CHAPTER 4

The Verb and Simple Sentence Structures

4.1 Word Class Verb

4.1.1 Identifying Features

The word class of verbs is defined by phonological, semantic and morphosyntactic criteria. The simple verb stem is usually monosyllabic and has the canonical syllable structures CV or CVV (or sometimes CrV).\(^1\) As with nouns, any of the possible combinations of consonants, vowels and tones are attested with verbs. All polysyllabic verbs have to be understood as complex structures (cf. chapter 2). Unlike nouns, simple verbs have not been attested with any prefixes as part of their lexical structure. In general, verbs do not pattern into semantic or functional classes depending on their phonological shape. Prototypically, verbs describe different kinds of activities and events and as such divide into various semantic classes, which have different morpho-syntactic properties (cf. 4.1.2.). Verbs can productively be derived as nouns (cf. 3.3.2.). There is no productive means to derive verbs from other word classes in the language. Remnants of an old derivational system based on suffixes might be found, that was probably used to mark number (cf. 4.1.3.). However, new meanings can be productively generated by the combination of verbs in serial verb constructions, which have partly lexicalized. These complex verbs often differ in certain respects from simple verbs, and from the simple verbs that make up complex structures (cf. 4.4.). The main identifying feature of the word class of verbs in Mbembe is that verbs function as head of a predicate. Verbs fall into different classes depending on the number of arguments they usually take (cf. 4.2.2.) and the semantic roles these arguments fulfill (cf. 4.2.3.). Moreover, verbs can be modified by tense, aspect and mood markers (cf. 4.3.) and adverbs (cf. 7.2.).

4.1.2 Semantic Subclasses—Lexical Aspect

The classification of verbs into different semantic classes is not very straightforward in Mbembe. The aspectual meaning of a verb stem does not seem to be a stable part of its lexical meaning, but rather depends on the different

\(^1\) However, the phonological structure of verbs is rather restricted and since the meanings of verbs can differ depending on the context, it is often difficult to decide whether one is dealing with the same verb in the given structures or with actually different, but homophonous verbs.
contexts in which the verb is used. Nevertheless, since most verbs have one predominant use in the language, they are grouped at least tentatively into the semantic classes of the traditional classification models (cf. Vendler 1957, Timberlake 2007), i.e. into stative verbs, process verbs, accomplishment verbs and achievement verbs. While only the most common meanings of the different classes of verbs will be outlined here, their varying semantic and morpho-syntactic properties will be discussed throughout the following chapters (4.2., 4.3.). In addition, the modifications of the inherent lexical aspect of verbs by combinations with other verbs in serial verb constructions will be discussed (cf. 4.4.).

4.1.2.1 Stative Verbs

Stative verbs are verbs that refer to states that endure over stretches of time. States are not dynamic, although they may be the result of a change or have the potential for future change—but the meaning does not involve any change itself. States are thus durative without change or telicity (Timberlake 2007: 284).

There seem to be very few underived stative verbs in Mbembe. The main stative verbs are the existential verb má ‘be’, which can refer to general existence, but also to location, and the locative verbs té ‘be located at’ or bí ~ sí ‘stay’.

99.

a) ē má ĕ̄
   3SG:S be here
   ‘He is here.’

b) kẽ yă té ĕ̄ mwè syé-yí
   monkey PAST stand ADP mouth pit-LOC
   ‘The monkey stood at the mouth of the pit’

c) bó sí mgbă tă-í
   3PL:S stay big house-LOC
   ‘They live in a big house.’

2 Moreover, this verb is frequently translated as ‘keep something (somewhere)’. It remains unclear whether these are actually two different, homophonous verbs, or the same verb that has extended its meaning.