The interaction of tense and actionality: The case of zero verb marking in Sranan
CONTENT

- Introduction:
  - Sranan
  - Sranan TMA system
- Uses of the unmarked verb form
- Previous semantic analyses of the zero form
- Alternative analysis: zero as a marker of *present* tense
  - With stative verbs
  - With dynamic verbs
- Conclusion
SRANAN

- Creole language, lingua franca of Surinam

Introduction:
- Sranan
- Sranan TMA system

The unmarked verb form

Previous analyses

Alternative analysis: present tense

Conclusion
SRANAN

- Superstrate/lexifier languages: English and, to a lesser extent, Dutch
- Substrate languages: West-African Gbe languages

(1) *San mi wani taki over a brifi:* what I want say about the letter
‘What I want to say about the letter:’
SRANAN T&A SYSTEM

In Sranan, tense and aspect (as well as modality) are expressed by pre-verbal markers (cf. Winford 2000 for an elaborate description):

Tense:
- *ben* simple past, pluperfect, protasis of counterfactual conditionals
- *o* future (high degree of certainty)
- *sa* future (lower degree of certainty)

Aspect:
- *e* imperfective
- *kba* completive

But verbs in finite sentences can also remain unmarked...
USES OF THE UNMARKED VERB FORM ACCORDING TO CONTEXT

- The interpretation of unmarked verb forms in Sranan depends on the actionality of the verb involved and on context.

- Actionality:
  Two main types of lexical aspect:

  - **Stative verbs**
    - Homogeneous, unbounded situations
    - Contractible
  
  - **Dynamic verbs**
    - Heterogeneous, bounded situations
    - Not contractible
USES OF THE UNMARKED VERB FORM ACCORDING TO CONTEXT

- In Sranan, unmarked verb forms are given a different temporal interpretation with stative verbs than with dynamic ones:

- Stative: present

(2) Ala smo Ø sabi now pe
all person know now where

den e kari Micromarkt.
SUBJ.3PL IPFV call Micromarkt.

‘Everybody now knows the place they call Micromarkt.’
Uses of the unmarked verb form according to context

- Dynamic: past perfective

Note: Perfective aspect, a kind of grammatical aspect, entails an external viewpoint on a situation which is thus viewed in its entirety.

(3)  

\[\text{Di a karta } \emptyset \text{ fadon,} \]
\[\text{when the card fall} \]

\[\text{dan mi } \emptyset \text{ si} \]
\[\text{then SUBJ.3SG see} \]

\[\text{en futu.} \]
\[\text{POSS.3SG foot} \]

‘When the card fell, then I saw his feet.’
Uses of the unmarked verb form according to context

- **Dynamic:** present perfect (anterior)

(4) *Mi bribi mi masra*

**SUBJ.1SG believe POSS.1SG husband**

*dede want a Ø fadon*

**dead because SUBJ.3SG fall**

*a no e opo moro.*

**SUBJ.3SG NEG IPFV get_up anymore**

‘I believe my husband is dead, because he’s fallen and he isn’t getting up again.’
**Uses of the unmarked verb form according to context**

- Dynamic (& stative): protasis of realis conditionals

\[
(5) \quad \textit{Dus ef'} \quad a \quad \textit{sma} \quad \emptyset \quad \textit{denki} \quad f'
\]

thus if the person think how

\[
\text{SUBJ.3SG be the person can stay}
\]

\[
\text{gewoon nanga en pikin te ala}
\]

normal with POSS.3sg child until all

\[
\text{sani waka a sma bun.}
\]

thing walk the person good

“Thus, if the person considers how it is, the person can just keep her child, until everything goes well for the person.’
**Uses of the unmarked verb form according to context: overview**

Unmarked stative verbs:
- Present (prototypical)
- Protasis of realis conditional

Unmarked dynamic verbs:
- Past perfective
- Present perfect
- Protasis of realis conditional
  \[ \rightarrow \text{present interpretation impossible} \]
USES OF THE UNMARKED VERB FORM: OVERVIEW

- To refer to the present with dynamic verbs, the imperfective marker e is needed (which creates an *internal* perspective on the event):

(6) Now

   now  you  e  teki  en  kba
   now  you  IPFV  take  it  already

   nownow?

   now

   ‘Are you already taping right now?’
PREVIOUS ANALYSES OF THE UNMARKED VERB FORM

- Remarkable polyfunctionality:

(1) Polysemous analyses:

- Bickerton (1975): present for stative, past for dynamic
- Seuren (1981, 2001): resultative perfect and simple past

Problem: these analyses do not propose one basic meaning for zero, thus not unifying its various uses
Previous analyses of the unmarked verb form

- Remarkable polyfunctionality:

(2) Monosemous analysis:

Winford (2000): zero marks *perfectivity*

Problems:

- Why do stative verbs typically receive a present interpretation?
- Paradigmatic inaccuracy: if *ben* = past and zero = perfective, then ‘*ben* + zero + stem’ = past perfective
Previous analyses of the unmarked verb form

- ‘ben + zero + stem’ = past perfective? → Not always the case

Imperfective readings are possible:

a) ‘ben + zero + stem’ typically occurs in irrealis contexts (Wilner 2000), while these normally receive imperfective marking:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(7)</th>
<th>Efu</th>
<th>Masra</th>
<th>no</th>
<th>ben</th>
<th>seni</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>if</td>
<td>Lord</td>
<td>NEG</td>
<td>PAST</td>
<td>send</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yu</td>
<td>gi</td>
<td>mi,</td>
<td>fa</td>
<td>mi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUBJ.2SG</td>
<td>for</td>
<td>OBJ.1SG</td>
<td>how</td>
<td>SUBJ.1SG</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ben</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>du?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAST</td>
<td>IPFV</td>
<td>do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

‘If the Lord hadn’t send you to me, what would I do?’
Previous analyses of the unmarked verb form

- ‘*ben* + zero + stem’ = past perfective? → Not always the case

Imperfective readings *are* possible:

b) ‘*ben* + zero + stem’ in anaphoric contexts:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(8) } & \quad \text{Dan} & \quad \text{omeni} & \quad \text{yari} & \quad a \\
& \quad \text{then} & \quad \text{how}.\text{many} & \quad \text{year} & \quad \text{SUBJ}.3\text{SG}
\end{align*}
\]

\[\text{**ben** } \quad \text{abi?}\]

PAST have

‘So how old was he?’ (Winford 2000: 404)
ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS: ZERO AS A MARKER OF PRESENT TENSE

At the most schematic level of definition, tense markers indicate epistemic distance and are thus modal (cf. Langacker 1991):

The present versus past distinction is seen as a basically epistemic distinction between immediate reality (IR) and non-immediate reality (NIR).

In Sranan: zero → situation in IR; *ben* → situation in NIR

Prototypical temporal interpretations at a more specific, less basic level.
ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS: ZERO AS A MARKER OF PRESENT TENSE

- Hypothesis: at the temporal level, a present-tense marker (such as zero) indicates full and exact coincidence with the time of speaking (Langacker 1991: Chapter 6, 2001)
ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS: ZERO AS A MARKER OF PRESENT TENSE

- Stative situations: contractible

  e.g. *sabi* ('know')

  ![Diagram showing full and exact coincidence between the time of speaking and a representative part of stative situation.]

  - Full and exact coincidence between the time of speaking and a *representative part* of stative situation.
**ALTERNATIVE ANALYSIS: ZERO AS A MARKER OF PRESENT TENSE**

- Epistemic and durational problems with dynamic events in the present: hardly ever full and exact coincidence (Langacker 2001)

- Distribution of zero (and e) as a result of this conceptual incompatibility
SOLUTIONS TO THE EPISTEMIC AND DURATIONAL PROBLEMS

Solution 1: The epistemic and durational problems are avoided by assigning a (temporally) ‘non-present’ interpretation to unmarked dynamic verbs.

- Past perfective: no coincidence with the speech event, yet the situation is still in IR, as opposed to past situations referred to by *ben*.
  - Zero involves situations in the recent past, situations that are brought to the fore, etc., whereas *ben* has a (subjective) distancing effect (e.g., past before past, remote past).
SOLUTIONS TO THE EPISTEMIC AND DURATIONAL PROBLEMS

○ Solution 1: The epistemic and durational problems are avoided by assigning a (temporally) ‘non-present’ interpretation to unmarked dynamic verbs

• Present perfect: temporal coincidence between the resultant end-state of the past event and the present, via contractibility (cf. Brisard & Meeuwis 2009). Past event has present relevance and is thus part of IR.
SOLUTIONS TO THE EPISTEMIC AND DURATIONAL PROBLEMS

- Solution 1: The epistemic and durational problems are avoided by assigning a (temporally) ‘non-present’ interpretation to unmarked dynamic verbs

- Non-counterfactual conditional: condition construed as if it were present (= part of IR). Again no compatibility problems with the present. *Ben*, used in counterfactuals and other irrealis contexts, indicates that a situation is not viewed as part of the speaker’s immediate reality.
SOLUTIONS TO THE EPISTEMIC AND DURATIONAL PROBLEMS

Solution 2: by means of e, the originally bounded and heterogeneous situation is *imperfectivized* → this enables coincidence with the present:

[Diagram showing MS and IS1]
SOLUTIONS TO THE EPISTEMIC AND DURATIONAL PROBLEMS

Solution 2: by means of e, the originally bounded and heterogeneous situation is *imperfectivized* \(\rightarrow\) this enables coincidence with the present:

![Diagram showing time and IS1, IS2, MS, t]
**Conclusion**

- Sranan, like other creole languages, exhibits a remarkable polyfunctionality of the unmarked verb form.

- In our study, the unmarked verb form is analyzed as a present-tense marker, whereby ‘present tense’ is considered to be a basically *epistemic* category.

- At the epistemic level, all zero-marked situations are located in the speaker’s immediate reality.

- At the temporal level, coincidence with the present is impossible in the case of dynamic verbs. Various strategies have been developed to avoid this problem, while still allowing an (epistemically) present interpretation: no coincidence (but foregrounding), coincidence with the resultant state, virtual coincidence and imperfectivization.
GRANTANGI!
REFERENCES


Langacker, Ronald W.


Seuren, Pieter A.M.

