

THE SYSTEM OF TENSE AND ASPECT MARKERS IN LEFA (BANTU, A.50)

Isaac Kendall
SIL-Cameroon
kendall_isaac@sil.org

Abstract: This paper describes the verbal morphemes used in Lefa for tense (4 pasts, 2 futures, Narrative) and aspect (Progressive, Habitual, Persistent, Inceptive, Perfect) and describes their morphological and constructional properties. Although these tense and aspect markers form semantic systems, the markers vary in these properties with no two acting in exactly the same way in regard to all of them. While this variety of morphological and constructional properties may be unexpected in certain formalistic theories, it is not surprising from the perspective of grammaticalization.

Introduction

Lefa is a Narrow Bantu language (A.50) spoken by around 15,000 speakers in the Centre Region of Cameroon, specifically in the Deuk sub-division of the Mbam and Inoubou Division, north of the town of Bafia. It is closely related to the language Rikpa (Bafia). The examples in this paper come from work done in conjunction with CODELEFA, the Lefa language committee, and are given in the standardized orthography (following the General Alphabet of Cameroon Languages), except that all tone is noted for clarity (instead of just high tone). The author would like to thank MINRESI for the various permits granted to study Lefa, as well as the community and CODELEFA. He would also like to thank CABTAL (Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy) for their aid in this study. Although verbal extensions are outside the scope of this paper, a few notes on verbal stems are in order. Verbal stems in Lefa are limited to two syllables: a single-syllable root optionally followed by an extension, or a two-syllable root including a frozen extension. All two-syllable stems (whether including a productive extension or not) act alike in the tense / aspect system. As with all words in Lefa, verbal stems are either vowel-final or end with glottal (ʔ) or (ŋ). For a more thorough description of all the verbal morphemes of Lefa, see Isaac 2018.

1. System of Tense/Aspect

1.1 Tense

Lefa has a Narrative tense, four past tenses and two future tenses. At first glance, the system appears straightforward, although some are marked by prefixes, some by suffixes, and some others by both. The Narrative is simply a zero-marked verb with subject agreement. Out of context, the Narrative of a stative verb is interpreted as present and the Narrative of an active verb as past (for a present interpretation of an active verb, the Progressive is used).

- | | | |
|-----|--------------|-----------|
| (1) | à-wéŋ | lì-wéŋ |
| | 1.SP-kill | 5-kill |
| | ‘He killed.’ | ‘to kill’ |

The Distant Past (P4) is shown by a suffix after the stem, often *-gà*.

- | | | |
|-----|---------------|------------|
| (2) | à-tùmé-gà | lì-tùmé |
| | 1.SP-start-P4 | 5-start |
| | ‘He started.’ | ‘to start’ |

Although this suffix is always *-gà* for two-syllable verb stems, it has morphological variation in the case of certain single syllable stems. For single syllable stems ending in a nasal, there is no variation.

- (3) à-wéŋ-gà lì-wéŋ
 1.SP-kill-P4 5-kill
 ‘He killed.’ ‘to kill’

In other cases, there is morphological variation. The suffix becomes *-kà* for single syllable stems ending in a glottal (’).

- (4) à-dǎ-kà lì-dǎ’
 1.SP-sell-P4 5-sell
 ‘He sold.’ ‘to sell.’

For other single syllable stems, it is simply *-à*.

- (5) à-fá-à lì-fá’
 1.SP-give-P4 5-give
 ‘He gave.’ ‘to give’

Note that here we can see that there is no consonant by the fact that this word is optionally pronounced [áféà], using an alternate pronunciation for long a. The General Past (P3) is shown by an *n’* prefix after the subject agreement, and a final high tone. In this context vowel-final stems and glottal final stems act similarly, as the glottal drops. For these stems, the final high tone is realized as a high-toned copy of the final stem vowel.

- (6) à-n-dǎ-ǎ à-n-fá-á
 1.SP-P3-sell-P3 1.SP-P3-give-P3
 ‘He sold.’ ‘He gave.’

For stems ending in a nasal, the high tone simply replaces the lexical tone of the preceding vowel.

- (7) à-n-buŋ lì-buŋ
 1.SP-P3-tell-P3 5-tell
 ‘He told.’ ‘to tell.’

The Yesterday Past (P2) is similar, with a different prefix – *á-* – found after the subject agreement, but the same final H, realized in the same manner as for P3.

- (8) à-á-dǎ-ǎ à-á-fá-á à-á-wǎŋ
 1.SP-P2-sell-P2 1.SP-P2-give-P2 1.SP-P2-kill-P2
 ‘He sold.’ ‘He gave.’ ‘He killed.’

Finally, the Immediate Past (P1) is realized by a suffix *-yì* following the stem¹. It also requires a falling tone on the final tone of the verb. In the case of a lexically low-tone final vowel, this falling tone starts at mid. This is likely a merger of the lexical low with the initial high of the falling tone. (Note that the double vowel is an orthographic convention for writing contour tones. It is not clear whether there is an actual difference in length or not.)

- (9) à-dǎ-ǎ-yì à-fá-à-yì à-tùmÉÈ-yì
 1.SP-sell-P1 1.SP-give-P1 1.SP-start-P1
 ‘He sold.’ ‘He gave.’ ‘He started.’

Lefa has two future tenses, although it is not clear if the difference is distance in time or degree of certainty. The Near Future (F1) is formed with a *é-* prefix after the subject agreement marker. This involves two vowels coming together, and in this case one elides,

¹ Unlike all the other tenses, this tense does not have a cognate in Bafia. Bafia does have a *-yì* suffix (apparently without the tone perturbations found in Lefa), but it is a centrifuge marker (Guarisma 2000: 159, 238).

leaving a single vowel (/a/ > /ə/ > other) with the combined tone (perhaps lengthened in the case of a contour tone).

- | | | |
|------|------------------|---------------------------------------|
| (10) | wə́ə́fá | dǎ́fá |
| | wə́-ə́-fá | dǎ́-ə́-fá |
| | 2SG-F1-give | 5.SP-F1-give |
| | ‘You will give.’ | ‘He (class 5, e.g. chief) will give.’ |

In the case of class 1, the vowel becomes /a/, but exceptionally, this combined vowel takes a high tone (instead of rising, as would be expected from the underlyingly low à- subject agreement)

- | | |
|------|-----------------|
| (11) | áfá |
| | à-ə́-fá |
| | 1.SP-F1-give |
| | ‘He will give.’ |

The Distant Future (F2) also has this same prefix but includes a -gǎ “suffix” as well.

- | | | | |
|------|------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| (12) | wə́ə́fagǎ | dǎ́fagǎ | áfagǎ |
| | wə́-ə́-fa-gǎ | dǎ́-ə́-fa-gǎ | à-ə́-fa-gǎ |
| | 2SG-F2-give-F2 | 5.SP-F1-give-F2 | 1.SP-F2-give-F2 |
| | ‘You will give.’ | ‘He (class 5) will give.’ | ‘He will give.’ |

This suffix follows a final ŋ, while a final glottal drops before it.

- | | | | | |
|------|-----------------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|
| (13) | á-wéŋ-gǎ | lì-wéŋ | á-dǎ́-gǎ | lì-dǎ́ |
| | 1.SP.F2-kill-f2 | 5-kill | 1.SP.F2-sell-F2 | 5-sell |
| | ‘He will kill’ | ‘to kill’ | ‘He will sell’ | ‘to sell’ |

Word breaks for some of these verbal morphemes are not always clear, and -gǎ is written as a suffix according to convention and speaker intuition. However, the status of -gǎ as a suffix is contestable, and there is evidence that it may be a separate word. This evidence will be discussed below. The tense morphemes clearly form a coherent semantic system and are quite similar in their morphological representation. Differences are apparent, however, with the variation in prefix or suffix realization. As we look more closely at the properties of these morphemes and their interaction with certain aspects and certain verbs, more differences will be apparent.

1.2. Aspect

There are several aspectual morphemes in Lefa. Even at an initial morphological level, these show more variation than those of the tense markers. Again, some aspects are marked with prefixes and others with suffixes. But here, one aspect (the Progressive) is marked with reduplication. We will start by looking at this reduplication. For single-syllable verb stems, the reduplication process involves the entire stem, with a reduction of most vowels to *i* in the initial reduplication. This initial portion retains the lexical tone, with the second copy always being low toned.

- | | | | | |
|------|-------------------|-----------|--------------------|------------|
| (14) | à-fí-fa-gà | lì-fá | à-kìn-kèŋ-gà | lì-kèŋ |
| | 1.SP-PROG-give-P4 | 5-give | 1.SP-PROG-leave-P4 | 5-leave |
| | ‘He was giving.’ | ‘to give’ | ‘He was leaving.’ | ‘to leave’ |

For two syllable verbs, a reduplication of the first syllable following the above pattern is possible. However, it is also possible to have a different reduplication process involving a full reduplication of the two-syllable verb stem with no vowel reduction. In some tenses there

is a slight change in form of one of the reduplications (discussed further below). The example given here, in P4, maintains the same form. As with the first reduplication process, the first copy maintains the lexical tone of the stem.

- | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| (15) à-tì-tùmÉ-gà | à-tùmÉ-tùmÈ-gà | lì-tùmÉ |
| 1.SP-PROG-start-P4 | 1.SP-PROG-start-P4 | 7-start |
| ‘He was starting.’ | ‘He was starting.’ | ‘to start.’ |

For the Present Progressive another, non-reduplicated form is possible. This involves a falling ê (assimilating to /a/ for class 1) after the subject agreement marker. In cases where the subject agreement marker is underlying low toned, this falling tone starts at a lower point (again, a merger of the low-tone subject agreement marker with the initial high of the falling tone). In cases where the first syllable of the verb ends in a nasal, this form has a nasal after this falling-toned vowel as well. The verb stem itself is always low toned.

- | | | |
|----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| (16) aā-fà | aān-wèŋ | aān-wùndì |
| 1.SP.PROG-give | 1.SP.PROG-kill | 1.SP.PROG-win |
| ‘He is giving’ | ‘He is killing’ | ‘He is winning.’ |

The difference in starting point can be clearly seen in the following contrast between the low-toned 2nd singular and the high-toned class 3 marker.

- | | |
|---------------|----------------|
| (17) wə̀ə̀fà | wóə̀-fà |
| wə̀-ə̀-fà | wí-ə̀-fà |
| 2SG-PROG-give | 3.SP-PROG-give |

Two aspectual meanings, the Habitual and the Perfect, are marked by suffixes. Here we will discuss the basic form of these suffixes, but later we will see that each of these suffixes is a bit unusual. The base form of the Habitual is -lǎ́, but in the present (or narrative) it also requires the Progressive (in its second, non-reduplication form).

- | |
|-----------------------|
| (18) aā-fà-lǎ́ |
| 1.SP.PROG-give-HAB |
| ‘He gives (normally)’ |

This does not happen in other tenses.

- | |
|----------------------|
| (19) à-fá-lǎ́-gà |
| 1.SP-give-HAB-P4 |
| ‘He gave (normally)’ |

This suffix has some morphophonemic variation, becoming -kǎ́ after verbs ending in glottal (ʔ) and -gǎ́ after nasals.

- | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| (20) aā-dǎ́-kǎ́ | aā-wə̀ŋ-gǎ́ |
| 1.SP.PROG-sell-HAB | 1.SP.PROG-kill-HAB |
| ‘He sells (normally) | he kills (normally).’ |

Besides this basic variation, this suffix interacts in a different way with two syllable stems, which will be discussed below. The base form of the Perfect is -í, which can be seen in a relatively few roots, namely those ending in high vowels.

- | | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| (21) à-ywĩ | à-dì-í |
| à-yù-í | à-dì-í |
| 1.SP-come-PERF | 1.SP-eat-PERF |
| ‘He has come.’ | ‘He has eaten.’ |

Even here, in the second example, you see that the vowel quality of the root is changed (from *i* to *ɔ*). With other roots ending in vowels (or a glottal that drops), it is the suffix that undergoes modifications, assimilating to the final vowel.

- (22) a-fá-á a-dǎ-ǎ
 1.SP-give-PERF 1.SP-sell-PERF
 ‘He has given.’ ‘He has sold.’

In nasal-final and two-syllable stems there are even more changes. These changes will be discussed in the divergences section below. Some other aspects are expressed by prefixes. The prefix, *kaā-* has a clear persistive meaning.

- (23) à-kaā-fà à-kaān-wèŋ
 1.SP-PERS-give 1.SP-PERS-kill
 ‘He is still giving.’ ‘He is still killing.’

There are aspects of this form that are strongly reminiscent of the non-reduplication form of the Progressive. These include the descending tone, the fact that this prefix includes a nasal precisely when the first syllable of the stem ends in a nasal, and the low tone neutralization on the stem. However, this form always contains an *a-* (like class 1) and does not change by class.

- (24) lì-fœŋ dí-kaā-dì
 5-chief 5.SP-PERS-eat
 ‘The chief is still eating.’

In addition, as will be seen below, the Persistentive can be combined with the Progressive (in its reduplication form). The prefix *tí-* has a somewhat unclear meaning, although its clearly aspectual. It emphasizes the moment of the action, and can be used as a verb that happens, meaning “at the moment that” or as a verb that doesn’t happen, meaning “almost”. We tentatively give it the label “Inceptive”.

- (25) à-tí-wù
 1.SP-INCP-die
 ‘He is about to die / Just as he died’

2. Divergences

2.1. Tenses

Besides the fact that some of the tenses may involve either prefixes or suffixes or both, each tense has other unique properties. As we saw, only one, the Immediate Past (P1), has a tonal effect on the verb root. The other differences relate to how the tense interacts with the progressive reduplication described above, to interact with the negative markers, and to the suppletive verb *lìbá* “to be.” The tenses interact in different ways with the long, two-syllable form of progressive reduplication, as seen in the following example.

- (26) à-tánzɛ́-tánzɛ̀-**gà** ‘he started (long ago)’ (P4)
 à-**á**-tánzɛ́ɛ́-tánzɛ̀ŋ ‘he started’ (P3)
 à-**n̄**-tánzɛ́ɛ́-tánzɛ̀ŋ ‘he started (yesterday)’ (P2)
 à-tánzɛ́ɛ̀-**yì**-tánzɛ̀ŋ ‘he started (just now)’ (P1)²
á-tánzɛ́ŋ-tánzɛ̀ŋ ‘he will start’ (F1)
á-tánzɛ́ɛ́-tánzɛ̀ŋ-**gó** ‘he will start (someday)’ (F2)

In these examples, the markers of the tenses in question are bolded. We can see that the suffix is applied to the final reduplication for P4 and F2, but to the first reduplication for

² Some speakers do not permit this type of reduplication in P1.

the others (P3, P2, and P1). Also, F2 has a change to the initial form as well. There is also a change in the form of one of the stems for certain tenses. This is specific by tense and predictable. Negation is marked everywhere by a post-verbal *mí*, which is shown by tone tests to be outside the (phonological) verb word. In the non-past, there is also a preverbal *a*-marking negation. Negation itself is not allowed for the Near Future (F1) (a possible explanation is given in the discussion section below). In F2 there is another difference with the negative *mí*. For this tense only, the clearly distinct *mí* can optionally be inverted with the “suffix” -*gó*.

- (27) k-á-kpí-gó mǐ k-á-kpí mǐ gó
 7.SP-F2.NEG-fall-F2 NEG 7.SP-F2.NEG-fall NEG F2
 ‘It (e.g. tree) will not fall.’ ‘It will not fall’

These tenses also differ constructionally. First, there is a difference as relates to the tone process of metatony. This is a tone process common in Bantu A that involves the raising of tones in words following the verb in certain tenses. The details of what type of words or how these words are affected vary from language to language. In Lefa, this process raises the tone of the noun-class prefix of the word immediately following the verb (it has no effect on words without a noun-class prefix).

This process clearly happens in F1.

- (28) á-wéŋ fǐ-nyǐ (fǐ-nyǐ)
 1. .SP.F1-kill 19-bird 19-bird
 ‘He will kill a bird.’ ‘bird’

In F2, it does not seem to happen, unless we assume that *gó* is actually a separate word that “absorbs” this process (it is high toned, but even more significantly, does not have a prefix).

- (29) á-wéŋ-gó fǐ-nyǐ
 1.SP.F2-kill-F2 19-bird
 ‘He will (someday) kill a bird.’

In any case, this process shows a difference in F2, either in that it does not cause metatony like F1, or that the F2 morpheme is a separate word. The second way these vary constructionally is as to the choice among the two roots for the verb “to be”. This verb has two distinct roots, *ǒá* and *lǐ*, which are used in different tenses. One, *lǐ*, is used in the Narrative and in P3. The other, *ǒá*, is used in all other tenses (the verb is not used in P2). Additionally, *ǒá* is used in the present for the negative, without *mí* (which occurs in all other cases of main clause negation).

Tense	Positive	Negative
P4	à-ǒá-à ‘He was (long ago)’	à-ǒá-à mǐ ‘He was not (long ago)’
P3	à-n-lǐ-í ‘He was’	à-n-lǐ-í mǐ ‘He was not’
P2	----	----
P1	à-ǒá-yǐ ‘He (just) was’	à-ǒá-yǐ mǐ ‘He (just) was not’
Nar	à-lǐ ‘He is’	à-á-ǒá ‘He is not’
F1	á-ǒá ‘He will be’	----
F2	á-ǒá-gó ‘He will be (sometime)’	á-á-ǒá-gó mǐ ‘He will not be’

In addition, there is an extension with the same form, that has some type of plural meaning or is simply frozen. It does not apply to all verbs, but for those who allow it, there is ambiguity in many cases. In the Narrative without the Progressive, a verbal form is clearly from the root plus the extension. In the Narrative with the Progressive, it is either the Habitual of the base verb or the Progressive of the extended verb. There is no distinct Habitual form for the extended verb.

(36)	â-fá-lǎ'	lì-fá	â-fálǎ'	lì-fálǎ'
	1.SP.PROG-give-HAB	5-give	1.SP.PROG-distribute	5-distribute
	'He gives (normally)'	'to give'	'He is distributing.'	'to distribute'

This same ambiguity holds in other tenses, where the Progressive is not needed for the Habitual.

(37)	à-n-fá-lǎ-ǎ	lì-fá	à-n-fálǎ-ǎ	lì-fálǎ'
	1.SP-P3-give-HAB-P3	5-give	1.SP-P3-distribute-P3	5-distribute
	'He gave (normally)'	'to give'	'He was distributing.'	'to distribute'

The Perfect also has some differences from other suffixes, both in its morphological and constructional properties. Morphologically, the Perfect has some variations from the high tone *i*, besides the assimilation of this suffix described above. In verbs not ending in a vowel, the high tone is realized on the vowel of the final syllable, with no other indication of the Perfect.

(38)	à-bùŋ	à-búŋ
	1.SP-tell(NARR)	1.SP-tell.PERF
	'He told.'	'He has told.'

This means that for lexically high, single-syllable verbs not ending in a vowel, the contrast between the Narrative and the Perfect is neutralized.

(39)	à-pwáŋ	à-pwáŋ
	1.SP-cut(NARR)	1.SP-cut.PERF
	'He cut.'	'He has cut.'

In two syllable verb stems ending in a vowel plus nasal, besides the tonal difference, the final nasal drops and there is a change in the quality of the vowel, which becomes ϵ :

(40)	à-kwènzèŋ	à-kwènzé
	1.SP-surround(NARR)	1.SP-surround.PERF
	'He surrounded.'	'He has surrounded'

Constructionally, the Perfect is only allowed with the Narrative. For certain other tenses, similar changes of form are required by the tense. However, these forms do not have perfect meaning and do not contrast with base forms in that tense. Other tenses require the base form and do not allow this change of form. The following shows some examples of this with the verb 'to surround' as in example (38) (where the modified form indicates Perfect).

(41)	à-kwènzé-gà	* à-kwènzeŋ-gà
	1.SP-surround-P4	
	'He surrounded.'	
(42)	à-kwènzéè-yì	* à-kwènzéèŋ-yì
	1.SP-surround-P1	
	'He surrounded.'	

“to be” is also not unexpected. This kind of suppletion is common cross-linguistically, especially in common words like the verb “to be”. Possible sources for both forms have been reconstructed for Proto Bantu - *dì ‘be’ and *bá ‘dwell, be’, and their simultaneous use in a single Bantu language is common. Formalistic theories would just relegate this to the lexicon, but that begs the question of why this is most common in frequently used lexical items. A grammaticalization view including frequency and a usage-based approach provides more insight. So, we see that while the tense and aspect markers of Lefa form a more or less coherent system semantically (clearly for tense, less so for aspect), each morpheme has particularities in properties, both morphologically and constructionally. While this may be surprising for some, it is to be expected from a perspective of grammaticalization, where each morpheme has a unique history. Some tentative hypotheses may even be proposed from this perspective to explain some of these differences.

References

- Guarisma. G. (2000). *Le cas du Bafia : complexité morphologique simplicité syntaxique : langue bantoue (A 50) du Cameroun*. Paris: Peeters.
- Isaac. K. (2018). *The system of verbal morphemes in Lefa*. Yaoundé: SIL. Retrieved from <https://www.silcam.org/resources>.
- Nurse. D. (2008). *Tense and aspect in Bantu*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tadadjeu, M. & Sadembouo E. (1984) *General Alphabet of Cameroon Languages*. Yaoundé: University of Yaoundé.