

How much Tense is needed? The mixed response from Capeverdean

The language. Capeverdean is a Portuguese-based Creole, the mother tongue of virtually all inhabitants of the Republic of Cape Verde and of most Cape Verdeans living abroad. It has two main dialectal varieties, roughly associated with the two most populated islands of the archipelago, São Vicente (the Barlavento variety) and Santiago (the Sotavento variety).¹

The problem. A detailed description of its temporal morphology raises significant doubts about the need of a TP projection. In the Santiago variety, there is one morpheme – the verbal suffix *-ba* – that sometimes behaves like a Tense marker, placing the Topic Time before the time of utterance (Klein 1994, 2010). It is not the case, however, that it always separates past readings from their non-past counterparts: (i) in embedded constructions, its contribution is not as clear-cut; and (ii) the bare forms of most predicates also exhibit a past reading, which is obtained by other means. As for *tá* or *táva*, in some past sentences in the variety of São Vicente, they seem in fact multifunctional morphemes, thus resisting a simple Tense label. Moreover, the language shows other syntactic features that may be related with the lack of a TP projection (Lin 2010).

Proposal. Regarding Tense, Capeverdean exhibits a mixed status, showing different values in a language continuum where the enduring contact situation with Portuguese still plays a role.

The details. Concerning temporal morphology in root clauses, the two varieties behave alike in one point and differ in another. The common point involves two features, defined in A. and B.:
A. the bare forms of a few stative predicates (some instances of *sabe* ‘know’, *ten* ‘have’ and the modals *pode* ‘can’, *debe* ‘must’) have a present reading (1); the others have a past reading (2), including all dynamic predicates, but also other statives, like *kridita na Diós* ‘believe in God’.

(1) *N sabe konta ti sen.* (examples adapted from Brüser & Santos 2002)
1SG know count PREP one.hundred
‘I can count until one hundred.’

(2) *E txiga kasa, e ba durmi.*
3SG arrive house, 3SG go sleep
‘He arrived home, he went to sleep.’

B. specific present readings for the predicates in this later group occur with the preverbal morpheme *ta* [tə] (to be distinguished from *tá* [ta]).²

(3) a. *E ta txiga tardi.*
3SG TA arrive late
‘He arrives late.’ (habitually)

b. *Nha amigu ta kridita na spritu.*
POSS friend TA believe PREP spirit
‘My friend believes in spirits.’

The distinctive point also involves two features, here described in C. and D.:

C. the post-verbal affix in the Santiago variety, *-ba*, may bring a past meaning to all the above present constructions, preserving their aspectual differences.

(4) a. *N sabeba konta ti sen.*
1SG know:BA count PREP hundred
‘I could count until one hundred.’

b. *E ta txigaba tardi.*
3SG TA arrive:BA late
‘He used to arrive late.’ (habitually)

c. *Nha amigu ta kriditaba na spritu.*
POSS friend TA believe:BA PREP spirit
‘My friend used to believe in spirits.’

¹ These varieties are also spoken in other islands, with some variation of their own, but the data presented here come from these two.

² In the São Vicente variety, this morpheme may also be *te* [ti].

A similar effect is obtained when *-ba* is affixed to these verbs in progressive constructions:

(5) a. *Miriam, bu sata kume bolu antis di djanta?* (Pratas 2007: 42)

Miriam, 2SG PROG eat cake before of dinner

‘Miriam, are you eating cake before dinner?’

b. *Miriam, bu sata kumeba bolu antis di djanta?*

Miriam, 2SG PROG eat:BA cake before of dinner

‘Miriam, were you eating cake before dinner?’

D. the São Vicente variety, where no such morpheme exists, obtains an equivalent contribution through a distinction in the preverbal markers for habitual (6) (cf. 4b,c) or progressive (7a,b).

(6) *N táva trabadja parmanhan.* (adapted from Pratas 2012b)

1SG TAVA work in.the.morning

‘I used to work in the morning.’

(7) a. *Ainda ten un na skóla ti te fazê kurs d’prufsor.*

still have one PREP school PROG do course of teacher

‘There is still one [pupil] at school doing a teacher’s training.’ (Swolkien 2015:201)

b. *Kes tropa táva te kore.*

DET troupe PROG.PST run

‘The troops were running.’

(Swolkien 2015:205)

Discussion regarding the whole array of temporal meanings available. Most of them are obtained through a complex interaction between functional markers of various sorts³, lexical information (besides the lexical aspect of different predicates, there is also the contribution of other words, like adverbs or modal verbs), and pragmatic inferences. For example: given the right context, the combinations illustrated in (3) may convey a future reading, and the ones illustrated in (4) and in (6), with *-ba*, *ta+-ba* or *táva*, may occur in conditionals; this happens with any of the predicates, even the statives whose bare form has a present interpretation, like *sabe resposta* ‘know the answer’.⁴ Moreover, if the proposal of a null Perfect is on the right track (in Pratas 2012a, 2014, the bare verb constructions in the language have been considered equivalent to some instances of the English Perfect), it accounts for these past readings with no recourse to grammatical Tense. This said, however, the precise status of the verbal affix *-ba*, in Santiago, must be established, and compared with the multifunctional *táva* from São Vicente.

Regarding other specific syntactic properties that have been linked with tenseless languages (Lin 2010, a.o.), Capeverdean displays some of them: (i) it has no overt expletive subjects; (ii) in some predicative constructions (namely with negation), it dispenses with the copular verb (these sentences have no verb at all); (iii) it shows no morphological distinction between finite and non-finite forms. Other properties in this line of inquiry will be exhaustively described, such as Case-related syntactic restrictions (adding to the lack of morphological Case marking).

Finally, this set of empirical facts inspires an approach which considers the contact history of the language and assumes there is a continuum made of subtly distinct grammatical features.

Brüser, M. & A. R. Santos, com a contribuição de Ekkehard Dengler e Andreas Blum, sob a direcção de Jürgen Lang. 2002. *Dicionário do Crioulo da Ilha de Santiago (Cabo Verde)* com equivalentes de tradução em alemão e português. Tübingen.

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Pratas, F. 2007. *Tense Features and Argument Structure in Capeverdean Predicates*. PhD Dissertation, Universidade Nova de Lisboa.

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Pratas, F. 2014. The Perfective, the Progressive and the (dis)closure of situations: comment on the paper by María J. Arche. *NLLT*, 32(3): 833–853.

Swollen, Dominika. 2015. *The Cape Verdean Creole of São Vicente: its genesis and structure*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Coimbra.

³ Mainly in the variety of São Vicente, which developed later (early 19th century) than the original one from Santiago (16th century), there are additionally some suppletive forms that look like the homophonous auxiliary verbs in the lexifier but behave as functional morphemes.

⁴ The definition of a value for the morpheme *ta* is a complex task, but its most prominent meaning seems to be modal (Pratas 2012a): (i) it turns eventive predicates into a kind of states (in habituals); and (ii) it participates in future and conditional constructions. It is also involved, however, in the description of some embedded ongoing situations, like in *Djon odja Maria ta badja* ‘Djon saw Mary dancing’.