
Kambaata aspect marking: On an unusual but systematic case of syncretism

Yvonne Treis

CNRS/Llacan, Paris

Yvonne.TREIS@cnrs.fr

Kambaata is a Cushitic language of Ethiopia. It is suffixing and agglutinating-fusional with many portmanteau morphemes and morphological stress. In the verbal system, a primary morphological distinction is made between main and subordinate clause verbs. Fully finite indicative main verb forms are marked for four aspectual categories – imperfective, perfective, perfect and progressive – and 7 different persons/genders/numbers of the subject: 1sg, 2sg, 3m, 3f/3pl, 3hon, 1pl, 2pl/2hon. Overall, Kambaata's verb inflection is very regular, and the forms of the many paradigms are all predictable if morphophonological rules are considered. One could go as far as to say that the language has no irregular verbs. This does, of course, not mean that Kambaata comes close to the ideal of a language with canonical inflection. Syncretism is widespread (e.g. in negative and subordinate paradigms) and targets different categories (aspect, person/number/gender). This paper concentrates on one particular case of syncretism: in a phonologically definable subclass of verbal lexemes, the perfective/perfect distinction is systematically neutralized in paradigm cells where one would least expect (but most need) it, namely in the cells of 1sg and 3m main verb forms (1), whereas the distinction is made everywhere else, e.g. 3f in (2).

(1) *barg-ée'u* 1. 'he has added' = 2. 'he added'

(2) *barg-itee'u* 'she has added' vs. *barg-itóo'u* 'she added'

Interestingly, the perfect/perfective distinction becomes visible again in a morphosyntactic niche. When the verbs are relativized (for 1sg subjects) or object-marked and then relativized (for 3m subjects), perfect and perfective come to be distinguished prosodically, alone by their different stress patterns (3).

(3) *barg-ée-'e* '(which) he has added for me' vs. *barg-ee-'é* '(which) he added for me'

Closely related languages display no syncretism in their perfect/perfective paradigms, which raises the question how the Kambaata case could be explained diachronically.