

GRAMMATICIZATION OF THE VERB 'SAY' TO FUTURE TENSE IN OBOLO

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Scholars of grammaticization in African languages, such as Heine et al. (1991) and Bybee et al. (1994), have identified several source concepts for the future tense. These include verbs of motion such as 'go' and 'come', volitive verbs such as 'want', the verb of action 'do', and the verb 'to have'. Another major set of source concepts is the adverb, and this includes 'quickly', and the temporal adverbs 'now', 'then', and 'afterwards'. The verb 'say' has been seen to function as a source concept for intention (Bybee et al. 1994) and the causative (Lord 1976).

In Obolo, a Lower Cross language of the Benue Congo family, the verb 'say' has grammaticized to definite future. The grammaticization channel along which the development has taken place is: verb *bé* 'say' → intention → future.

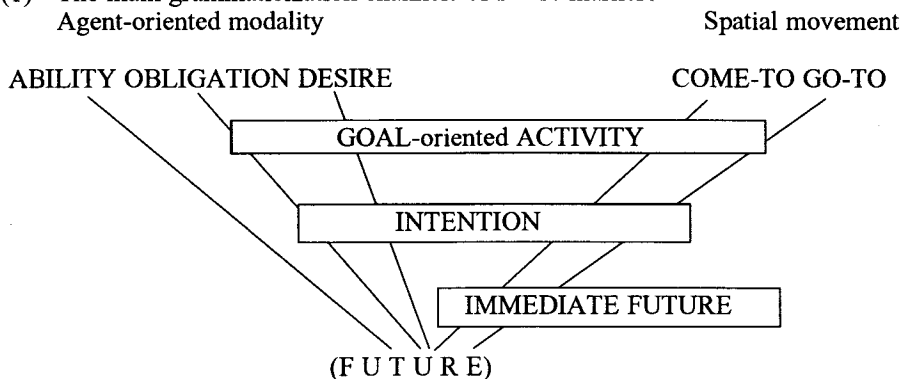
Les chercheurs ont proposé plusieurs concepts comme sources du temps futur dans la grammaire des langues africaines. Ces éléments comprennent des verbes de direction, tels 'aller', 'venir', de volonté, tel 'vouloir', d'action, tel 'faire', et le verbe 'avoir'. Les adverbes constituent une autre source fructueuse, par exemple 'vite', 'maintenant', 'alors', 'après'.

En obolo, membre minoritaire des langues Lower Cross de la famille Bénoué-Congo c'est le verbe 'dire' qui sert de marque grammaticale du futur imminent. Le développement en serait selon le schéma *bé* 'dire' → intention → temps futur.

0. INTRODUCTION

Works on grammaticization such as Heine and Reh (1984), Bybee et al. (1994), Sweetser (1988), Traugott (1988), and Heine, Claudi, and Hünemeyer (1991) have identified different grammaticization channels through which markers of future tense develop crosslinguistically. Most of these channels are given below in (1) from Bybee et al. (1994) taken from Heine et al. (1991:174).

- (1) The main grammaticization channels of future markers



Heine and Reh (1984:131) also identified other less prevalent sources in some African languages such as volitive or desiderative verbs (e.g., *taka* 'want' in Swahili), and adverbs (e.g., *fade* 'quickly' in Sango).

In this article I intend to show that the future tense marker, the affix *-bV-* (where V = vowel alternation for person)¹ has developed from the verb *bé* 'say' in Obolo. Supportive evidence for this process is drawn from Ibibio (Benue Congo), Igbo (Kwa),

¹ Abbreviations: 1s - first-person singular; 2s - second-person singular; 3s - third-person singular; 1p - first-person plural; 2p - second-person plural; 3p - third-person plural; AUX - auxiliary; Cp - common plural marker; COMPL - complementizer; DFUT - definite future; FUT - future tense; HORT - hortative; NSP - neutralized subject prefix; SBJ - subjunctive.

and Nigerian Pidgin English. The article is based on the Ngo dialect, but examples will be cited from the Ibot Obolo dialect where necessary.

1. THE PROBLEM

Presently the verb, **bé** 'say' indexes more than one meaning. In each of the examples below it has a different meaning.

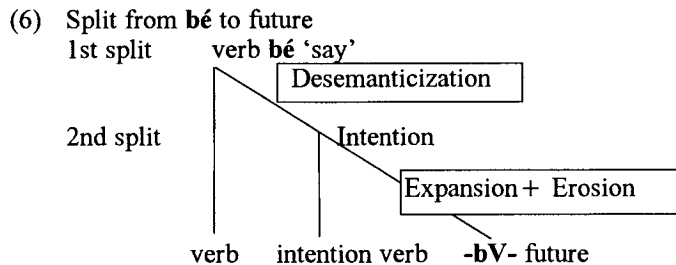
- (2) **áyì ì-bé (ké) òmô mô-sì éwé**
 Ayi 3s-say COMPL 3s 3sFUT-go market
 Ayi says (that) she will go to market.
- (3) **áyì ì-riṣṣṅ ì-bé (ké) òmô mô-sì éwé**
 Ayi 3s-know 3s-say COMPL 3s 3sFUT-go market
 Ayi knows (that) she will go to market.
- (4) **áyì ì-bé òmô í-sì éwé**
 Ayi 3s-say 3s NSP:HORT-go market
 Ayi intends to go (or is going to go) to market.
- (5) **áyì ì-bô-sì éwé**
 Ayi 3s-DFUT-go market
 Ayi is going to go (or intends to go) to market.

Whereas in (2) **bé** is a verb meaning 'say', in (3), which contains a serial verb construction, **bé** is a grammaticized complementizer. It is seen here layering with the old complementizer **ké** 'that' which has now become optional because of the presence of **bé**. In (4) (Ibot Obolo dialect) **bé** can be interpreted as expressing intention, or as a periphrastic expression of futurity. In (5) **-bé-**, in its third-person singular allomorphic form, **-bô-**, it is a marker of definite future, and may also index intention.

2. GRAMMATICIZATION CHAIN

The **bé** in (3), which is a grammaticized complementizer, does not belong in the grammaticization chain that leads from **bé** to the future marker. It just happens that **bé** 'say' is a common source for two types of morphemes, complementizer and future tense markers (Lord 1976). This is a case of polygrammaticization (Craig 1991) and will not be discussed in this article.

The development of **bé** from a prototypical verb in (2) to a future marker in (5), excluding (3), follows a grammaticization chain. Between (2) and (4) **bé** also undergoes a semantic reanalysis (Langacker 1977) from 'say' to 'intend to'. It still remains a verb, but with a change of mood from declarative to hortative. A syntactic result of this modal change is that the complementizer **ké** is obligatorily deleted. This intermediate form is still being used in the Ibot Obolo dialect to index both definite future and intention. In all other dialects, **bé** has further desemantized and undergone phonetic erosion (Heine et al. 1991) to become an affix **-bV-**, a marker of future tense, as exemplified in (5). These splits are represented diagrammatically in (6).



Sweetser (1988) and Traugott (1988) have pointed out that grammaticization involves not only semantic bleaching, but also semantic gain. This claim is borne out here. At the affixation stage, **bé** is completely decategorialized. It is no longer a verb but a verbal affix. It does not have a full lexical verbal meaning, but it has a grammatical meaning: future tense. It can no longer take verbal inflections such as tense, aspect, negation, and person markers. Rather, as an affix itself, it participates in marking these attributes. Obolo verb roots do not inflect or alternate for person, but affixes do. The paradigm for the affix **-bV-** as a future marker, showing its allomorphic variations for person, is given in (7).

(7) **m-bâ-sì** **éwé**
1s-1sDFUT-go market
I am going to go to market.

ò-bô-sì **éwé**
2s-2sFUT-go market
You are going to go to market.

ì-bô-sì **éwé**
3s-3sFUT-go market
S/he is going to go to market.

é-bê-sì **éwé**
Cp-CpDFUT-go market
We/you/they are going to go to market.

As can be observed in (7), both second- and third-persons singular share the same allomorphic form **-bô-**. Also all plural persons, first, second, and third, share a common allomorph **-bé-**. This phonological adaptation is a common phenomenon among future tense affixes as will be seen below. The affix **-bV-** also shares a falling tone pattern with the other future tense marker to be discussed.

3. GRADUALNESS AND SPECIALIZATION

In accordance with the findings of Chung (1977) and Lichtenberk (1991), this process of grammaticization from 'say' to future tense affix, represented schematically in (8) occurred gradually and continuously.

(8) verb **bé** 'say' → intention → future

The continuity of the process is signalled by the absence of a total shift, in which case forms to the left of → would cease to exist. **bé** still continues to exist in the language both as the verb 'say' and as an expression of intention, and these two forms also coexist with the phonetically eroded form, **-bV-**, that is now a marker of futurity.

Before **bé** grammaticized into a future marker, there was another future marker, **-mV-**, already existing in the language. This is exemplified in (9) with different person markings. According to Faraclas (1984:61), **-mV-** developed from the verb **mâ** 'like', which is likely.

(9) **mâ-tàkà** **íchíp**
1sFUT-eat coconuts
I will eat coconuts.

mô-tàkà **íchíp**
2s/3sFUT-eat coconuts
You/s/he will eat coconuts.

mê-tàkà íchíp
 CpFUT-eat coconuts
 We/you/they will eat coconuts.

It is useful to mention here that **-mV-**, with a high rather than a falling tone, also marks the subjunctive as exemplified in (10).

(10) *èmì má-sì*
 1s 1sSBJ-go
 I would have gone.

òwù/òmó mós-sì
 2s/3s 2s/3sSBJ-go
 You/s/he would have gone.

èjì/ènyì/èmâ mé-sì
 1p/2p/3p 1p/2p/3pSBJ-go
 We/you/they would have gone.

Without documented evidence of the history of the language, it is hard to establish any convincing relationship between these future and subjunctive markers. Semantically, however, future tense and the subjunctive are both irrealis, so their markers may be related.

The future marker, **-mV-**, seems to be older than its counterpart, **-bV-**, in that it only occurs in bound form and has no periphrastic allomorph (even in subjunctives), whereas **-bV-** occurs both periphrastically (as in the Ibot Obolo dialect in (4)) and in bound form (in other dialects as shown in (5)).

Although both **-mV-** and **-bV-** coexist as layers of future marking, they are actually specialized, each with a different future meaning. Because **-bV-** has not yet shed its intention meaning, it tends to be used to index definite future while **-mV-** indexes non-definite future. Faraclas (1984:60) refers to the **-bV-** future form as “stronger” than the **-mV-** form, indicating by this that there is a stronger probability that events so marked will come to pass than those marked by **-mV-**.

(11) *m̂-bâ-sì éwé*
 1s-1sDFUT-go market
 I am going to go to market (for sure). (Also: I am on my way to market.)

(12) *mâ-sì éwé*
 1sFUT-go market
 I will go to market.

4. MOTIVATION AND INFERENCE

As in the case of ‘say’ to causative in Lord (1976), the grammaticization of the verb **bé** ‘say’ to a future tense marker may have been motivated through conversational implicature, by the cognitive relationship between saying something and doing it, and futurity. There is an iconic temporal relationship between the saying and the doing in that doing is inherently futuristic relative to saying. It may have also been motivated by the need to represent events that are imminent in the future as distinct from non-definite future events.

There is a sense in which part of the meaning of **bé** ‘say’ involves intention. According to Bybee et al. (1994:27) “when a speaker states in first person what s/he wants to do or has to do, it can usually be inferred that the speaker intends to do just that.”

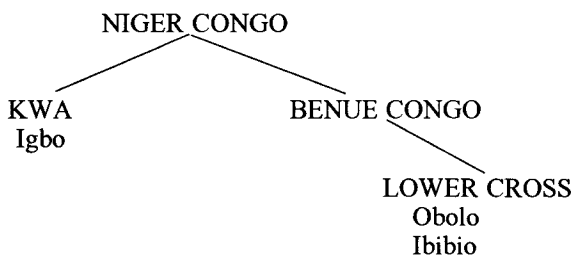
To the extent that intention is only a part of the meaning of **bé** 'say', and that this meaning token is the one that has grammaticized into a future marker, it is evident that the inference involved here is metonymical. At the same time, since intention necessarily involves futurity, the extension of the intentional meaning of **bé** to future marking is also metonymical. In this way one can say with Traugott (1988) that the intention token of the meaning of **bé** has been strengthened pragmatically.

It is also worth mentioning here that **bé** only qualifies as a marker of futurity because a part of its meaning, intention, necessarily implies futurity. Therefore the new gram², **-bV-**, has an inherent semantic content, namely intention/future, which is clearly carried over from its diachronic source (Bybee 1988). It is not simply assigned futurity meaning in contrast with other grams with which it interacts in the system. As Bybee (1988) points out, this evidence contradicts the view presented by Jakobson 1957, Diver 1964, Kirsner 1969, Waugh 1975, and Reid 1988, that a gram does not have an inherent meaning of its own, but rather has its value defined as a member of a set of mutually exclusive grams.

5. EVIDENCE FROM OTHER LANGUAGES

The process, verb 'say' → intention → future, is not restricted to Obolo, as it is also found in other areally contiguous languages. Examples given below are from Ibibio, Igbo, and Pidgin English. Ibibio and Igbo are genetically related to Obolo, as shown in (13), while Pidgin English is spoken in and around the Obolo area. In the case of Pidgin English the use of 'say' to indicate intention would have to spread through contact, because it is only areally related to Obolo and the other languages in the region. Since this feature is not present in the English language on which Pidgin English is based, it is likely that Pidgin English borrowed it from the surrounding languages.

(13) Family tree of some Niger Congo languages



(14) Ibibio

a. **á-bò (ké) ùdiá á-kwèré**
 3s-say COMPL food 3s-finish
 S/he says the food is finished.

b. **á-bò ì-kâ ùrùà**
 3s-say 3sSHORT-go market
 S/he intends to go to market.

(15) Igbo

a. **á sị (nà) nírí á-gwù-là**
 3s say COMPL food 3s-finish-SUFF
 S/he says (that) food is finished.

²The term GRAM is used by Bybee et al. (1994) as a short form for 'grammatical sized morphemes', i.e., morphemes which are formed with lexical items through the process of grammaticization.

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