

*TENSE, ASPECTS AND MODALITY  
SYSTEMS IN THE MBANDJA  
VERB*

*By*

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*DECEMBER, 1997*

**NAIROBI EVANGELICAL GRADUATE SCHOOL OF  
THEOLOGY**

**TENSE, ASPECT AND MODALITY SYSTEMS IN THE MBANDJA  
VERB**

**BY  
GOMA MABELE**

*A Linguistics Practicum submitted to the Graduate School in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Translation Studies*

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**December, 1997**

STUDENT'S DECLARATION

TENSE, ASPECT AND MODALITY SYSTEMS IN THE MBANDJA  
VERB

I declare that this is my original work and has not been submitted to any other College  
or University for academic credit.

(Signed) \_\_\_\_\_

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a final flourish, positioned above a dashed horizontal line.

Rev. Goma Mabele

Date: December 10th, 1997

**DEDICATION**

**TO**

**my wife, Jeanne L. Goma**

**our son, Luyada A. Goma**

**our daughter, Yenga S. Goma**

## Acknowledgment

A successful completion of this project has been made possible by the grace of the Lord, for apart from him we can do nothing. To him be all the glory.

We want to appreciate Dr. Sim's academic warning without which we would not have perceived the seriousness of this project so soon. We are also truly grateful to Dr. Sim's family for their prompt assistance which helped us to raise and keep our academic balance when we were knocked down by sad news from our home country.

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We really want to express our thankfulness to our home church, through the Rt. Rev. Luyada Gbuda Ata Gbanzi for releasing us for the work of Bible translation and Translation studies.

To the NEGST Congolese community, we express our gratitude for the fellowship and mutual spiritual comfort and support we enjoyed together.

To all those who indirectly contributed to the realization of this project and are not mentioned by name, we want to acknowledge that we really appreciate their contribution.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Name and origin of the language

According to the Ethnologue (1988:346), the language may be variously called Mbanza, Mbandza, Mbanja, Mbandja. As a native speaker of the language, I consider the correct name to be Mbandja for the following reasons:

(a) Linguistically, this one fits in with one of the common word patterns CVCV if- [ᵐb] is interpreted as one segment, and

- [ᵐdʲ] is also interpreted as a single segment.

(b) During the translation work, the translation team conducted a poll among the Mbandja in their different areas to find the correct Mbandja name. Unanimously, the two major dialects agreed with that orthography.

(c) Interpreted as a single segment, many of the Mbandja words have the segment [ᵐdʲ], as in the following:

- badja       `stone'

- djapa       `whip'

- gbadjèvo   `hailstone'

- andja       `they'

- tandja      `to vomit'

- tandju      `to drink'

- The following compound verbs:       - tadji ò `to listen, to hear'

- tadji kudu `to dig a hole'

- tadji ngbeze 'to get lost, to go astray'.

Traditionally, the Mbandja people say that they originated from Sudan. They were in the process of conquering and displacing various Bantu groups south of the area, when this was halted by Belgian colonization. The Sudanese origin of Mbandja can be supported by the following statement by Bendor-Samuel because it belongs to the Banda group of languages: "There are probably more than 500,000 Banda speakers in CAR and more than 100,000 in Zaire (Fultz and Morgan 1986). The number in Sudan is unknown and no breakdown by individual language is available" (Bendor-Samuel 1989:193).

In Occasional Papers in the study of Sudanese languages, no.4 (Sampson 1985:135,148-151), the following Tongbago words appear; there are some similarities between the Tongbago and Mbandja words:

<b>Tongbago</b>	<b>Mbandja</b>	<b>gloss</b>
vàná	vàná	`four'
mà <sup>n</sup> dà	mà <sup>n</sup> dà	`door'
dà <sup>m</sup> bá	dà <sup>m</sup> bá	`fail'
kà <sup>m</sup> bà	kà <sup>m</sup> bà	`knife'
yutu	yutu	`wash'
bīši	'bīši	`two'
měṛə	méré	`swell, to'

a <sup>m</sup> bǎřǐpè	á <sup>m</sup> bérépé	`star'
su	tásu	`pierce'
kākó	kākó	`leaf'
ǵbābi	ǵbābi	`bone'
àbá	àbá	`father'

The above cases of similarity show clearly that Mbandja may indeed be one of the Banda languages which originated from Sudan.

## 1.2 Location

The Mbandja people live in the Northwest corner of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Zaire). The main area is in North Ubangi, and another part in South Ubangi. In the Ethnologue (1988:346), it is stated that the Mbandja are mainly in the Equatorial Region, in various areas in North Ubangi, South Ubangi, and Western Mongala subregions, to the west, southwest, and east of the Ngbaka language. (See map 1, p. 74, taken from SIL: Nairobi).

## 1.3 Demographic factor

According to the Ethnologue (1988:346), there are 200,000 native speakers of Mbandja. Even in 1988 this estimate was too low because of the difficulty in reaching all the Mbandja speakers who are scattered in various areas in Ubangi land (see map 2 extracted from Benji Wald 1994:324). Actually the Mbandja speakers could now in 1997 be nearly one million.

### 1.4 Language family

Mbandja belongs to the super family of the Niger-Congo languages, and classified within the branch of Adamawa-Ubangi. As we have seen in 1.1. above, Mbandja is one of the Ubangian sub-branches which belongs to the group of the Banda languages (J. Bendor-Samuel 1989:192-3). The language is described in the *Ethnologue* (1988:346) as: Niger-Kordofanian, Niger-Congo, Adamawa Ubangi, Ubangi, Banda, Southern.

Benji Wald in the *Atlas of the world's languages* (Benji Wald 1994:292) states that "Niger-Congo is the dominant phylum in sub-Saharan African, and accounts for more than half of the total number of speakers of sub-saharan African languages." However, there is a discussion about the classification of its different branches. Benji Wald in the Atlas says that "because of its diversity, there are inevitably remaining problems and disagreements about subclassification, even among the better described Niger-Congo languages (Benji Wald 1994:292).

Despite the classification problems of the Niger-Congo phylum, the Atlas presents the Adamawa Ubangian sub-branches as follows: [see map 2 extracted from Benji Wald 1994:324].

### 1.5 Dialects and orthography

The Mbandja language has two major dialects called "Kala" and "Gbado" (Ethnologue 1988:346). The Kala dialect is spoken in the southern Ubangi, whereas the Gbado is spoken in the northern Ubangi.

The pronunciation and the vocabulary are the two major differences between these two dialects as shown below:

**(a) Pronunciation**

Two consonants [l] and [r] constitute the main characteristic to distinguish the pronunciation of these two dialects. Gbadɔ dialect frequently uses the consonant [r] in many of its words. On the other hand, the Kala dialect uses the consonant [l] instead of [r].

**Examples:**

<b>Kala</b>	<b>Gbadɔ</b>	<b>gloss</b>
begala	begara	`maize'
yabolo	yaboro	`goat'
kpolo	kporo	`drum'
milu	miru	`leopard'
bamala	bamara	`lion'
bulu	buru	`dusty'
tulugu	turugu	`soldier'
tala	tara	`to calm (storm)'
tagolo	tagoro	`to slander'
yavɔɔ	yavɔrɔ	`dog'
ndɔɔ	ndɔrɔ	`cloud'
kɛɛ	kɛrɛ	`name'
kalako	karako	`peanuts'

**(b) Vocabulary**

These are some of the differences in vocabulary between the two dialects:

<b>Kala</b>	<b>Gbado</b>	<b>gloss</b>
songba ngu	kpakara	`fish'
bungu	gbogbo	`mat'
mólómbe	ka'danga	`cassava root'
mœ	nyamu	`palm tree'
ngu mœ	mœ	`mountain'
tsaga	tsama	`voice'
gole	gware	`price'
nyema	nyana	`what'
to	yi'ba	`message'

Before closing this section, it is important to say something about the phonology which is related to the orthographic system. Mbandja has eight vowels which are listed in the chart below:

	Front	Central	Back
close	i	ɯ	u
close-mid	e		o
open-mid	œ		ɔ
open		a	

We also want to signal that six of these eight vowels also have nasalized counterparts:  $\tilde{i}$ ,  $\tilde{e}$ ,  $\tilde{a}$ ,  $\tilde{ɯ}$ ,  $\tilde{o}$ ,  $\tilde{ɔ}$ .

Mbandja has three major word patterns: CV, CVCV and CVCVCV.

There are also three less common patterns VCV, CVV and VCVCV.

As a tonal language, Mbandja has three tones:

- High tone (H t) /
- Mid tone (M t) -
- Low tone (L t) \

Although belonging to the Gbadɔ dialect group, we will be using the orthography which is based on the Mbandja New Testament in this study.

## **1.6 The importance of the subject of tense, aspect and modality systems (TAM systems)**

The importance of the subject is expressed by T. Givón (1984:269) when he stated: "Of all grammatical sub-systems, tense-aspect-modality is probably the most complex and frustrating to the linguist. For one thing, it is an obligatory category without which simple sentences cannot be produced." In the light of T. Givón's pertinent observation about TAM, we will investigate how it works in the Mbandja verb.

Mbandja is mainly an ISOLATING language. Its constituent word order is SVO (AVP). Although an isolating language, it, nevertheless, has an interesting morphology which should be studied. This morphology is mostly found in the verb, and tentatively this will be described under the following chapter headings:

- Tense
- Aspect
- Mood

## **1.7 Previous research**

To the best of my knowledge, no previous academic study of this kind has been done on the Mbandja language, except the general study done by France Cloarec-Heiss (1972) on the Banda verb, focusing on the Banda-Linda, an Ubangian language of CAR, and the early work by R.P. Charles Tisserant (1930) which was an attempt to describe the grammar of Banda.

The lack of any descriptive study of many of the Niger-Congo languages is also expressed by B. Wald in the *Atlas* (1994:292) as follows: "However, its size and diversity also keep it in need of much further study. Thus, most of the still underdescribed languages of sub-saharan Africa are probably Niger-Congó."

## **1.8 The purpose of the study**

Considering the lack of a descriptive study of the Mbandja language, the purpose of this paper is twofold:

- (1) To give a detailed discussion of the Mbandja verb, and
- (2) to make the Mbandja language data available to others.

## **1.9 Data collection method**

In this paper, one method only will be used in the collection of the data. Having no language informant, we will be using both memory and personal knowledge of the language as a native speaker to collect the data and analyse them by a descriptive approach. However, it is important to note that there is in the appendix a folk tale text from which we will be extracting some examples to illustrate our investigation which begins on the following page. The folk tale is translated from the Ngbaka folk tale booklet.

## **2. TENSE**

### **2.1 Preliminaries**

T. E. Payne (1994:190) defines tense as "the grammaticalized expression of the relation of time of an event to some reference point in time, usually the moment the clause is uttered." Payne's definition focuses on the moment at which the clause is uttered, and does not mention the sequentiality of the tense system as does T. Givón below.

T. Givón (1984:273) bases his definition of tense on two fundamental features which are involved in the concept of time, as reflected in tense systems, as follows:

- a. **Sequentiality:** Tense is a way of construing time as a succession of points, each one occupying a fixed position in the linear order, this either preceding or following other discrete points in the sequence. Within such a sequence, precedence means existing/occurring before, and subsequence existing, occurring after...
- b. **Point of reference:** within the flow of linear time, one may establish a point of reference - the time axis - with respect to which the 'past' precedes and the 'future' follows. The most common universal point of reference is the time of speech, anchored to the speaker at the time of performing the speech act.

Precedence and subsequence are the two fundamental sequences by which T. Givón defines the tense system with regard to the point of reference.

On the other hand, F. R. Palmer (1965:37) says that "Tense appears to have three distinct functions, first to mark purely temporal relations of Past and Present time; secondly in the sequence of tenses that is mainly relevant for reported speech, and thirdly to mark 'unreality', particularly in conditional clauses and wishes". He goes on by stating that "the most important function of tense is to indicate Past and Present time". Although his most important function of tense meets our concerns in this paper, it is important to also note that Palmer purposely leaves out the future in his three distinct functions of tense.

## 2.2 Tense diagram

According to T. Givón (1984:273), the interaction between the two features of tense may be expressed diagrammatically as follows:

