

To *bi* or not to *bi*: A pronominal analysis for past tense in Saamáka

According to Bickerton's (1984) Language Bioprogram Hypothesis (LBH), past time reference morphemes in creole languages convey a past reading with stative verbs and a past perfect reading with nonstative verbs i.e. implying that it is Aktionsart dependent. However, in Saamáka the past time reference morpheme *bi*, regardless of Aktionsart, triggers, a simple past or a past perfect interpretation, making the reading context dependent, as exemplified in (1) and (2)

- | | |
|--|---|
| (1) Mi bi fee dagu.
1SG PST fear dog
'I feared dogs'.
or 'I had feared dogs'. | (2) Mi bi boi nyanya.
1SG PST cook rice
'I cooked rice'.
or 'I had cooked rice'. |
|--|---|

Describing *bi* as ambiguous is not in itself a satisfying analysis unless we can understand the source of that ambiguity instead of merely stipulating it. Moreover, in all the creole languages that have an equivalent of *bi*, unmarked eventive predicates (i.e. without *bi*) also get a past tense interpretation. Thus, not only would *bi* have to be ambiguous, it would also have to be optional in Saamáka (for nonstative predicates). A closer examination of the data has shown that the appearance of *bi* in past tense sentences is extremely discourse sensitive, and varies according to context, narrative style and speaker choice.

For all these reasons, Bickerton's ideas regarding the past time reference morpheme in creole languages have largely been abandoned in recent research and replaced by the hypothesis that these morphemes denote a relative past tense reading (see e.g. Jaganauth 1988, Winford 2000, Hackert 2004, Yakpo 2009). Relative tense does not obligatorily take the time of utterance as anchor time, but some contextually given time (see e.g. Comrie 1985). This analysis tries to capture the discourse sensitivity of the past time reference morphemes in these languages by explaining why it conveys a simple past reading in a certain context and a past perfect reading in another. It is not the morpheme which is ambiguous, but it is the time to which the morpheme is anchored to that is able to move along the time axis. When this hypothesis is applied to Saamáka, the past time reference morpheme *bi* would be a T head which would express a temporal ordering relation between a contextual relevant anchor time and the topic time. *bi* would locate the topic time prior to the anchor time i.e. AT AFTER TT (in the sense of e.g. Klein 1994, Demirdache & Uribe-Etxebarria 2000, 2007). Two problems arise for this hypothesis. First, certain cases of optionality still cannot be explained by the 'free choice' of anchor time. Stative verbs and the imperfective morpheme *ta*, in isolation, need to be marked by *bi* to convey a past time reference reading. In (3), only the second predicate is modified by *bi*, but the situations are interpreted as occurring simultaneously and being located prior to the utterance time. Under the hypothesis that *bi* is a T head, optionality is unexpected and cannot be accounted for in a formal theory. A T head is always present in the underlying structure. Since the default T head in Saamáka indicates that the topic time occurs simultaneous with the time of utterance i.e. expresses PRESENT, (3) cannot be accounted for.

- (3) Di muyee ta naai kosu nóo a bi ta konda wan sonde a dee
DET woman IMP sew cloth NARR 3SG PST IMP tell ART thing LOC DET.PL
sembe.
person
'The woman was sewing cloth(s) while she was telling something to the others'.

Secondly, under a relative past tense hypothesis, it is expected that a relative past tense is able to locate a situation in the past with respect to a contextually salient future topic time. In Saamáka, it is ungrammatical to modify a past-in-the-future with the morpheme *bi*, as demonstrated in (4).

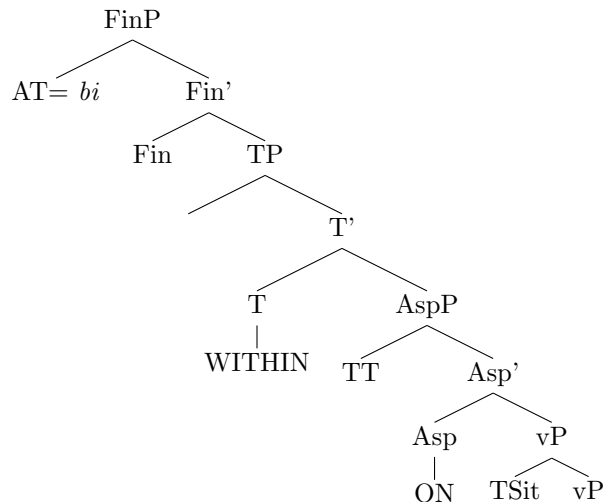
- (4) *Te fii ko di oto yaa di ta ko mi bi foloisi go a foto.
when FU.2SG come DET other year DET IMP come 1SG PST move go LOC P

Intended interpretation: ‘When you come next year, I will have moved to Paramaribo’.

Sentences like (4) are systematically judged ungrammatical and replaced by counterfactuals (in which both predicates are marked by *bi*) or temporal ‘when’ clauses (in which neither are marked by *bi*).

Since both Bickerton’s LBH and the relative past tense hypothesis cannot explain the characteristics of the past time reference morpheme in Saamáka, I formulate an alternative hypothesis. I argue *bi* to be a temporal pronominal (in the sense of e.g. Partee 1984, Hinrichs 1986, Kratzer 1998) which shifts the anchor time directly (in the sense of e.g. Enç 1987, 2004, Giorgi 2006). As a temporal pronominal, *bi* receives its interpretation from the discourse context. It does not locate a situation before a contextual relevant anchor time, but it establishes this anchor time directly. The presuppositional content of *bi* constrains this anchor time to be situated at some contextually salient past moment. This entails that the embedded situation is located before the time of utterance i.e. $e < TU$. The idea that this anchor time is located prior to the time of utterance explains *bi*’s inability to modify a past-in-the-future situation. Thus, *bi* is not a functional T head which expresses a precedence relation between the topic time and anchor time, but it is a temporal pronoun which is contextually identified, constrained to occur in the past. To capture the ambiguity between the simple past and the past perfect interpretations under this analysis, I assume the existence of a null perfect head that combines productively with eventive predicates in Saamáka to give the past-like interpretation found in the unmarked case. (I summarize earlier work which shows that the unmarked interpretation for these predicates is indeed a perfect and not a simple past). The ambiguity thus arises from whether the *bi* morpheme embeds one of these null perfects or a simple nonperfective predicate. Moreover, this analysis also allows us to give a unified analysis for the T head in Saamáka as a null PRESENT in all cases. In the underlying structure, *bi* is the first argument of T and is situated under FinP. The temporal ordering relation established via Asp between topic time and time of situation is based on the telicity of the predicate (in the sense of Bohnemeyer & Swift 2004). Atelic verbs are interpreted as imperfective and telic verbs as perfective. The underlying structure of (2) is demonstrated in (5).

(5)



Analyzing *bi* as a temporal pronoun explains *bi*’s dependency on the discourse context and its optionality. It also explains why *bi* is not distributionally sensitive to Aktionsart or to be more precise stativity; Fin is not adjacent to Asp.

The temporal pronoun analysis thus proves itself to be a compelling analysis for Saamáka, and possibly also other languages with the same profile, where a relative tense analysis has been proposed. If this reanalysis is on the right track and *bi* is not really a T head, then this has far-reaching implications for what we should infer about the functional sequence of the clause from the ordering of so-called ‘tense’ morphemes in Saamáka and other similar creoles.