Vagueness and context-dependence in Luganda temporal remoteness morphemes

In this paper, we point out that past time operators (PTOs) in Luganda, a language that makes three past time remoteness distinctions, are vague and context-dependent, and provide an analysis. We call the relevant PTOs RECENT, INTERMEDIATE, and DISTANT ((1-3), respectively).

(1) Nzinye (ku matya).
   1SG-dance-REC.PST (LOC morning)
   ‘I danced (this morning).’

(2) Nazinye (jjo).
   1SG-dance-INT.PST (yesterday)
   ‘I danced (yesterday).’

(3) Nazina (luli).
   1SG-dance-DIST.PST (another.time)
   ‘I danced (the other day).’

First, Luganda PTOs give rise to borderline cases, where it is difficult to decide whether a past reference time (RT) counts as ‘recent’, ‘intermediate’ or ‘distant’. Consider (4-6) as a response to the question “what’ve you been doing?”.

(4) Nzinye saawa {satu/nnya/tano} emabega.
   1SG-dance-REC.PST hour {three/four/five} behind
   ‘I danced {three/four/five} hours ago.’

(5) Nazinye saawa {satu/nnya/tano} emabega.
   (INTERMEDIATE PAST)

(6) Nazina saawa {satu/nnya/tano} emabega.
   (DISTANT PAST)

In this context, use of the recent PTO is acceptable with three hours ago, unacceptable with five hours ago and borderline with four hours ago. By contrast, the intermediate PTO is acceptable, while the distant PTO is infelicitous, for all three cases.

Second, what counts as ‘recent’, ‘intermediate’ or ‘distant’ is context dependent; e.g., there are contexts where the recent past is acceptable with an RT of a few weeks ago (7), and contexts where the distant past is acceptable for an RT of a few minutes ago (8).

   b. Nsimbye kasooli.
      1SG-plant-REC.PST maize
      ‘I planted maize.’

(8) a. Context: We’re at a party, and I ask why you aren’t dancing to the song that’s playing. You say you danced a few songs ago.
   b. Nazina luli.
      1SG-dance-DIST.PST another.time
      ‘I danced a while ago (to another song).’

Analysis. We assume that like tenses in English, PTOs in matrix clauses in Luganda restrict the relation between utterance time (UT) and RT (though cf. Cable, 2012). However, while English past tense presupposes that RT precedes UT (e.g. Kratzer, 1998), Luganda PTOs additionally encode as part of their meaning a vague, context-dependent measure function that compares the length of a time interval to a contextual standard. For reasons of space, we illustrate with the recent past morpheme, whose interpretation (9) includes a function rec, taking t (UT in matrix clauses), and returning the earliest time \( t'' \) that exceeds a standard of closeness \( s \) to \( t \) (10).

(9) \[ \text{REC.PST} \] \( t' = \lambda t' : t' \in [\text{rec}(t), t).t' \]

(10) \( \text{rec}(t) = \text{earliest}(\lambda t''.\text{close}(t, t'') \succ s) \)

On this analysis, Luganda PTOs are like relative adjectives like tall, which are also vague and context dependent (Kennedy 2007). Just as the positive standard for tall depends on its comparison class, the standards for Luganda PTOs depend on a comparison class of time intervals (growing seasons, song lengths, etc.). This paper therefore highlights and provides an analysis for an aspect of temporal remoteness which has not received much attention.

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