Mengaka tense-aspect system

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Abstract

This paper has one main goal: to provide a first description of the tense-aspect system of Mengaka. The paper indicates that Mengaka shows various tenses (past tenses, a present tense, a future tense) and aspects (perfective, habitual, progressive). Furthermore, the dividing lines between the degrees of past in Mengaka appear to be at least basically rigid. It is also argued in this paper that the tense-aspect system of Mengaka can be analysed as operating according to twelve tense-aspect categories. These categories may have one or more than one basic use. Also, they may be manifested by any of the following: the lack of a tense and an aspect marking, a tonal alternation, a free-standing marker or the use of a construction which may include tense and/or aspect markers and a nasal verb prefix.

Keywords: Mengaka, Grassfields, tense, aspect, language description

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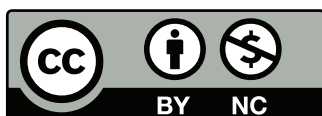
1. Introduction

Mengaka is a Grassfields language spoken mainly in two villages (Bagam and Bamendjing) that are located in the Bamboutos division of the West Region of Cameroon. Approximately 42,000 people speak Mengaka (Joshua Project). Also, as indicated by Seguin (1993: 3), Mengaka speakers speak a single homogeneous language, with no reported variations in pronunciation or vocabulary. Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig (2019) classify Mengaka as follows: Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benue-Congo, Bantoid, Southern, Wide Grassfields, Narrow Grassfields, Mbam-Nkam, Bamileke.

In this paper, I propose a first description of the tense-aspect system of Mengaka.[1] The discussion in the paper is restricted to declarative verbal main clauses which are in the positive form. The paper is organised as follows: section 1 provides relevant background information on Mengaka and indicates the aim of the paper. Section 2 briefly discusses the basic ordering of elements within the declarative verbal main clause. Section 3 provides a broad overview of the Mengaka tense-aspect system. In section 4, I discuss in detail each individual tense-aspect category. Section 5 concludes the discussion in the paper by summarising its major findings.

2. On the structure of the declarative verbal main clause in Mengaka

Excluding elements such as negative markers, adverbs, prepositional phrases or multi-verb main clauses,[2] the basic ordering of elements within the declarative verbal main clause in Mengaka may be schematised as follows:[3]

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
SBJ	TNS	ASP	Ń-	Root	-EXT	-SUFF	TNS	-ASP	OBJ

Position 1. This position is occupied by the subject of the clause. This might be a pronominal or a nominal subject. It will be shown in section 4 below that the category of tense may be signalled by a tone alternation on the subject in Mengaka.

Position 2. Position 2 may be occupied by past or future tense markers. For example, the remote past marker **kà**, the future marker **ní/dɛ́**.

Position 3. This slot may be occupied by an aspect marker. Only free-standing aspect markers may be found here.

Position 4. Position 4 may be occupied by a nasal consonant prefix that appears in most tense-aspect constructions. This nasal prefix, which is symbolized by the archiphoneme 'Ń-' through-

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[1] A review of the literature reveals that while there is no previous study on the tense-aspect system of Mengaka, some linguistic research has been carried out on Mengaka. This includes studies on: (1) the sound system (Johnston & Malcolm 1921, Feussi 1991, Konrad 1999, Rovenchak 2009), (2) sociolinguistics (Richardson 1957, Seguin 1993, Joshua Project), and (3) a study on numerals (Malcom 1920).

[2] This refers to main clauses with more than one verb which are conceptualised as describing a single event.

[3] Abbreviations used in this paper are as follows: 3s: third person singular pronoun, ASP/A: aspect (grammatical category), C: consonant, -EXT: verbal extension, FUT: future, HAB: habitual, H_PST: hodiernal past, INF: infinitive, IPFV: imperfective, ń-: nasal verb prefix, N_PST: near past, OBJ: object, PROG: progressive, PRS: present, PST: past, R_PST: remote past, SBJ: subject of the clause, -SUFF: suffix, TNS/T: tense (grammatical category), UTA: unmarked tense-aspect, V: Vowel, vb: verb.

out this paper, always bears a high tone and is attached to the verb. Moreover, it is homorganic with the consonant it follows. That is, the nasal and the consonant following the nasal have the same place of articulation, and this is attributed to a place feature assimilation of the nasal to the following consonant. Also, the presence of the nasal prefix before the verb may occasion the consonant alternation of the initial consonant of the verb. For example, the verb-initial consonant [ɣ] alternates with [g] when the verb takes a nasal consonant prefix. I propose that the fricative /ɣ/ is the phoneme and that it becomes [g] by a spreading of occlusion from the nasal prefix to the verb-initial consonant. However, further research has to be carried out on the phonological system of Mengaka to check this proposal.[4] A striking fact about the nasal prefix discussed here is that its function(s) is/are still unclear. I therefore simply gloss it as 'Ń-'. Research on the diachronic source of the nasal consonant prefix in Mengaka, as well as in related languages where a nasal prefix occurs that is very similar in form to the nasal prefix discussed in this paper,[5] might help to shed light on its function(s). However, this will not be covered in the present study. Example (1) below displays the nasal prefix in a clause.

(1) à   tsé   ŋ́gə̀bə́   mèkrə́
     à   tsé   Ń-ɣə̀p-ə́   mèkrə́
     3s   PROG   Ń-distribute-IPFV   fritters
     'S/he is distributing fritters.' (now)

Position 5. Position 5 may be filled by the verb root. Verb roots in Mengaka are mainly mono-syllabic, with one of the following two major syllable structures: CV, for example, **fú** 'read', **mè** 'finish' and CVC, for example, **ɣə̀p** 'distribute', **fáʔ** 'cultivate'. Two classes of verb roots may be distinguished in Mengaka on the basis of their lexical tones: high and low tone verb roots.

Position 6. This position may be occupied by a verbal extension. From an examination of about 100 verbs, I have been able to identify one verbal extension in Mengaka, namely **-rV**, where 'V' represents a copy of the verb root vowel. This verbal extension seems to indicate the repetition of the action described. For example, the verb **tsə́** 'cut' becomes **tsə́rə́** 'cut several times', with the addition of the extension **-rV**.

Position 7. This position may be occupied by the verb suffix **-nè**. The verb suffix **-nè** is attached to the verb root or verb stem (verb root + extension) to form the non-finite form of the verb. This refers to the form of the verb which does not co-occur with grammatical markers, such as tense or aspect markers and is not the main verb in a clause. This is illustrated in the following example:

(2) à   zjə̌   tsə́nè
     à   zjə̌   tsə́-nè   (lexical tone of the main verb: **zjɛ̀**)
     3s   cut.H_PST   cut-INf
     'S/he has started to cut.'

In example (2), the finite verb is **zjə̌** 'has started', while the non-finite verb is **tsə́nè** 'cut'. As can be observed from the glossing, the verb suffix is glossed as '-INF', that is, infinitive marker. I propose this form of the verb as the one which should appear in a dictionary. Note that the

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verb suffix **-nè** surfaced consistently in the list of verbs I collected in isolation. In other words, the language consultants I worked with always added it at the end of the verb root or verb stem when asked about the verb corresponding to a given action in their language.

Position 8. Position 8 may be occupied by a future tense marker which is realised on the verb.

Position 9. This position may be filled by the underlying high tone imperfective verb suffix. Verbs may take an imperfective verb suffix in Mengaka. Also, two forms of the imperfective suffix occur in Mengaka. One of them, namely vowel-lengthening, is used when the verb has an open syllable structure (CV). It involves the lengthening of the vowel of the verb and the alternation of the tone of the lengthened vowel into a high tone. The second form, namely vowel-copying, is used when the verb has a closed syllable structure (CVC). It involves the copying of the vowel of the verb after the verb-final consonant and the alternation of the tone of the copied vowel into a high tone. Interestingly, the high tone carried by the lengthened vowel may provoke the modification of the tone of the verb root as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Influence of the tone of the imperfective marker on the tone of the verb in Mengaka.*

Underlying high tone verbs	Underlying low tone verbs
fú 'read' + **ú** → [fú:]	**fì** 'warm' + **í** → [fǐ:]
fáʔ 'cultivate' + **á** → [fáʔá]	**ɣə̀p** 'distribute' + ə́ → [ɣə̀bə́]

As can be observed from Table 1, when the verb has a lexical low tone, the tone of the verb and the high tone of the imperfective suffix merge into a low high tone. The imperfective verb suffix in Mengaka is closely similar in form and function to the "echo vowels' in Ngiemboon-Bamileke discussed by Anderson (2008: 5). Also, it may be used alone to express the habitual meaning or in combination with the habitual or progressive marker to convey the habitual or progressive meaning.

Position 10. This position may contain the object of the clause. This might be a nominal or a pronominal object.

3. Overview of the Mengaka tense-aspect system

Comrie provides the following definitions for the grammatical categories of tense and aspect: "tense is grammaticalised expression of location in time" (Comrie 1985:9) and "aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation" (Comrie 1976: 3). Taking as a basis Comrie's definition of tense and aspect, the term *tense* is used in this study to refer to location of a situation[6] in time in relation to a reference point, which is most typically the moment of speech, and *aspect* refers to the representation of the internal temporal structure of a situation.

From an analysis of the material collected,[7] it appears that Mengaka distinguishes three

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[6] The term 'situation' is used throughout this paper to refer to an action or a state.

[7] The data analysed were gathered through one principal method, namely, working sessions with language consultants in Bagam (one of the two villages where Mengaka is mainly spoken). These working sessions were guided by one main tool, namely, a questionnaire constructed on the basis of a questionnaire developed by Dahl

past tenses (hodiernal past,[8] near past, remote past), a present tense, and a future tense. In the aspectual domain, a three-way division is observed in Mengaka: perfective,[9] habitual, and progressive. Also, the tense-aspect system of Mengaka can be analysed as operating according to twelve tense-aspect categories. These categories may have one or more than one basic use, which is contrasted against secondary uses.[10] Also, Mengaka's tense-aspect categories may be manifested by any of the following: the lack of a tense and an aspect marking, a tonal alternation, a free-standing marker or the use of a construction which may include tense and/or aspect markers and a nasal verb prefix.

The twelve tense-aspect categories are as follows: Hodiernal Past[11] (H_PST), Hodiernal Past Progressive (H_PST PROG), Near Past (N_PST), Near Past Progressive (N_PST PROG), Remote Past (R_PST), Remote Past Progressive (R_PST PROG), Past Habitual (PST HAB), Progressive (PROG), Present Habitual (PRS HAB), Future (FUT), Future Progressive (FUT PROG), Future Habitual (FUT HAB), and Unmarked Tense-Aspect (UTA).

All tenses, except the present tense, are overtly marked. Also, all aspects except the perfective are overtly marked.[12] Worthy of note is that no free-standing tense/aspect marker appears after the verb. Also, the nasal prefix that appears in most tense-aspect constructions is not analysed as a tense/aspect marker, but it must accompany some tense/aspect markers. Some of the tense-aspect constructions found in Mengaka clearly include both tense and aspect markers. When occurring together, tense markers always precede aspect markers.

Another interesting fact about the tense-aspect system of Mengaka is that the dividing lines between the various degrees of past tense (hodiernal past, near past, remote past) appear to be at least basically rigid.[13] While in certain languages, for example, Sotho (Comrie 1985: 90-91), it is possible to combine any past tense marker with any past time adverbial without giving rise to ungrammaticality, in Mengaka, there appears to be a co-occurrence restriction

(1985). The language consultants were instructed to orally produce in their native language the appropriate sentences from the questionnaire, taking as basis a context indicated within square brackets.

[8] The name 'hodiernal past', is derived from the Latin word ***hodie***, 'today' (Dahl 1985: 125).

[9] Comrie (1976: 16) points out that there are some misleading characterisations of the perfective that frequently appear in the general linguistic literature on aspect, as well as grammars of individual languages. For example, the claim that the perfective describes a completed/terminated action is inadequate in that some languages (e.g. Russian) distinguish a future perfective (a future situation has not yet occurred and, thus, cannot be viewed as completed). In this paper, a situation is regarded as perfective when there is no explicit reference to its internal temporal structure. In other words, no information is provided about its unfolding.

[10] The material available for this study made it possible to describe mainly the basic use(s) of the tense-aspect categories identified. This refers to the use(s) derived from the structural (as opposed to contextual) linguistic environment of tense-aspect markings. An instance of structural linguistic environment of a tense-aspect marking is the words with which the tense-aspect marking co-occurs or may co-occur. For example, it co-occurs or may co-occur with a time expression, such as 'today', 'tomorrow', 'yesterday' or 'last week'.

[11] In this paper, initial capitalisation is used when writing tense-aspect category labels. This is to make a distinction between tense-aspect categories and tense-aspect values or markings.

[12] When considering other Grassfields languages, it appears that the absence of a clearly identifiable present tense or a perfective marker in Mengaka is not extraordinary. The Babanki language, a Grassfields language of Northwestern Cameroon (Akumbu & Chibaka 2012: 151-160), for instance, does not have an overt marking for the present tense and the perfective aspect.

[13] In his cross-linguistic study of the tense category, Comrie (1985: 90-91) notes that while in some languages the dividing line between various degrees of remoteness distinctions is fairly rigid (e.g. in Haya, a Northeast Bantu language, the yesterday past must and can only be used for situations that occurred yesterday), in others, it is flexible/fluid (e.g. in Sotho, a Southern Bantu language, it seems possible to combine any past tense with any past time adverbial without giving rise to ungrammaticality, since distinctions of temporal distance are subjective rather than objective).

that operates between remoteness (tense) markers and the time adverbials that they allow. The combination of, for instance, the hodiernal past tense marker with the adverb 'yesterday' in a clause results in an ungrammatical clause. Similarly, the combination of the near past marker with the time adverbial 'last year' results in an ungrammatical clause. Also, the delimitations or divisions between the degrees of past tense appear to be precise. Each degree of past tense is somewhat related to a clear time interval or measure. For example, the Remote Past tense is clearly related to the time interval 'a month ago or any time before that'. However, it is important to point out that the remoteness markings in Mengaka may have extended functions that seem to be controlled by various factors, such as the discourse context in which they occur (for example, they occur in stories), or subjective elements (for example, how the speaker perceives or wants the listener to perceive the situation described). For example, there is the possibility for the speaker to refer to a situation as close, even if in reality it is remote (see 4.2 below). The precise limits of the rigidity of temporal reference, as well as the extended or special uses of the remoteness markings in Mengaka, require further exploration.

It is also worth noting that based on peculiarities regarding the use of the tense-aspect categories (see 4.9 and 4.12 below), Mengaka verbs may be sub-divided into two types:[14] dynamic verbs, for example, **twɔ́** 'go out, leave', **fáʔ** 'cultivate' and stative verbs, for example, **ɣɛ́** 'be large, be big', **kʰóʔ** 'be small'. A detailed discussion of the tense-aspect categories in Mengaka is provided in section 4 below.

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[14] These two types of verbs are sufficient for the scope of this paper. However, a more fine-grained sub-grouping of verbs in Mengaka would certainly be possible.

4. Tense-aspect categories in Mengaka

The markings used to encode the tense-aspect categories identified in Mengaka are shown in the overview in Table 2 below.

Table 2. *Tense-aspect markings in Mengaka.*[15]

Label		T marker	A marker	Ń-	Verb	T marker	A marker
Hodiernal Past		LH tone			vb		
Hodiernal Past	Progressive	**bɛ̌**	**tsé**	Ń-	vb		-VL^H, -VC^H
Near Past		HL tone		Ń-	vb		
Near Past	Progressive	HL tone	**tsé**	Ń-	vb		-VL^H, -VC^H
Remote Past		**kà**			vb		
Remote Past	Progressive	**kà**	**tsé**	Ń-	vb		-VL^H, -VC^H
Past	Habitual	**kà**			vb		-VL^H, -VC^H
Progressive			**tsé**	Ń-	vb		-VL^H, -VC^H
Present Habitual			**dɛ̀**	Ń-	vb		-VL^H, -VC^H
Future		H tone **ní/dɛ́**		Ń-	vb	H tone	
Future	Progressive	H tone **ní/dɛ́**	**tsé**	Ń-	vb	H tone	-VL^H, -VC^H
Future	Habitual	H tone **ní/dɛ́**		Ń-	vb	H tone	-VL^H, -VC^H
Unmarked Tense-Aspect					vb		

4.1 Hodiernal Past (H_PST) LH tone vb

The Hodiernal Past is indicated by a tone alternation on the verb. More precisely, the lexical tone of the only or last vowel of the verb is realised as a low high tone at the level of the surface structure. It typically describes a past perfective situation of the day of speaking, as in the sentence:

(3) **à** **ɣǒp** **mèkrɔ́** (lexical tone of the verb: **ɣɔ̀p**)
  3s distribute.H_PST fritters
  'S/he distributed fritters.' (today)

The Hodiernal Past may also be used to describe an activity whose end is interpreted as just having occurred. Furthermore, it may serve to present a current state as being the result of some

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[15] In this table, -VL means vowel-lengthening, -VC vowel-copying, LH low high tone, HL high low tone, H high tone. The slash (/) indicates a choice between formally distinct tense markers. Variants of the same marker are separated by a comma (,).

past situation. This is shown in the following examples:

(4) **à**   **ɣɞ̌p**   **mèkrɔ́**   (lexical tone of the verb: **ɣɔ̀p**)
3s   distribute.H_PST   fritters
'He has distributed fritters.' (the speaker is talking about something his brother has just done)

(5) **à**   **fǎʔ**   **ŋ̀gɔ̀sáŋ**   (lexical tone of the verb: **fáʔ**)
3s   cultivate.H_PST   maize
'He has cultivated maize.' (the speaker gives an explanation for the fact that his brother looks very tired)

In example (4), the Hodiernal Past is employed to describe an activity that has just ended, whereas in (5), it presents a current state as being the result of a past situation. The uses of the Hodiernal Past in examples (4) and (5) can be said to be similar to two functions commonly associated with the perfect: the perfect of recent past (as in example 4) and the perfect of result (as in example 5). One can, therefore, posit that the absence of a specifically Perfect category in Mengaka is due to the fact that most of the functions commonly expressed using the Perfect in other languages, for example, in English, are expressed using the Hodiernal Past in Mengaka. It is worth mentioning that I did not find other markers or auxiliaries in my data that emphasize that a situation 'just' happened. When considering the lexical tone of the verb in examples (3), (4), and (5), it appears that the lexical tone contrast between high and low tone verbs is neutralised. In other words, lexical high and low tone verbs surface as high low tone verbs. One can, therefore, say that a process of tonal neutralisation on verbs occurs in the Hodiernal Past in Mengaka.

4.2 Hodiernal Past Progressive (H_PST PROG) **bɛ̌ tsé** Ń-vb-VL^H, -VC^H

The Hodiernal Past Progressive is expressed by a construction which consists of three pre-verbal elements and the underlying high tone imperfective verb suffix (**-VL^H, -VC^H**). The pre-verbal elements are the hodiernal past marker **bɛ̌**, which is considered as a grammatically conditioned allomorph[16] of the tonal alternation described in 4.1 above, the progressive marker **tsé**, and the nasal verb prefix ń-, in that order. The Hodiernal Past Progressive is used to describe situations which were ongoing on the day of the utterance, but before the moment of speaking. The Hodiernal Past Progressive also appears to be frequently used to describe a remote past progressive situation. That is, it is used to describe a situation that was ongoing one month ago or any time before that time, if the speaker is telling a story and wants to make a remote past situation seem a bit more temporally near.

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[16] The marker **bɛ̌** and the tonal alternation that indicates the Hodiernal Past (see 4.1) are considered as grammatically conditioned allomorphs due to the fact that their selection is determined by a grammatical feature, namely, whether the tense-aspect construction contains a progressive marker or not.

(6) à   bɛ̌   tsé   ɴ́tʃǐ: mèkrɘ́
     à   bɛ̌   tsé   ɴ́-tʃí-í   mèkrɘ́
     3s   H_PST   PROG   ɴ́-fry-IPFV   fritters
     'S/he was frying fritters.' (today)

(7) kxɥòjɛ́   mòtô   bɛ̌   tsé   ɴ́twɔ̌:
     kxɥòjɛ́   mòtô   bɛ̌   tsé   ɴ́-twɔ̀-ɔ́
     when   motorbike   H_PST   PROG   ɴ́-go.out-IPFV
     'when (as the story goes) a motorbike was going out.'

In example (6), the Hodiernal Past describes an action that was ongoing on the day of the utterance, but before the time of speaking, whereas, in (7), it refers to a remote past progressive situation.

4.3 Near Past (N_PST) HL tone ɴ́- vb

The Near Past is indicated by a tone alternation on the subject pronoun or noun preceding the verb. More concretely, the lexical tone of the only or last vowel of the subject pronoun or noun preceding the verb is realised as a high low tone at the level of the surface structure. Also, the verb takes a nasal verb prefix (ɴ́-). The Near Past is used to describe past perfective situations that took place less than one month before the moment of speech, except situations that occurred on the day the utterance of the speaker is made.

(8) â   ŋ́gɘ̀p   mèkrɘ́
     â   ɴ́-ɣɘ̀p   mèkrɘ́   (lexical tone of the subject pronoun: à)
     3s.N_PST   ɴ́-distribute   fritters
     'S/he distributed fritters.' (yesterday or some time before yesterday)

(9) â   ɴ́tʃǐ   mèkrɘ́
     â   ɴ́-tʃí   mèkrɘ́   (lexical tone of the subject pronoun: à)
     3s.N_PST   ɴ́-fry   fritters
     'S/he fried fritters.' (yesterday or some time before yesterday)

4.4 Near Past Progressive (N_PST PROG) HL tone tsé ɴ́-vb-VLᴴ, -VCᴴ

The Near Past Progressive is expressed by a construction which consists of three pre-verbal elements and the underlying high tone imperfective verb suffix (-VLᴴ, -VCᴴ). The pre-verbal elements are the near past marker (see 4.3 above), the progressive marker **tsé**, and the nasal verb prefix ɴ́-, in that order. The Near Past Progressive is used to describe situations which were ongoing in the near past, that is, less than one month before the moment of speech, except on

the day the utterance of the speaker is made.

(10)   â   tsé   ŋ́gɔ̀bɔ́   mèkrɔ́
       â   tsé   Ń-ɣɔ̀p-ɔ́   mèkrɔ́   (lexical tone of the pronoun: **à**)
       3s.N_Pst PROG   Ń-distribute-IPFV   fritters
       'S/he was distributing fritters.' (yesterday or some time before yesterday)

(11)   â   tsé   ńtʃĭː   mèkrɔ́
       â   tsé   Ń-tʃĭ-í   mèkrɔ́   (lexical tone of the subject pronoun: à)
       3S.N_PST PROG   Ń-fry-IPFV   fritters
       'S/he was frying fritters.' (yesterday or some time before yesterday)

4.5 Remote Past (R_PST) **kà** vb

The Remote Past is expressed by the marker **kà**, which precedes the verb. It is used to describe past perfective situations which took place either a month ago or any time before that, as in the following sentences:

(12)   à   kà   ɣɔ̀p   mèkrɔ́
       3s   R_PST   distribute   fritters
       'S/he distributed fritters.' (a month ago or any time before that time)

(13)   à   kà   fáʔ   ŋ̀gɔ̀sáŋ
       3s   R_PST   cultivate   maize
       'S/he cultivated maize.' (a month ago or any time before that time)

The Remote Past is frequently used at the beginning of narratives, where it temporally locates the narrative in the past. Interestingly, this is the only tense-aspect category where no tonal change is observed, whether on the verb or the subject. Also, the remote past marker (**kà**) seems to have cognates in other Bamileke languages. For instance, it is very similar in form to the Yesterday Past marker **kà** in Bamileke-Ngiemboon (Anderson 1983: 263) and the Non-Recent-Past marker **ka**…´ in Ngomba (Satre 2002: 10).

4.6 Remote Past Progressive (R_PST PROG) **kà tsé** Ń-vb-VL[H], -VC[H]

The Remote Past Progressive is expressed by a construction which consists of three pre-verbal elements and the underlying high tone imperfective verb suffix (VL[H], -VC[H]). The pre-verbal elements are the remote past marker **kà**, the progressive marker **tsé**, and the nasal verb prefix Ń-, in that order. The Remote Past Progressive is used to describe situations which were ongoing in the remote past, that is, one month ago or any time before that.

(14) **à**   **kà**   **tsé**   **ŋ́gə̀bə́**   **mèkrə́**

     à̀   **kà**   **tsé**   **Ń-ɣə̀p-ə́**   **mèkrə́**

     3s   R_PST   PROG   Ń-distribute-IPFV   fritters

     'S/he was distributing fritters.' (a month ago or any time before that time)

(15) **à**   **kà**   **tsé**   **ńʧí:**   **mèkrə́**

     à   **kà**   **tsé**   **Ń-ʧí-í**   **mèkrə́**

     3s   R_PST   PROG   Ń-fry-IPFV   fritters

     'S/he was frying fritters.' (a month ago or any time before that time)

4.7 Past Habitual (PST HAB) **kà** vb-vL^H, -vc^H

The Past Habitual is expressed by a pre-verbal element, namely the remote past marker **kà** and the underlying high tone imperfective verb suffix (-**vL^H**, -**vc^H**). It is used to describe past habitual situations.

(16) **à**   **kà**   **fáʔá**   **ŋ̀gə̀sáŋ**

     à   **kà**   **fáʔ-á**   **ŋ̀gə̀sáŋ**

     3s   R_PST   cultivate-IPFV   maize

     'S/he used to cultivate maize.'

An observation that can be made here is that Mengaka has three distinct past progressive categories but only one Past Habitual. Also, the past habitual construction includes the remote past marker (as opposed to the hodiernal or the near past marker). This suggests that past habitual situations in Mengaka concerned only remote past situations. In fact, it came out of my discussion with the language consultants that only remote past situations may be perceived as habitual in Mengaka. One can, therefore, say that just like in Kerebe, a Bantu language of Tanzania (Nurse 2008: 144), the degrees of remoteness in the past (for example, near past versus remote past) are neutralised with the habitual in Mengaka, which focuses on the remote past. This is certainly due to the fact that an event which has occurred over a short period of time – that is, today or a few weeks ago – is not easily seen as habitual.

4.8 Progressive (PROG) **tsé** Ń-vb-vL^H, -vc^H

The Progressive is expressed by a construction which consists of two pre-verbal elements and the underlying high tone imperfective verb suffix (**vL^H**, -**vc^H**). The pre-verbal elements are the progressive marker **tsé** and the nasal verb prefix Ń-, in that order. The Progressive is used to describe present progressive situations. This means that, when not co-occurring with an overt tense marking, the progressive construction does not merely express progressive meaning, but also present tense meaning. Also, the situation referred to may be ongoing at or around the moment of speech.

(17) à   tsé   ŋ́gə̀bə́   mèkrə́
      à   tsé   Ń-ɣə̀p-ə́   mèkrə́
      3s   PROG   Ń-distribute-IPFV fritters
      'S/he is distributing fritters.' (now)

(18) à   tsé   ŋ́gɛ́:
      à   tsé   Ń-ɣɛ́-ɛ́
      3s   PROG   Ń-be.big-IPFV
      'S/he is putting on weight.'

In example (17), the Progressive describes a situation that is ongoing at the moment of speech, whereas in (18), it describes a situation in progress around the time of speaking, or gradually advancing. Worthy of note is that the progressive construction may be used with both dynamic and stative verbs in Mengaka (see example 17 for an illustration of the co-occurrence of the progressive construction with a dynamic verb and example 18 for an illustration of the co-occurrence of the progressive construction with a stative verb).

4.9 Present Habitual (PRS HAB) dɛ̀ Ń-vb-VL^H, -VC^H

The Present Habitual is indicated by a construction which consists of two pre-verbal elements and the underlying high tone imperfective verb suffix (VL^H, -VC^H). The pre-verbal elements are the present habitual marker **dɛ̀** and the nasal verb prefix ń-, in that order. The Present Habitual is used to describe situations performed or observed on multiple occasions over an extended period of time. Also, the Present Habitual implies that the situation described still holds true at the moment of speech.

(19) à   dɛ̀   ńtʃí: mèkrə́
      à   dɛ̀   Ń-tʃí-í   mèkrə́
      3s   PRS.HAB Ń-fry-IPFV   fritters
      'S/he fries fritters.' (usually)

Interestingly, the present habitual marker (**dɛ̀**) is exclusively used to describe present habitual situations. That is, it cannot be used with other tense morphology to describe a past habitual situation or to express the fact that an action is going to be performed on a regular basis. In his analysis of tense/aspect and verbal negation in Ngomba, a Grassfields language of the Bamileke group, Satre (2002: 20) notes that there are only a few languages in the world that distinguish a present habitual marker (as opposed to a habitual marker that works with all tenses or a habitual marker that is specifically used to describe past habitual situations).

4.10 Future (FUT) H tone **ní/dɛ́** ń-vb-H tone

The Future is indicated by three pre-verbal elements and a high tone alternation on the only or last vowel of the verb. The pre-verbal elements are a high tone alternation on the only or last vowel of the subject pronoun or noun preceding the verb, the future marker **ní/dɛ́**, and the nasal verb prefix **ń-**, in that order. The Future is used to describe any future perfective situation. Where necessary, time adverbials are used to pinpoint the event location in time. Recall that a situation is considered as perfective in this study when there is no explicit reference to its internal temporal structure. In other words, no information is provided about its unfolding.

(20)　**á**　　　**ní/dɛ́**　**ŋgə́p**　　　　**mèkrɔ́**
　　　á　　　**ní/dɛ́**　**ń-ɣə́p**　　　　**mèkrɔ́**　　(lexical tone subject and verb: **à**, **ɣə̀p**)
　　　3s.FUT　FUT　ń-distribute.FUT　fritters
　　　'S/he is going to distribute fritters.'

(21)　**á**　　　**ní/dɛ́**　**ńʧí**　　**mèkrɔ́**
　　　á　　　**ní/dɛ́**　**ń-ʧí**　　**mèkrɔ́**　　(lexical tone subject and verb: **à**, **ʧí**)
　　　3s.FUT　FUT　ń-fry　maize
　　　'S/he is going to fry fritters.'

When considering the lexical tone of the verb in examples (20) and (21), it appears that just like in the Hodiernal Past discussed in 4.1 above, a process of tonal neutralisation on verbs occurs in the Future. In other words, the lexical tone contrast between high and low tone verbs is neutralised. However, while in the Hodiernal Past underlying high and low tone verbs surface as low high tone verbs, in the Future, underlying high and low tone verbs surface as high tone verbs. The tonal neutralisation observed in the Future is also displayed in the Future Habitual (4.12) and the Future Progressive (4.11).

　　　It emerged from discussions with language consultants that the future marker **ní** is formally identical to a verb which has full lexical meaning in Mengaka, namely **ní** 'go'. This suggests that just like in many languages of the world, for example, the Danish language of the Indo-European family, the Mwera language of the Niger-Congo family, the Margi language of the Afro-Asiatic family, and many others (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994: 267), the future markers in Mengaka historically developed from the grammaticalization of movement verbs. Another interesting fact that came out of my discussion with language consultants with respect to the Future is that there is a kind of certainty associated with the Future in Mengaka. In other words, the use of the future construction by a speaker implies that the situation referred to is conceived of as definite or certain at the time of speaking.

4.11 Future Progressive (FUT PROG) H tone **ní/dɛ́ tsé** ń-vb-H tone -vL^H, -vc^H

The Future Progressive is expressed by a combination of the future marker (see 4.10 above), the progressive marker **tsé**, and the imperfective high tone verb suffix (**vL^H**, **-vc^H**). It is used to describe situations that will be in progress at a certain time in the future, unrestricted with regard to temporal distance.

(22) á   ní/dɛ́ tsé   ŋ́gə́bə́   mèkrə́
      á   ní/dɛ́ tsé   Ń-ɣə́p-ə́   mèkrə́ (lexical tone subject and verb:
                                                     à, **ɣə̀p**)

      3s.FUT FUT   PROG Ń-distribute.FUT-IPFV fritters
      'S/he is going to be distributing fritters.'

(23) á   ní/dɛ́ tsé   ńʧǐ: mèkrə́
      á   ní/dɛ́ tsé   Ń-ʧǐ-í   mèkrə́ (lexical tone subject and verb:
                                                     à, **ʧǐ**)

      3s.FUT FUT   PROG Ń-fry.FUT-IPFV   fritters
      'S/he is going to be frying fritters.'

4.12 Future Habitual (FUT HAB) H tone ní/dɛ́ Ń-vb-H tone -VLᴴ, -VCᴴ

The Future Habitual is indicated by a combination of the future marker (see 4.10 above) and the imperfective high tone verb suffix (**VLᴴ, -VCᴴ**). It is used to express the fact that an action is going to be performed on a regular basis or routinely.

(24) á   ní/dɛ́ ŋ́gə́bə́   mèkrə́
      á   ní/dɛ́ Ń-ɣə́p-ə́   mèkrə́   (lexical tone subject and verb:
                                                     à, **ɣə̀p**)

      3s.FUT FUT   Ń-distribute.FUT-IPFV fritters
      S/he is going to distribute fritters.' (routinely)

(25) á   ní/dɛ́ ŋ́fá ʔá   ŋ̀gə̀sáŋ
      á   ní/dɛ́ Ń-fáʔ-á   ŋ̀gə̀sáŋ   (lexical tone subject and verb: **à**, **fáʔ**)

      3s.FUT FUT   Ń-cultivate.FUT-IPFV maize
      'S/he is going to cultivate maize.' (routinely)

4.13 Unmarked Tense-Aspect (UTA) Ø vb

Unmarked Tense-Aspect is marked for neither tense nor aspect. It is signalled in the transcription by an empty set symbol 'Ø' before the verb. Unmarked Tense-Aspect has a present state interpretation with stative predicates. It may also be used in discourse (narration, description, exposition, etc.) to replace a tense-aspect marking already employed either explicitly, that is, using an explicit tense-aspect marking, or implicitly, that is, without any tense-aspect marking, since the speech-act participants already know the context. Unmarked Tense-Aspect, thus, has relative time reference in discourse. This means that the reference point for the location of situations in time is not the moment of speech, but rather the previous situation. At the current stage of research, the use of Unmarked Tense-aspect to replace a construction already employed has

only been observed with dynamic verbs.

(26) à   Ø   ɣέ
     3s   UTA   be.big
     'It is big.' (the speaker is talking about his house)

(27)

â	tsé	ńnì:	zɔ̂	ǹʧjέ	m̀vɛ̂	Ø	tsí	kwé	mé
â	tsé	Ń-nì-ì	zɔ̂	ǹʧjέ	m̀vɛ̂	Ø	tsí	kwé	mé
3s.N_PST	PROG	Ń-walk-IPFV	in	forest	suddenly	UTA	put	leg	his

'He was walking in the forest, suddenly, he put his leg (=stepped)

nú	nɔ́	nɔ́	Ø	nwɔ́	wé	à	Ø	jɔ́	tá	ŋgɔ̀ʔ
on	snake	snake	UTA	bite	him	he	UTA	take	a	stone

on a snake, the snake bit him, he took (=picked up) a stone…'

Example (26) contains a stative predicate, and so the Unmarked Tense-Aspect has a present state interpretation in (26). In (27), the Unmarked Tense-Aspect is used to replace a construction already employed by the speaker, namely, the near past construction.

5. Conclusion

This paper has provided a first descriptive account of the tense-aspect system of Mengaka. I have shown that Mengaka distinguishes various tenses (three degrees of past tense, a present tense, a future tense) and aspects (perfective, habitual, progressive) and that the dividing lines between the degrees of past in Mengaka appear to be at least basically rigid. It has also been argued in this paper that the tense-aspect system of Mengaka can be analysed as operating according to twelve tense-aspect categories, that is, grammatical units that communicate temporal and aspectual information about the verb. These categories may have one or more than one basic use. Also, they may be manifested by any of the following: the lack of a tense and an aspect marker, a tonal alternation, a free-standing marker or the use of a construction which may include tense and/or aspect markers and a nasal verb prefix. It is hoped that this study will increase the drive to carry out further linguistic research on Mengaka, which is certainly one of the least studied languages of the Grassfields area. When compared to other Grassfields languages which have been better studied, for example, Ngiemboon (Anderson 1983), or Bafut (Tamanji 2009), Mengaka shows certain unusual features with respect to the tense-aspect system, such as the fact that a tense and an aspect marker may co-occur post-verbally (see Table 2), or the existence of a purely present habitual marker (a habitual marker exclusively used to describe present habitual situations).

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