

## The depiction of tense, aspect and mood in Taba

John Bowden

Jakarta Field Station

Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology

Taba is an eastern Malayo-Polynesian language from the South Halmahera – West New Guinea subgroup of the Austronesian language family. Taba is a predominantly head-marking language with AVO word order. It is of a mixed nominative/ accusative and split-S alignment. Human arguments occur with nominative/ accusative alignment while non-humans operate according to a split-S pattern of alignment. Taba is a language which pays great attention to matters of animacy in its grammar, but temporal relations do not figure prominently as matters that need to be paid much attention by speakers of the language. The language has obligatory proclitics that cross-reference Actors, but Undergoers are not usually cross-referenced obligatorily.

Taba has very few morphemes of any type that are strictly dedicated to the expression of tense and aspect. However, a variety of different resources are used in actual speech to express temporal relations and other related meanings. In this paper I explore the range of strategies employed by Taba speakers. These include reduplication and demonstratives, verb serialisation, a range of independent words with aspectual and other temporal meanings, as well as dedicated aspectual markers.

### Dedicated TAM markers:

Taba has two optional clause level particles which can be used to mark realis mood and continuative aspect: *do* and *hu* respectively. There is never any grammatical obligation to mark aspect or mood in a Taba clause.

The realis mood marker *do* occurs as the final element of a clause (unless it co-occurs with continuative *hu* in which case it precedes *hu*). The clauses marked by *do* may be verbal as exemplified in (1) or non-verbal as in (2).

- (1) *Kmul Keten okik yapyap dumik do*  
 k=mul Keten okik yapyap dumik do  
 1s=return Moti finish ash be.complete REAL  
 ‘Once I had returned to Moti there was ash everywhere.’

- (2) *Manusia lloci do*  
 people many REAL  
 ‘There are a lot of people (now/ already)’.

Continuous aspect is marked by the particle *hu* which always occurs clause finally. Both verbal and non-verbal clauses may be marked as continuous. Example (3) illustrates *hu* in an undergoer oriented intransitive verbal clause while (4) illustrates the same particle in a directional clause.

- (3) *Bonci ne kutu-kutu hu*  
 peanut PROX small-small CONT  
 ‘These peanuts are still small.’

- (4) *Si ya-se hu*  
 They up-ESS CONT  
 ‘They’re still up (in the neighbouring village).’

The realis and the continuative markers are (very) occasionally found together in the same clause where *do* always precedes *hu*. This combined usage serves to emphasise the reality of some continuing activity, as in (5) which is a response to another person’s complain that an expected visitor had not yet arrived. The use of both particles emphasises that the expected visitor was still in the process of coming.

- (5) *I n=wom do hu*  
 He 3s=come REAL CONT  
 ‘He’s still coming.’

## Verbal reduplication – repeated action

The reduplicative prefix (C)aC(C)(a)<sup>1</sup> is attached to either transitive or intransitive verbs and indicates that an action is performed repeatedly, often implying the existence of more than one Undergoer. It is not common in discourse, and although it is unattested in natural speech with either realis *do* or continuous *hu*, either particle can be used with reduplicated verbs in elicited sentences. The verbal reduplicative prefix is illustrated in (6) and (7).

- (6) *K=sung um*  
 1s=enter house  
 ‘I entered the house.’
- (7) *K=sanga-sung um*  
 1s=RED-enter house  
 ‘I kept on entering the house(s).’

The Taba reduplicative prefix illustrated here encodes what Durie (1986) has labelled ‘verbal number’. The undergoer noun phrase in (7), *um* ‘house’ is grammatically Singular, but Taba inanimates are always grammatically singular whether they refer to one or more entities. Thus, example (7) is ambiguous between two readings, either ‘I kept on entering the same house (over and over)’ or ‘I entered multiple houses on multiple occasions’. The important fact about what (7) signifies is that the action of entering was repeated a number of times.

## Modal and aspectual verb serialisation

Taba has very productive verb serialisation, and serialisation is often used for denoting aspectual and modal meanings. Both modal and aspectual serialisation are very common and each type has two very productive serial verbs which are in opposition to each other. All of these constructions are used frequently.

In modal serialisation, a semantically primary verb occurs alongside a verb denoting ability or inability. The ability denoting verb *ahan* may occur either before or after the semantically main verb but the inability denoting *ahate* only occurs last in the series.

- (8) *Wwe n=ahan ncagal*  
 wwe n=ha-han n=sagal  
 ‘(My) leg would be able to walk.’

<sup>1</sup> Space precludes providing full details of the morphophonemics of this prefix here. The interested reader is directed to Bowden (2001: 75-76) for further information.

- (9) *N=pe n=ahan*  
3s=do 3s=be.able  
'He can do it.'
- (10) ...*ada mamatuo=si l=tagil l=ahate do*  
and old.people=PL 3p=walk 3p=not.be.able REAL  
'...and old people who couldn't walk any more'

