

Grammatical encoding through tone in Bamali tense, aspect and mood

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Bamali is a Grassfields Bantu (Mbam-Nkam, Nun) language spoken in the North West Region of Cameroon (Eberhard et al. 2023).

The Grassfields Bantu languages are known to have rich and complex tone systems (Watters 2003). The central research question for this study was: Where does the Bamali grammar rely on tone to mark grammatical distinctions? Verb paradigms were elicited with a group of five Bamali speakers to study grammatical categories in the verb phrase. Surface tone was transcribed for all the data collected.

Three areas were found in the Bamali verb phrase where tone differences must be understood to disambiguate grammatical functions. These are illustrated with examples below. The tone marks on the data beneath the phonetic data indicate underlying tone, although for some morphemes this is tentative and subject to further research.

(1) Tense: Distant past (P3) vs near past (P2)

P3	[à nə ntá]	‘He sewed (distant past).’
	à nə N-tá	
	3SG P3 N-sew	
P2	[á ↓nə ↓ntá]	‘He sewed (near past).’
(H)	à nə N-tá	
P2	3SG P2 N-sew	

My current analysis is that the P2 tense is marked by a clause-initial floating H tone as well as the *nə* tense marker. (Note that the P3 tense marker is identical segmentally but has underlying L tone.)

The reason for the downstep between the P2 segmental marker and the verb ‘sew’ needs further research but an initial hypothesis is that the N- prefix on the verb carries L tone which delinks and floats.

(2) Aspect: Perfective vs progressive (with object, in tenses such as the imminent future, F1)

Perfective	[à wǎ ↓ntá ↓ndwí]	‘He will sew [a] dress.’
	à wǎ N-tá ndwí	
	3SG F1 N-sew dress	
Progressive	[à wǎ ntã ↓ndwí]	‘He will be sewing [a] dress.’
	à wǎ (L)-N-tá ndwí	
	3SG F1 PROG-N-sew dress	

My current (tentative) analysis is that the perfective aspect may be unmarked and the progressive aspect may be marked with a L tone prefix on the verb.

(3) Mood: Declarative vs hortative

Declarative	[ò tá]	‘You sewed.’
	ò tá	
	2SG sew	

Hortative		[ó	↓tá]	‘You should sew.’
	(H)	ò	tá	
	HORT	2SG	sew	

My current analysis is that the declarative mood is unmarked and the hortative mood is marked with a clause-initial floating H tone.

In conclusion, tone plays a significant role to mark grammatical functions; this is seen in all three categories of tense, aspect and mood. A further notable element of the tense and aspect (but not mood) constructions described is that the verb root takes a homorganic nasal prefix (which desyllabifies and delinks its tone).

These findings could help in typological comparisons of grammatical tone in the Grassfields Bantu languages, and in the Mbam-Nkam subgroup in particular.

References

- Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). (2023). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. 26th edition. Dallas: SIL International.
- Watters, J. (2003) Grassfields Bantu. In Nurse, D. and Philippson, G. (eds), *The Bantu Languages*, 225-256. London: Routledge.