



A critique of 'A re-evaluation of tense in isiZulu'



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This article is a response to Groenewald's 2014 article, 'A re-evaluation of tense in isiZulu'. Sub-themes identified in Groenewald's article and explored in this exposé in the light of an array of recently published research on the topic of tense are: the suitability of the distinction between absolute and relative tense and the use of the term 'absolute tense'; the appropriateness of defining tense in terms of deixis; the remoteness distinctions in terms of past and future tenses generally distinguished in the Bantu languages with particular reference to isiZulu; the semantic significance of the use of the so-called short and long forms of the present and past tenses of isiZulu and the naming of the individual tenses.

'n Herevalurering van grammatiese tyd in isiZulu. Hierdie artikel is 'n antwoord op Groenewald se 2014-artikel, getiteld *A re-evaluation of tense in isiZulu*. Sub-temas wat in Groenewald se publikasie geïdentifiseer is en in hierdie artikel verder ondersoek word in die lig van 'n groot verskeidenheid resente wetenskaplike publikasies oor die kategorie grammatiese tyd is: die sinrykheid van die onderskeiding tussen absolute en relatiewe tye en die toepaslikheid van die gebruik van die term 'absolute tyd'; die betekenisvolheid daarvan om grammatiese tye te definieer in terme van deiksis; die onderskeid tussen verre en nabye verlede- en verre en nabye toekomstige tye in die Bantutale met spesifieke verwysing na isiZulu; die semantiese implikasies van die gebruik van die sogenaamde kort- en lang vorme van die teenwoordige en verlede tye van isiZulu en die benoeming van die onderskeie grammatiese tydvorme.

Introduction

Research on time and tense reckoning in literary texts should be encouraged since this is a neglected area of research in the Bantu languages. Such research should, however, go beyond proposing unsubstantiated changes to well-established terminology. Interesting research has been carried out in the field of tense in narratives for languages other than the Bantu languages.¹

In his article Groenewald (2014) sets out to determine the 'grammatical and semantic nature of tenses in isiZulu...with the ultimate goal of presenting an alternative view of these tenses'. In view of his findings, he proposes changes to the conventional analyses and to the naming of the tenses of isiZulu. His first proposal is that the term 'absolute tense' should be discarded. He maintains that this term is inappropriate since these tenses are not 'absolute', and the word 'absolute' is furthermore incompatible with the notion of deixis. His second proposal is that the distinction between absolute and relative tenses should be discarded. He does, nevertheless, retain this distinction between the two tense systems which he calls 'basic tenses' and 'compound tense forms'. His third proposal relates to the naming and semantic significance of the remote past tense. He maintains that the remote past tense does not denote remoteness, but rather seminal events and that this tense should (therefore) not be called a remote past tense. He uses the label 'a-past tense' to refer to this tense form. Fourthly, he objects to the notion that tenses are grammaticalised. His fifth proposal relates to the semantic significance of the so-called short and long forms of the present and past tenses. He claims that the long form of the past tense indicates that an event 'has indeed taken place'. He furthermore claims that the morpheme -ya- that occurs in the present tense serves to confirm an event, or is an aspect 'indicating weight'. His sixth proposal relates to the need to distinguish a present relative tense (in his terminology a 'present compound tense'). Finally, he proposes a renaming of the two future tense forms as a 'definite'

1. Consider among others in this regard Declerck (2003), Elson and McKeown (2010), Fludernik (2004) and Harvey (2006) who discuss the use and function of different tense forms in narratives.

Note: The aim of this article was to respond to the article: Groenewald, H.C., 2014, 'A re-evaluation of tenses in isiZulu', *Literator* 35(1), Art. #1062, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/lit.v35i1.1062>. The response will hopefully start a debate on the topic of tense (focusing on the Bantu languages of zone S).

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and an 'indefinite future tense'. Groenewald's proposals as specified above will be refuted thematically and systematically in this article.

The appropriateness of the term 'absolute tense' and defining absolute tense in terms of deixis

Groenewald's (2014:72) discussion of tense is based on Smith's (2008:231) description of tense, namely that, '...tense is a morpheme that expresses temporal information, by a verbal inflexion or auxiliary'.

The notion that tenses in isiZulu are marked by a (single) morpheme is inaccurate. A particular tense is marked by a combination of particular morphemes (notably the form of the subject morpheme and the categorial verb final morpheme). Tense is one of a number of time-reckoning mechanisms available in language. Tense and temporal adverbials are the two most productive time-reckoning devices in language to mark time-space relations.² While tense is marked (morphologically and phonologically) in the verb form, it has an impact on the clause or sentence as a whole. Like Comrie, Haspelmath (1997:24) in his discussion of time adverbials highlights the fact that temporal adverbials, like tense, may be deictic. He says: 'The temporal relation of situations to the speech situation, or time deixis, is more relevant to the study of tense than to the study of time adverbials'.

The three major approaches to tense analysis were developed by Reichenbach (1947), and refined by Comrie (1985) and Klein (1994). All three of these approaches regard the absolute tenses as being deictic. According to Reichenbach's analysis temporal reference involves three parameters, namely 'S' (point of speech), 'E' (point of event) and 'R' (point of reference).

Time itself does not provide particular landmarks, and speech time is therefore taken as the default reference point to interpret the temporal significance of a tense form. Nerbonne (1983:3) explains the relevance of these three notions as follows:

Reichenbach distinguished speech time *s*, event time *e* and reference time *r*.... Speech time is simply the time of utterance ... while the time of the various episodes described constitutes event time. ... reference time is the time 'from which an event is seen'.

In his approach Comrie (1985) adopts the same parameters used by Reichenbach to analyse tense, namely (S, E and R). Comrie, however, draws a distinction between absolute, relative and absolute-relative tenses. According to him the absolute tenses mark a relationship between S and E, while R is only relevant to the interpretation of the absolute-relative tenses. Comrie, moreover, highlights the fact that tense

²Consult Posthumus (1990) for a discussion on the time-reckoning mechanisms operative in isiZulu.

marking is represented in relation to the deictic centre. He says (1985:11):

The notions that are most commonly grammaticalised across the languages of the world are simple anteriority, simultaneity, and posteriority, i.e. with the present moment as deictic centre, past, present and future.

Like Reichenbach and Comrie, Klein (1994) also uses three parameters to analyse tense distinctions. He refers to these parameters as: time of utterance (TU), time of the situation (Tsit) and topic time (TT). The notion of TT is central to his theory. He (1994:4) defines TT as, 'the time span to which the speaker's claim on this occasion is confined'.

Lyons (1968:305) also emphasises the deictic significance of tense stating that:

The essential characteristic of the category of tense is that it relates the time of the action, event or state of affairs referred to in the sentence to the time of utterance (the time of utterance being 'now').

Apart from the linguists referred to above by far the majority of scholars who have conducted research on tense have emphasised that tense is a deictic category. Some of these scholars are: Fillmore (1975), Gabbay and Rohrer (1978), Bäuerle and Von Stechow (1980), Hyman (1980:228), Steedman (1982), Levinson (2004:111), Huddleston (1989:335), Von Stechow (1995:363), Barentsen in Janssen and Van der Wurff (1996), Hlongwane (1996), Pretorius (1999), Salkie (2000), Botne and Kershner (2000, 2008), Givon (2001:286), Lindfors (2003:9), Zagana (2003, 2012:365), Robertson, Houston and Stuart (2004), Rodríguez (2004), Tavangar and Amouzadeth (2006:103), Chung (2007:187), Botne (2014), Declerck, Reed and Capelle (2008), Mezhevich (2008:328), Smith (2009), Ranamane (2009:25 et seq.), Weist (2009), Haspelmath (2010), Davidse and Vandelanotte (2011), Nichols (2011:19), Van de Vate (2011:21), Hengeveld (2012), Gerner (2013:171 et seq.), Bohnemeyer (2014:955), De Saussure in Jaszczolt and De Saussure (2014:46), Ma and Simango (2014) and Tonhauser (2005:478, 2015:136).

Apart from the widely used term 'absolute tenses' it is true that a number of researchers have referred to the absolute tenses using alternative terms. Some scholars, notably Salkie (2000), Chung (1999, 2007), Weist (2009), Bohnemeyer (2014:955), Haspelmath (2010) and Van de Vate (2011), have used the term 'deictic tenses' instead of 'absolute tenses'. Other scholars such as Hornstein (1990), Nurse in Nurse and Philippson (2003) and Soga (2011) are among the scholars who have used the term 'basic tenses' to refer to the absolute tenses. A few scholars have used the term 'primary tenses' to refer to the absolute tenses. Among them are Kibort (2009:1391) and Ma and Simango (2014:123). Yet another term employed to refer to the absolute tenses is the term 'pure tenses'. See for instance in this regard Salmon in Jokic and Smith (2003:138).

The term 'absolute tense' is a well-established term that has been used by hundreds if not thousands of scholars for more



than seven decades, precisely defining these tense forms in relation to deixis. It is therefore bizarre that Groenewald (2014:73) maintains that the term 'absolute is incompatible with the notion of deixis'. He says:

The use of the word 'absolute' in the term 'absolute tense(s)' as used by Posthumus is problematic, intrinsically, as well as in the light of how tenses have been used by writers in narrative discourse...The description 'absolute' is incompatible with the notion of deixis.

Firstly, Groenewald maintains that the use of the term is intrinsically problematic because the use of the word 'absolute' in the term 'absolute tense' is inapt. He then supplies a dictionary explanation of the word 'absolute'. Instead of consulting a general dictionary, he should rather have consulted a dictionary of linguistic terms.

The term 'absolute tense' is defined as follows in the work of Trask (2003:3):

absolute tense *n.* A tense form which takes the present moment as its point of reference, such as the simple past, present and future tenses found in many languages. The term is traditional, but regrettable, since the so-called **absolute-relative tenses** have just as much claim to being considered 'absolute'. Cf. **relative tense**, **absolute-relative tense**. (See Comrie 1985 for discussion)

Rose, Beaudoin and Nurse (2002:1) also base their definition of 'absolute tense' on Comrie's model of tense analysis. They define absolute tense as:

ABSOLUTE (tense) 'The term absolute tense is a traditional, though somewhat misleading term that has come to be used to refer to tenses which take the present moment as their deictic centre' (Comrie 1985:36). Comrie goes on to say that it would be more accurately 'interpreted to mean a tense which includes as part of its meaning the present moment as part of its deictic centre'.

In defining absolute and (absolute-)relative tense one has the option of defining these two tense systems differently or to define them using the same basic description. The first option is to define absolute tense as, 'the grammatical expression of time reference in the verb form (usually past, present and future) relative to "now" – the time of the utterance' (the deictic centre) while defining absolute-relative tense as, 'the grammatical expression of time reference in the verb form as a relation between the time of the event, relative to reference time which is in turn situated relative to utterance time'.

The second (and possibly preferred) option is to provide a definition encompassing both absolute and absolute-relative tense forms by defining tense as follows:

Tense is the grammatical expression of time reference in the verb form as a relation between the time of the event (or the time of the situation), reference time and utterance time. In the case of the absolute tenses reference time (or TT) coincides with utterance time.

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that tense has to be defined semantically in terms of deixis. The term 'absolute

tense' is a well-established, conventionalised term that has been used by linguists over decades. Moreover, Comrie (1985:36) himself points out that the term 'absolute tense' is somewhat misleading because absolute time reference is impossible in that time can only be interpreted from another established time point even though the present moment (the deictic centre) is the default point from which the temporal interpretation of events can be measured. In spite of this he asserts:

There is thus a real sense in which taking the present moment as the deictic centre establishes the most basic tenses cross-linguistically, those in terms of which it is often easier to understand deviations from absolute tense. We shall continue to use the traditional term absolute tense...

Paradowski in Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk and Kosecki (2014:313) is yet another of the numerous scholars who uses the term 'absolute' with reference to tense forms that are anchored to speech time. He says:

In Russian, for instance, tenses are arbitrary: anterior to, concurrent with, or posterior to the matrix clause action/state. English tenses, in contrast, are absolute, i.e. they relate the message to the moment of speaking...

Groenewald's (2014:73) second objection to the use of the term 'absolute tense' is based on 'how tenses have been used by writers in narrative discourse'. His (2014:75) argument is strongly based on the premise that the so-called remote past tense has various functions and that it should rather be called the 'narrative tense' or 'a-past tense'. This matter is discussed in some detail in this article in the section, 'Distinguishing between the two past tense forms and naming these tenses'.

Since Reichenbach's publication of 1947, numerous scholars have described tense across languages defining the absolute tenses with respect to the deictic centre. Kibort (2009:1390) maintains that Reichenbach's parameters are adequate to model tense meanings in language and to 'provide a suitable foundation for a formal framework to model tense'.

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the term 'absolute tense' is well-established and widely used by scholars and that there is thus no need to disregard this term. Hardly any scholar who has analysed tense has not defined tense in terms of deixis. It is impossible to distinguish semantically between absolute and relative tenses without describing the difference between these two tense forms in terms of deixis. Contrary to what Groenewald says the notion of deixis is fundamental to the interpretation of tense.

The distinction between absolute and relative tenses and the naming of the two tense systems

The description of tense as the interpretation of event time from either speech time or from reference time (as championed by Reichenbach) has led to the differentiation of tenses as being absolute or relative. The large majority of grammarians



who have conducted research on tense have consistently distinguished between absolute and relative tenses. Tense forms whose temporal interpretation is done from the 'now' of speech time are labelled 'absolute tenses', while those whose temporal interpretation is done from a reference point which may be located either before the TU or after the TU are labelled 'relative tenses'.

Groenewald (2014:72), however, concludes in his article that, 'the basis on which a distinction is made between the so-called absolute and so-called relative tenses of isiZulu is contentious' and reiterates his conviction that, 'Based on the arguments and examples set out above, a distinction between so-called absolute and relative tenses is not reasonable' (Groenewald 2014:79).

He (2014:74) furthermore maintains:

The analysis of the tenses will hopefully show that there is no need, in the case of isiZulu, from a pragmatic point of view, to make a distinction between absolute and relative tenses based on grammatical form, because there are often no clear, 'absolute' differences in use between certain tenses, as the examples will show.

Groenewald (2014) has completely misconstrued Comrie's discussion on relative tense reference and relative time adverbials. Comrie (1985:56) draws a parallel between the semantic interpretation of relative tenses and relative time adverbials. He does not state that relative time adverbials necessarily specify the context for the relative tenses. In his discussion on the relative tenses he merely draws a parallel between the relative tense system and relative time adverbials on semantic grounds. He highlights the fact that while diurnal deictic adverbs such as *izolo* ['yesterday'], *kuthangi* ['the day before yesterday'] and *kusasa* ['tomorrow'] are always interpreted from the 'now' of the utterance and therefore denote 'absolute' time reference, the relative counterparts *ngayizolo* ['the day before'], *ngakuthangi* ['two days before that day'] and *ngakusasa* ['the day thereafter'] cannot be interpreted from the 'now' of utterance, but has to be interpreted from a point established by the context. These adverbs can thus be labelled 'relative time adverbials'. Comrie explains that while these relative time adverbials (like relative tense forms) need to be interpreted from an established reference point [which is not utterance time (UT)] they do not constitute a prerequisite for the employment of the *be*-relative tenses as suggested by Groenewald (2014:6).

As Comrie (1985:56–57) points out, if a relative time adverbial is used, '...one's natural reaction is to look for a reference point in terms of which this time adverbial can be interpreted – the next day after what?' This is exactly the reason why Groenewald (2014:77) regards the examples '*Ngalelo langa wayethenga imoto*' [On that day she or he bought a car] [sic] and '*Ngosuku olungaphambili kwalolo wayethenga imoto*' [sic] [On the day before that he or she bought a car] as being 'less acceptable in isiZulu discourse'. Groenewald's sentences will be perfectly acceptable (with the necessary translational and

grammatical corrections) if they are contextualised. Consider examples 1 and 2 below:

1. *Mhla ka-10 kuNhlolanja ngangiseMnambithi noThemba. Ngalelo langa wayethenga imoto.* [On the 10th of January I was in Ladysmith with Themba. On that day he was (busy) buying a car.] [author's own translation]

In example 1 above the temporal adverbial clause in the first sentence *Mhla ka-10 kuNhlolanja* 'on the 10th of January' establishes the reference time from which the eventuality of 'buying the car' should be interpreted:

2. *Mhla ka-10 kuNhlolanja ngangiseMnambithi noThemba. Ngayizolo wayethenga imoto.* [On the 10th of January I was in Ladysmith with Themba. The previous day he was (busy) buying a car.] [author's own translation]

Similarly, in example 2 the temporal adverbial clause in the first sentence, namely 'on the day before the 10th of January' establishes the reference time from which the eventuality of 'buying the car' should be interpreted.

Groenewald (2014:77) cites the example, '*Mhla efika uzothenga imoto*' [On the day he or she arrives he or she will buy a car] as a counterargument for his own misconception that Comrie maintains that a relative adverb is a prerequisite for the use of the relative tense. Apart from misconstruing Comrie's discussion as claiming that adverbs denoting relative time reference are a prerequisite for the use of relative tense, Groenewald is also guilty of gross language mapping. The English adverbial phrase 'on the day/at the time when' can only be translated into isiZulu using a conjunction, namely *mhla*. Different languages do not necessarily express meanings using the same word categories or devices.

Temporal adverbials may interact with relative tense forms but they are not prerequisites for the establishment of reference time in such tense forms. Temporal adverbials often serve to mark the point or period within the time region specified by the tense form. While the form of the auxiliary verb with *-ba/-be* determines the time region in relation to which the temporal interpretation of the eventuality denoted by the complementary verb should be interpreted, the temporal adverbial more precisely specifies the point or period in the time region from where the temporal interpretation should be made. (The term 'eventuality' is used here following Hogeweg, De Hoop and Malchukov (2009:1) who declare, 'We will use the term eventualities as a comprehensive term for events, states and processes'.)

In example 3 below the temporal adverbial *ngoLwesihlanu olwedlule* ('last Friday') specifies more precisely the period within which the eventuality that is indexed by the auxiliary verb form *ube* within a time region in the recent past, takes place:

3. *Umama ubezokuya esitolo ngoLwesihlanu olwedlule kodwa ugcine engayanga.* [Mother was about to go to the shop last Friday but in the end she did not go.] [author's own translation]



Another eventuality may serve as the anchoring point for the temporal interpretation of the relative tense form. Consider the eventuality *simvakashele* in example 4. In this example Mphemba's completion of his book should be interpreted from the time 'we visited him' as reference point (or point of view):

4. *UMphemba ubeqedela incwadi yakhe ngenkathi simvakashele.* [Mphemba was finishing off his book at the time when we were visiting him.] [author's own translation]

In the case of folktales (*izinganekwane*) the use of the relative tense can simply serve to specify the time region (as remote past) within which the eventualities in the story should be interpreted temporally. (This opening formula is typical of folktales.) Consider example 5 below from M'khize's (1983:48) collection of folktales. The narration immediately continues in the next sentence focusing on the woman introduced in the opening sentence:

5. *Kwabe kukhona inkosikazi eyabe ineso elilodwa.* [There was a woman who had one eye.] [author's own translation]

Groenewald (2014:77) maintains that another reason why the *be*-relative tenses cannot be regarded as relative tenses is that Comrie distinguishes between absolute and relative tenses 'on contextual and not on grammatical grounds'. This is not accurate. Comrie recognises the role played by grammatical devices in establishing the context for the interpretation for relative tenses. He (1985:76) asserts:

One formal characteristic of absolute-relative tenses in many languages is their compositionality, i.e. one can identify morphological correlates of the various time relations involved.

Comrie (1985:77) continues to clarify the nature of absolute-relative tenses and the role of grammar in marking such tense forms by stating:

A similar pattern, though using rather different morphological means, obtains in Maltese, with the auxiliary verb 'be' establishing the reference point and the tense of the lexical verb establishing the location of the situation relative to the reference point.

This is exactly what happens in the case of the use of the relative tenses of isiZulu and the other Bantu languages. A copulative verb stem with the meaning of 'become' (*-be* in the case of isiZulu) is used as auxiliary verb to establish a reference point from where the eventuality expressed in the verb should be interpreted semantically. Consider for instance examples 6–8 below.

Numerous other scholars have studied the relative tenses of different languages. In her discussion of absolute and relative tenses of Spanish, Zagona (2012:367) describes the relative tenses as follows:

The latter is a 'relative tense', in the sense that the evaluation of time is established relative to a linguistic antecedent rather than a speaker's 'now'.

The isiZulu relative tenses under discussion are those that employ the auxiliary verb stem *-ba/-be*. The grammatical form of the auxiliary verb part (with *-ba/-be*) establishes the position

of the reference point (the period within which the temporal interpretation of the eventuality has to be made) in relation to the TU. The grammatical form of the complementary verb on the other hand marks the time of the situation in relation to the reference point. Consider the elucidating examples below:

6. *UThandi ubecula ngenkathi sifika esontweni.* [Thandi was (busy) singing when we arrived at the church.] [author's own translation]

In example 6 above, the form of the auxiliary verb *ube* (< *ubecula*) alerts the addressee to the fact that *Thandi's* singing should be interpreted from a point (shortly) before the TU. It thus marks the relation between UT and reference time while the form of the complementary verb *ecula* on the other hand indicates that *Thandi's* singing was happening at that point (reference time). It thus marks the relation between the situation of the eventuality and the reference time as coinciding.

Compare example 7 below with example 6 above:

7. *UThandi wayecula ngenkathi sifika esontweni.* [Thandi was (busy) singing (long ago) when we arrived at the church.] [author's own translation]

In example 7 above, the form of the auxiliary verb *waye* (< *wabecula*) alerts the addressee to the fact that *Thandi's* singing should be interpreted from a point (long) before the TU. The auxiliary part thus again marks the relation between UT and reference time. The form of the complementary verb *ecula* still denotes that *Thandi's* singing was happening at that particular reference time. The complementary verb thus still marks the relation between the eventuality expressed in the verb and the reference time as being coincidental, but in this instance the reference time is situated long before UT.

In example 8 below the only change in meaning (compared to example 7) is that the eventuality had (already) taken place before reference time (which is 'our arrival at the church'):

8. *UThandi wayeculile ngenkathi sifika esontweni.* [Thandi had sung (long ago) when we arrived at the church.] [author's own translation]

While the auxiliary verb *waye* in examples 7 and 8 denotes the same relation between the TU and the reference time, the form of the complementary verb (*e*)*culile* in example 8 indicates that *Thandi's* singing had taken place before the established reference time whereas in example 7 *Thandi's* singing was happening at reference time.

Botne (1986:304) describes the relative tenses as quoted below. Note that he uses the term 'second event-locus' instead of 'reference time':

In effect, the grammaticalization of this second event-locus establishes a second temporal continuum, dependent on the time of the speech event for its proper temporal interpretation.



Groenewald (2014:74) asserts that there is no semantic difference between the verb forms '*Sasigima* [We ran]' [*sic*] and '*Sagima*'. Groenewald's translation (and thus the temporal interpretation) of the form *sasigijima* as being identical to that of *sagijima* has probably misled him. The appropriate translation of *sasigijima* should be 'We were (long ago, busy) running'. The assumption made here is again erroneous. The temporal meaning of the verb form *sasigima* (< *sabe sigijima*) should not be interpreted directly from the TU, while the verb form *sagijima* has to be interpreted from the TU.

For detailed discussions on the development, morphological form and the imbricated forms of these relative tense verb forms consider Posthumus (1988, 1999, 2001, 2006, 2008).

It is quite telling that even though Groenewald (2014:74) maintains that he will discard the distinction between the absolute and relative tenses, his list of tenses (2014:79) contains five 'compound tenses' apart from the five basic tenses. He thus uses the term employed by some isiZulu grammarians to refer to these tense forms, including Suter (n.d.:49), Doke (1981:190 et seq.), Taljaard and Bosch (1988:149), Poulos and Msimang (1998:306), who all refer to at least some of the relative tense forms as compound tenses. Griesel (1982:145), Engelbrecht (1962:96) and Van Wyk (1981) also refer to these tense forms as 'saamgestelde tye' ['compound tenses'] while Van Eeden (1956:320) refers to them as 'saamgestelde tydvorms (met -ba/-be)' ['compound tenses with -ba/-be'].

Groenewald (2014:79) distinguishes five 'basic tense forms' which he calls, '*a*-past, past, present, definite future and indefinite future'. According to him the compound tenses all denote the activity or state as 'continuous'. In this regard he is heavily influenced by the traditional grammarians who have even labelled the relative tenses as 'past continuous tenses'. The relative tenses do not signify continuity.³ Consider for instance examples 9 and 10 below (which will probably be classified as a compound past and a compound definite future respectively in Groenewald's exposition of tenses). There is no continuity of the eventualities implied in the underlined verbs in these sentences nor in the sentences as a whole. In example 9 the eventuality is expressed as having taken place at reference time while in example 10 the eventuality is expressed as still having to occur at reference time:

9. *Abafana bebedlile ngenkathi lina izulu.* [The boys had eaten at the time when it rained.] [author's own translation]
10. *Abantu abasebenza ebusuku bazobe bezobuya emsebenzini kusasa ekuseni uma sifika ekhaya.* [The people who work night shift will be about to return from work tomorrow morning when we arrive home.] [author's own translation]

Groenewald's (2014:79) subcategorisation of the 'compound tenses' is unsatisfactory since within each of his four

categories there are four different forms, each denoting a distinct tense. Consider, for instance, example 11 which is an excerpt from Nyembezi (1987:149). Note that examples 12–14, which have been adapted from example 11, each denote a temporal reading different from the original sentence. The difference between the temporal interpretation of the relative tense forms in these examples can be illustrated schematically by plotting the time of the eventuality relative to reference time (RT). The position of RT in relation to UT is marked by the auxiliary verb part, while the complementary part of the verb denotes the position of the time of the eventuality relative to RT. The Venn diagram demarcates the domain within which the eventualities are situated relative to RT. In example sentences 11–14 RT is situated shortly before UT as marked by the auxiliary verb part *ebengi-*. The vertical line originating from RT pointing to the verb *ebengizixosha* denotes an eventuality that coincides with RT while the line originating from RT slanting to the left and pointing to the verb *ebengizixoshile* denotes an eventuality that occurs anterior to RT. The lines originating from RT and slanting to the right, pointing to the verbs *ebengizoxosha* and *ebengizoxosha* denote an eventuality that occurs shortly before and long before RT respectively⁴:

11. *Izinyamazane ebengizixosha angisaziboni neze.* [The game that I have been chasing away, I do not see it at all any longer.] [author's own translation]
12. *Izinyamazane ebengizixoshile angisaziboni neze.* [The game that I had chased away, I do not see it at all any longer.] [author's own translation]
13. *Izinyamazane ebengizoxosha angisaziboni neze.* [The game that I would have had to chase away (shortly), I do not see it at all any longer.] [author's own translation]
14. *Izinyamazane ebengizoxosha angisaziboni neze.* [The game that I would have had to chase away (later), I do not see it at all any longer.] [author's own translation]

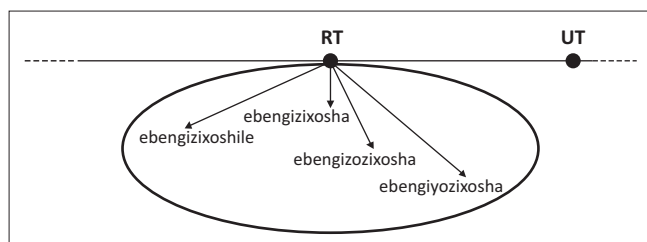
Groenewald's proposal implies that all four forms above should be labelled as examples of 'compound past tense'; however, they denote very different temporal distinctions as is evident from the preceding discussion. Using a single label to denote these different tenses is unsatisfactory as is evident from the discussion above.

In his discussion on the co-occurrence of the compound past tense with the *a*-past tense, Groenewald (2014:78) states that the first four verbs in the excerpt below from Makhambeni are all in the *a*-past tense. However, these verbs are not in the *a*-past tense; they are in the consecutive mood. The effect of the use of the consecutive mood adds to building suspense in the narrative. Groenewald's erroneous identification of tense forms has impacted on his analysis of these tenses:

15. *Lagqagqamuka ihhashi. Wasondela umfula. Lwakhula uvalo kuSishebo. Wajuluka. Ukuba ubengabambile isikhuni ngalesi*

3. For a detailed discussion on the semantic significance of the relative tenses and why these tense forms should not be labelled 'continuous past' tenses, see Posthumus 2006.

4. Posthumus (2001, 2006) offers a comprehensive discussion of the 16 relative tense forms of isiZulu supplying elucidating examples and schematic representations. Note that the schematic presentation used in this article is a simplified version of the schematic presentations used in the articles referred to above. The schematic representation shown in Figure 1 in this article is more in line with the representation used by Declerck and Reed (2006:172).



Source: Adapted from Declerck, R. & Reed, S., 2006, 'Tense and time in counterfactual conditionals', *Belgian Journal of Linguistics* 20, 172. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/bjl.20.11dec>

FIGURE 1: Relative tenses.

esinye isandla, ubezokwesula umjuluko. [The horse reared up. The river came closer and closer. Sishebo's fear grew. He broke out in a sweat. If he had not been holding a torch in the other hand he would have wiped off the sweat.] [author's own translation]

The distinction between the absolute and relative tenses has been well-established since the publications of Reichenbach (1947) and Comrie (1985). In spite of a few attempts by linguists to refine the description of relative tense forms (some even regarding such forms as expressing modality) the terms 'absolute' and 'relative tense' and the description of these two tense systems with their subcategories are still adhered to by most scholars in the field. The absolute and relative tense forms mark different temporal information and the distinction is not at all superficial as Groenewald (2014) suggests.

Distinguishing between the two past tense forms of isiZulu and naming these tense forms

isiZulu, like many other languages, distinguishes degrees of remoteness in terms of past and future temporal references.⁵ Nurse (2008:88 *et seq.*) points out that Bantu languages generally have various degrees of absolute past and future tenses. He says (2008:89):

Bantu languages are known for their multiplicity of past and future tense contrasts...Bantu languages with two pasts most often contrast hodiernal vs pre-hodiernal...These contrasts are flexible in many languages depending on the situation and the speaker's intent.

Walker (2013:56) distinguishes two 'pure past' and two 'pure future' tenses for Kabwa.

Botne (2012, 2014) also discusses the wide-spread occurrence of remoteness distinctions in Bantu. He analyses tense in terms of his multidimensional dissociative model. He (2014:18) comments as follows on the possible historical development of the past remoteness distinctions in the Bantu languages of zones F and S:

Nearly all of the languages exhibit a contrast between \emptyset -B-ILE and -A-B-A constructions (where B denotes verb base); some have lost one or the other. Hence, the analysis presumes an early Bantu contrast between resultative \emptyset -B-ILE and perfect -A-B-A.

5. For a detailed discussion on the absolute tenses of isiZulu, see Posthumus (1988, 2001).

Botne (2014:18) elaborates on the realisation of remoteness distinctions as follows:

Thus, for example, we will see that Kondo only superficially distinguishes four tenses, a consequence of a simple linear analysis. Rather, the *-ire* forms denote a Current Time Region, the *-á* forms a Distal Time Region, the remoteness distinction deriving from an implicit difference in time scales of use, days vs. years.

It is well known that isiZulu has two grammatically distinct past tense forms - one with the verbal final morpheme *-ile/-e* and the other a remote past tense morpheme *-a-* that coalesces with the subject morpheme. However, isiZulu grammarians hold different views on the semantic significance of these forms and their labelling. isiZulu grammarians have used both the terms 'remote past' and 'a-past tense' to refer to the remote past tense. It is not crucial whether the past tense characterised by the morpheme *-a-* is called a remote past tense or an *a*-past tense; what is more important is to establish the temporal semantic significance of this tense form as opposed to the forms with *-ile/-e*.

While there is an overlap between the contexts in which the two past tense forms of isiZulu can be used, the remote past tense is mutually exclusive with the diurnal adverbs *namhlanje* ['today'], *izolo* ['yesterday'] and *kuthangi* ['the day before yesterday']. (While the adverb *kuthangi* may be used with the remote past tense in some dialects, the other two diurnal adverbs do not co-occur with this tense form in any of the isiZulu dialects.) Example 16 below is therefore ungrammatical:

16. *UZo wangilethela le ncwadi izolo. [Zo brought me this book yesterday.]

It is important to note that the use of the remote past tense does not necessarily express a physically remote spatio-temporal relation, but often rather expresses a cognitive, psychological or mental remoteness. A speaker is, in many instances, at liberty to use either the past tense or the remote past tense to refer to an eventuality that is located at a particular point in the past. If the remote past tense is used, the interpretation is that the speaker regards the event as one that has occurred long ago cognitively, while the use of the past tense form with *-ile/-e* on the other hand marks the event as having taken place cognitively in the (recent) past. Consider examples 17 and 18 below that refer to the same event:

17. Ubabamkhulu uthengise imoto yakhe ngonyaka odlule. [Grandfather sold his car last year.] (Cognitively perceived to be a short while ago. [author's own translation])
18. Ubabamkhulu wathengisa imoto yakhe ngonyaka odlule. [Grandfather sold his car laaast year.] (Cognitively perceived to be long ago. [author's own translation])

For a comprehensive discussion of the remoteness distinctions in Bantu with reference to past and future time reference see Botne (2014) and Botne and Kershner (2008).

Let us now focus on Groenewald's second consideration for not considering the so-called remote past tense as indicative



of remote past events. Groenewald (2014:74) cites a number of examples of the so-called remote past tense forms 'which do not denote a remote past'. His examples include the forms repeated below. The first example is used often in soccer commentary. (His examples are numbered in this article for easy reference.):

19. *Laduma!* [And there it (the ball) thunders!] [author's own translation]
20. *Ngafa!* [And there I die!] [author's own translation]
21. *Wathint' abafazi wathinta imbokodo.* [(If) you touch a woman, you touch a grinding stone.] [author's own translation]
22. *Hawu wathula kangaka Fuze. Ucabanga indaba kaMpiyakhe yini?* [My word, you are so quiet Fuze. Are you thinking about the matter concerning Mpiyakhe?] [author's own translation]

These, and similar, examples bring Groenewald (2014:74) to the conclusion that:

In texts consulted, examples of the so-called remote past indicating recent past actions (and in one case an event in the present) outnumbered remote events.

The problem with Groenewald's pronouncement is that none of the examples he cites are remote past tense verb forms. His analysis is thus based on the erroneous assumption that the verb forms are in the remote past tense while they are actually verbs in the consecutive mood. The remote past tense is characterised by long length on the vowel *-a-* that coalesces with the subject marker. None of these verb forms have this characteristic length.

Groenewald (2014:75) maintains that:

The primary semantic function of this tense [the remote past] is to mark events as 'seminal'. The so-called remote past tense highlights events in narration (whether oral or written).

Unfortunately, the verb forms Groenewald is referring to above are not in the remote past tense, and the deduction that the remote past tense marks events as seminal therefore does not hold.

In order to account for the tenses of isiZulu in a systematic and holistic way, cognizance has to be taken of the contributions made by numerous scholars (Bantuists in particular) to the study of tense. Moreover, an analysis of tense has to take into account that tense interacts with mood, modality and aspect. In this regard Jaszczolt (2009:35) remarks:

Just as the semantic category of temporality is not basic and can be traced back, both diachronically and synchronically (i.e. with respect to semantic properties) to the category of modality, so the conceptual category of time can be shown to be none other than a conceptual category of modal detachment.

Grammarians still grapple with the distinction between past tense, perfect aspect and stativity. Nurse (2003:96), maintains that perfect (or anterior aspect as he calls it) is primarily expressed by a Proto-Bantu reflex **-ide*. It is difficult to

distinguish between this aspectual reflex and the past tense morpheme in the Bantu languages. Another factor that has compounded the confusion in describing tense in the Bantu languages is that a large number of scholars have used the terms 'perfect' and 'imperfect' as subcategories of the tense system while they actually denote aspect.

Groenewald (2014:75) seems to favour the view on the distinction drawn by some scholars between the past and 'perfect' tenses. He says:

What Posthumus (1990) calls the past tense, Taljaard and Bosch (1998:55), Sithole (2003:150), and some other scholars in fact call the perfect, reserving the term 'past tense' for the *a*-past tense...

Even though Van Wyk used the terms 'imperfective' and 'perfective' with reference to the tense forms of Northern Sotho, he eventually opted to reserve these terms for aspectual distinctions. He remarks (1987:283):

I have used the term TENSE for these categories in the past, but now I consider ASPECT to be more appropriate.

Louwrens (1994:116) also discarded the use of the terms 'imperfect' and 'perfect tense'. He explains:

This analysis leads, *inter alia*, to the conclusions that (a) the terms **perfect** and **imperfect** 'tense' should be done away with by replacing them with **past tense** and **present tense** respectively...

Brisard and Meeuwis (2009:25) strongly criticise the inappropriate use of the term 'perfect' with reference to tense as used by Poulos and Bosch and Poulos and Msimang. They say:

Many Bantuists link up the alleged past reference of the form with some notion of perfect aspect. Poulos and Bosch (1997:22) refer to the cognate morpheme *-ile* (with allomorphs *-e* and *-i*) in Zulu (zone S) as the 'perfect or past tense', not only treating perfect unconventionally as a category of tense, rather than aspect, but also presenting perfect and past as synonymous labels. Moreover, Poulos and Bosch observe that the same form is used with stative verbs. However, as translations of the latter into English do not involve any notion of pastness, they feel compelled to ascribe this use to a separate entry in the Zulu verb system, which they then call the 'stative tense' (Poulos & Bosch 1997:22–23).

In another publication on Zulu (Poulos & Msimang 1998), past is not used as a synonym of perfect when the form is discussed. Yet these authors call the same form a 'perfect tense' (1998:265; our emphasis), also insisting on the interpretation of 'perfect' as a category of tense in the rest of the book...

From the foregoing discussion it is abundantly clear that the terms 'perfect' and 'imperfect' should be reserved for labelling aspectual distinctions and not tense forms.

A number of tense and aspect analyses carried out for different languages open up new avenues for a more satisfactory analysis of the isiZulu tense and aspect system. Among these are Janssen, Brisard and Meeuwis and Botne and Kershner (2000, 2008). Janssen (1994) analyses the Dutch preterite and perfect from the speaker's vantage point and



mental field of vision. Brisard and Meeuwis (2009) analyse the Lingala tense and aspect forms from a Cognitive Grammatical perspective, emphasising that this approach offers 'important advantages in the analysis of tense meaning, by stipulating what tenses refer to (profile) and what is relegated to the background of their semantic makeup' (2009:42). This approach agrees to some extent with Janssen's analysis above. Botne and Kershner (2000) investigate the isiZulu (near) past tense forms with *-il..e* and its imbricated variant *-i..e* (not the short [or conjoint] form with *-e*). In their approach they (2000:162) employ the dichotomy 'now/not now (past)' to determine two conceptually distinct worlds or domains – 'a cognitively primary performative domain and a distinct, conceptually distant, non-active domain'. The scholars referred to above approach tense as a multidimensional perspective rather than as time regions along a single time line.

While the contexts in which the past tense and the remote past tense of isiZulu can be used overlap, there are contexts where the past tense may be used but not the remote past tense. Furthermore, the remoteness distinction between these two past tenses in contexts where they can both be used is often on the mental or psychological level rather than on the spatio-temporal level.

Questioning the fact that tense forms are grammaticalised or are forms of grammaticalisation

Groenewald (2014:74) alleges that Posthumus has indicated that tenses are forms of grammaticalisation⁶ and maintains that this is an incorrect use of the term. Firstly, this is not accurate – what he did say is that tenses are grammaticalised – thus marked grammatically in the verb form. Moreover, the terms 'grammaticalised tense' and even 'grammaticalisation of tense' are widely used and do not warrant any motivation – see for instance the quotation from Comrie on page 2 and that of Botne on page 5 of this article and the title of Hengeveld's chapter in Heine and Narrog in the list of references.

The semantic or syntactic significance of the long and short forms of the present and past tenses⁷

The morpheme *-ya-* that realises in the affirmative form of the present tense in the indicative mood does not mark the present tense as suggested by Groenewald (2014:73). He supplies a table containing the present tense form 'Ngiyabhala'

6. The term 'grammaticalisation' has been used in the narrow sense to refer to historical language change whereby words such as nouns and verbs become grammatical markers, but the term has also been used extensively to mean 'marked grammatically'. This term has been used in the latter sense in tense analyses, as is evident from the references cited in this article.

7. Meeusen introduced the terms 'conjoint' and 'disjoint' in 1959 to refer to the so-called short and long forms of the present and past tenses respectively. The terms 'conjoint' and 'disjoint' have been favoured by scholars such as Van der Spuy (1993), Sabel and Zeller (2006) and Buell (2005, 2006) to refer to these forms of the verb.

with the *-ya-* underlined and explains: 'The morpheme through which the clauses [*sic*] are tensed are underlined; ...' If the morpheme *-ya-* were a marker of present tense, all present tense verb forms would have had to contain this morpheme, which is not the case. One of the syntactic functions of this morpheme is to mark focus on the verb (as the new information) in the sentence.

Groenewald (2014:76) concludes his discussion on the present tense by stating:

The short form should, in my view, be regarded as the norm for the present tense, whilst the long form should be regarded as an aspect indicating weight (associated with present tense).

It is not at all clear what is meant by the phrase, 'as an aspect indicating weight (associated with present tense)'.

Ironically, the true significance of the use of the morpheme *-ya-* occurring in the present tense is contained in the quotation from Sithole (2003) supplied by Groenewald (2014:76). Sithole ascribes the use of the long form of the present tense rather than the short form primarily to syntactic considerations and secondarily to emphasis. The term 'focus' is, however, more appropriate than 'emphasis'. (See in this regard among others, the quotation from Botne and Kershner (2000:163) in relation to the short and long forms of the past tense elsewhere in this article.)

The long (or disjunctive or disjoint) form of the past tense with *-ile* is, like the long form of the present tense, a semantic-syntactic marker of the fact that the focus is on the verb in the particular sentence. Groenewald (2014:76), however, maintains that the long form of the past tense with *-ile* denotes that '... an event has indeed taken place...'

In the example that Groenewald supplies as illustration of the function of the long form of the past tense, the pronouncement that Shumi's girlfriend makes clearly, highlights that she emphasises her act of 'bóóking in at the hotel'. Had she used the short form in this context, the focus would then have been on the adverbial description '*lapha ehhotela*' and no longer on the verb. What is in focus in example 23 is her action of booking herself in and not where she has booked in:

23. *Ngibhukile lapha ehhotela.* [I have booked here in the hotel.]
[author's own translation]

A number of Bantuists have pointed out that the choice between the use of the short and long forms of the present and past tenses is based on syntax and focus. Botne and Kershner (2000) examine the alternation of the *-ile* and *-i..e* forms of the long form of the past tense in isiZulu. With reference to the discussions on the contributions of scholars such as Doke (1981), Beuchat (1966), Ziervogel (1967) and Taljaard and Bosch (1988), Botne and Kershner (2000:163) remark:

The focus of most of this discussion has been the syntactic alteration between constructions ending in the 'long form' *-ile*



and those ending in the 'short form' *-e...* Our concern lies not with this particular alternation conditioned by factors related to focus and syntax, but rather with an alteration in the long form itself, between *-ile* and *-i...e*.

Groenewald (2014:75) states that the past tense verb forms of isiZulu do not always denote past tense. According to him the past tense form can be used to mark: (1) 'events that do not feature as seminal events' (especially the short form), (2) stativity and (3) perfectivity or completion.

The fact that Groenewald wants to attach a different meaning to the 'past relative tenses' is probably due to the fact that he does not interpret the relative tense forms comprising two verbal forms as denoting a single tense. He remarks (2014:75):

The very fact that the past tense or perfect (henceforth: past tense) can co-occur in the relative tenses is proof that the past tense can be used to indicate something other than tense.

Declerck *et al.* (2008:363) are among the linguists who indicate that tense forms sometimes mark meanings other than the particular tense. They indicate that the past tense form of English, when used in a relative tense, can mark coincidence between two times in the future. They say:

This means that not all past tense forms locate a situation in the past. An absolute past tense form does, but a relative past tense form just expresses coincidence between two times in a past domain and can therefore be used even if the two times are interpreted as lying in the future...

Van der Spuy (1993) advanced the hypothesis that the alteration between the use of the so-called short or long forms of the present and past tenses of isiZulu is conditioned by the syntactic position of the verb within the surface structure constituents. Buell (2005, 2006) based his analysis on Van der Spuy's findings.

Distinguishing a present compound tense

Groenewald (2014:78) argues that there is a need to distinguish a present compound tense. The example he supplies as justification for the need to distinguish such a tense is repeated here as 24 (with my own translation):

24. *Wena Sivalo uthi le ngane ayifane kanjani namantombazane ibe ingumfana yona?* [...] [You, Sivalo, how can you say this child should resemble the girls while being supposed to be a boy?] [author's own translation]

The copulative *ibe ingumfana* in example 24 is in a relative tense form, but not in a 'present compound' tense. The auxiliary part *ibe* of this verb is itself in the situative mood.

The term 'present continuous tense' is a misnomer because a tense form that takes the present moment (UT) as the point of reference for tense interpretation is inevitably an absolute tense. The relative tenses with the auxiliary *-ba/-be* denote that the temporal construal of the eventuality communicated

by the predicate should be interpreted from a time region other than the 'now' of speech.

The morphological form of the auxiliary part of the relative tense indexes the reference point (for the temporal interpretation of the predicate) relative to UT (the deictic centre). The temporal interpretation of the eventuality is then done from this newly established RT. (Note, however, that this RT does not become the deictic centre as some scholars, notably Chung [1999:iii, 15 et seq.] and Botne [1986, 1989, 1993] and Declerck *et al.* [2008:502] maintain, nor does it constitute a shifted deictic centre. For a comprehensive discussion on this topic see Posthumus [1999].)

Relative tenses are those tenses where (in the Comrie model of tense analysis) E (event time) is not interpreted from S (speech time) but rather from R. In other words whenever the interpretation of the tense form deviates from the simultaneity assumption (namely that $S = R$) such a tense form denotes relative tense.

Naming the two future tenses

While Groenewald (2014:76) maintains that *-zo* and *-yo* do not primarily mark tense, but that they are rather aspects marking 'definite or indefinite immanence' he (2014:79) nevertheless includes a definite future and an indefinite future tense in his exposition of the isiZulu tenses. He furthermore distinguishes a 'compound definite future' and an 'indefinite compound future tense'. He does not motivate his preference for the use of the terms 'definite' and 'indefinite future tense' over the conventional terms 'near' and 'remote future' as used by the majority of Bantuists.

Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca (1994:248-249) point out that while different futures are distinguished cross-linguistically the distinctions 'definite' and 'indefinite' futures are very rare. They conclude:

Definite and indefinite also qualify predictions of future events, but rather than the speaker's confidence in making prediction, what is at issue is whether the speaker is offering an assurance that an event will take place at some definite time or is not offering such an assurance. Grams with these functions are rare; at best only one language (Nung) has a definite future, and two others (Inuit and Buriat) have indefinite futures.

Botne and Kershner (2008:158 et seq.) refer to Mbom (1996) and Hyman's (2010) distinction between proximate, distal and remote future tenses in Basaa, redefining the use of these tense forms distinguishing between a P- and D-domain. According to Botne and Kershner (2008:159) the remote future of Basaa denotes a:

subjective distance or separation of the event with respect to the speech event; hence, not only can it be used to refer to temporally distant events, but also to temporally proximate ones, which are then construed as subjectively 'remote'.

Like the two past tenses that denote remoteness in the past, the two future tenses of isiZulu also mark temporal



remoteness as two time regions, but stretching into the future seen from the 'now' of UT. As with the two past tenses the use of one particular future tense rather than the other may be conditioned by psychological or mental considerations. While the -zo- future tense forms of isiZulu may include a notion of definiteness as opposed to the -yo- future tense forms that may include a notion of indefiniteness the primary distinction between these two tense forms remains that of near future as opposed to remote future.

Conclusion

While some misconceptions and concerns relating to tense analysis in isiZulu have been addressed in this article as a response to Groenewald's proposals, a lot more research needs to be done on tense in the Bantu languages of Guthrie's zone S. A discussion on tense without proper cognizance of the interrelated categories time, mood, aspect and modality is incomplete; however, it is not possible to discuss all these categories and their interrelatedness in a single article.

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