

Notes on Somali Verbal Aspect

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe some phenomena concerning the category of verbal aspect in Somali. I am not presenting a systematic study but simply a number of facts that seem to be worthwhile discussing. The Somali data are examined in the framework of a model of verbal aspect applied to Polish, proposed by Antinucci & Gebert (1975-76 and 1977). Slavic languages are considered by linguists as « classic aspect languages » because no verbal form can exist in them without being morphologically and semantically marked either as perfective or as imperfective.

Our model is based on the assumption that the aspectual value of a verb is determined by its meaning. Specifically there is a fundamental difference in aspectual behaviour between stative verbs and verbs whose meaning involves a change of some kind. On the other hand the semantic values of STATE and CHANGE are present in aspectual functions themselves; namely, the perfective aspectual forms are the result of assertion bearing on the semantic component of CHANGE whereas the imperfective ones, at a very abstract level, realize the meaning of STATE.

1.1. *The imperfective form*

It should be specified that in Slavic and in many other languages the same imperfective form covers a range of meanings, such as: the durative meaning (which may be paraphrased by: « be doing something »), the repetitive meaning as well as habitual and potential/generic meaning.

The reasons of the formal identity for all these values is the common semantic denominator of STATE. Leaving aside all the details of such an analysis, presented in Antinucci and Gebert (1975-76), the main issues are as follows.

1.1.1. The durative meaning. The durative meaning is described in terms of a locative structure in which the event is treated like a material object. The object's INTERIOR coincides with the referent of the agent (or of the patient in non-agentive, processive verbs). Obviously, being located in the interior of something belongs to the category of STATE; it is neither a process, nor a change.

Such a description may appear excentric for Slavic languages, but a number of languages realize this semantic analysis overtly, starting from Italian:

(1) *Sto a lavorare* « I am working »

I-am at working.

Similarly, in archaic and dialectal English we have:

(2) *Fred's been a' singing.*

In the above example (reported by Comrie 1976: 99), the verbal noun is preceded by a locative preposition: *a'*. A number of data in this respect is offered by African languages as well, as for instance by Chadic (see E. Wolff 1979) or by Mande languages (see Heine and Reh 1984: 206) realizing the imperfective meaning by means of locative structures. In Ewe, Igbo and Yoruba analogous locative structures occur to express progressive (that is imperfective-durative value) (Heine and Reh 1984: 123; Comrie 1976).

1.1.2. *The iterative meaning.* Another semantic value realized by the imperfective forms is the iterative, covering the repetitive, habitual and potential/generic functions. In the model of aspect to which I am referring here, it has been described in terms of the semantic component of ADDITION. It corresponds to the notion of a sum, of a collection of objects (things) which may or may not be of the same type. In case of the material objects of the same type, the semantic component of ADDITION is represented as the category of plural in nouns. If such a collection of objects is of temporal kind, in other words, if they are not material objects, but events, the operation of ADDITION gives the iterative meaning as a result.

Both COINCIDENCE, responsible for the durative meaning and ADDITION, present in the whole range of iterative semantic values, can be realized formally in the same way, as in Slavic languages, by the imperfective form of the verb (or by the Italian imperfect: *mentre andavo, andavo sempre*), being semantic components of STATE.¹

2. The Imperfectives in Somali

I will now try to show that Somali and some of its variations (specifically its Central variation, Dabarre) offer evidence for this stative nature of imperfectives, in general. In fact each of the above listed meanings is realized in Somali by means of a stative marker.

2.1. Durative value

Let us consider the durative value. Somali uses the so called « progressive » form to realize it, which is for standard Somali:

(3) *Waan shaqeeynayaa/shaqeeynanay* « I am/was working »

F-I am-working was-working²

The verbal forms in these examples are derived from the following periphrastic construction:

(4) *shaqayn* (verbal noun) + *hayaa* (present)/*hayay* (past) (the auxiliary *have*).

The contracted form of standard Somali appears as fully periphrastic in the Mudug variation, where we have:

(5) *waan shaqayn hayaa*

¹ COINCIDENCE can be realized in English as the verb *to stay, to have* or *to be in a place*, undoubtedly stative verbs. On the other hand, ADDITION, expressing an abstract notion of a collection of events, does not imply any change or development and, at an abstract level, it belongs to the category of STATE too.

² F is used in glosses, denoting a focus marker.

or in Dabarre, a Central Somali variation:

(6) *sheqaashow heeshë/heeshtë/etc.*

(apparently in this Somali variation, the progressive form does not exist for the past).

Thus the durative meaning is expressed in Somali by a stative construction (similarly to English: *I am working* or to Italian: *sto lavorando*), since the verb *hay* (have/keep) is a stative verb.³

2.2. The iterative in Somali

The label of « iterative » in classic aspect languages covers a number of meanings, such as habitual, repetitive and potential/generic.

2.2.1. *Habitual function in Somali.* The first one is realized in Somali by a periphrastic construction;

(7) *Wuu keeni jiray* « He used to bring »

F-he bring stayed

with the past of the stative verb *jir* « stay » (the whole paradigm of which is: *jiray/jirtay/jiray/jirtay/jiray/jirteen/jireen*) as auxiliary. The corresponding value in Dabarre is realized by the verb *can* which has been desemanticized as an auxiliary:

(8) *Un kerī* « He used to eat »

eat could

(9) *Waan woo dhan kerī* ⁴ « He used to drink milk »

milk F drink could

Thus, the stative nature of the habitual meaning is realized overtly by the auxiliary verb occurring in these Somali constructions.⁵

2.2.2. *Repetitive function in Somali.* Let us consider now the repetitive event. In the model of the verbal aspect to which I am referring here, such value is considered as a realization of a collection of events seen as temporal objects. Thus, as said above, repetition for events is what plural is for material objects.

What is interesting for Somali (and according to Heine and Reh 1984 this is true also for a number of other African languages) is that such value is exhibited overtly by the reduplicated verbal forms. Reduplication is a device used by a number of languages to reflect physically the idea of repetition. In other words, it is a material realization of the mental operation of ADDITION, of a sum. Thus, one of the semantic values marked by reduplicated forms is the repetitive event. But, as it can be seen, reduplicated forms realize a range of meanings much broader than the repetitive function.

2.2.2.1. *Reduplication in Somali.* Heine and Reh (1984) observe that reduplicated forms in African languages mark either a quantity or an intensity. The quantity marking can refer either to the action or to its participant. If it refers to the action, it can have the following values: frequent (what I call repetitive), durative, habitual, stative. If it refers to the participant it can have a distributive or a plural meaning.

³ A. Zaborski (1975: 60), discussing its etymology, relates it to the verb « be », following Moreno (1955) who derives the form *hay* from *ak*.

⁴ The same verb is used in its primary meaning in the present tense: *mësë un kerë* « I cannot eat ».

⁵ In this respect, Heine and Reh (1984) observe that in African languages « Habitual aspects, similar to progressive aspects, tend to go back to "durative" verbs like "stay", "live, exist" or "remain". » (p. 128), offering thus a further evidence of the stative value of the habitual meaning.

Let us see now how the above listed meanings are realized concretely in Somali: ⁶

Frequent event

- (10) *Wuu qurquriyay* « He drank one draught after another »

F-he drank-one-draught-after-another

- (11) *Wuu cuncunay* « He ate it repeatedly by small bites »

F-he ate-many-times

as opposed to: *wuu cunay* « he ate »

- (12) *Wuu daadegayaa* « he is going down repeatedly »

F-he is-going-down-repeatedly

as opposed to: *wuu degayaa* « he is going down ».

Durative event

- (13) *Wuu laalaabayaa* « He keeps folding »

F-he keeps-folding

compare to: *wuu laabayaa* « he is folding ».

Apparently, this kind of « durative event » corresponds to the « progressive » value of the imperfective form. But in reality the durative meaning in this example (it is the only one I have found as far as Somali is concerned to illustrate Heine and Reh's classification; in fact, the authors themselves do not give any examples) is of a different kind. It refers to verbs that can be defined as « inherently iterative » (see Antinucci and Gebert 1976) which means that they denote internally structured events that can be seen as a repetition of an elementary single event. Thus « to keep folding » means « to fold many times » ⁷.

In conclusion, this « durative meaning » represented by reduplicated verbs is closer to the repetitive meaning rather than to the progressive one.

Habitual event

- (14) *Wuu tegtega* « He goes usually »

F-he goes-usually

derived from: *wuu tegaa* « he goes ».

Stative event

As a result of reduplication, action verbs change into stative verbs; thus *xir* (« to close something »), the intransitive counterpart of which is *xiran* « to be closed or linked », reduplicated gives *xirxiran* meaning « to be closed (of character) ».

Heine and Reh (1984) give some more examples of this stativization process by means of reduplication in other African languages, i.e. in Ewe: *dzó* - « to leave »; *dzó-dzó* - « left ».

The facts offer further overt evidence for the existence of the common semantic denominator of STATE in the repetitive, habitual event and the stative event.

⁶ Reduplication in Somali has been studied by Roberto Ajello (1981).

⁷ Some other examples of this kind of verbs that have some precise syntactic properties in their aspectual behaviour in Slavic languages are the following: « to talk », « to cough », « to knock », « to cry », « to dance » and many, many others corresponding to the category of « activity verbs » described by Vendler (1967).

Quantity

When quantity concerns the participant, following Heine's and Reh's classification (1984), it can exhibit two functions represented by the semantic component of ADDITION. The first one is the distributive function illustrated by the following examples:

- (15) *qaybsan* « to be divided »
qaybqaybsan « to be divided in more than two parts »
- (16) *jeex* « to tear »
jeexjeex « to tear in small pieces »
- (17) *jaban* « broken »
wuu jjabanyahay « broken in several pieces » (also: « broken more than once » - repetitive function).

Thus the distributive meaning is realized by change of state verbs when the resultant state conveyed by the event is applied to a plurality of objects (it refers typically to events that require two participants - therefore to transitive verbs).

When the event is a STATE not resultant from a change (and this is typically the case of events requiring one participant), the reduplicated form can occur only with the plural of the subject. Thus we can have:

- (18) *Naaguhu waa yaryihiin* « Women are small »
 women F small-are

or:

- (19) *Naaguhu waa yaryaryihiin* « Women are small »
 women F small-small-are.

The meaning of (19) with reduplicated verb is: « they are small each » whereas (18) means generically « they are small » (Ajello 1981). The same relation occurs between the following two sentences:

- (20) *Niman way waaweynyihiin* « Men are big »
 men F-they big(redupl.)-are
- (21) *Niman way weynyihiin*
 men F-they big-are.

The two functions distinguished by Heine and Reh (1984), the distributive function and the plural of the participant function, both concerning the participant, could be thus reconducted to one which is the plural of the participant that undergoes a STATE. This unification is irrespective of the character of such STATE whether resulting from a change or not, but the distinction is not relevant for the Somali verbal aspect.⁸

In addition to that, it is interesting to note that reduplication in Somali is a marker of plural in a class of nouns (Puglielli and Ciise Mohamed Siyaad 1984), as the following examples show:

- (22) *af* « language, mouth »; plural: *afaf*
dab « fire »; plural: *dabab*
ur « smell »; plural: *urar*
bood « jump »; plural: *boodbood*.

These facts offer an evidence for the analysis of the iterative forms of verbs and of plurals in terms of a common semantic denominator of ADDITION.

⁸ It would be however, for the Slavic aspect since in the first case we have perfective verbs, whereas the second group of examples refers to stative, thus imperfective verbal forms.

2.2.3. *Generic/potential function in Somali*. The last function of the « iteratives » is the generic/potential one. Standard Somali realizes it with a simple present form of the verb, as in the following example:

- (23) *Cali kalluun waa cunaa* « Ali eats fish »

Ali fish F eats

compared to the equivalent present continuous for:

- (24) *Cali kalluun waa cunayaa* « Ali is eating fish »

Ali fish F is-eating.

It is interesting that the Dabarre variation of Somali uses a special particle *së* in front of the present form of the verb to mark the generic/potential meaning:

- (25) *Aleey intoo së kooyë* « Ali comes here »

Ali here-F part. comes

- (26) **Aleey intoo kooyë*

Ali here-F comes

- (27) *Dëbkë së hurë* « Fire burns »

fire-the part. burns

- (28) **Dëbkë hurë*

fire-the burns

- (29) *Innë biyë së waraabë* « I drink water »

I water part. drink

- (30) **Innë biyë waraabë*

I water drink

As the ungrammatical sentences above show, the marker *së* is obligatory in Dabarre, whenever the verb appears in a present non-continuous tense. There is however an exception to this rule concerning the stative verbs, which will be discussed in the next section. Notice that *së* occupies a fixed position within the verbal complex of the sentence, namely the initial one, before pronouns, prepositions, the impersonal marker and the partial-negative marker, that is in NP negation, as the following examples show:⁹

- (31) *Aleyoo sënë aragë* « Ali sees us »

Ali-F part.-us sees

- (32) *Diinsoroo sëlënkë kooyñë* « Somebody does not come from Diinsor »

Diinsor part.-imp.-neg.-from does-not-come.

It is preceded however by the negative marker if the negation bears on the whole sentence:

- (33) *Faadumë mësë kooytë* « Faduma does not come »

F. neg.-part. comes

Although the data at my disposal are very limited, it is reasonable to assume that the position occupied by *së* is normally reserved to adverbial elements, such as the adverbial deictic *saa* (corresponding to Standard Somali *soo*) of which I have only two examples:

- (34) *Kobaakii woo saa digsëdi* « I put on my shoes »

shoes-my F adv. put-on

- (35) *Idee saaguun kalbaawi* « I got in love with you »¹⁰

you-F adv.-you-for/to got-in-love.

⁹ For the structure of the Dabarre sentence see Gebert and Cabdallah Cumar Mansuur (1984).

¹⁰ Notice that in Standard Somali the place occupied by the equivalent particle *soo* is different: *Xamar buu ka soo noqday*; it occurs in fact, after the preposition *ka*.

However, the origin and the exact value of this marker are obscure to me. If we accept its adverbial origin, *sē* appears as a desemanticised adverb developed into an aspect marker.¹¹

Now, Dabarre verbal forms with *sē* are slightly different semantically from Standard Somali present forms, such as the one illustrated in (24). The difference consists in the range of what I called a generic/potential value. Namely, one of the consequences of the generic meaning is the possibility that the event takes place in the future; therefore Dabarre sentences such as (25-27-29) can have also a future value, in accordance with the context, meaning, respectively: « Ali will come », « Fire will burn » and « I will drink water ». This value is absent in Standard Somali generic verbal forms.

3. Stative Verbs in Somali

Let us consider now the behaviour of stative verbs from the aspect point of view. One would expect that stative verbs need not occur with any of the mentioned syntactic and lexical markers; since such markers introduce stative meaning, their presence would appear redundant. This, in fact, is what really happens.

Let us see first examples of stative predicates in which explicit « be » occurs:

(36) *Warqaddaani waa cad-dahay* « This paper is white »
paper-this-subj. F white is

(37) *Magaaladaani waa weyn tahay* « This town is big »
town-this-subj. F big is.

As expected, other stative verbs do not use a progressive form to express an actual present event (unlike other semantic classes of Somali verbs), such as the following, classified by prof. Andrzejewski (personal communication):¹²

(38) *baallee* (to be beside), *bug* (to be ill), *buux* (to be full), *dambee* (to be behind, to be after), *dalool* (to have a hole or holes), *dhaan* (to be better than), *dhexee* (to be in the middle), *fadhi* (to be seated, to stay), *fooror* (to be stooping), *hay* (to hold, to have control over), *horree* (to be before, to be in front), *hoosee* (to be below), *hub* (to be sure), *hurud* (to be asleep), *janjeedh* (to lean, to list), *jeed* (to be facing from a particular direction), *jiif* (to be lying down), *jir* (to exist), *joog* (to be present at or in, to stay), *kadalloob* (to be sitting on the haunches), *kuduud* (to be crouching), *liido* (to be weak), *qab* (to have), *waar* (to last for ever, to last for a very long time).

The progressive form is possible if the change-of-state semantic value is introduced to the meaning of the stative verb, that is when the verb loses its stative status as in (39):

(39) *Magaaladaani waa weynaysaa* « This town is becoming big »
town-this-subj. F becoming-big.

The form *weynaysaa* in this example is derived from *weynaw* « to become big », according to the derivative possibilities of Somali stative verbs.

¹¹ Heine and Reh (1984) list the desemanticisation of adverbs as one of the means of aspect marking. The others are: nominal periphrasis and serial periphrasis (p. 111). One of the examples they give is from Bari, an Eastern Nilotic language in which the adverb *dé* (« then, afterwards ») was desemanticised to a future marker.

¹² I am grateful to prof. B. Andrzejewski for precious remarks and for having put at my disposal his unpublished linguistic materials that I report partly in (38).

In some other cases, a possible progressive form has the immediate future meaning, due to the change-of-state semantic value:

- (40) *Waan joogayaa magaalada* « I am going to stay in the town »
F-I am-staying town-the.

The same situation can be observed in Dabarre:

- (41) *Xaanshēday eddē* « This paper is white »
paper-this white-is
(42) *Shumburtē fududdē* « The bird is light »
bird-the light-is.

Notice that in Dabarre the verb can never occur in the present simple tense without *sē* marker unless it is a stative verb. Compare the examples above (26-28-30) with:

- (43) *Aleey garēbkes bedē woo fēdhihē* « Ali is sitting on his left side »
Ali side-his left F sits

- (44) *Innē ogē inee kuliil jērē* « I know it is hot ».
I know that-F hot is.

Stative verbs, however, may occur with *sē* as well:

- (45) *Aleey sē fēdhihē* « Ali sits (always) »
Ali part. sits

(to compare with (43)). The meaning of sentences such as (45) is the generic one. But among stative verbs the verb « to be » never occurs with the marker *sē* even if it expresses a generic meaning:

- (46) *Xaanshē eddē* « Paper is white »
paper white-is

- (47) *Shumburaa fududyaan* « Birds are light »
birds light-are

- (48) **Xaanshē sē eddē*
paper part. white-is

- (49) **Shumburaa sē fududyaan*
birds part. light-are.

This is probably related to the inherent permanent state nature of such predicates.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, Somali data demonstrate that stativity determines strictly the aspectual behaviour of the verb. This issue confirms what has been claimed in Antinucci and Gebert (1975-76 and 1977) with reference to Slavic languages that are « aspect languages » *par excellence*, since aspect category is extremely grammaticalized in them. A grammaticalized category is not transparent any more and that is why it is difficult to capture the exact semantic values of different aspectual forms. What is interesting about Somali is that such values are realized overtly thus offering evidence for the adequacy of the proposed model.

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