

## Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

**Narrative structuring (and restructuring) in Totela: a  
group study of tense-aspect in the field**  
Thera Marie Crane, *University of California, Berkeley / University of Zambia*

## Narrative Structuring (and Restructuring) in Totela: Group Study of Tense-Aspect in the Field

Narrative and other discourse data often differ significantly from data obtained through traditional elicitation; both types of data are crucial for adequate linguistic analysis. In this paper, I discuss a method that combines the two and yields considerable insight into the pragmatic and discourse-structuring functions of a tense, aspect, and mood (TAM) marking system. Specifically, I explore the narrative-structuring functions of TAM markers as evidenced in the telling and revision of traditional folk stories in Totela, a highly endangered Bantu language spoken in Zambia's Western Province. Stories were recorded in natural settings before live audiences. A selection of raw transcriptions were later revised by the investigator and a team of speakers (generally also present at the original telling), with the goal of creating a short anthology. Revision involved removal of speech errors and code switching, clarification of details, and the occasional reordering of events, in order to ensure that a reader unfamiliar with the story could follow the plotline.

Totela does not have a written tradition, but storytelling is a highly developed art; the revision process aimed at preserving as far as possible the form and style of the originals. Nevertheless, speakers sometimes suggested TAM marking that deviated from the original. A number of interesting trends emerged, including the following:

FORM / (TYPICAL) FUNCTION	ORIGINALS	REVISIONS
(a) Narrative-specific forms used to indicate successive events: (i) a verbal infinitive with the comitative proclitic <i>na</i> generally co-occurs with a change of grammatical subject or location, or a minor episodic break; (ii) the bare verbal infinitive typically occurs when the actor has not changed, or when the verb in question is part of a series of events depicted as part of a single narrative thread.	distinction a general trend but highly variable; subject change not always clearly marked	more consistent distinction between <i>na</i> = forms and the bare infinitive
(b) Serial verbs in the infinitive used to narrate change of location and the beginning and ending of events; series begin with one or two verbs such <i>-iza</i> ('come'), <i>-sika</i> ('arrive') and <i>-mana</i> ('finish') and are often conventionalized in word choice and order.	very commonly used; occasional variation of word order in series-initial verbs	highly conventionalized; ordering of series-initial verbs consistent
(c) Class 14 (abstract) nominal marking on verbs emphasizing, e.g., manner of action and the subject's participatory role rather than the event itself.		generally unchanged from original
(d) Non narrative-specific TAM marking with special narrative-structuring functions, e.g. (i) to set the general time frame of the narrative and give background information (past imperfective); (ii) to mark breaks in the action or give information that falls outside of the linear ordering of story events (past perfective); or (iii) to give certain details more immediacy (present/present progressive).	occur commonly and illustrate discourse-structuring functions of the TAM markers	in many cases changed to the narrative forms described in (a)

Analysis of TAM usage in the original recorded stories together with their revised versions provides a clearer picture of discourse-structuring properties of TAM markers (cf. e.g. Hopper 1979 and Seidel 2008), as well as speaker conceptions of their functions. In particular, occurrences of non narrative-specific TAM marking in the original narratives illustrate their pragmatic and discourse functions, and the consistencies emerging in narrative revision give clues about linguistic competence and stylistic preferences. Such insights are less likely to emerge in elicitation, or through oral narration or narrative translation alone.

### References:

- HOPPER, PAUL J. 1979a. Aspect and foregrounding in discourse. *Discourse and syntax*, ed. by Talmy Givón, 213-241. New York: Academic.
- SEIDEL, FRANK. 2008. *A grammar of Yeyi: a Bantu language of southern Africa*. Cologne: Rüdiger-Köppe Verlag.