

Long Form and Short Form Verbs in Suyá¹

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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.

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|---|---|
| 1. mɛ'ndije ra 'ŋgrɛ
women sm dance
"The women danced." | 2. mɛ'ndije ra 'ŋgere 'kere
women sm dance neg
"The women didn't dance." |
| 3. 'pa \n 'wa 'tɛp 'ku
1ps top 1ps fish eat
"I who ate fish." | 4. 'pa \n 'wa 'tɛp 'kuru rɔ 'ŋi
1ps top 1ps fish eat part pos. v.
"I who am eating fish." |
| 5. ludu ra 'tɛp 'kuru mǎ
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 'ŋgrɛ "to dance" takes its long form 'ŋgere. The verb "to eat" (cf. 3),

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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 *mã*, which more easily contributes to clarifying the viewpoint addressed here, although its distribution is more complex than other particles and postpositions.

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

I- As a postposition following nouns:

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|----|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|--|----|---------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|--------------|-----------|
| 6. | <i>karupi</i> | <i>ra</i> | <i>ŋɔɔ</i> | <i>mã</i> | <i>ʔẽ</i> | | 7. | <i>ʔira</i> | <i>\n</i> | <i>i\</i> | <i>mã</i> | <i>*krwa</i> | <i>ŋõ</i> |
| | prop. n. | sm | m.h. | postp | go | | | 3ps | top | 1ps | postp | arrow | give |
| | “Karupi went to the men’s house.” | | | | | | | “He gave me arrow.” | | | | | |
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- | | | | | | | | |
|----|-------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------------|
| 8. | <i>ʔa</i> | <i>\n</i> | <i>ʔa</i> | <i>a\</i> | <i>mã</i> | <i>ʔep</i> | <i>ŋõho’hogo</i> |
| | 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 system².

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|----|--|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| 9. | <i>*mbotʃi</i> | <i>*kãm</i> | <i>na</i> | <i>mɛ</i> | <i>ra</i> | <i>mã</i> | <i>po</i> | <i>rõ</i> | <i>saʔi</i> |
| | deer | postp | top | people | sm | hab | wear | postp | jump/dance |
| | “In the deer festival, people dance wearing ‘põ’ (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.

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|-----|-----------------------|--------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|--|-----|-----------------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|----------------|-----------|
| 10. | <i>ʔhẽn</i> | <i>ʔa’nu</i> | <i>ra</i> | <i>ku’kwõj</i> | <i>ʔĩ</i> | | 11. | <i>mã</i> | <i>\n</i> | <i>ʔa’nu</i> | <i>ra</i> | <i>ku’kwõj</i> | <i>ʔĩ</i> |
| | 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.

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. kujusi ra fa'zēda 'mã \n 'tēm mã
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. i\ 're hwīso'sok 'piri 'ked mã
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. 'ludo ra hwīso'sok 'pi 15. i\ 're hwīso'sok 'piri 'kere
prop. n. sm notebook take 1ps erg notebook take neg
“Ludo took the notebook.” “I didn't take the notebook.”

Data 12 and 13 demonstrate that *mã* (fut) is used indiscriminately to refer to a remote or near future. Data 14 and 15 exemplify the use of the neutral³ 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. pīreje tō ra mēm'biye tō pot sō'mūn 'ked mã
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 clause and affects, in terms of tense, both the main and subordinate clauses:

17. 'ke mē'ndije 'tō ra mēm'biye 'tō 'pot 'kām sō'mun
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 *mã* 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. kao'mi ra a'ngro 'pīrĩ mã '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 – *pīrĩ* – 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).

19. mbat_Λ ra i'ta 'pī
fever sm 3ps kill
“The fever killed him.”
20. mbat_Λ \n i'ta 'pī
fever top 3ps kill
“It was the fever that killed him.”
21. ture ra 'huru 'mã 'tẽ
father sm field postp go
“The father went to the field.”
22. 'huru 'mã \n ture ra 'tẽ
field postp top father sm go
“It was to the field that the father went.”
23. pĩreje ra hwĩsosok_Λ kãm na 'ta
children sm school postp top pos. v.
“In school is where the children are.”

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. kao'mi ra a'ngro 'pĩrĩ mã \n 'tõ 'ta
prop. n. sm pig kill ? top part pos. v.
“Killing the pig is what Kaomi is doing.”

In other words, the particle *mã* is attached to the verb in long form and not to the construction that expresses the progressive – *'tõ 'ta* –.

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. me'ndije tõ ra sõ'hwed mã 'tẽm mã
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 *\ku*.

26. hĕn ka'o'mi ra 'hrõ 'mã 'mbri ʔi ʔõ
 past prop. n. sm wife postp wild game meat give
 “Kaomi gave his wife some wild game meat”

27. wə'tən ka'o'mi ra 'hrõ 'mã ku\ ʔõ
 int prop. n. sm wife postp pref give
 “What did Kaomi give to his wife?”

28. ʔa \n 'wa mi'tʃi 'ku 29. mi'tʃi \n 'wa ku\ 'ku
 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 *ʔi* “to kill” (short form of the verb). Check:

30. ʔa \n 'wa mi'tʃi ʔi 31. mi'tʃi \n 'wa ku\ ʔi
 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. 'hĕn ku\ ʔi 33. 'kere, ʔiri '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. a'ŋgro ʔiri ra 'mberi 35. m'e'ndije ʔgere ra 'mbetʃi
 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. m'e'ndije 'mberi ra 'tãmã 37. hĕn 'wa ʔiri 'mberi
 woman beautiful sm fall past 1ps kill well
 “The beautiful woman fell.” “I killed well.”

38. ŋgati'reje t̃ ra ndə'rin 'twə 39. ŋgati'reje t̃ ra 'swərə kur'meni
 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 – *ndorin* “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.	ka'o'mi	ra	'pĩri	'kām	na	'mbra		40.	li'ana	ra	'kĩn	'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 *'ta*), 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

?	- element to be defined
1ps	- first person singular
3ps	- third person singular
erg	- formative that accompanies pronouns in the subject function of transitive verbs
fut	- future
hab	- habitual aspect
int	- interrogative word
neg	- neutral negation

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

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