

Tense and aspect in Shona

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This paper describes and analyses tense and aspect, especially progressive aspect, in Shona, a Bantu language spoken in Zimbabwe, using the tense/aspect framework in Demirdache and Uribe-Etxebarria (D & U-E, 2007). In this framework, tense orders utterance time and assertion time, and aspect orders assertion time and event time. These relations are expressed by the content of tense and aspect heads (BEFORE/AFTER/WITHIN). Progressive aspect places assertion time WITHIN event time. Shona progressives both support and challenge D & U-E's framework.

Shona has two distinct progressive morphemes: -ri and chi-. The auxiliary, -ri, is used in present contexts, which are unmarked for tense, and the verbal prefix, chi- is used in past and future contexts. The two progressive morphemes can co-occur, producing a persistive aspectual reading (Brauner, 1995).

D & U-E's model predicts the possibility of tense and aspect heads to be marked by the same morpheme. I show that this is the case in Shona, which allows a single morpheme to mark either tense or aspect, depending on its syntactic position. My second claim is that Shona's present progressive provides an example of covert tense marking, complementing the covert aspect marking described in D & U-E. Finally, I show that in Shona, contra D & U-E, progressive aspect can iterate. This iteration produces exactly the temporal relations which D & U-E believe is vacuous because one assertion time is contained within another. However, in Shona the resulting meaning is persistive aspect, which does make a presupposition about two such assertion times. A persistive expresses not only that an event is in progress at a certain time, but also that there is a larger context in which this event has been in progress. Thus, Shona iterated progressives are non-vacuous, satisfying D & U-E's economy constraint.