Whomever It Concerns—Notions of Control, Initiation and Affectedness in Expressions of Body-Centred Activities in Mbembe

Doris Richter genannt Kemmermann

Abstract

Body-centred activities in Mbembe (Benue-Congo, Central Jukunoid) are defined rather broadly in the present chapter to include physical processes as well as cognition, perception and emotion. These can be referred to by different classes of verbs. Certain verbs are specific to one body-centred activity, while others can describe different activities or be used in other contexts. Depending on the class of the verb as well as on the meaning expressed in the respective context the arguments are realised in different ways. For example, verbs which can be used in contexts other than body-centred activities often require an explicit reference to the body of the referent performing or being affected by the activity. The realisations of the subject and object arguments of the verbs depend on factors like initiation and control on part of the subject referent and affectedness of the object referent. While these notions are generally attested in the Mbembe language, they are highly relevant in the domain of body-centred activities. Moreover, animacy and topic play a role. Thus expressions of body-centred activities in Mbembe illustrate especially clearly how different factors interact to yield the various syntactic constructions attested in the language.

1 Introduction

Mbembe is a Central Jukunoid (Benue-Congo) language spoken in the borderland between Nigeria and Cameroon. It is a mainly analytic, isolating language with little bound morphology. Since there are hardly any morphological

---

1 The present study is based on the so-called ‘Upper Mbembe’ variety, one of the two dialect areas within Cameroon. The other variety in Cameroon is called ‘Lower Mbembe’. These dialect areas further divide into sub-varieties, which show a number of lexical, phonological and grammatical differences. The different varieties form a continuum, whereby villages closer to the border of another dialect area show properties of that area. The differences will not be mentioned in detail here, since they do not affect the topic described.
means in the language to derive new meanings or grammatical categories, other strategies are used in the language. This is especially relevant for verbs, which cannot be productively derived from other word classes. Within the word class verb derivation is quite restricted as well. There is, for example, no productive means to increase or decrease the valency of a verb. Instead, new meanings are derived by the combination of two or more verbs in serial verb constructions or by the combination of a verb with a specific object argument in so-called verb-noun-collocations. Moreover, many verbs in the language are used in different types of syntactic constructions without any morphological changes. Thus argument structure in Mbembe depends on a number of different factors, for example the different types of syntactic constructions a verb can be used in, the event structure, the semantics of the verbs and the context. All of these interact with one another yielding the different types of sentences attested in the language. Nevertheless, it is assumed that verbs do have a basic event structure encoded in their semantics which is reflected in their predominant use in one type of syntactic construction.

Since neither the verb nor its core arguments are morphologically marked as such in a sentence, they have to be defined syntactically. Constituent order is the main means to define the subject and object arguments. The basic word order in Mbembe is SV/AVO —thus the subject is the noun phrase preceding the verb and the object the one that follows it.

(1)

a) ŋwåsyô yí yâ
child IMPFVA come
‘The child is coming.’

b) bô ðî ~ zî vê
3PL:S eat meat
‘They eat meat.’

By contrast, peripheral arguments are usually overtly marked, for example by the general preposition ɲɛ̀ (2.a) or the comitative/instrumental preposition wô/ô ‘with’ (2.b).

(2)

a) vrû tô kû ɲê tô-í
fruit tree fall:SG ADP tree-LOC
‘The fruit fell from the tree.’

b) ê tʃî gê wô fêndʒî
3SG:S cut 3SG:O:NH with axe
‘S/he cuts it with an axe.’