nou*
 "All the eggplants have seeds at this time of year."

In narrative sequences imperfectively marked verbs and stem forms tend to occur in complementary distribution. Whereas, as we saw in example (5), the stem form tends to carry the backbone of narrative action, the imperfective marker is associated with backgrounded, framing or otherwise incidental events and actions – those events which are either NOT clearly sequenced or are incidental to the main line of narrative action.

- (21) *wel oroun sevon oklak, rait? wan abi fren Ø kom an tel abii dat hou
 dee Ø hiir Jan de bai DT rait? l'abii gu bring wan poliis an chek in di
 hous sii i onda bed haidop. wel seem taim m'a gu out mi Ø miit ongl
 M. an mi Ø tel ongl M. if ii kyan kom dong a bak hiia gi wan wach fo
 mii*

“Well around seven o’clock, right? One of our friends came and told us that they had heard that John was over at DT’s house, right? She suggested that we go and get the police and check in the house to see if he was hidden under the bed. Well at the same time, I was going out – I met Uncle M. and I asked Uncle M. if he could come down to the back here and take a look for me.”

The excerpt illustrates one typical function of the imperfective marker in narrative sequences – that of showing simultaneity (a break in sequence). Such simultaneous events are typically backgrounded in that they set the stage for some development in the main line of narrative action.

To summarize, the basic meaning of the imperfective particle in GC is “unbounded event or situation”. In this capacity it is used primarily to refer to habitual or progressive situations. It also has a number of secondary uses including reference to future events.

4. Conclusions

The preceding analysis suggests that Ø is only partially grammaticalized in GC. The imperfective marker is obligatory for the expression of “event in progress” (progressive) but not for habitual. Thus we have seen that stem forms can convey habituality in the right discourse context. A variety of evidence suggests that imperfective in Guyanese Creole developed along a path from locative (*Jan de a gyadin*, “John is in the garden”), to progressive (*Jan (d)a wok*, “John is at work/is working”), to imperfective (*Jan a wok*, “John works”) (see Pochard & Devonish 1986). While it is not possible to present all the diachronic evidence here I will give a brief summary. Guyana experienced British colonization relatively late in comparison with other territories. Our earliest records of speech come from the very late 18th and early 19th centuries (about 60 years after the beginnings of English settlement in the territory). As Rickford (1991:311) notes, imperfective (continuative) *de* or *(d)a* is not found in any of the early-nineteenth-century texts. In contrast, both future/irrealis *sall* (e.g., “if I sall do dat, me go to hell.” Pinckard 1806 vol. 2:170) and past *been* (e.g., “me been see that white man in me country.” Bolingbroke 1807: 105) are attested (both examples are cited in Rickford 1987). Furthermore, in these texts we find the stem form of the verb used in both habitual and progressive contexts. Pinckard’s (1806 vol. 2:60) Sable Doctor uses the stem form to convey habituality.

- (22) *It always so, Massa, at this time o’ year, because him weather Ø change from wet to dry.*

St. Clair (1834 vol. 1:129, cited in Rickford 1987), speaking of an incident in which a slave points at a group of “baboons” during a hunt, provides an example of the stem form used to express “event in progress”.

- (23) *Heree! Heree, Massa! Heree him Ø run!*

The first attestations of progressive/imperfective *(d)a* come from middle of the 19th century. Barton Premium (1850) provides the following examples:

- (24) *Hey! Quaco, you da go dance in a field* (p. 74)
 (25) *tha' nyung mangea no ha' sense, he da play h-l yander* (p. 106)

In (24) the *da* is used in combination with *go* to express "event in progress" (i.e. "going" - it is important to note that the *(d)a+go* construction here conveys real movement, i.e. it does not express future intention as it can in contemporary GC, e.g., *ii a go fain di badi wa tek am*. "He is on his way to find the person who took it" or "He will find the person who took it."). In (25), *da* is ambiguous between progressive and habitual readings (i.e. "He is raising/raises hell over there."). The argument that progressive uses arose through an extension of locative meanings is supported by the fact that in these first examples a locative interpretation is still available (e.g., "There you go to dance in the field"). The earliest examples we have of *da* being used to express aspectual meaning are thus found in precisely those contexts which would have allowed for reanalysis from locative to progressive (see Hopper & Traugott 1993). Further support for the grammaticalization argument comes from the fact that it is in just these same texts that we find the first attestations of the locative copula *de* from Guyana.

- (26) *me no de a field Torsday*. (Premium 1850: 219)

By the late nineteenth century, in the texts of McTurk, Kirke and Crookall, *(d)a* is used consistently in expressions of "event in progress" and variably in expressions of habituality. It thus seems clear that the process of grammaticalization by which *(d)a* came to express progressive meaning was a gradual rather than abrupt one reflecting recurrent patterns of discourse level patterning and collocation. While perhaps ultimately shaped by cognitive factors, such processes do not depend on the operation of a language bioprogram triggered by the nativization of an earlier pidgin. Rather than emerging spontaneously in a creole created by children, imperfective markers appear to have developed through a gradual processes of grammaticalization along a path well-attested in cross-linguistic studies (see Bybee et. al. 1994). An original locative expression (itself formed by the use of a reconstituted locative copula *de*, source: English *there*) came to be used in expressions of "event in progress". This progressive marker was then extended to cover habitual situations and events (a path found to be common across a large sample of languages by Bybee and Dahl 1989:82) thus becoming an imperfective marker. The evidence I have reviewed here, which shows that habitual situations can be conveyed by the use of the stem form of the verb, indicates that in GC this

process of grammaticalization is not complete. This synchronic indeterminacy and diachronic path is quite incompatible with Bickerton's language bioprogram hypothesis and other approaches to creole genesis which propose that these languages arose abruptly through a process of nativization. The GC materials highlight the fact that some features of a language, creole or otherwise, emerge gradually over time as lexical items (or phrases) take on grammatical functions, become fixed in their syntactic distribution, reduced in phonological substance and obligatory for the expression of a particular meaning. This last stage, correlates with the full grammaticalization of zero. It is reasonable to assume that, being relatively young languages, many creoles will primarily convey "optional" rather than "zero" meanings through the use of unmarked forms (Bybee 1994; Sankoff 1990).

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