

# Number and category in the verbal system of Měbengokre

Andrés Pablo Salanova

Měbengokre is a northern Jê language in which all morphemes specifically described as tense and view-point aspect are optional. Nevertheless, two morphological categories obligatorily manifested on verbs have a clear effect on aspectual interpretation. These can be seen in the paradigm in (1, 2). The two morphological categories in question have been previously described as reflecting an opposition between nominalized and fully verbal forms of the predicate, in the case of (1) versus (2), and as number agreement with an absolutive argument, in the case of (1a) and (2a) versus (1b) and (2b). Their effect on interpretation in nonfuture main clauses is summarized in the following table:

	VERBAL	NOMINALIZED
SINGULAR	Perfective; singular object	Experiential perfect, relative to the subject's lifespan
PLURAL	Perfective; plural object	Habitual

In this talk, we provide a precise characterization of the meaning of verbal number and of the categorial opposition in predicates, and show how the interpretation of the cited examples is derived from these basic building blocks.

## Category label and the setting of topic time

The meaning of (1) can be characterized as positioning the event with respect to a topic time that is set by narrative context. This is the meaning that is assigned to perfective tenses in most modern approaches to tense stemming from the work of Partee (1973). In the sequence in (3), for instance, sentence (3a) sets a topic time, something which we could represent as in (3d), and the perfective viewpoint aspect in sentence (3b) signifies that the time of the event described by it is fully contained in that topic time, as represented in the logical form in (3c).

In (2), on the other hand, the event is also contained in an interval, though one that is not anaphoric but rather coterminous with the subject's lifespan (*mutatis mutandis* for inanimate subjects). This interpretation has been variously described as “stative” or “subject-oriented.” We propose to understand this fact about the interpretation of (2) by comparing the clauses headed by these nominalized forms of verbs to clauses headed by underived nouns. Nouns in Měbengokre are unable to predicate directly, and so sentences headed by them are interpreted as existential constructions, of which, according to Freeze (1992), possessive constructions are a special case (cf. 4). In the general case, nominal existential sentences in Měbengokre consist of a nominal predicate and a genitive or postpositional phrase indicating a location. Existence is claimed of individuals satisfying the nominal predicate, restricted to the location expressed by the postpositional phrase.

Our proposal for clauses headed by nominalized verbs, i.e., (2a) and (2b), is that, analogously to existential sentences, there is existential quantification over individuals of a certain type (events), restricted to a certain location; importantly, it is the ergatively marked phrase that serves as the restriction. The parallel is seen in (5). The fact that existence is claimed of events, rather than individuals, forces an interpretation where the postpositional phrase acting as a restrictor denotes a time span, rather than a physical location, i.e., in  $\text{in}'(x, y)$ ,  $x$  is interpreted as the interval of  $x$ 's lifespan, only in the cases in which  $y$  is an event.

## The interaction of number and reference timespan

We contend that the number contrast on verbs always reflects the cardinality of the event, even in those cases where it seems to indicate the number of the object noun phrase. Thus, we translate (2a) as (6a), and (2b) as (6b).

Obtaining the habitual interpretation given to plural nominalized verbs requires some work. We will argue that, in relating plural eventualities to any interval, the singular eventualities that make up a plural event will be implicated to cover the interval completely. When the interval provided by the structure is a lifespan, as we argued for the constructions involving nominalized verbs, the result is a habitual. In the case

of non-nominalized verbal predicates, a (relatively short) topic time is introduced, and for this reason the plurality is interpreted as a plurality of subeventualities associated with singular objects, yielding a plural object interpretation.

The decomposition of aspectual interpretation into lexical category label and event cardinality, described for M̐ebengokre verbal forms above, is argued to underlie the formation of habituals, perfects and perfectives cross-linguistically, both semantically and morphologically. This idea has several precedents. For habituals, cf. Ferreira (2005), where they are argued to differ from other imperfectives solely in the cardinality of the set of eventuality intervals denoted. For perfects, cf. Iatridou et al. (2001), which characterizes their semantics as crucially dependent on a “perfect time span”, something that obviates topic time as described for the nominalized verbs of M̐ebengokre.

## Examples

- (1) a. krwɣj jã nē mop krē  
parakeet DEM NFUT malanga eat.V.SG  
“This parakeet ate the malanga.”
- b. krwɣj jã nē mop ku  
parakeet DEM NFUT malanga eat.V.PL  
“This parakeet ate the malangas.”
- (2) a. krwɣj jã nē kute mop krēn  
parakeet DEM NFUT 3ERG malanga eat.N.SG  
“This parakeet has eaten malanga (once in his life).”
- b. krwɣj jã nē kute mop kur  
parakeet DEM NFUT 3ERG malanga eat.N.PL  
“This parakeet eats malanga (generally).”
- (3) a. What happened while you were in the house?  
b. John called.  
c.  $\exists t^* < t_0: \exists e: \tau(e) \subseteq t^*: \llbracket \text{John call} \rrbracket(e)$   
d.  $t^* := \tau(\iota e. \llbracket \text{you in house} \rrbracket(e))$
- (4) a. ba i-kra  
1NOM 1-son  
“I have a son (i.e., there is a son to me)”, not “I’m someone’s son”
- b. i-ɲō kλ  
1-POSS canoe  
“I have a canoe.”
- (5) a. tɛp kam tɣaw  
fish in salt  
“There’s salt on the/a fish.”  
 $\exists x. \exists y. \text{salt}'(x) \wedge \text{fish}'(y) \wedge \text{in}'(x, y)$
- b. krwɣj kute mop krēn  
parakeet 3ERG malanga eat.N.SG  
“A/the parakeet has eaten malanga.”  
 $\exists e. \exists x. \text{eating.SG malanga}'(e) \wedge \text{parakeet}'(x) \wedge \text{in}'(e, x)$
- (6) a.  $\exists e. \exists x. \text{eating malanga}'(e) \wedge \text{parakeet}'(x) \wedge \text{to}'(e, x) \wedge |e| = 1$   
b.  $\exists e. \exists x. \text{eating malanga}'(e) \wedge \text{parakeet}'(x) \wedge \text{to}'(e, x) \wedge |e| > 1.$

## References

- Ferreira, Marcelo. 2005. Event quantification and plurality. Doctoral Dissertation, MIT.
- Freeze, Ray. 1992. Existentials and other locatives. *Language* 68:553–595.
- Iatridou, Sabine, Elena Anagnostopoulou, and Roumyana Izvorski. 2001. Observations about the form and meaning of the perfect. In *Ken Hale: a life in language*, ed. Michael Kenstowicz, 189–238. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Partee, Barbara. 1973. Some structural analogies between tenses and pronouns. *Journal of philosophy* 70:601–9.