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THE TAM SYSTEM OF SHUPAMEM

Abass Ngoungouo Yiagnigni
University of Yaoundé 1
abass.ngoungouo@univ-yaounde1.cm

Abstract: This paper examines the tense, aspect, and mood (TAM) system of Shupamem, a language spoken in Western Cameroon, highlighting its complexity and divergence from the familiar past, present, and future distinctions found in English. Drawing on empirical data collected from native speakers through questionnaires, supplemented by existing literature and language corpora, the study investigates the morphological encoding of TAM in Shupamem. The analysis reveals that, unlike English, where tense is typically marked within the verb (e.g., 'walked', goes), Shupamem encodes tense through preverbal prefixes. For instance, infinitives are marked by the prefix *jiN-* (e.g., *jìn-tá* 'to kick', *jì-mbə̌ʔ* 'to open', *jì-ŋkʉ̌* 'to cry'). The present tense in Shupamem is obligatorily accompanied by aspectual markers, distinguishing between ongoing actions (progressive), witnessed events (evidential), and habitual occurrences. The past tense system is subdivided into four categories, each reflecting a different degree of temporal remoteness, with markers such as *pé* (recent past) and *kàpí* (remote past) encoding these distinctions. Similarly, the future tense is expressed through three sub-tenses, marked by morphemes like *nántwə* (immediate future), *nálo?* (intermediate future), and *nántwəlo?* (remote future). Imperative constructions are formed by placing the verb stem directly after the pronoun, resulting in a streamlined structure. Overall, the study demonstrates that Shupamem's TAM system, with its preverbal markers, aspectual distinctions in the present, and nuanced sub-tenses for past and future, provides valuable insights into the diverse strategies languages employ to encode temporality.

Key words: Shupamem; tense; aspect; mood

1. Introduction

In grammar, tense is a fundamental category that encodes time reference relative to the moment of speaking, allowing speakers to situate events or states in time (Fabricius-Hansen 2006). According to Comrie (1976: 6), the semantic concept of time reference may be grammaticalized in a language, meaning that the language possesses a specific grammatical category dedicated to expressing temporal distinctions. Only in such cases, we say the language has tenses. However, not all languages have grammatical tense; some lack tense marking but still convey temporal information through lexical means, such as temporal adverbials (e.g., 'yesterday', 'tomorrow'). This distinction highlights the diversity of linguistic strategies for expressing temporality across the world's languages.

Typically, tenses are realized through specific verb forms, often involving conjugation patterns that signal past, present, or future time frames. The most common tense distinctions found cross-linguistically are the past, present, and future. Yet, many languages simplify this system, marking only two broad categories, such as past vs. nonpast or future vs. nonfuture. Conversely, other languages exhibit far more nuanced tense systems, making fine-grained distinctions that reflect subtle temporal relationships.

Shupamem, a language spoken in Western Cameroon, is an example of a language with a richly articulated tense system. Shupamem distinguishes not only between past, present, and future but also subdivides these categories into multiple sub-tenses. For instance, the past and future tenses are further differentiated into immediate, recent, and remote temporal zones, allowing speakers to convey precise information about the timing and remoteness of events relative to the present moment.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive description of how Shupamem encodes tense and aspect, shedding light on the intricate ways this language captures temporal distinctions and contributes to our broader understanding of tense systems in human language.

It further examines the aspectual and mood system of this less-studied Grassfield Bantu language.

2. The temporal system of Shupamem

In Shupamem, three primary tenses are recognized: the present tense, the past tense, and the future tense. Each of these tenses is morphologically and semantically complex, expressed through a variety of markers and constructions that will be explored in detail in the following sections.

2.1. The present tense

Existing literature on Shupamem (Nchare 2005: 2012; Ngoungouo 2016; Njutapmvoui 2017; Ngoupayou 2023) posits that the present tense in Shupamem is invariably intertwined with aspect, identifying three distinct present forms: the progressive present, the habitual present, and the evidential present. Each of these is marked by a specific morpheme that precedes the verb stem. The progressive present is marked by the morpheme *ténă* (realized as *tié* in rapid speech), which signals an ongoing action. The habitual present employs the morpheme ká, indicating regularly occurring or habitual actions. The evidential present is marked by *nâ*, which conveys that the speaker has direct evidence or firsthand knowledge of the event. These distinctions are illustrated in the following examples:

(1) Progressive Present
Nsangou ténă nʒuóp ŋkɛ̀
Nsangou PROG sing song
'Nsangou is singing (a song).' (Affirmative)

(2) Habitual Present
Nsangou ká nʒuóp ŋkɛ̀
Nsangou HAB sing song
'Nsangou sings (songs).' (Affirmative)

(3) Evidential Present
Nsangou nâ nʒuóp ŋkɛ̀
Nsangou EVID sing song
'Nsangou sings (I have witnessed this).' (Affirmative)

The data above demonstrate that the present tense in Shupamem is typically accompanied by an aspectual morpheme, with *ténă* marking progressive, *ká* marking habitual, and *nâ* marking evidential nuances.

However, contrary to this analysis, I argue that Shupamem also possesses a form of present tense that is not linked to aspectual marking. This form is realized through the verb *jim-bə́* 'be', which expresses states such as 'being drunk', 'being naked', or qualities like colors and sizes (e.g., 'being black', 'being short'). Crucially, in these cases, there is no overt tense or aspect morpheme preceding the verb, suggesting that the present tense feature is inherent in the verb morphology itself, which alternates from *jim-bə́* to *pâ* in the present.

(4)
a. *lápáʔ mɔ́n Ø pa fý*
shoes child PRS be white
'The child's shoes are white.'
b. *màmgbié-jʉ́ə́ Ø pa ntămmà*
woman-that PRS be naked
'That woman is naked.'

In both sentences, the verb expresses a present state without any accompanying aspectual morpheme, indicating a distinct present tense form. Based on this evidence, I propose that Shupamem has two forms of the present tense: (i) PRS1, which is used for stative verbs expressing inherent or current states, and (ii) PRS2, which incorporates aspectual distinctions such as progressive, habitual, and evidential.

2.2. The past tense

The past tense in Shupamem is characterized by a finely articulated system that distinguishes four distinct temporal categories. Each

category reflects the temporal distance of the event from the moment of speaking, allowing speakers to convey subtle nuances about when an action took place. These four past tenses are: Immediate Past (PST1), Recent Past (PST2), Intermediate Past (PST3), and Remote Past (PST4).

The immediate past refers to actions that have just occurred moments before the time of speaking. This tense is unique in that it is unmarked morphologically; that is, it does not require an explicit tense marker. Instead, the immediacy of the event is understood from context and the verb form itself. This lack of overt marking highlights the closeness of the action to the present moment.

(5) The immediate past tense

Màtwá	*Ø*	*kùm*	*màmví*
car	PST1	knock	goat

'The car has knocked the goat.'

In this example, the null morpheme (Ø) indicates that the action happened very recently. The listener infers the immediacy based on situational context or other temporal cues in discourse.

The recent past encompasses events that occurred somewhat earlier than the immediate past, such as minutes or hours ago, or earlier within the same day. This tense is explicitly marked by the morpheme *pé*, which precedes the verb. The presence of this marker signals that the event is no longer immediate but still relatively close to the present.

(6) The recent past tense

màtwá	*pé*	*kùm*	*màmví*
car	PST2	knock	goat

'The car knocked the goat.'

Here, *pé* clearly encodes that the action took place recently but not just moments ago, distinguishing it from the immediate past.

The intermediate past refers to actions that occurred further back in time than the recent past but are still within a timeframe that is accessible and relevant to the speaker and listener. It is marked by the morpheme *pí*, which is placed before the verb.

(7) The intermediate past tense

màtwá	*pí*	*kùm*	*məmví*
car	PST3	knock	goat

'The car had knocked the goat.'

The use of *pí* conveys that the event is temporally more distant than the recent past, often implying a completed action that may have consequences or relevance to the current discourse.

The remote past expresses events that happened a long time ago, often with vague or no precise temporal reference. This tense is marked by the morpheme *kàpí*, which signals a significant temporal distance from the present.

(8) The remote past tense

màtwá	*kàpí*	*kùm*	*məmví*
car	P4	knock	goat

'The car had knocked the goat (a long time ago).'

This form is used when the speaker wants to emphasize the remoteness of the event, sometimes indicating historical or legendary actions, or events whose exact timing is no longer known.

The four-way distinction in past tenses in Shupamem is not only a grammatical feature but also a pragmatic tool that enhances communication. By specifying how recently or distantly an event occurred, speakers can provide listeners with important contextual information that may affect interpretation, relevance, or emotional impact. For instance, the immediate past (P1) can be used to highlight urgency or recency, often drawing the listener's attention to an event that just happened. The recent past (P2) situates events within a timeframe that is still fresh but less urgent. The intermediate past (P3) may be used in narratives or explanations where the timing is important but not immediate, while the remote past (P4) often appears in storytelling, historical accounts, or when the exact timing is unknown or irrelevant.

2.3. The future tense

The future tense in Shupamem is systematically divided into three distinct forms that encode varying degrees of temporal distance from the present moment. These forms—immediate future (F1), intermediate future (F2), and remote future (F3)—allow speakers to specify how soon or how far ahead an action is expected to occur.

The immediate future refers to actions that are expected to take place very soon, often within moments or the near future. This tense is marked by the morpheme *nántwə́*, which is placed before the verb stem. The use of *nántwə́* signals the speaker's intention or prediction that the event will occur imminently.

(9) The immediate future tense

màtwá	*nántwə́*	*kùm*	*màmví*
car	FUT1	knock	goat

'The car shall knock the goat.'

In this example, *nántwə́* clearly indicates that the knocking action is imminent or about to happen shortly.

The intermediate future expresses actions that will take place later in the future, beyond the immediate timeframe, but still foreseeable. It is marked by the morpheme *ná lɔ̌ʔ*, which precedes the verb. This form situates the event at a moderate temporal distance from the present.

(10) The intermediate future tense

màtwá	*ná lɔ̀ʔ*	*kùm*	*màmví*
car	FUT2	knock	goat

'The car shall knock the goat.'

Here, *ná lɔ̌ʔ* conveys that the event is planned or expected to happen later, but not immediately.

The remote future denotes actions that are temporally distant or indefinite in their timing. It often refers to events that are far off or whose exact timing is unspecified. This tense is marked by the combination of the immediate and intermediate future morphemes, *ná ntwə́ lɔ̀ʔ*, placed before the verb.

(11) The remote future tense

màtwá	*ná ntwə́ lɔ̀ʔ*	*kùm*	*màmví*
car	FUT3	knock	goat

'The car shall knock the goat.'

The compound marker *ná ntwə́ lɔ̀ʔ* signals that the action is situated in the remote future, emphasizing temporal distance or uncertainty about when it will occur. The tripartite future tense system in Shupamem provides speakers with a nuanced temporal framework to express not only that an event will happen but also when it is expected to happen relative to the present. This gradation enhances communicative precision, allowing distinctions between imminent, foreseeable, and distant future events. The morphological strategy of combining two morphemes (*ná ntwə́ and ná lɔ̌ʔ*) to form the remote future marker is particularly interesting, as it reflects a compositional approach to encoding temporal remoteness. This compositionality suggests a layered conceptualization of future time, where the remote future is understood as an extension or combination of the immediate and intermediate futures.

3. The aspectual system of Shupamem

Aspect is a grammatical category that reflects how an event or action is viewed with respect to its internal temporal structure (Comrie 1976: 3). Unlike tense, which situates an event in time, aspect focuses on the nature of the event itself—whether it is ongoing, habitual, completed, or involves other temporal characteristics. In Shupamem, several aspects are morphologically distinguished, including the progressive, habitual, dynamic, and static. Below, each is discussed in detail.

3.1. The progressive aspect

The progressive aspect indicates that the action described by the verb is occurring at the time of utterance. For example, in English, the sentence *I am eating bananas* shows an action simultaneous with speaking. In Shupamem, the progressive aspect is marked differently

depending on tense: in the present tense, it is marked by the morpheme *ténă* (sometimes *tié* in rapid speech) placed before the verb. In the past and future tenses, the progressive is marked by the morphemes *pà mə* followed by the infinitive form of the verb.

(12) Present tense
mɔ́n *ténă* *ŋgwàn* *lérəwà*
child PROG go school
'The child is going to school.'

(13) Past tense
mɔ́n *pé/pi/kàpí mbə mə* *jìŋ-gwàn* *lérəwà*
child P2/P3/P4 PROG INF-go school
'The child was going to schoo.'

(14) Future tense
mɔ̀n *ná ntwə́/ná lɔ̀ʔ/ná ntwə́ lɔ̀ʔ pə* *mə* *ji-ŋgwàn* *lérəwà*
child F1/F2/F3 PROG INF-go school
'The child shall be going to school.'

This system shows that the progressive aspect is consistently marked across tenses, emphasizing ongoing or continuous action relative to the time frame.

3.2. The habitual aspect

The habitual aspect conveys that an action occurs regularly or customarily. In Shupamem, it can be expressed in three ways:
– By the morpheme *ká* placed before the verb (usually in past tense form);
– By using the verb *mètnə́* 'use to' followed by the infinitive verb;
– By using the verb *ŋgʉ̀ʔ* 'love/like' followed by the infinitive verb.

(15) Habitual with *ká*
mɔ̀n *ká* *ŋgwàn* *lérəwà*
child HAB go school
'The child used to go to school.'

(16) Habitual with *mètnə́*

mɔ̀n	*mètnə̀*	*jin-ŋgwə̀n*	*lérə̀wà*
child	HAB	INF-go	school

'The child is used to going to school.'

(17) Habitual with *ŋgʉ̀ʔ*

mɔ́n	*ná*	*ŋgʉ̀ʔ*	*ji-ŋgwə̀n*	*lérə̀wa*
child	AFF	like	INF-go	school

'The child likes going to school.'

These forms are in free variation and provide speakers with flexible means to express habitual actions.

3.3. The dynamic and static aspects

These aspects distinguish between actions involving movement (dynamic) and states or conditions without movement (static). In Shupamem, this distinction is largely lexical and inherent to the verb class. Dynamic verbs typically denote motion or change, such as *jiŋ-gwə̌n* 'go', *jìn-twə́* 'come', *jìn-tɛ̀ːrə́* 'jump', and *jim-búnnə́* 'hurry', while static verbs denote states or conditions, like *jìm-bə́* 'be' and *jìn-dié* 'sleep'. This lexical distinction aligns with the semantic nature of the verbs rather than overt morphological marking.

4. The modal system of Shupamem

Mood is a grammatical category that encodes the speaker's attitude toward the proposition expressed by the verb, indicating whether the action or state is presented as factual, commanded, hypothetical, or conditional. In Shupamem, mood is expressed through a combination of morphological, syntactic, and tonal strategies, with the primary moods being the indicative, imperative, and conditional. Below is a detailed examination of each mood, including its forms, functions, and syntactic behavior.

4.1. The indicative mood

The indicative mood in Shupamem is the default mood used to express factual statements, assertions, and real events. It is characterized by the absence of any overt morphological marker, making it a null morpheme mood. This means that the verb form and tense markers alone suffice to convey factuality without additional mood marking.

(18) *mɔ́n* *pé* *jù* *pén*
child P2 eat fufu
'The child ate fufu.'

Here, the past tense marker *pé* situates the action in time, but no explicit marker signals the indicative mood. This lack of marking is common cross-linguistically, where the indicative is often the unmarked or default mood.

4.2. The imperative mood

The imperative mood in Shupamem is used to issue commands, requests, or exhortations. Its expression relies heavily on syntactic strategies rather than morphological marking: the subject is omitted in second-person singular and plural imperatives, reflecting the direct address to the listener. The first person plural inclusive (i.e., 'let us') retains the subject pronoun to include the speaker and addressees in the command.

(19) Imperative mood
a. *twə̀t* *lì* *ʃú*
write name your
'Write your name!' (2nd person singular)
b. *pùə* *twə̀t* *lì* *ʃú-puə̀*
1PL write name our
'Let us write our names!' (1st person plural inclusive)
c. *twə̀t-nʉ́n* *lì* *ʃʉ́n*
write-SM name your(plural)
'Write your names!' (2nd person plural)

The verb stem may carry subject markers (SM) to indicate person and number, especially in the plural imperative. However, there is no distinct morphological marker that explicitly encodes the imperative mood itself. Instead, the mood is inferred from the absence of the subject and the syntactic context.

4.3. The conditional mood

The conditional mood in Shupamem is morphologically and syntactically more complex and is used to express hypothetical or contingent actions that depend on certain conditions. Ngoungouo (2024) posits that Shupamem employs a discontinuous morpheme pair to mark conditional clauses: *kʉ̀* and *mbú*. The morpheme *kʉ̀* introduces the conditional clause (the 'if' clause), often inserted between the subject and verb, while *mbú* introduces the main clause (the result or consequence). When the conditional clause precedes the main clause, the structure is: kʉ̀ [conditional clause] *mbú* [main clause]. When the main clause precedes the conditional clause, a different pair is used: *mə̀ jʉ̌ə* [conditional clause] *nə́* [clause-final marker]. Additionally, in the past tense, the tone on *kʉ̀* shifts from low to high (*kʉ́*), signaling tense interaction with mood.

(20) Conditional clause first (*kʉ̀...mbú*):
mɔ́n kʉ̀ mbgʉ́ mbú í ná ntwə́ kʉ̀p puə-í
child COND1 fall COND2 3SG EVID F1 break arm-POSS
'If the child falls, he will break his arm.'

(21) Main clause first (*mə̀ jʉ̌ə...nə́*):
mɔ́n ná ntʉə́ kʉ̀p puə-í mə̀jʉ̌ə í mbgʉ̀ nə́
child EVID F1 break arm-his COND1 3SG falls COND2
'The child will break his arm if he falls.'

The two structures show flexibility in word order, with corresponding changes in conditional markers to maintain clarity and grammaticality.

5. Conclusion

The TAM system of Shupamem offers a compelling example of how languages can encode temporality and modality with intricate morphological and syntactic strategies. Its division of past and future tenses into multiple subcategories based on temporal remoteness allows speakers to convey nuanced time frames rarely found in more familiar tense systems. The obligatory integration of aspect within the present tense, especially the marking of progressive, habitual, and evidential nuances, challenges the common notion of tense and aspect as separable categories. Moreover, Shupamem's mood system, with its null indicative, syntactically marked imperative, and morphologically complex conditional constructions, illustrates a sophisticated interplay between morphology, syntax, and prosody in expressing speaker attitudes and hypothetical scenarios. By analyzing Shupamem's TAM system, this study enriches our understanding of the diversity of temporal and modal encoding in human language, highlighting typological features that expand beyond the Indo-European models. It underscores the importance of investigating less-studied languages to fully appreciate the range of linguistic strategies for expressing time, aspect, and mood.

Abbreviations

PROG – progressive aspect
NEG – negation
PST1 – immediate past tense
PST4 – remote past tense
FUT3 – remote future tense
RECIP – reciprocal
POSS – possessive
EVID – evidential marker
PRS – present tense
PST3 – intermediate past tense
SM – subject marker
HAB – habitual aspect
PST2 – recent past tense
FUT1 – immediate future tense
INF – infinitive marker
COND – conditional marker
FUT2 – intermediate future tense
AFF – affirmative
SG – singular

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