Expanding the notion of a tenseless language: Data from Anii

Deborah Morton*

LSA Annual Meeting, Minneapolis, January 2-5, 2014

1. Introduction. The question addressed here is that of whether or not a language with a far-past marker can be claimed to be tenseless. A tenseless language is a language whose morphology does not include a tense (whether overtly pronounced or not). Whether a language can be argued to be tenseless depends on how the concept of 'tense' is defined. For the purposes of this paper, a tense (or tense marker) is "a natural language expression that forms part of a grammatical paradigm and constrains the temporal reference of the clause in which it occurs" (Cover and Tonhauser forthcoming: 3).

2. Theoretical Background. This work assumes a neo-Reichenbachian view of temporal and aspectual reference (Reichenbach 1947, Klein 1994, etc.). For each utterance, there are three times that are important for analysis. The utterance time (UT) is the time at which an utterance is spoken. The topic time (TT) (sometimes referred to as the reference time) is the time an utterance is about. The eventuality time (ET) (sometimes referred to as the situation time) is the time during which the eventuality denoted by an utterance holds. In this paradigm, temporal reference is the relationship between the TT and the UT, and is often constrained by tense markers. Aspectual reference is the relationship between the ET and the UT, which is often constrained by aspect morphemes.

Verbs in prototypical 'tenseless' languages can be marked with aspectual or modal verbal morphology, but not with tense markers (cf. Bittner 2005, Tonhauser 2011). Another common quality of such languages is the existence of 'unmarked clauses', i.e. clauses not marked for tense or aspect, but which have restricted temporal and aspectual reference.
It can be argued that such languages have phonologically null tense markers (cf. Matthewson 2006). Such an argument is much stronger if the phonologically null marker is part of a paradigm (i.e. there are also overt tense markers) (cf. Cover and Tonhauser forthcoming).

3. Anii: The specific language being investigated here is Anii, a Kwa language spoken by about 50,000 speakers in Togo and Benin, West Africa. Data given here is from fieldwork in Bassila, Benin on the Bassila dialect (about 12,000 speakers).[1] Anii has unmarked clauses with restricted temporal (and aspectual) reference, as shown with the unmarked clauses in (1). (1a) has an eventive predicate, and (1b) a stative predicate:[2]

---

* Many thanks to my Anii language consultants, especially ATTI KALAM Hakimou, BABABODY SALIFOU Nouhoum, FAFANA Moumouni, IBRAHIM INOUSSA Malokia, and ISSIFOU Rahinatou. Thanks also to Judith Tonhauser, Jefferson Barlew, and Stefanie and Martin Zaske for help and advice. All errors are my own.
Author: Deborah Morton, The Ohio State University (morton.73@buckeyemail.osu.edu).

1 Population estimates are my own.

2 Gloss abbreviations used here are: 1 = 1st person, 2 = 2nd person, AGR.CL = noun-class agreement CL =noun-class marker (Anii noun classes are additionally labeled with the letters of the Anii alphabet), FOC = focus marker, NEG = negation, PERF = perfect marker, POSS = possessive, PST = past marker (TRM), SG = singular, SUBJ = subject marker, REAL = marker used in realis clauses only, IRR = marker used in irrealis clauses only. All Anii data is given in IPA transcriptions.

(1) a. Situation: Mardjanatou is telling her friend that she lost her bucket down the well yesterday, but also got it back yesterday. Her friend asks how she got it back, and Mardjanatou says:
ń dʒə̀m lɔ̀kɔ̀ ní
1.SG.SUBJ.REAL jump well into
'I jumped into the well.'

b. Situation: I am talking to my mother, who asks me how I felt about my boyfriend yesterday (my feelings change frequently). My response is:
ń sɔ̀lɔ́ ꜜ ní
1.SG.SUBJ.REAL love 3.SG.OBJ
'I loved him.'

The sentence in (1b) can also have present temporal reference, but that in (1a) cannot. There could be a null tense marker here (perhaps past, or at least non-future). The plausibility of such an analysis is increased if it could be shown that Anii has overt tenses.

4. Possible Overt Tense Markers in Anii. This section illustrates that the overt markers found in Anii future and far-past clauses are not tense markers.

4.1 FUTURE CLAUSES. It appears that the future is marked in Anii largely with an irrealis construction (consisting of a different set of pronouns and different tone pattern from realis clauses). The construction in question is bolded:

(2) Situation: Answering the question 'what will you do tomorrow?'
gàtsɨ́ŋ̀ ná, **má ʃɛ́r̀**
tomorrow FOC 1.SG.SUBJ.IRR sweep
'Tomorrow, I will sweep.'

To illustrate this form not future tense marking, see the negation of the examples in (1), which have past temporal reference. The same construction found in the future clause in (2) is found in the past clauses in (3):

(3) a. Situation: Mardjanatou is telling her friend that she lost her bucket down the well yesterday. Her friend asks her if she got it out by jumping into the well:
ààí, kɨ́ **má dʒə́m̀** lɔ̀kɔ̀ ní ꜜ ná
no NEG 1.SG.SUBJ.IRR jump well into NEG
'No, I did not jump into the well.'

b. Situation: I am talking to my mother, who asks me how I felt about my boyfriend yesterday (my feelings change often):
kɨ́ **má sɔ́lɔ́** ꜜ ní ꜜ ná
NEG 1.SG.SUBJ.IRR love 3.SG.OBJ NEG
'I did not love him.'

This construction is referred to here as irrealis. Future research is needed to confirm whether this is in fact an irrealis construction. What is clear is that this construction does not have future temporal reference, since it can be used in clauses with past temporal reference.

4.2 FAR-PAST CLAUSES. Clauses marked with the marker /bə̀ŋà/ have the interpretation that the eventuality referred to by that clause occurred far in the past (more than about three weeks), as shown here. This is the only marker used in past contexts that could possibly be a tense:

(4) Situation: We are talking in 2013 about my consultant's trip to Ghana, which occurred in 2003. He says:
ń bə̀ŋà tsɨ́ gàná
1.SG.SUBJ.REAL PST go CL.B.Ghana
'I went to Ghana long ago.'

This form looks like a far-past tense, because it is acceptable in this case where the TT far precedes the UT. An unmarked clause would also be acceptable here (but the perfect marker /ʧɛ̀é/ would not—the clause has perfective, not perfect, aspectual reference).

However, /bə̀ŋà/ is also acceptable in circumstances where the TT is the UT (where a past tense marker would not be). Specifically, /bə̀ŋà/ can be used in some of the same such situations as the perfect marker /ʧɛ̀é/:

(5) Situation: While driving, you pass a house where a friend has lived, but where the person does not live anymore. You mention this to a fellow traveller by saying:
àmù-sórò à ʧɛ̀é ꜜ dá àtíjà, ɲə́mə̀ kà kɔ̀ɔ́
1.SG.POSS.CL.A-friend AGR.CL.A PERF be.there here now NEG again
dá àtíjà ná
be.there here NEG
'My friend has lived here, but now he does not live here anymore.'

(6) Situation: While driving, you pass a house where a friend has lived, but where the person does not live anymore. You mention this to a fellow traveller by saying:
àmù-sórò à bə̀ŋà dá àtíjà, ɲə́mə̀ kà kɔ̀ɔ́
1.SG.POSS.CL.A-friend AGR.CL.A PST be.there here now NEG again
dá àtíjà ná
be.there here NEG
'My friend lived here long ago, but now he does not live here anymore.'

Crucially, /bə̀ŋà/ is not acceptable if the friend in question still lives in the house the speaker is passing, but /ʧɛ̀é/ is:

(7) Situation: While driving, you pass a house where a friend has lived for awhile, and still lives. You say:
a. #àmù-sórò à bə̀ŋà dá àtíjà
1.SG.POSS.CL.A-friend AGR.CL.A PST be.there here

b. àmù-sórò à ɣɛ̀é dá àtíjà
1.SG.POSS.CL.A-friend AGR.CL.A PERF be.there here
'My friend has lived here.'

The examples above suggest that /bɔ̀ŋà/ has different semantics from both a past tense marker and a perfect marker.

Plungian and van der Auwera (2006) noted that many languages have past markers that differ from standard tenses in that their meaning includes the concept of complete lack of overlap between the ET and the UT. Cable (2013) analyzed markers in Gĩkũyũ that had been previously called tenses as Temporal Remoteness Markers (TRMs). TRMs, according to Cable, are not tenses or aspects, but instead modify the relationship between the ET and the UT. Cable suggested that many other languages with multiple 'tense' markings might actually have TRMs, not tenses.

The Anii marker /bɔ̀ŋà/ is probably a TRM, and it is the only past TRM in Anii—Anii does not have graded past markers like Gĩkũyũ. Further data is being collected for diagnostics that /bɔ̀ŋà/ is a TRM, not a tense. Such data includes the fact that /bɔ̀ŋà/ is not acceptable in past prospective contexts (TT < UT, ET > TT), where a past tense would be. Additionally, /bɔ̀ŋà/-marked clauses are not acceptable in a 'past perfect continuous' situation (TT < UT, ET begins before the TT, continues at TT). Examples can be found in Morton (2014).

5. Conclusions. Several points have been made here. First, some clauses with past temporal reference in Anii are unmarked. Second, future clauses in Anii are not always marked with a future tense marker. The future in Anii is actually quite complicated, and is discussed in more detail in Morton (2014). What is important here is that it is possible that there is no future tense marker in Anii. Additionally, the far-past marker in Anii is a TRM, not a tense. The data presented here thus suggests that Anii may be a tenseless language, though perhaps not a prototypical one.

References

Bittner, Maria. 2005. Future discourse in a tenseless language. *Journal of Semantics* 22: 339-387.

Cable, Seth. 2013. "Beyond the past, present and future: towards the semantics of 'graded tense' in Gĩkũyũ". *Natural Language Semantics*. n4 (21030209).

Cover, Rebecca and Judith Tonhauser. Forthcoming. "Semantic theory in the field: Temporal and aspectual reference". In: Bochnak, Ryan and Lisa Matthewson (Eds.). Volume on semantic fieldwork methods. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Klein, Wolfgang. 1994. *Time in language*. London: Routledge.

Matthewson, Lisa. 2006. Temporal semantics in a superficially tenseless language. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 29:673-713.

Morton, Deborah. 2014. The temporal and aspectual semantics and verbal tonology of Gisida Anii. PhD Dissertation, The Ohio State University.

Plungian,Vladimir A. and Johan van der Auwera. 2006. Towards a typology of discontinuous past marking. *Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung* 59(4): 317-349.

Reichenbach, Hans. 1947. The tenses of verbs. In: *Elements of Symbolic Logic*. New York: Macmillan and Company.

Tonhauser, Judith. 2011. Temporal reference in Paraguayan Guaraní, a tenseless language. *Linguistics and Philosophy* 34: 257-303.