

TWO PAST TENSES IN COMORIAN: MORPHOLOGICAL FORM AND INHERENT MEANING

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1. Introduction

Comorian is a Bantu language spoken on the Comoro Islands, a small archipelago between the East African coast and the northern tip of Madagascar. It is usually grouped within the Sabaki languages together with Swahili, Mwani, Elwana, Pokomo and Mijikenda (Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993: 4-19).

Internally Comorian is divided into different dialects. In congruence with the four main islands, four dialects of Comorian are usually distinguished in the linguistic literature (Ahmed-Chamanga 1992:13; Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993: 18): Shingazija on the island of Ngazija (Grande Comore), Shimwali on Mwali (Moheli), Shinzwani on Nzwani (Anjouan) and Shimaore on Maore (Mayotte).¹ These four dialects are arranged into two dialect groups (Shingazija/Shimwali vs. Shinzwani/Shimaore) which are supposed to reflect peculiar linguistic similarities and differences².

Although, in general, the greatest morphological differences between the Comorian dialects are within the TAM-markers, the past tense is morphologically quite homogeneous. Therefore dialectal differences do not play a dominant role for the subject of this paper.

Two different past tense forms frequently used in everyday speech will be treated here: one morphological simple (one word) form and one compound (two word) form combining the auxiliary *-ka* (be) with the main verb. They will be discussed first from a formal point of view demonstrating the rules to create the morphosyntactical form. After this they are treated with regard to their semantic contents.

The results presented here are based on a one year dialectological research on the Comoro Islands 1996-97.³ Interviews were made in 56 towns and villages on all four islands of the archipelago.

¹ The French names which are also often used by Comorians themselves are given in brackets.

² I am currently working on my doctoral thesis which is concerned with the dialectological situation on the Comoro Islands and which will partly revise these assumptions.

³ I am much indebted to the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) for a one year scholarship to carry out the field research on the Comoro Islands.

2. Morphological forms of the two past tenses

2.1. The simple one word form

The verb in Comorian has a template structure typical for Bantu languages. The arrangement of the different slots in a simple one word form is basically identical with the one in Swahili:

Slot	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Content	Verbal Preprefix (Pre)	Subject marker (SM)	TAM	Object marker (OM)	Root	Extension (Ext)	Suffix ₁	Suffix ₂

As in many Bantu languages, the minimal form is the imperative singular with slots 5 and 7 only, but for most finite verb forms slots 2, 3, 5 and 7 are obligatory, too, possibly supplemented by morphemes in the other slots.

The simple past tense in Comorian differs from most other tense/aspect forms in that the TAM-marker in slot 3 is \emptyset and the suffix₁ in slot 7 is not uniform. Sometimes we find the final vowel *-a*, sometimes it shows vowel harmony with the root vowel. The general structure of the simple past tense consists of only three overt obligatory elements:

SM – Root – Suffix₁ (*-a* or vowel harmony)

In Comorian there is only one form of the subject marker for personal plural subjects and for subjects belonging to the classes 3-18, but for personal singular subjects we have three different sets:

	Set 1	Set 2	Set 3 (only Shingazija & Shimwali)
1sg	ni-	tsi-	-m-
2sg	u-	hu-/u-	-o-
3sg	a-	ha-/a-	-u-
1pl	ri-		
2pl	m-/mu-		
3pl	wa-		

Which set is used depends on the TAM of the concrete verbal form. For the affirmative past tense set 2-markers are employed. The 1sg is always represented by *tsi-*, but for the 2sg and 3sg the forms differ depending on the dialect. Other Sabaki languages also have a second set of subject markers, normally of the form *ku-* (2sg) and *ka-* (3sg) (Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993: 365-366; Rombi & Alexandre 1982: 37). Nurse & Hinnebusch even reconstruct it for Proto-Sabaki as **ku-* (besides **u-*) and **ka-* (besides **a-*). Comorian has undergone sound changes

resulting in the lenition of the reconstructed Proto-Bantu plosives **p*, **t* and **k*. So Proto-Bantu and Proto-Sabaki **k* was weakened to *h* and further to \emptyset :

$$*k \rightarrow h \rightarrow \emptyset$$

For the subject markers of set 2 Shingazija has only done the first step resulting in the forms *hu-* and *ha-* for 2sg and 3sg whereas the other three dialects have gone one step further to \emptyset using the forms *u-* and *a-* in this context. This means for Shimwali, Shinzwani, and Shimaore that the only difference between sets 1 and 2 is in the 1sg.

As mentioned earlier, the form of the final vowel in slot 7 varies. Sometimes we find the vowel *-a*, sometimes vowel harmony with the vowel of the verbal root. The morphophonological rule regulating the form of the final vowel is best and most completely described in Rombi (1983: 148-152) for Shimaore but proves right for the other dialects as well. In brief, the rule can be summarized like this:

First we must exclude verbs of foreign (mostly Arabic) origin with a final vowel other than *-a* in the infinitive. Their final vowel is invariable independent of the tense/aspect/mood of the finite verb:

urudi (to return) \rightarrow *arudi* (he returned)

For verbs of Bantu origin with infinitives on final *-a* we can distinguish four cases. They differ in the shape of the verbal stem which in turn determines the final vowel:

- a) monosyllabic verbal roots of the form *-CVC-* or *-VC-*
- b) monosyllabic verbal roots of the form *-CV-*
- c) verbal stems of more than one syllable or stems containing an extension (slot 6 occupied)
- d) short verbal roots without a vowel

Verbs of type a) show vowel harmony in the simple past tense:

urema (to hit) \rightarrow *tsireme* (I hit)

uona (to see) \rightarrow *uono* (you saw)

Verbs of type b) and c) retain the final *-a* in the simple past tense:

ukia (to hear) \rightarrow *tsikia* (I heard)

uremwa (to be hit) \rightarrow *aremwa* (he was hit)

ununua (to buy) \rightarrow *rinunua* (we bought)

For the short verbs of type d) the final vowel in the past tense is unpredictable. Their past tense forms are idiosyncratic:

ula (to eat) \rightarrow *ali* (he ate)

unwa (to drink) \rightarrow *uno* (you drank)

uwa (to fall) \rightarrow *awu* (he fell)

uβa (to give) \rightarrow *riβa* (we gave)

The vast majority of past tense forms can be explained with this morphophonological rule but there are still some exceptions where we would expect vowel harmony and find retention of the final *-a*. For some there is an external reason, e.g. the past tense *rihisa* (we finished) of the

verb *uhisa* (to finish) because there also exists a verb of foreign origin *uhisi* (to feel) with fixed final vowel. Therefore the past tense form *rihisi* is already occupied by this verb. To avoid ambiguity *uhisa* retains the final *-a* in the past tense. So we can explain the exception with paradigmatic restraints upon the morphophonological rule. Other examples can only be treated as exceptions without an explanation, like the verbs *ukura* (to be full, satisfied) or *ulola* (to marry). Both retain the final *-a* in the past tense against the rule.

The negative of this past tense follows the normal pattern of negative tenses in Comorian:

ka – SM – TAM – Root – *a*

The preprefix *ka-* is the marker for the 'primary negative' and derived from Proto-NEC⁴ **nka-* (Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993:365). The subject markers for the 1-3 sg are taken from set 1. For the 1sg we find a contracted fixed form *tsi-* containing the semantic entities of negation and 1sg⁵

The shape of the tense marker varies depending on the dialect. For Shingazija it is *-ja-*, for the other three dialects it is *-a-*. There occur many contractions of *-a-* with the preceeding vowel of the SM.

The final vowel of the negative past is always *-a* for verbs of Bantu origin irrespective of their behaviour in the affirmative past.

2.2. The compound form with the auxiliary *-ka*⁶

The affirmative of the compound tense has the same form in all dialects:

SM – *ka* SM – Root – Suffix₁

The subject markers for the 1-3 sg are again taken from set 2 and the morphophonological rule with regard to the final vowel (suffix₁) is the same as outlined above for the short past tense form. Therefore the general structure above can be rewritten as:

SM – *ka* + simple past tense form

or even more abstract:

past_{aux} + past_{main verb}

If there is a verbal object marker it is included in the second (main verb) part in the usual slot directly before the verbal root:

tsika tsihuono I saw you (*-hu-* is OM 2sg)

Following Heine's classification of auxiliary constructions (Heine 1993), the Comorian compound past tense falls within the 'Serial Schema', one of his 'Complex Schemas', because

⁴ NEC = Northeast Coast Bantu; Sabaki is a subgroup of NEC

⁵ In Shingazija we find *n-* instead of the expected *tsi-*.

⁶ For Shingazija Lafon (1991) gives the longer form *-kaya* (be) which I found rarely used, especially with the compound past tense.

both the auxiliary and the main verb are finite. It even meets the more restricted definition of this schema proposed by other authors (Heine 1993: 38) in that we find subject reference identity between auxiliary and main verb.

The negative of the compound tense is basically formed by negating both the auxiliary and the main verb. The negation preprefix *ka-* is used only once at the beginning of the verbal form whereas the TAM-morpheme for the negative past appears in both parts. For the three dialects of Shimwali, Shinzwani, and Shimaore this principle produces the following verbal structure:

ka – SM – *a* – *ka* SM – *a* – Root – *a*

The SMs are taken from set 1 which is standard for all negative tenses. For the 1sg we find the usual contraction of preprefix *ka-* + SM to *tsi-* resulting in a form like:

tsaka nahuona I did not see you

For other SMs the forms are more regular:

karaka rawaona we did not see them (*-wa-* is OM 3pl)

As for the negative simple form the final vowel is always *-a*.

In Shingazija there is also a kind of double negation but the TAM-morphemes applied in the auxiliary and the main verb are different. The general structure is:

ka – SM – *ja* – *ka* SM – *a* – Root – *a*

In the auxiliary part the TAM-morpheme *-ja-* is identical with the one used for negating the simple past tense. In the main verb part the TAM-morpheme is *-a-* which is the usual negative past tense marker in the other three dialects. Concerning the TAM-markers, this results in a mixed form like:

karijaka rawaona we did not see them

Parallel to the negative simple tense in this dialect the contracted form of preprefix *ka-* + SM 1sg is not *tsi-* but *n-*:

njaka nahuona I did not see you

Rombi (1983: 168) analyses the morphological structure of the negative compound form for Shimaore as a combination of the auxiliary *-ka* in the negative simple past tense (*l'accompli négatif*) and the main verb in the past relative (which she calls '*relatif-participe*'). This analysis is formally correct and would have even the advantage of also being able to explain the Shingazija form without any additional remarks. On the other hand, this explanation fails to account for the affirmative compound form. Trying to explain the negative form in a systematic context rather than providing an isolated analysis I would therefore favour the first explanation of a double negation of the affirmative form although there remains the necessity of further comments on the mixed form in Shingazija.

3. Semantic concepts of the two forms

3.1. Semantic categories: absolute vs. relative tenses

Tense is a grammaticalized expression used to locate a situation (event etc.) in time. In this paper we are only concerned with past tenses, i.e. with situations that happened prior to the speech moment. Following Comrie (1985), the main split within the tense category is between absolute and relative tenses. Absolute tenses have the moment of speech as their deictic center. For relative tenses another reference point, provided by the context, is added and serves as the deictic center to which the situation is temporally related. The relative tense that is important for the following discussion is the past perfect. It locates the situation prior to a reference point which itself is already located in the past. It can be regarded as a 'past in the past' (Comrie 1985: 65). This includes no hint at the temporal distance between the moment of speech and the situation described in the past perfect. If the reference point is close to the moment of speech and the situation described close to the reference point the temporal distance between the moment of speech and the situation can be very short.

For the absolute tenses on the other hand we find different degrees of remoteness in the past and future in many languages of the world. Different grammatical forms locate a given situation at different temporal distances with regard to the moment of speech. Languages that mark temporal distances grammatically may have different numbers of degrees of remoteness ranging from two up to seven (the latter case in Kiksht, an Amerindian language; Comrie 1985: 87 citing Hymes). The most common and clearly marked boundary for different past tenses is between 'earlier today' and 'before today' or hodiernal and prehodiernal. Other delimitations are often more vague (Dahl 1984: 112-113). Cut-off points also found in many languages are between 'yesterday' and 'before yesterday' or between 'a few days ago' and 'more than a few days ago' (Comrie 1985: 87-88).

There are also differences in application. In some languages a given degree of remoteness demands a rigid temporal interpretation so that it is not possible to combine that tense with a 'wrong' temporal adverb. In other languages the dividing-line is more fluid and the combination of a special tense with the 'wrong' temporal adverb might be used to express a subjective impression of the temporal distance (Comrie 1985: 90). Dahl (1984: 109-110) therefore subsumes this difference under objective vs. subjective judgment of temporal distance.

Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca (1994: 98-99) divide languages into one group with distinctions on the daily cycle (hodiernal and hesternal tenses) and another group with the less specific division of immediate vs. remote. As to their sample, the latter type is much more common.

3.2. Meaning of the compound tense with *-ka*

To define the semantic difference between the two past tense forms I shall start on investigating the semantic content of the marked compound form, so that the unmarked simple past tense can be explained in contrast to it. Provided that the compound form primarily contains a

temporal meaning the question arises if it represents an absolute or a relative tense; or more precisely: is it a remote past or a past perfect?

In the interviews this form was labeled 'plus-que-parfait' by nearly all the informants spontaneously. In my view this label is linguistically incorrect and originates in the formal education system where linguistic questions are discussed in secondary school only with respect to the French language. In French there is no remote past and therefore there is no appropriate term to be learned at school. The nearest equivalent to the Comorian compound tense seems to be the French 'plus-que-parfait', especially in relation to other past tense forms.

In the discussions following the interviews the difference between the two past tense forms became much clearer. About 80% of the informants declared that they regarded the compound form as being more remote than the simple form. This rate is quite convincing, especially as until today there exists no codified grammar for Comorian which could be the basis for learning the language in a standardized way.

Even the comments found in other linguistic publications on Comorian remain rather vague in this point. For the French authors who mention the compound tense, Ahmed-Chamanga (1997: 17) calls it 'le passé révolu ("plus-que-parfait")' and translates it with the French past perfect. The same does Blanchy (1996: 22) using the terms 'accompli' or 'accompli absolu', and also Picabia (1996: 84) who labels the form 'antériorité absolue' and regards it as an aspect rather than a tense. Rombi (1983: 167-168) calls it 'accompli absolu' and is more cautious in the translation, stating that there is not a corresponding tense in French and that the translation can be 'passé composé', 'plus-que-parfait' or 'parfait' depending on the context. The most adequate characterization is found in Nurse (1983:89) who says that far past and past perfect can be expressed with this form but he does not analyse which function is primary.

The kind of explanations my informants gave concerning the semantic difference between the two past tenses did not vary much for speakers of different dialects. On every island more than 70% analysed the compound form as being more remote than the simple form. Within the 20% of devious answers the vast majority could not recognize a semantic difference between the two tenses probably reflecting a lower degree of linguistic competence (but see also 3.2.1.). Other individual interpretations were that a situation described in the compound tense was shorter or uncertain. These semantic connotations could also be related to more remote situations.

3.2.1. Defining the borderline

When asked to define the temporal borderline between the two tenses the answers given by the informants showed a wider range of variation. The most common answers were:

- a) the simple form is used for situations that happened earlier today and yesterday, the compound form for situations that go back to last week and before

b) the borderline is between situations earlier today vs. yesterday and before (hodiernal vs. prehodiernal).

Other boundaries more scarcely stated by the informants ranged from very recently vs. this morning and before to last week vs. last year and before. Some of the informants totally refused to fix any borderline just stating that the simple form is more recent and the compound form more remote. This coincides with an important remark made by nearly all of the informants when I urged them to define a precise borderline: it is not a strict boundary and must be seen rather as a tendency than as a rule of language use. In conversational situations, when the matter of tense was not explicitly emphasized, this became more obvious. Even informants who had claimed before that they would apply the boundary very strictly did not do so in a nonformal situation.

Therefore it seems appropriate to define the difference between the two past tenses as one of immediate vs. remote with a very fluid dividing-line. The application of one form or the other is not governed by a strict rule.

In Shingazija there is another compound form expressing an even more remote situation. It is formed by the auxiliary *-para* (get, receive) combined with the main verb infinitive resulting in a merger of the final *-a* of the auxiliary with the infinitive prefix *u-* to *-o-*. Thus we get the form:

tsiparohuona I saw you (long ago)

This form is rarely used compared with the other two because it is applied more strictly for very remote situations one or many years ago only. Basically, the other two forms could also be used in the same context (with a preference for the compound form). In Shinzwani and Shimaore there are no comparable forms expressing a very remote past.⁷ Many informants for Shingazija said that, using this form, a situation is also regarded as more uncertain. This modal meaning component can be interpreted as secondary. It is quite logical that, generally speaking, a more remote situation can not be remembered with the same certainty as a very recent one.

3.3. Expression of 'past perfect' meaning

If we define the compound tense with *-ka* as a remote past there remains the question how the semantic concept of 'past perfect' is expressed, i.e. how is it possible to place a situation temporally before a reference point which itself is already located in the past? The answer is that there is no special grammatical tense to indicate this but that other past tense forms are used in combination with lexical temporal expressions, adverbs or conjunctions to make clear the temporal configuration.

⁷ I did not check this form in Shimwali. Rombi (1983: 162-163) lists a compound form with *-paro-* also for Shimaore being formally identical with the one in Shingazija but having another meaning:

tsiparofanya hazi I have already worked (once in my life)

In combination with lexical temporal expressions or adverbs (last week, last year, before etc.) that place a situation prior to another one mentioned before, one of the two past tense forms described in this paper is used. As far as I can see there is no preference for the compound form in this context. In a subordinate temporal clause introduced by the temporal conjunction 'after' – probably the most frequent context in which the semantic concept of 'past perfect' is used – the situation is somewhat different. Although some people use the simple past tense after the conjunction (*baada* or *baanda* in Comorian) the vast majority uses the past relative indicated by the TAM-marker *-a-*. Therefore the sentence 'After we had arrived we went eating' would normally be translated as:

Shimwali: *Baanda rawaswili, rende rili.*

Shingazija: *Baada rahaja, rende rili.*

Shinzwani/Shimaore: *Baada raza, rende rili.*

There is a phonological rule that /z/ in Shinzwani/Shimaore becomes /j/ in Shingazija/Shimwali. *-za* and *-waswili* are synonyms. The additional *-ha-* in Shingazija seems to be inserted in the past relative before short verbal roots.

The use of a relative after *baada* points to the nominal origin of this conjunction as does the connective plus infinitive in Swahili (*baada ya kumaliza* ...). Although, like in Swahili, *baada* (or *baanda*) is no more used as a noun of its own today, in the construction above it functions formally as the reference noun for the relative.

Out of the different forms used in different syntactic contexts to express the semantic concept of 'past perfect' none has exclusively or primarily the meaning of a 'past in the past'. Only the combination with temporal conjunctions, adverbs or other expressions leads to this interpretation.

4. Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was to explain the meanings of the two most commonly used past tense forms in Comorian. First the two tenses were introduced and their morphological form thoroughly analysed: the simple form consisting of just a subject marker, the verbal root and a final vowel whose shape depends on the structure of the verbal root; and the compound form composed of the auxiliary *-ka* and the main verb both in the past tense form.

To clear up the semantic content of the two forms I investigated especially the meaning of the compound form (in contrast to the simple form). I hope it became clear that the compound form is not a past perfect but that its primary meaning is remote past although there is no strict boundary between the two tenses. Therefore they are more or less interchangeable and the preference for one form to describe a more recent or a more remote situation is only a tendency, no obligation.

The semantic concept of 'past perfect' is not marked by a special morphological tense in Comorian. It is expressed by a combination of lexical temporal expressions, adverbs or conjunctions with past tense forms (simple past tense, compound past tense, past relative) so that

it becomes clear that the described situation is prior to another situation in the past given by the context.

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