Long Form and Short Form Verbs in Suyá

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Suyá is a language of the Jê family spoken by about 250 people in the Xingu Indigenous Park (Mato Grosso, Brazil). This language presents a morphophonological variation of verbs that is conditioned, most of the time, by negation, progressive aspect, and future aspect. The examples below illustrate this distribution.

1. meñíje ra ɲgre
   women sm dance
   “The women danced.”

2. meñíje ra ɲgere ʔkere
   women sm dance neg
   “The women didn’t dance.”

3. ᵗa ʔn wa ʔep ˈku
   1ps top 1ps fish eat
   “I who ate fish.”

4. ᵗa ʔn wa ʔep ˈkuru ɾo ʔji
   1ps top 1ps fish eat part pos. v.
   “I who am eating fish.”

5. ludo ra ʔep ˈkuru mä
   prop. n. sm fish eat fut
   “Ludo will eat fish.”

In 1 we have a neutral clause, without any time/aspect markers, that always indicates a past fact. In 2, conditioned by negation, the verb ɲgere “to dance” takes its long form ɲgere. The verb “to eat” (cf. 3),

DOI: 10.5433/2237-4876.2022v25n3p93


Received on: 05/02/2022
Accepted on: 05/18/2022
conditioned by the progressive aspect (cf. 4) expressed by the particle + positional verb construction, takes its long form ‘kuru. This same verb occurs in its long form, conditioned by the particle expressing the future, in 5.

Despite this conditioning, the status of the long form verb is not clear. The difficulty arises from the fact that, in some contexts, not all of them identified yet, the long form verb seems to function as a noun. Our intention with this work is to discuss the possibility of considering long form verbs as nouns.

In order to develop such interpretation, it is necessary to discuss the particles and postpositions of Suyá. However, in an article like this, it would be impossible to address all of these elements. Thus, I restrict myself only to the particle mā, which more easily contributes to clarifying the viewpoint addressed here, although its distribution is more complex than other particles and postpositions.

The particle mā is assigned different functions according to the syntactic position it occupies. Here is the distribution of this element.

I- As a postposition following nouns:

6. karupi ra ŋa mā tē  7. ŋira ŋ i mā krwa ŋ̃
   prop. n. sm m.h. postp go 3ps top 1ps postp arrow give
   “Karupi went to the men’s house.”  “He gave me arrow.”

8. pə ŋ a mā tep ŋ̃̃o’hogo
   1ps top 1ps 2ps postp fish clean
   “I cleaned the fish for you.”

The examples show that, as a postposition, the particle expresses the directional (6), the dative (7) and the benefactive (8) cases.

II- Immediately after the nominal subject constituent to express habitual aspect. It should be clarified that when the nominal subject constituent has a nominal nucleus, it will always be marked by the particle ra “subject marker” regardless of whether the constituent is the subject of a transitive or intransitive verb, that is, Suyá simple sentences configure a nominative-accusative system\(^2\).

9. mbotʃi kām na me ra mā po ro sarī
deer postp top people sm hab wear postp jump/dance
   “In the deer festival, people dance wearing ‘pô’ (a type of garment made with buriti leaves).”

III- As the first element of the sentence, associated with the topic marker, the particle indicates that the speaker is present and referring to the fact or thing mentioned.

10. ʃən ŋənu ra kəkəwaj pɨ 11. mā ŋ ŋənu ra kəkəwaj pɨ
    past prop. n. sm monkey kill part top prop. n. sm monkey kill
    “Janu killed monkey.” “Janu killed monkey.”

In sentence 10, regardless of whether the speaker witnessed the event or not, the clause should be used when discussing the situation after it happened (hours later, the next day or days later). Sentence 11 can only be used if the speaker is present as a witness to the event.

IV- The particle also occurs as the last element of the sentence to express the near or remote future.

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\(^2\) Suyá is a nominative-marked language (which configures a nominative/accusative system) in simple sentences when the nominal constituent has a noun as its core. In the case where the core is a pronoun, the system is partially ergative/absolute and partially nominative/accusative. For more details, please refer to Santos (1997).
12. kujusí ra fazêda mā \n tēm mā  
prop. n. sm farm postp top go fut  
“Kujusi will go to the farm (in a distant future to deal with pollution issues in the Sujá-Missu river).”

13. ì re hwísosok piri  
1ps ? notebook take neg fut  
“I won’t take the notebook (He is already on the verge of taking it, his hand is already heading towards the notebook).”

14. ‘lude ra hwísosok ‘pi  
1ps erg notebook take neg  
“Ludo took the notebook.”

15. ì re hwísosok piri ‘kere  
1ps erg notebook take neg  
“I didn’t take the notebook.”

Data 12 and 13 demonstrate that mā (fut) is used indiscriminately to refer to a remote or near future.  
Data 14 and 15 exemplify the use of the neutral negation that is linked to the clause. Comparing data 13 and 15, it can be observed that the future particle occurs after the neutral negation, indicating that it is not directly linked to the verb since the sequence – long-form verb + future – can be interrupted.

16. pîreje tō ra membjie tō pot sōmûn ‘ked mā  
girl sing sm man sing arrive see neg fut  
“The girl will not see the man who arrived.”

As can be observed from data 16, the future particle only affects the main clause and not the subordinate clause, just as the neutral negation only affects the main clause (the proposition) and not the subordinate clause (the presupposition). If it is necessary to put both clauses in the future, another particle occurs at the beginning of the verb since the sequence – long-form verb + future – can be interrupted.

17. ‘ke mēndije tō ra membjie tō pot ‘kām sōmun  
fut woman sing sm man sing arrive part see  
“The woman will see the man who will arrive.”

In other words, just like the particle mā is attached to the clause and not to the verb, the particle ‘ke attaches to the complex clause. Therefore, time particles occupy syntactically contiguous positions to the clause, whether it is simple or complex.

V. “Lastly, the particle can occur immediately after long-form verbs.”

18. kaomi ra aŋgro ‘pīrī mā tō ta  
prop. n. sm pig kill ? part pos. v.  
“Kaomi is killing the pig.”

It is precisely in this syntactic position that the status of the particle requires further reflection. Defining its character should help us clarify the role of long-form verbs.

Let’s first look at the syntactic position occupied by the particle that can be attached to the long form verb – pīrī – or attached to the construction that expresses the progressive aspect – tō ta –. This ambiguity is clarified when we add the topic marker – tō ta – (\n, when following a vowel) to the sentence, which attaches to constituents, not specific words, as demonstrated in the following examples.

\[3\] The term neutral negation is being used according to Givón (1984).
In 19 we have a neutral clause without topicalization. In 20, the nominal subject constituent is topicalized by the particle that, in this case, accumulates the function of a subject marker. The comparison between 21 and 22 shows that the constituent can be displaced when it receives the topic marker, or it may not be displaced, as exemplified in data 23. Therefore, the topic marker is not linked to a specific word, but to the constituent that can be displaced from its canonical position or not. Given this, compare data 18 with the following:

24. kaomi ra ʔŋgro ʔígí mā \n tə təa
   prop. n. sm pig kill ? top part pos. v.
   “Killing the pig is what Kaomi is doing.”

In other words, the particle mā is attached to the verb in long form and not to the construction that expresses the progressive – tə tə –.

Another question that arises is whether the particle in this position could be indicating a near/far future, since from the context of the sentence (cf. 24) the animal has not yet died. To clarify this point, consider the example below:

25. mendije tə ra səhwed mā ʔëm mā
    woman sing sm work ? go fut
    “The woman will work (in the near future).”

In other words, the future marker (cf. item IV , data 12 to 15) co-occurs with the particle (data 25). Furthermore, compare data 24 and 25 with data 12, where the particle occurs as a postposition. That is, after a long-form verb, the particle does not indicate the future, whether it is near or remote.

Therefore, how should we consider the particle that follows verbs in the long form? It seems to us that a possible interpretation would be, as we have already said, to consider that verbs in the long form are nouns and, therefore, the particle that follows them is a postposition. We present below the arguments for such an interpretation.

a) As already demonstrated, for each function of the particle, there is a different syntactic position. If we consider the verb in its long form as a verb, the particle would be in a new syntactic position without an associated function, since in this position, it does not manifest tense/aspect or any other function. However, if we consider the verb in its long form as a noun, the particle would be in one of its characteristic syntactic positions, namely postposition.

b) The Suyá language has a class of transitive verbs whose objects, when deleted or moved, trigger the appearance of a prefix, the prefix ʔku.
26. hēn kaomi ra hr̤ mā mberi ʃi ʃi past prop. n. sm wife postp wild game meat give  “Kaomi gave his wife some wild game meat”

27. wɔnta kaomi ra hr̤ mā ku\ ʃi int prop. n. sm wife postp pref give  “What did Kaomi give to his wife?”

28. pa \n wa mirtʃi ʃi ku 29. mirtʃi \n wa ku\ ʃi 1ps top 1ps alligator eat alligator top 1ps pref eat “I was the one who ate alligator.” “It was alligator that I ate.”

In 26 and 28 the object is contiguous to the verb and therefore the prefix does not occur. In 27, the absence of the object causes the emergence of the prefix, as well as in 29, the displacement of the object results in the presence of the prefix. Among the verbs that receive the prefix is the verb ʃi “to kill” (short form of the verb). Check:

30. pa \n wa mirtʃi ʃi 31. mirtʃi \n wa ku\ ʃi 1ps top 1ps alligator kill alligator top 1ps pref kill “I was the one who killed the alligator.” “It was an alligator that I killed.”

Now, when this same verb takes its long form, it occurs without the prefix.

32. hēn ku\ ʃi 33. kere, ʃiri kere asp pref kill neg kill neg “Did he kill?” “No, he didn’t kill”

In its short form (cf. 32), the verb cannot do without the prefix, while in the given 33 (the long form of the same verb) the prefix does not occur. That is, the verb loses its verbal transitivity character, and consequently, in the data 34 and 35, we would have nominal complements and not objects.

c) In other words, the complement structure, long-form verb plus particle that occurs in data 18, 24 and 25 is similar to strongly nominal structures such as that in the following data:

34. amgro ʃiri ra mberi 35. mɛndiʃe ṣgere ra mbeʃi pig kill sm well/good women dance sm beautiful “The pig killing was good.” “The women’s dance is beautiful.”

d) Long form verbs share the same type of modifier structure with nouns.

36. mɛndiʃe mberi ra tāmā 37. hēn wa ʃiri mberi woman beautiful sm fall past 1ps kill well “The beautiful woman fell.” “I killed well.”

38. ɲatʃreʃe tɔ ra ndaʃin two 39. ɲatʃreʃe tɔ ra swaʃɔ kwɛnɛi boy sing sm fast bathe boy sing sm bathe much “The boy took a quick bath.” “The boy took a long bath.”
In 36 we have a nominal constituent whose nucleus is modified by the adjective, and the same type of structure is found in 37 with a verb in its long form outside its characteristic conditioning context. However, 38 demonstrates that the short form of the verb does not share this same type of structure since the modifier – *ndrin* “fast” occurs before it. On the other hand, in 39, the corresponding long form of the verb “to bathe” has the structure – nucleus + modifier – equal to those in 36 and 37. Therefore, it is understood that the difference between long and short form verbs is not only morphophonological but also syntactic.

e) Other similar structures also point to the possibility that the particles that occur after verbs in their long form are postpositions, such as the case of the particle *kām*. Compare data 23 with the following:

39. kaomi ra *pīri* *kām* na *mbra* 40. liana ra *kīn* *kām* na *mbra*
prop. n. sm kill ? top pos. v. prop. n. sm cheerful postp top pos. v.

“Kaomi is in the killing season.” “Liana is cheerful.”

The context of data 39 needs to be explained: let’s suppose (in a purely hypothetical situation) that my informant, Kaomi, has killed someone. In this case, there will be a time, after the death, in which he will be prevented from eating certain foods or doing certain things, that is, he must observe a period of seclusion. Note the semantic similarity of being inside a physical space (cf. 23) and being “inside” a psycho-cultural period of time. It seems to us that the particle occurs as a postposition and, consequently, the long-form verb would be a noun. The same semantic interpretation can be given to data 40, especially when we pay attention to the cultural-semantic meaning of the positional verb *mbra*, which denotes the fact of a person being in motion “inside” some place or region (if the person were stationary, the positional verb would be *tā*), that is, literally, the meaning of 40 would be “Liana remains in motion in joy”, which, one can say, is very similar to the semantic content of the habitual aspect that can be expressed, in Portuguese, by “Liana is happy”. Therefore, in both examples, we consider that the particle that occurs after the long-form verb is a postposition.

It seems to us that, based on the presented exposition, it is possible to consider, in certain contexts, the long form verb as a noun. Thus, the elements marked as “?” should actually be marked as postpositions. This does not mean that the Suyá language does not have verbs. What we want to emphasize is the analytical possibility that has been initiated here, which seems to have been obscured so far by the ease with which the distribution of occurrence of the long verb forms4 (cf. data 1 to 5) is established.

Abbreviations used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>?</td>
<td>element to be defined</td>
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<tr>
<td>1ps</td>
<td>first person singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3ps</td>
<td>third person singular</td>
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<tr>
<td>erg</td>
<td>formative that accompanies pronouns in the subject function of transitive verbs</td>
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<tr>
<td>fut</td>
<td>future</td>
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<td>hab</td>
<td>habitual aspect</td>
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<td>int</td>
<td>interrogative word</td>
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<tr>
<td>neg</td>
<td>neutral negation</td>
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4 Also the Caiapó language (from the same linguistic family as Suyá) has long and short form verbs. However, studies of this language so far have only indicated the characteristic distribution of long form verbs.
part - particle
past - past
pos. v. - positional verb
postp - postposition
pref - prefix
prop. n. - proper noun
sing - singular
sm - subject marker of transitive or intransitive verbs
top - topic

References

