

A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THREE PAST TAM FORMS IN VWANJI

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This paper presents data from Vwanji, an under-documented Bantu language spoken by approximately 28,000 people in southwestern Tanzania. Bantu languages are well known for having multiple degrees of past time reference grammaticalized in their TAM systems, and Vwanji is a good example of such a language, but one with some interesting typological differences from certain general TAM trends in Bantu languages noted in Nurse (2008). Three past TAM forms, in particular, are the focus of the research: P_1 /Anterior *SM-VB-ile*, P_2 *SM-a-vB-a*, and the Near Past Habitual *SM-a-vB-aya*. The analysis of data from a corpus of narrative and non-narrative texts (both written and oral) reveals that these three TAM forms have multiple discourse functions which do not necessarily follow in expected ways from their places in the TAM system as a whole. Comparing the Vwanji findings with those of neighbouring languages suggests some possible directions in which the verb forms in Vwanji may be changing functionally or being lost. The goal of this investigation is to increase understanding of a typologically interesting language which has not been well described and for which there is very little published data. The paper also shows the importance of taking natural discourse data into account when considering TAM functions in a language. Relying on elicited data alone may hide interesting complexities and variation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The diachronic shift from anterior to past is well attested cross-linguistically (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994: 81).¹ The anterior signals a past action with present relevance; it shifts to the past by losing its present relevance requirement.² Bybee et al. (1994: 86–87) theorize that this change comes about through language use. A speaker uses an anterior in order to present the situation referenced in his/her utterance as relevant to the current situation, even though it may not be. Framing utterances as relevant in this way “more often than would be strictly necessary for the communication of the propositional content” (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994: 86–87) weakens

1 I am grateful to Juhudi Konga, Ahimidiwe Mahali, Nahumu Mhalila, Stephen Nguvula, and Ezekiel Nyambo for helping me with my questions about the Vwanji language. The first version of this paper was presented at the “The semantics of verbal morphology in under-described languages” workshop (see the Introduction to this volume). My thanks go to Hazel Gray, Steve Nicolle, the workshop participants, two anonymous reviewers, and the editors of this volume for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2 Following Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca (1994) and in keeping with other TAM descriptions of Bantu languages, the term “anterior” is used throughout this paper for the aspect category referred to as “perfect” in other traditions.

the present relevance requirement, leading to its eventual loss and the establishment of the former anterior as a past.

Bantu languages can provide a rich source of data for the shift from anterior to past, as they typically encode multiple degrees of past reference, most commonly two or three (Nurse 2008: 89). Vwanji (/ˈβwɑːɲji/; G66, ISO 639-3: wbi) is a Bantu language spoken by approximately 28,000 people (Krüger 2003: 2) in the Kipengere Mountains in Makete District, Njombe Region, southwestern Tanzania. It is a typologically interesting language in relation to past tense categories for two reasons. Firstly, it recognises four degrees of past, a pattern which is attested in only 10 percent of the sample of 100 Bantu languages used by Nurse in his comparative study. Secondly, the time ranges for the nearer past forms do not match up with the common pattern for Bantu languages with four past tenses, whereby P_1 covers the immediate past and P_2 is a hodiernal past (Nurse 2008: 91). Instead, in Vwanji, as will be explored in Section 2, P_1 covers both immediate and hodiernal time reference, and also functions as an anterior, which is not a system described by Nurse. Vwanji also stands out in another typological way in contrast to its immediate neighbours as it is not a tone language, but rather has a system of predictable stress placement based on mora count.

In this paper I focus on three past tense verb forms in Vwanji: P_1 and P_2 , which are both perfectives, and a form which is the habitual equivalent of these verb forms. Firstly, I describe these verb forms in the context of the Vwanji TAM system as a whole, using some elicited data to explain the categories which have been assigned to the verb forms in question. I then turn to the findings from a corpus of text data, which shed further light on how the three verb forms behave in natural discourse contexts. Finally, I summarize the patterns observed in the Vwanji data and briefly compare them with those of neighbouring Bantu languages which have structurally similar forms, noting some points of similarity and difference. None of these languages has the same system as Vwanji, but there are some phenomena which can be seen as a later stage of the current situation in Vwanji.

The main goal of the research presented here is to supplement our understanding of the Vwanji TAM system by paying close attention to what can be observed in natural discourse data. In addition, the findings contribute further examples of how a Bantu language may organize its TAM system in relation to levels of past, and, more broadly, how the categories of anterior and past may be related in languages. It is suggested that the Anterior verb form in Vwanji has developed into a past tense covering both immediate and hodiernal past reference, and the P_2 and Near Past Habitual verb forms have developed the additional function of narrating a story in an informal style.

2. VWANJI PAST TENSES: SYSTEM AND SEMANTICS

Before looking in more detail at the three verb forms which are the focus of this paper (P_1 /Anterior, P_2 , and the Near Past Habitual), it is helpful to see the place of these verb forms in the Vwanji past time reference system as a whole, as shown in Table 1.³

3 See Eaton (2019) for further detail on the Vwanji past tenses described here and how the perfectivity/imperfectivity distinction and other aspectual categories are manifested in present and future tenses.

Table 1 Past tenses

	PFV <i>-ile/-a</i>	IPFV <i>-ay-a</i>
NAR <i>ka-</i>	<i>to-ka-sek-a</i> SM-NAR-VB-FV '(and then) we laughed'	
P ₄ <i>l'a-</i>	<i>to-l'a-sek-ile</i> SM-PST4-VB-PFV 'we laughed' (long ago)	<i>to-ka-sek-ay-a</i> SM-NAR-VB-IPFV-FV 'we were laughing' (long ago)
P ₃ <i>ka</i> ⁴	<i>to-ka-sek-ile</i> SM-PST3-VB-PFV 'we laughed' (some time ago)	
P ₂ <i>a</i>	<i>to-a-sek-a</i> SM-PST2-VB-FV 'we laughed' (recently)	<i>to-a-sek-ay-a</i> SM-PST2-VB-IPFV-FV 'we were laughing' (recently)
P ₁ /ANT	<i>to-sek-ile</i> SM-VB-PFV 'we have laughed'/ 'we laughed' (today)	

Of the five forms categorized as Perfectives, the Narrative is exceptional in that it overlaps in time reference with two of the other four, namely P₄ and P₃. That is, the Narrative narrates events which occur in a time range which can also be expressed by P₄ or P₃. Typically the Narrative carries the main event line of a story and as such often follows a scene-setting introduction in which either P₄ or P₃ predominates, as in (1), where '(he married)' (P₄) is followed in the next clause by 'he told' (Narrative):⁵

- (1) *o-mo- 'yo:si ju 'mo:ŋga a-l'a -tol-ile 'o-ŋ-dala*
 AUP-1-man NCP1-one SM1-PST4-marry-PFV AUP-1-wife
a-ka-ŋ 'bo:l-a 'o-ŋ-dala 'y'a:ke 'ku:ti
 SM1-NAR-OM1.tell-FV AUP-1-wife ACPL.3SG.POSS 15.say
 'A certain man **married** a wife. **He told** his wife that [...].'

Although this pattern is typical, it is not necessary for the first occurrence of the Narrative to be preceded by an establishing tense. As the Narrative is thus not dependent on another tense, following Longacre (1990: 109), it is analysed as a Narrative rather than as a Consecutive.

There are two further possible options for narrating perfective events in Vwanji. If the narrative is set in what is considered the recent past (especially in contrast with a different narrative line that is set further back in the past), it is appropriate to use P₂ to narrate the sequences of events. If the events took place on the day of the time of reference, P₁ is used, as illustrated in example (2) below.

With the exception of P₁, the past form with the nearest past tense reference, the four degrees of past time reference in Vwanji are best described as flexible rather than rigid. P₂ is most commonly described as being used for expressing a situation which occurred earlier than the day of the time of reference, up to around a month ago. P₃ expresses situations which occur further back, but not as far back as what would be considered remote past and therefore expressed

4 /ka-/ is glossed according to its function as PST3 in the P₃ verb form and as NAR elsewhere.

5 In the transcription of the sentence examples, stress is marked in words of more than one syllable. Vowel length (which typically only occurs in the penultimate syllable) is indicated by IPA length mark (:). Vwanji has seven phonemic vowel qualities (i e a o u). The language also has prenasalized consonants (^mb ⁿd ^ɲj ^ŋg), syllabic nasals (m̩ n̩ ŋ̩), and aspirated nasals (m^h n^h ŋ^h).

with P₄. It remains to be investigated how clear-cut the dividing line is between P₂ and P₃ and between P₃ and P₄, and to what extent, if any, its placement depends on contextual factors.

In contrast to the past tenses with more remote time references, the use of P₁/Anterior as a past tense is restricted to situations occurring on the same day as the time of reference. Some elicited examples suggest that the Vwanji consider the end of one day and the start of the next as the time of going to sleep.⁶ Therefore, for example, if a tree falls down at 11:30 pm one night, the appropriate tense to describe the event to someone on the following day would be P₁, assuming that the speaker had already gone to bed and was woken up by the sound.

The Perfective forms of the four past tenses and the Narrative include either the Perfective morpheme /-ile/ or the final vowel /-a/ and represent the situation expressed by the verb as a single whole. The contrasting Habitual verb forms contain the Imperfective morpheme /-aɣ/. As Table 1 illustrates, each of the two Habitual past tense verb forms covers a time reference range which corresponds to two equivalent Perfective forms. The Far Past Habitual is the Habitual counterpart of P₃, P₄, and the Narrative (and thus covers the same time range as the Narrative), leaving the Near Past Habitual as the Habitual counterpart of the nearer pasts, P₁/Anterior and P₂. However, as will be seen in Section 3.3, no examples have been found of the Near Past Habitual with a hodiernal past tense reference, so it remains to be seen whether it is appropriate to consider it as including the full time range of the P₁/Anterior. (A non-habitual imperfective meaning, such as progressive, is normally expressed periphrastically in non-present tenses.)

Systematically, P₁ must be counted as a Past, as it is used for describing a past situation which took place on the day of reference:

- (2) *omɔ 's'ɔ:ɣɔ pa l'wakilo ni-'lot-ile ko=mo-'ɣɔ:da ni pi:le*
 today morning 1SG.SM-go-PFV 17.LOC=3-field 1SG.SM.weed.PFV

‘This morning **I went** to the field and **weeded**.’ (Elicited example)

This same verb form also acts as an Anterior, when the lexical aspect of the verb and the discourse context support this interpretation, and in such uses the event itself need not have a hodiernal time reference:

- (3) *ni-'tol-ile*
 1SG.SM-marry-PFV

‘**I am married**. / **I got married** (today).’ (Elicited example)

- (4) *i'kal-ile 'ko-la a-'yal-ile*
 SM1.sit-PFV NCP17-DIST.DEM SM1-be_drunk-PFV

‘**He has sat down** over there, **he's drunk**. / **He sat** over there and **got drunk** (today).’ (Elicited example)

In both examples, in the absence of further discourse context, the first gloss is the most natural, given that the lexical aspect of the verbs is inchoative (encoding both the change and the resultant state) and favours an anterior interpretation. However, given an appropriate discourse context, the verbs can be interpreted as P₁ and the second glosses are possible. In the case of (4), the two events are interpreted as occurring sequentially, earlier on the same day as the time of reference, as in (2).

6 See Dahl (2008) for a discussion of the relationship between the start of “today” and sleeping time.

The preceding three examples show how one verb form, *SM-VB-ile*, fills two roles in the Vwanji tense system. When *SM-VB-ile* functions as an anterior, the same-day restriction on its time reference no longer applies, as in the first gloss for (2), where the action of getting married took place earlier than today, but (crucially) the state of being married continues to hold into the present. *SM-VB-ile* as an anterior also implies no narrative progression, as in the first gloss of (4), where the two events causing the situations being described (sitting, being drunk) did not necessarily occur in the order in which the verbs are presented. In contrast, when *SM-VB-ile* functions as a hodiernal past, the time reference is limited to the same day and it may be used for narrative progression, as in the second gloss of (4). The interpretation of *SM-VB-ile* as either an anterior or a hodiernal past depends on contextual clues, either from the real world setting of the utterance or from the wider discourse context. The lexical aspect of the verb, as for example in (3), can also weight the interpretation in one particular way. In the discussions below, *SM-VB-ile* will be referred to as P_1 /Anterior.

In summary, the Vwanji past tense system distinguishes four levels of past in perfective verb forms and two in imperfective verb forms. Of the seven verb forms described in this section, five forms have been categorized as Perfectives and two as Imperfectives, both of which are Habituals. Four of the Perfectives match up with the four levels of past recognised in the system. The remaining verb form is the Narrative, which covers two of these past levels, P_3 and P_4 . Finally, it is argued that the P_1 verb form also functions in the aspectual system as an Anterior.

3. FINDINGS FROM THE TEXT CORPUS

In order not to rely on the intuitions of speakers regarding elicited sentences, it is important to look at natural text data. The findings I present below come from a text corpus of 2,480 clauses. The corpus comprises written narratives, transcribed oral narratives, and written non-narrative texts (mainly hortatory or expository in nature). The narrative corpus includes both traditional folktales and real-life stories. None of the texts in the corpus is a translation from another language, but I will also make some observations about some relevant examples from additional texts which are translations from Swahili. The corpus contains examples of all seven verb forms given in Table 1, but I will restrict my comments to the three past tense forms closest to the speech time, namely P_1 /Anterior (*SM-VB-ile*), P_2 (*SM-a-VB-a*), and the Near Past Habitual (*SM-a-VB-aγ-a*).⁷

The first observation which can be made is that there is great disparity in the frequency of occurrence of the three forms: P_1 /Anterior occurs 338 times, P_2 13 times, and the Near Past Habitual 26 times. Table 2 categorizes the results according to text genre and separates narration clauses (Nar) from speech clauses (Sp) and main clauses (Main) from subordinate clauses (Sub).

7 The most frequent verb form in the text corpus is the Narrative, which carries the main event line of a story.

Table 2 Distribution of P₁/Anterior, P₂ and Near Past Habitual in text corpus

Genre (medium)	Narrative (written)	Narrative (oral)	Non-narrative	Total	Verb form totals
Number of clauses	1395	294	791	2480	
Percentage of corpus	56.35%	11.85%	31.90%		
P ₁ /ANT (Nar Main)	8	15	48	71	338
P ₁ /ANT (Nar Sub)	110	10	79	199	
P ₁ /ANT (Sp Main)	40	3	11	54	
P ₁ /ANT (Sp Sub)	12	0	2	14	
P ₂ (Nar Main)	0	10	2	12	13
P ₂ (Nar Sub)	0	0	1	1	
P ₂ (Sp Main)	0	0	0	0	
P ₂ (Sp Sub)	0	0	0	0	
Near Past HAB (Nar Main)	0	24	0	24	26
Near Past HAB (Nar Sub)	0	1	0	1	
Near Past HAB (Sp Main)	0	0	0	0	
Near Past HAB (Sp Sub)	1	0	0	1	

I will now take each of the three verb forms in turn.

3.1 P₁/Anterior

In narratives (both written and oral), P₁/Anterior occurs most commonly in temporal relative clauses, where it expresses the completion of an event before that of the main clause on which it depends. As such its time reference is not restricted to the hodiernal past and is instead determined by the time reference of the main clause:

- (5) *'i-pjuni si-ka-po 'liŋ^han-a ku-ko 'ŋ^ha:n-a*
 AUP-10.bird SM10-NAR-agree.RECP-FV 15-gather.RECP-FV

‘The birds agreed to gather together.

je si-ko 'ŋ^han-ile si-ka-po 'sani-a 'ku:ti
 when SM10-gather.RECP-PFV SM10-NAR-ask.RECP-FV 15.say

After **they gathered together**, they asked each other saying [...]’ (Hasty Bird 4–5)

In the second sentence of this example, the main clause event is described with a Narrative, which covers the P₃–P₄ time range. Therefore the verb in the clause before it also describes an event in that time range, even though the verb is P₁/Anterior. As the hodiernal past time reference does not apply in this use of P₁/Anterior, the verb is analysed here as Anterior rather than as P₁. Further support for this position comes from the fact that the other commonly occurring verb form in the /je/ temporal relative clause is also a non-past verb form, the Present or Progressive SM-*i*-VB-*a*, which is used when the event in the dependent clause occurs simultaneously with that of the main clause on which it depends.

In the corpus, the use of P₁/Anterior in a temporal relative clause typically downplays the situation it describes. In (5) the gathering of the birds is the next event in sequence after the birds agree to gather, and immediately precedes them starting to ask each other questions. It is not presented with a Narrative verb form, as the preceding and following events are, since this is pragmatically predictable from the preceding event. The narrator therefore chooses to

downplay the event of gathering together by presenting it in a temporal relative clause with a P₁/Anterior verb.

110 out of 118 examples of P₁/Anterior in non-speech clauses in the written narratives are found in subordinate clauses, such as the type shown in (5). The remaining eight examples have the marked discourse function of narrating climactic events. In the following example, a succession of events are related with the Narrative ('lifted up', 'took', 'thrust down', 'cut') and then the last event is repeated using P₁/Anterior in order to convey additional information regarding what is cut:

- (6) *lɔ'kelɔke a-'kinul-a* *ɔ-'lɔ-βoko* *l'wa:ke*
 slowly SM1-NAR.lift_up-FV AUP-11-hand ACP11.3SG.POSS
 'Slowly he lifted up his hand,
- a-ka-'to:l-a* *ɪ-'se:ʔgo* *a-ki'hɔ:t-a* *a-'ka-tem-a*
 SM1-NAR-take-FV AUP-9.sickle SM1-NAR.thrust_down-FV SM1-NAR-cut-FV
 took the sickle, thrust (it) down and cut.
- 'hi:mbe a-'tem-ile* *ɔ-'lɔ-yɔlv* *l'wa:ke* *ʔɔyuo*
 INTERJ SM1-cut-PFV AUP-11-leg ACP11.3SG.POSS 1.EMPH.PRO
 Oh, **he has cut** his own leg!' (Cow Buyer 16–17)

The narrative from which example (6) comes is set in the P₄ time range. That is, the situations and events of the story are presented mainly with the Narrative (for the main event line) or with P₄ (for backgrounded events and situations as well as scene-setting). Therefore, the use of P₁/Anterior is marked. Using P₁/Anterior here to reiterate and expand upon an event in the main event line shows that the narrator wishes to draw attention to this event. As such we typically find interjections, such as /hi:mbe/ 'oh', in examples of this kind.

As (6) does not advance the action along the chronological time line, the final clause is not part of the main event line, but the text corpus contains similar examples in which the clause containing the P₁/Anterior verb is part of the main event line:

- (7) *a-ka-'mɔ-lek-a* *ɔ-'m'wana* *'i-yon-a*
 SM1-NAR-OM1-leave-FV AUP-1.child SM1.NPST-sleep-FV
 '[...] she left the child sleeping.
- 'hi:mbe* *ɔ-'m'wana* *lɔ-'m'ay-ile* *'ɔ-l'wa* *ko-pa'pamok-a*
 INTERJ AUP-1.child SM11-OM1.get-PFV AUP-ACP11.CON 15-be_restless-FV
 Oh, the child **has become** restless (lit. 'a state of restlessness has got the child'),
- a-ka-'βɔ:k-a* *pa=βɔ-yono* *'i-hom-a* *'kɔ:ʔji*
 SM1-NAR-leave-FV 16.LOC=14-bed SM1.NPST-go_out-FV outside
 he got out of bed and went outside.' (Parents 11–12)

The leaving of the child and the child getting out of bed are events which are both expressed using the Narrative, but in between these two events the child becoming restless uses P₁/Anterior. As in (6), the clause is further highlighted by means of an interjection expressing surprise.

The use of P₁/Anterior in highlighting events in a narrative which otherwise uses verbs belonging to the P₃–P₄ time reference range is more common in oral narratives than in written ones, but is judged by speakers to be acceptable in both.

In speech and non-narrative texts, the interpretation of P₁/Anterior depends on the discourse context as well as on the lexical aspect of the verbs. For example, dynamic verbs can be interpreted as expressing an immediate or hodiernal past (8) or anterior aspect (9), depending on the expectation created by the preceding discourse:

- (8) *'kiki mo-m- 'bud-ile* *o- 'm^wa:na* *'y^{wi}:nu*
 what 2PL.SM-OM1-kill-PFV AUP-1.child ACP1.2PL.POSS
 ‘Why **did you kill/have you killed** your child?’ (Parents 25)

- (9) *βa- 'mo:ga* *βa- 'yol-ile* *a-ma- 'ga:le*
 NCP2-one SM2-buy-PFV AUP-6-car
 ‘Others **have bought** cars.’ (Agriculture 17)

Example (8) is spoken by people who hear the commotion when the parents accidentally kill their child, and come running. It is therefore clear that very little time has passed and the P₁/Anterior can be interpreted as expressing immediate past. However, the presence of the child’s body at the scene when the question is asked fulfils the requirement for present relevance (as a “perfect of recent past”, Comrie 1976: 60) and therefore an anterior reading is also possible here. In contrast, (9) is an example of an anterior which cannot in context be interpreted as an immediate or hodiernal past. This example is from a description of how people have done well by owning cows and have spent the money they earned on different things. It does not imply that the people bought their cars on the day of the time of reference, but that they continue to own the cars they bought at an earlier time, and this shows how well they are prospering today (a “perfect of result”, Comrie 1976: 56).⁸ Thus, the P₁/Anterior expresses anterior aspect and not immediate or hodiernal past time reference.

If the discourse clues are not decisive, the lexical aspect of the verb can favour a particular interpretation. Thus, inchoative verbs default to a resultative interpretation:

- (10) *m^we* *'βa:n^hu* *βa=ki- 'ka:ja* *'kia:go* *mo-ka 'g^{wi}:le*
 2PL.VOC.PRO 2.person ACP2.CON=7-village ACP7.1SG.POSS 2PL.SM-know.PFV
 ‘You people of my village (have come to) **know** [...]’ (Education 5)

When an auxiliary and a main verb are both P₁/Anterior, the auxiliary is analysed as past tense and the main verb as anterior aspect, as this follows the pattern whereby the auxiliary provides the tense and the main verb provides the aspect:

- (11) *a- 'βe:le* *a-sie 'milue* *ku- 'di:ⁿd-a* *o-mo- 'l^a:go*
 SM1-be.PFV SM1-forget.PFV 15-close-FV AUP-3-door
 ‘**She had** (just now) **forgotten** to close the door.’ (Parents 13)

⁸ This is the most natural interpretation in the context of the text as a whole, but it is also possible to understand that the people were able to buy cars in the past, but no longer own them. In this case, a more appropriate English translation would be ‘others bought cars’, and this example could be categorized as Comrie’s “experiential perfect” (1976: 58).

The main verbs in the preceding and following clauses are Narratives and constitute the main event line. The clause in (11) breaks off from the main event line to flash back to a prior situation which becomes relevant at this point in the narrative. This example lends additional support to the analysis of P₁/Anterior as filling two roles in the TAM system of Vwanji, that is, as being a tense form and, separately, an aspect form. Thus it is possible for an auxiliary and a main verb in combination to both be examples of the P₁/Anterior verb form, as each has a separate role, the first in providing the tense information and the second in providing the aspect information.

3.2 P₂

In contrast to P₁/Anterior, P₂ occurs very infrequently in the text corpus. There are only two examples (in adjacent clauses of one sentence) of P₂ functioning as a near past:

- (12) 'I-m^hola 'ŋio na-'polik-a
 AUP-9.news NCP9.REF.DEM 1SG.SM.PST₂-hear-FV
 i-'fi-yono ⁿdafi 'li:ŋgi 'fi-no 'fa-kil-a
 AUP-8-day NCP8.several NCP8-REL.PRO SM8.PST₂-pass-FV

'I heard this news several days ago (*lit.* which **passed**).' (Marriage 12)

This example is from a hortatory text in which a person writes to a friend who has decided to marry and gives him some advice. The main clause verbs in this text are mostly Anteriors and Presents, but the text contains some narrative portions as scene setting information, such as the one above, which explicitly gives the time reference as Near Past.

With one exception,⁹ the other occurrences of P₂ in the text corpus all come from a single oral narrative, where together they function as an informal alternative to the Narrative and express the main event line, as in (13):

- (13) a-βa=ko= 'ka:ja 'βasi-a pi-ko-mo- 'lo:ⁿd-a 'βi:ti
 AUP-ACP2.CON=17.LOC=home SM2.PST2.start-FV 15-15-OM1-look_for-FV¹⁰ SM2.NPST.say

'The people from home **started** to look for him, saying [...].' (Cow Man 20)

The events of this narrative do not happen in the recent past with respect to the reference time. That is, the narrative begins with several clauses containing P₄ verbs in order to set the scene in the remote past, but instead of then beginning the event line with the Narrative verb form, as would be expected, the storyteller uses a combination of P₂ and the Near Past Habitual (see Section 3.3 below). Vwanji speakers I have asked consider this storytelling style a good one in oral narratives, where they feel it is appropriate to be less formal, but not for written narratives.

If we turn to a corpus of translated text examples, we find further examples of the type shown in (12), where P₂ has its expected function of near past time reference. Most commonly, when

9 One text contains an instance of /'napela/ 'I beseech (you)', which has the structure of P₂, but is not a regular verb. It is a shortened form of /kupele'pesia/ 'to beseech.' No other irregular P₂ forms of this kind have been observed.

10 The class 15 nominal prefix has two forms: /ku-/ (which surfaces as [kɔ-] before an object and in certain other contexts) and /pi-/. In this example, /ku-/ occurs because of the following object and /pi-/ is the nominal prefix. The choice between the two forms of the nominal prefix is dependent on the location of the situation being expressed by the verb: /pi-/ is used when the event being expressed takes place at the deictic centre of the narrative and /ku-/ when it takes place away from it.

P₂ is used in this way, it occurs together with other past tenses in order to establish multiple degrees of past time reference, relative to the time of reference, as in the following example:

- (14) *ni-mo- 'let-ile* *ko= 'l̥o:βe* *o- 'mu:n^hu* *'ojo*
 1SG.SM-OM1-bring-PFV 17.LOC=2SG.PRO AUP-1.person NCP1.PROX.DEM
 ‘I have brought this person to you,
- a-ka-ko 'lilue* *na=βa- 'jahudi* *βa- 'loⁿd-ay-a* *pi-ko- 'm-bud-a*
 SM1-PST3-catch.PASS.PFV COM=2-Jew SM2.PST2-want-IPFV-FV 15-15-OM1-kill-FV
 he was caught by the Jews, they were wanting to kill him.
- 'neke 'na-lot-a* *na=βa- 'sikali* *'βa:ŋo* *na- 'm-pok-a*
 but 1SG.SM.PST2-go-FV COM=2-soldier ACP2.1SG.POSS 1SG.SM.PST2-OM1-rescue-FV
 But I went with my soldiers and rescued him,
- o 'l^wakoβa* *na- 'kagol-a* *'ku:ti* *o 'm^we:ne* *mō- 'lo:ma*
 because 1SG.SM.PST2-know-FV 15.say 3SG.CONTR.PRO 1-Roman
 because I knew that he was a Roman.’ (Acts 23:27)¹¹

Leaving aside the Near Past Habitual ‘they were wanting to kill him’ (which will be discussed in Section 3.3), there are five verbs to consider. ‘I have brought’ is P₁/Anterior, ‘he was caught’ is P₃, and ‘I went,’ ‘I rescued’, and ‘I knew’ are P₂. The first event in the timeline is ‘he was caught’, expressed by P₃, and is followed chronologically by two of the P₂ verbs, ‘I went’ and ‘I rescued’. The P₁/Anterior verb expresses the final event in the sequence. The presentation of the events out of chronological order (D–A–B–C) is possible because the three verb forms used express three distinct levels of past time reference, relative to each other.

Example (14) comes from a letter which is a narrative episode contained within a larger narrative. The larger narrative uses the Narrative for the main event line and P₄ for backgrounded material, but the events it describes (such as the writing of the letter) have a different narrator (third person and not first person) and a different temporal reference point, so the location of these events in time is not more remote relative to that of the events in the letter narrative.

It was mentioned in Section 2 that, with the exception of P₁/Anterior, which is restricted in its past tense use to immediate or hodiernal past tense reference, the time reference of the past tense forms is flexible rather than rigid. However, although the absolute time reference is flexible, the relative time reference is not, and when two or more of the perfective verb forms P₂, P₃, and P₄ are contrasted in main clauses in a single discourse context, P₄ will always have a more remote time reference than P₃, and P₃ will in turn always have a more remote time reference than P₂. When P₁/Anterior is included, this pattern does not hold so strictly because when P₁/Anterior functions as an anterior rather than an immediate or hodiernal past tense, the situation it expresses may have occurred prior to the same day as the time of reference, and thus possibly prior to the time reference of P₂.

The three examples of P₂ in the second sentence of (14) are interesting because the three verbs are not equal in discourse function. The first two verbs (in main clauses) express consecu-

11 This example, as well as (17) below, comes from the Vwanji New Testament translation, which at the time of this research was undergoing a final revision process. Although some degree of unnaturalness is likely in translated texts, the Vwanji New Testament translation has gone through multiple reviews and revisions with many speakers and can be considered a reliable representation of language use.

tive events ('I went', 'I rescued'), but the third (in a dependent clause) expresses a background situation ('I knew') which held before these two events. The context, the distinction between the main and the dependent clause, the conjunction 'because', and the lexical aspect of the verb 'know' all contribute to the interpretation of the sequence P_2 - P_2 - P_2 as two consecutive events and one backgrounded situation,¹² rather than as three consecutive events.

If the second sentence of (14) were narrated as happening in the far past from the perspective of the narrator, the following verb choices were suggested by the Vwanji speakers I worked with as being appropriate for the time setting:

- (15) 'neke *ni-ka-lot-a* *na=βa-'sikali* *'βa:ʒgo* *ni-ka-'m-pok-a*
 but 1SG.SM-NAR-go-FV COM=2-soldier ACP2.1SG.POSS 1SG.SM-NAR-OM1-rescue-FV
 'But I went with my soldiers and rescued him,
o'lʷakoβa *ni-βa-ka'gwi:le* *'ku:ti* *o'mʷe:ne* *mo-'lo:ma*
 because 1SG.SM-PST4-know.PFV 15.say 3SG.CONTR.PRO 1-Roman
 because I knew that he was a Roman.' (Acts 23:27b, revised)

Note that the sequence P_2 - P_2 - P_2 from the original example has been revised to NAR-NAR- P_4 . That is, the different discourse status of the third verb is explicit in the TAM choice when the narrative is related as happening in the far past. The Narrative is used for the main event line and P_4 for backgrounded material.

3.3 Near Past Habitual

When viewed as part of the system of tense and aspect categories in Vwanji, the Near Past Habitual verb form, SM-*a*-VB-*aγ-a*, is the habitual equivalent of the perfective verb forms P_1 /Anterior and P_2 , as shown in Table 1 above. However, in the text corpus, it occurs most frequently with a more remote past time reference and without a habitual interpretation, in apparent contradiction of its place in the system. For example, in the following extract, both 'got tired' and 'let go' describe perfective events in a story which is set in the remote past:¹³

- (16) 'yʷo:pe 'kʷmbele *a-ka'tal-ay-a* *a-'ma-βoko*
 3SG.ADD.PRO later SM1.PST2-tire-IPFV-FV AUP-6-hand
 'And later even (his) hands got tired.
a-ka'ti:le *a-'ma-βoko* *a-leke'sja:γ-a*
 SM1-tire.PFV AUP-6-hand SM1.PST2-let_go.IPFV-FV
 His hands tired, he let go.' (Cow Man 15-16)¹⁴

This example comes from the same oral narrative where we find example (13) and which provides most of the examples of the Near Past Habitual in the corpus. It is not clear why the narrator sometimes uses P_2 and sometimes the Near Past Habitual in this text. The examples

12 The situation of 'knowing' can be said to stem from an earlier event of 'discovering', which occurred before the 'going' and 'rescuing' events of the previous clause.

13 The story begins with a scene setting section using P_4 .

14 In a more formal, careful style, the first clause of the second sentence would be rendered in a temporal subordinate clause, 'When his hands tired [...]'.
 15 The story begins with a scene setting section using P_4 .

do not suggest that a difference in aspect is the deciding factor as the Near Past Habitual does not correspond to a habitual aspect interpretation, as illustrated in (16), where both formally habitual verbs ('got tired', 'let go') are functionally perfective. As mentioned in Section 3.2, using a combination of P_2 and the Near Past Habitual is considered a possible style for informal oral storytelling.

If we include translated texts, we find many examples of the Near Past Habitual in speech describing habitual situations in a time range where perfective events would be expressed with P_2 :

- (17) *na-βo^mb-ay-a* 'so:ni 'isio ko-ko-βa-βon-i-a 'ku:ti
 1SG.SM.PST2-do-IPFV-FV ACP10.all NCP10.REF.DEM 15-15-OM2-see-CAUS-FV 15.say
 'I was doing all these things to show you that [...].' (Acts 20:35a)

It is not clear whether this is due to the more formal context of a translated text or whether it is a result of the particular examples of translated texts investigated containing more complex narratives with more levels of past distinguished than those in the non-translated text corpus.

No examples have been found in any text, whether translated or non-translated, in which the Near Past Habitual refers to a hodiernal past (i.e. equivalent to P_1). The lack of examples may be because it would be unusual to have a habitual situation which was restricted to a single day. Vwanji has other imperfective options for a hodiernal past situation, including a progressive and a persistent. It may therefore be more appropriate to consider the Near Past Habitual as the habitual equivalent of P_2 only and not also of P_1 .

It is clear that the division between the Far Past Habitual *SM-ka-vb-ay-a* and the Near Past Habitual *SM-a-vb-ay-a* is more flexible than Table 1 may make it appear. The Near Past Habitual does not correspond rigidly to the P_1 – P_2 time range, nor does the Far Past Habitual correspond rigidly to the P_3 – P_4 time range. When a narrative uses P_3 , it is possible for either of the two habitual forms to occur (see example (14) in Section 3.2 for an example of P_3 and the Near Past Habitual), depending on the other past tenses in use and the number of past time distinctions the narrator wishes to make.

4. SUMMARY AND COMPARISON WITH NEIGHBOURING LANGUAGES

The discourse functions of P_1 /Anterior, P_2 , and the Near Past Habitual in Vwanji, as explored in Section 3, are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Discourse functions of P_1 /Anterior, P_2 , and Near Past Habitual

Verb form	Discourse function	Example
P_1 /Anterior <i>SM-VB-ile</i>	Hodiernal and immediate past tense reference Anterior aspect Completed situations in temporal relative clauses Climactic events in past tense narratives	(2), (3), (4), (8), (11) (3), (4), (8), (9), (10) (5) (6), (7)
P_2 <i>SM-a-vb-a</i>	Near past perfective Informal narration of narratives set in far past Distinguishing multiple degrees of past in narration	(12) (13) (14)
Near Past Habitual <i>SM-a-vb-ay-a</i>	Near past habitual (not necessarily covering the same time range as P_2) Informal narration of narratives set in far past	(17) (16)

P₁/Anterior in particular has a broad range of functions. It fits into the tense system as the most immediate of the four degrees of past which are recognised, but often occurs in temporal relative clauses in which its past time reference is instead determined by the tense of the main clause. It also clearly functions within the aspectual system as an anterior and can therefore refer to a past more remote than hodiernal if the situation described has present relevance. As an extension of this, P₁/Anterior can refer to climactic events in past tense narratives, in which the narrator chooses to highlight a situation by presenting it as having present relevance in the narrative context. A clear illustration of the tense and aspect functions of P₁/Anterior comes when an auxiliary and main verb in combination are both P₁/Anterior and the auxiliary functions as a tense and the main verb as an aspect (see example (11) in Section 3.1).

P₂ and the Near Past Habitual are found in texts with two main functions. One is the expected expression of past time reference which is pre-hodiernal, but not considered to be as far back as what would be appropriate for P₃ or the Far Past Habitual in the context. The second function of P₂ and the Near Past Habitual is to achieve an informal, engaging narrative style for oral stories. In this use, the expected habitual interpretation of the Near Past Habitual does not hold; it is not yet clear what distinguishes the two verb forms when they are used in this way.

The Vwanji findings relating to these three verb forms can be compared with those for structurally similar ones in neighbouring languages (Table 4).¹⁵

Table 4 Comparison with neighbouring languages

	SM-VB- <i>ile</i>	SM-a-VB- <i>a</i>	SM-a-VB- <i>ay-a</i> ¹⁶
Vwanji (G66, ISO 639-3: wbi)	P ₁ /Anterior	P ₂	Near Past Habitual
Kinga (G65, ISO 639-3: zga) (Schadeberg 1973)	Perfect	-	Durative Past
Bena (G63, ISO 639-3: bez) (Morrison 2011)	P ₂ Perfective P ₂ Anterior	-	P ₄ Progressive
Sangu (G61, ISO 639-3: sbp) (Kaajan 2012)	Perfect	Perfective Present (<i>or</i> Hodiernal Past) ¹⁷	Near Past ¹⁸
Safwa (M25, ISO 639-3: sbk) (Voorhoeve 1973)	Recent Perfect	Recent Consecutive	Recent Consecutive + Continuative
Nyakyusa (M31, ISO 639-3: nyy) (Persohn 2017)	Present Perfective	Subsecutive	Past Imperfective

There are several interesting points of similarity and difference. All six languages have the form SM-VB-*ile*, which is analysed as a Perfect or an Anterior (i.e. as the same aspectually), with the

¹⁵ Kinga, Bena, Sangu, and Safwa are (restricted) tone languages (unlike Vwanji, which is not a tone language). The tonal differences between the verb forms in the table are not considered here, but tone is discussed in all four source documents.

¹⁶ The morpheme /-ay/ in Vwanji corresponds to [-ak] in Kinga, [-ag] in Bena, Sangu, and Safwa, and [-ag] or [-ay] in Nyakyusa.

¹⁷ Kaajan (2012: 114–115) discusses both possible analyses and states a preference for the Perfective Present.

¹⁸ Kaajan (2012: 137–138) describes how some Sangu speakers use the Near Past for hesternal past up to the far past, whereas others use it for hesternal past up to the point at which they instead use a separate far past form (SM-a-VB-*ile*).

exception of Nyakyusa, where it is analysed as a Present Perfective. However, the functions of this verb form in Nyakyusa, as described by Persohn (Persohn 2017: 161–165), overlap with those of the Vwanji P₁/Anterior. Specifically, the default interpretation of inchoative verbs in the Nyakyusa Present Perfective is resultative (as in the first interpretations of the Vwanji examples (3) and (4) in Section 2) and the verb form may be used to relate a sequence of events (as seen in Vwanji in example (2) and in the second interpretation of (4) in Section 2).

The verb form *SM-VB-ile* fills both a Perfective and Anterior slot in the Bena TAM system, according to Morrison (2011: 250), which in this respect shows some similarity with Vwanji, although in Bena both the Perfective and Anterior are analysed as P₂, rather than as P₁ as in Vwanji. In all the languages except Safwa, *SM-VB-ile* is used for temporal relative clauses in a parallel way to that described for Vwanji in Section 3.1. For Safwa, *SM-a-VB-a* is instead used in temporal relative clauses.

Neither Kinga nor Bena, which are considered linguistically close to Vwanji, has an equivalent to P₂ *SM-a-VB-a* in Vwanji. In Sangu, *SM-a-VB-a* allows for two possible analyses with respect to tense, which both have a time reference closer to the reference time than in Vwanji. *SM-a-VB-a* in Safwa shows some similarity to Vwanji in that it is both a recent past and can be used to narrate consecutive events. *SM-a-VB-a* in Nyakyusa is analysed as a Subsecutive and is also used for narration, but it does not differ from Nyakyusa's other narrative marker with respect to tense, and often occurs together with it (Persohn 2017: 237). However, one point of similarity with Vwanji is that it is associated with an oral rather than a written style (Persohn 2017: 160).

All six languages have an equivalent of *SM-a-VB-ay-a*, which in all languages but Sangu carries some type of imperfective aspect meaning. Safwa and Sangu pattern with Vwanji in using *SM-a-VB-ay-a* for near past time reference, but Bena associates it with the most remote degree of past (Morrison 2011: 250). In Sangu, the /ag/ morpheme in this verb form is a marker of past tense rather than imperfective aspect (Kaaan 2012: 137), which is particularly interesting as we saw in Section 3.3, in relation to example (16), that in some uses Vwanji *SM-a-VB-ay-a* also does not have imperfective aspect.

This brief cross-linguistic comparison can help us to understand the Vwanji TAM system better if we consider the possibility that the five neighbouring languages might in some ways parallel Vwanji at a later stage of language change. With respect to *SM-VB-ile*, the existence of the well-attested path from anterior to past (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994: 81) suggests that Vwanji (and also Bena) has reached a stage in which the same verb form has both functions and is perhaps splitting into two homophonous forms, whereas Nyakyusa may have gone further, as Persohn (2017: 163) states that the structurally equivalent Present Perfective “neither necessarily brings about a persistent result, nor does it feature a strong relevance component”. The lack of *SM-a-VB-a* in Kinga, which is linguistically the closest to Vwanji of the five neighbouring languages considered in Table 4, could be interpreted as the stage towards which Vwanji is heading, as *SM-a-VB-a* occurs very infrequently in the text corpus, although it does have a particular function in informal storytelling (where the P₂ time reference requirement no longer holds). However, the infrequent occurrence of this verb form in the Vwanji corpus may simply be an artefact of the preponderance of narratives set in the remote past, and the absence of conversational data beyond what is contained in the narratives. For the third verb form in Table 4, *SM-a-VB-ay-a*, it is the Sangu data which provide a possible clue to the Vwanji system, as the association of imperfective aspect with /ag/ in Sangu has been lost, just as it has in at least some instances of the equivalent verb form in Vwanji.

A more detailed comparison of the Vwanji data with those of the other languages is needed to investigate the possible diachronic relationships more thoroughly, but the brief assessment given above suggests that this is a worthwhile direction for further research. It should also be borne in mind that the labelling of TAM forms by different researchers may be based on different theoretical assumptions and therefore the overview in Table 4 may obscure further similarities or differences. Care should also be taken in cross-linguistic comparisons to consider whether an analysis is a systematic one or one which also takes into account the possibility of different distribution patterns in discourse data.

The Vwanji research presented here has shown that a single verb form may have apparently contradictory functions. The verb form *SM-a-VB-ay-a*, for example, can function as either a Near Past Habitual or as a Far Past (Perfective) Narrative. The attested instances of the former come from written non-narrative texts and translated narrative texts, whereas those of the latter come from transcribed oral texts. It remains to be investigated to what extent text genre and register are factors in the interpretation of this verb form, but the co-existence of two very different functions is clear. A greater breadth of data, such as written texts describing recent events or transcriptions of oral non-narrative texts, would be helpful in understanding this particular issue. The different functions of this verb form, and of others discussed in this paper, indicate that the place of a verb form in a TAM system as suggested by elicited data may not correspond in expected ways to its discourse functions when natural text data is taken into account. A variety of data is necessary in order to make progress in adequately understanding the range of functions a single verb form may express.

ABBREVIATIONS

ACP	agreement class prefix	NPST	non-past
ADD	additive	OM	object marker
ANT	anterior	P	past
AUP	augment	PASS	passive
CAUS	causative	PFV	perfective
COM	comitative	PL	plural
CON	connective	POSS	possessive
CONTR	contrastive	PRO	pronoun
DEM	demonstrative	PROX	proximal
DIST	distal	PST	past
EMPH	emphatic	RECP	reciprocal
FV	final vowel	REF	referential
INTERJ	interjection	REL	relative
IPFV	imperfective	SG	singular
LOC	locative	SM	subject marker
NAR	narrative	VB	verbal base
NCP	nominal class prefix	VOC	vocative

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