

Lesson B. CONCEPTS OF TIME and VERB CONJUGATION

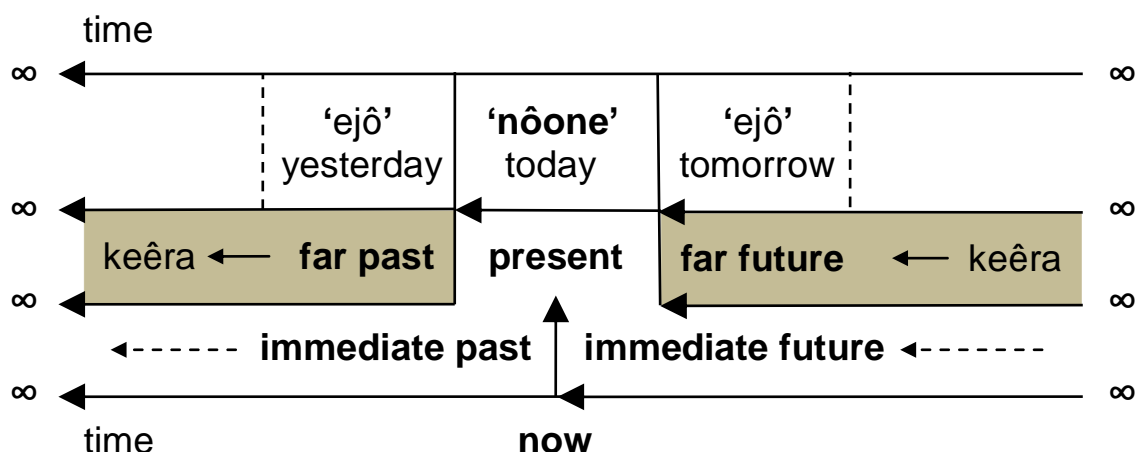
(Edited by M. Brack, with excerpts from Shimamungu and Kimenyi.)

The concepts of various time domains in Kinyarwanda are of basic importance for the construction of verb forms and other expressions. We first give an overview of the general concept of time (Sect. 1), and then we discuss the structure of verb forms (Sect. 2). In the following sections we go through the most important tenses and aspects, as well as some typical pre- and suffixes. We shall discuss here only general structures and principles; for detailed conjugations and grammar we refer to the relevant Cox lessons (and the other literature given in the introduction).

1: Concept of time structure

The point of reference is the '**now**' = '**nôone**', i.e. the moment of speaking. It lies in an interval of time, usually a day, which we call '**today**' = '**uyu muûnsi**' (or also '**nôone**' when the context is clear). This is illustrated in the diagram (following Shimamungu) below. Along the horizontal lines, we have the time axis. It is important to realize that time is perceived as **coming from the (infinite) future**, going through the now, and continuing into the (infinite) past. This means that the **time arrow** is **opposite** to what we use in our western scientific thinking. (Note that we do have some elements of the opposite thinking, too, when we e.g. speak of the 'coming week'!)

In the upper part of the diagram, we see three time regions: the central interval of 'today' = '**nôone**', to the left the 'past' starting with 'yesterday' = '**ejô**', and to the right the future ending (not starting!) with 'tomorrow' = '**ejô**'. It is very characteristic of the Kinyarwanda that the same word is used for 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow', its particular meaning only becoming clear from the context and/or the conjugation. Similar pairs of words are: '**keêra**' = 'long time ago, in old times' **and** 'in the far future'; '**-iîra**' (adj.) = 'early' **and** 'late' (from which '**keêra**' is derived); '**vubâ**' = 'recently' **and** 'soon' (besides 'quickly'). Thus, **statically** there is a perfect **symmetry** between future and past around the 'now' as a mirror point. But **dynamically** the symmetry is broken by the fact that time flows from the future to the past.



As shown in the middle and lower parts of the diagram, the Kinyarwanda language differentiates **two kinds** of '**not-today**': **far past** and **far future** (central part, grey), and **immediate past** and **immediate future** (lower part). Each of them is conjugated differently. The '**now**' is situated somewhere within the present day. The **immediate future** ends (not starts!) at the now or any time between now and the end of the day. The **far future** ends at the beginning of (early) tomorrow. The **immediate past** starts now, whereas the **far past** starts yesterday evening (or night).

It is important to note (following Kimenyi, 2002) that the Kinyarwanda speaker conceives the **time** as being **cyclic**. This expresses itself in an example of **semantic neutralization** (which means that semantically different things are conceived and named as the same). It explains the apparent opposite double meanings of the above-mentioned words 'ejô', 'keêra', 'vubâ', etc.: 'Tomorrow (ejô)' is a recurrent 'yesterday', distant future (kêera) is a kind of recycled far past, and so on. This demonstrates that the future linguistically does not exist, but is a past which comes back at us again.

2: Structure of a verbal form

The above concept is basic for the construction of the various forms of tenses in the conjugation of verbs. Any verbal form is of the following structure. Somewhere in the middle it contains the **root (rt)**, which is the semantic basis that gives the word its particular meaning of action (go, have, do, be, etc.). Before the root, it has one or more **prefixes**, and after the root, there may come one or more **suffixes**. It always **ends** with an **ending aspect suffix (ea)** which often is just a vowel (most frequently 'a'). The first prefix is usually the **personal prefix (pp)** which indicates the **subject** who (or which) is acting. Like for the nouns, this prefix accords to the 10 classes. For humans (1st class) it depends on the person(s) (1., 2., 3., singular or plural). We shall then denote it by **(pp) → (2ps)** for 2. person singular, **(3pp)** for 3. person plural, etc. In case of subjects from the classes 2 - 10, we denote it by **(pp) → (cl#s)** and **(cl#p)** for singular and plural, respectively, where # is the number of the class. In the case of a **negation**, a corresponding prefix **(neg)** ('nti-' or 'si-', see Lessons 17, 36) may precede the (pp) (see also Sect. 11 below); in all **affirmative** forms (pp) is the first prefix.

In most cases there is a **time prefix (tp)**, situated between the personal prefix and the root. It is absent in the present infinitive, the habitual present, and the imperatives. Various affixes may be added either before or after the root. They give further aspects, i.e., information about circumstances, intentions, causes, objects, etc. which are independent of time (past, present or future) and can occur within each of them.

The general structure of a regular verbal form is thus the following:

[(neg)] - **(pp)** - [...] - [(tp)] - [...] - **(rt)** - [...] - **(ea)**,

where all parts in square brackets [...] are facultative and stand for optional affixes. The minimum necessary parts are (pp) - (rt) - (ea). (Note, however, that in the **imperative** there is no personal prefix: 'kor-a!' = 'work!', see also Lesson 22.)

3: Infinitives

Let us first look at the **infinitive of the present**, e.g. 'kuvûga' (see Lesson 22):

ku - vûg - a 'to speak'
(cl9s) - (rt) - (ea)

Since the infinitive refers to an activity which is **independent of time**, it contains **no time prefix**. That the 'ku' (or 'gu', 'kw') is understood as a personal prefix (here: class 9) is due to the fact that the infinitive linguistically is something between a noun and a verb, or both together. It can e.g. be substantivized, and thereby acquire the augment 'u-': kwêemera = to believe → ukwêemera = the belief; kwîizeera = to hope → ukwîizeera = the hope. There is also a number of nouns that are built from verb roots and bear a different personal prefix and the ending vowel 'e', e.g.:

gu-têm-a = to cut → i-tem-ê = bridge; gu-ken-a = to be poor → u-mu-ken-ê = poor person, u-bu-ken-ê = poverty.

Unlike most European languages, the Kinyarwanda has a **future infinitive**: 'ku-zaa-vuga' (with low-tone 'u' in '-vuga'). We can only translate it by 'to speak', but it is a noun-verb expressed for far-future times. 'agoomba kuzaakora' - 'he will have to work'. Both the present and the future infinitives have **negative** forms and may also contain **infixes**. More details are given in Lesson 73 of Overdulse and Jacob (3). One example: 'kutûumvîra ababyêeyi bizaakugeza kure' - 'not to obey your parents leads you astray'.

4: Habitual present

The second tense which needs **no time prefix** is the habitual present, e.g. 'I am used to read', 'I have the habit of reading', or 'I usually read' (see Lesson 25). This is used to express a **habit** that holds both for the recent past and the actual day of speaking, and is expected to hold also in the near future. Thus, in the sentence: 'mvuga Kinyarwaanda' - 'I speak Rwandese' we have:

m - vug - a	similarly:	ba - vug - a	'they speak'
(1ps) - (rt) - (ea)		(3pp) - (rt) - (ea)	

Note that 'n' becomes 'm' because of the following 'v'. Note also that the root loses its high tone (û → u) in this tense. Another example: 'inzu gisaaza' - 'the house is aging', from 'gusâaza' - 'to grow old, to age; to die' (for persons):

ki - sâaz - a	→ 'gisaaza';	plural:	bi - sâaz - a	→ 'bisaaza'
(cl4s) - (rt) - (ea)			(cl4p) - (rt) - (ea)	

(note the application of Dahl's law). There are actually **two forms** of the habitual present, depending on if a complement (adjective, object, etc.) follows the verb ('**conjunct**' form) or not ('**disjunct**' form); see Kimenyi (2002) for details and Overdulse and Jacob, Lessons 11 and 12, for corresponding tables. The high tones are different in these two forms (see the examples given on page x of the introduction). The same two forms also exist for the actual present discussed next.

5: Actual present

This is the **-ra** present tense discussed in Lesson 16. Although '-ra' formally is a time prefix (tp)=(ra), it marks the context of 'today' (**actualization**) and replaces the time prefix. '-ra' is linguistically derived from the root '-ri' ('to be', here: 'to happen on this day'). This explanation is really a subtlety of some linguists (e.g. Shimamungu): in their interpretation, only past and future tenses need time prefixes (in which '-a' = 'not today' always occurs), whereas present tenses have either no time marker or its substitute '-ra'. For practical use there is, however, nothing wrong in understanding **-ra** simply as the **actual-present** time prefix (as it is presented in most books). Thus we have:

n - ra - vûg - a	→ 'ndavuga' = 'I speak (today), I am speaking'
(1ps) - (tp) - (rt) - (ea)	

(remember that 'nr' → 'nd'), etc. Like for the habitual present, there exist 'disjunct' and 'conjunct' forms also of the actual present. It is important to note that exactly the same form of the -ra present is also used for the **near future** tense coming next. The two forms 'disjunct' and 'conjunct' exist for most of the other tenses, too, but we will not mention them in all cases. (Often they differ only in length and tone of vowels.)

6: The near future

This tense is used whenever the speaker refers to the future that **ends today** (but may come from infinitely far); it is discussed in Lesson 29. In many European languages, we use the same. Instead of 'I will go home' we simply say: 'I go home' – which may happen either immediately after the moment of speaking or later (even on later days). Thus, e.g., in 'arasoma igitabo' - 'he will read the book', we have

a - ra - som - a
(3ps) - (tp) - (rt) - (ea)

etc. This refers to any moment after 'now' and may extend to tomorrow or later.

7: The far future

This tense requires the time suffix **'-a'** for **'not today'**. It is preceded by the part **'-za'** which stems from the root of **'kuu-za'** - 'to come': this explicitly expresses the fact that the future is thought of **coming towards us!** The complete time prefix for the **far future** is thus **'-za+a' → '-zaa'** (see Lesson 29). We have, e.g.:

tu - zaa - kôr - a → 'tuzaakora' - 'we will work' (from tomorrow on)
(2pp) - (tp) - (rt) - (ea)

or: 'nzaavuga' - 'I will speak' (after today), etc. Note that in both future tenses, a high-tone vowel in the root becomes low-tone. In the far future tense, no difference is made between 'conjunct' and 'disjunct' situations.

8: The near past

For the (perfect) **near-past** tense, the time prefix **'-a'** for 'not-today' is also required (see Lessons 51 ff.). Note that it is a low-tone 'a' (in contrast to the far-past prefix **'-â'**, see below). For example: in 'uyu muûnsi baaboshye ibiteebo' - 'today they have braided baskets', we have

ba - a - bôh - ye → 'baaboshye' (from 'kubôha' - 'to braid, bind, tie')
(3pp) - (tp) - (rt) - (ea)

(see Sect. 10 below and Lessons 51, 71, for the aspect suffix **'-ye'** for the **perfect past**; note also the phonetic rule 'oh-y' → 'oshy'). The high tone ô of the root 'bôh' is lost here, like in the -ra present and future tenses.

9: The far past

For the (perfect) **far-past** tense, the 'not today' prefix carries a **high tone** and is thus **'-â'** (see Lessons 51 and 71). The example above becomes correspondingly: 'ejô baâboshye ibiteebo' - 'yesterday they have braided baskets'. Here we have

ba - â - bôh - ye → 'baâboshye'
(3pp) - (tp) - (rt) - (ea)

The high tone in the root is lost also here, but it stays on the time prefix **'-â'**. This is the 'conjunct' form, used when a complement ('ibiteebo' in the above example) follows the verb. For the 'disjunct' form (when nothing follows the verb), the time prefix **'-â'** for the far past is combined with the **'-ra'** of the actual present, to form the time prefix **'-âra'**:

ba - âra - kôr - ye → 'baârakôze' = 'they have worked' (before today)
(3pp) - (tp) - (rt) - (ea)

Here the high tone of the root is kept (and '-kôrye' becomes '-kôze'). In the singular (1ps, 2ps, 3ps) of both forms of the (perfect) far-past, the high tone of the '-â' is shifted to the following syllable; e.g. 'n-â-somye' → 'nasômye', 'u-â-ra-kôze' → 'warâkoze'.

10: Various aspects of verb forms

The '**a**' (aspect) **ending**, which so far has been discussed, always characterizes an action that is **open** towards the future, i.e., the action is **not finished** (like, quite obviously, in the infinitive, the habitual present and the future tenses, and also in the imperative).

The aspect ending '**e**' occurs in different circumstances:

1) It is used for the **imperative**, when the latter contains an **internal object**, see the object prefix (op) below:

'kora!' = 'work!' but 'bikore!' = 'do it!'

It is also used for the **negative imperative** (see Lesson 22) and the imperative in its **plural** form (see Lesson 66).

2) It is used for the **simple optative** to express a wish (or command):

'ageendê' = 'he may leave'

from 'kugeenda' = 'to walk, go, leave' (without indication of place). Note that here the 'ê' has a high tone.

3) It is used in the **supplicative optative**, in combination with the actualization prefix '-ra' (even in the far future combined with the time prefix '-zaa'), to express a strong wish or an imploration. Hereby the final '-e' has a low tone. We give two examples:

'urageende vubâ' = 'leave quickly' (and urgently!)

'urazaageende vubâ' = 'you may leave fast' (tomorrow or later)

Note that in all three cases the final '**-e**' aspect, like the '**-a**' aspect, denotes an **open** (unfinished) **action**.

When an action that took place in the past has not been finished or was a habitual action, we use the **imperfect past**. For this, the affix '-ag' is put between the root and the final '-a' to form the aspect ending '**-aga**' (see Lesson 56). In the far past, e.g.:

n - âra - vûg - **aga** → 'narâvugaga' = 'I was speaking, I used to speak'
(1ps) - (tp) - (rt) - (ea)

(note the displacement of the high tone from the root to the end of the time prefix). For the habitual near past, the above example would become 'naavûgaga' = 'I was speaking (earlier today)'. It is important to note that both aspects '-aga' and '-ye' must be used in combination with the corresponding past-time prefixes when they are used for the past tenses.

When we speak about past times, an **action** can well be **finished**. Then we use the **perfect** past tenses, replacing the '-a' ending by the **'-ye' aspect** ending (see Lesson 51). It can be used for both the near and the far past, for which we have given examples in Sects. 8 and 9 above. The perfect is actually the most common form of the past used in daily language (as in many European languages and, especially, in dialects like Swiss or Bavarian which don't use the imperfect at all).

The aspect ending **'-ye'** can, however, also be used in the **present tense** without time prefix: 'bakoze' means 'they have just worked' or 'they are about to work', and refer to actions during the day of speaking (past or future). They correspond to the French 'ils viennent de travailler' or 'ils vont travailler'. Because of the rather complicated phonetic changes occurring when combining a root with the ending '-ye', one often lists the changed ending as a separate entry, the so-called **'past-tense stem'** in parentheses. e.g.: 'to work' = 'gu-kôre (-ze)' or 'to go (with place)' = 'ku-jya (-giye)', etc. For explicit lists of these past-tense stems, see Lessons 53, 54 below (or Lesson 36 in Overdulse and Jacob).

There is a large number of **aspect affixes** (both pre- and suffixes) in Kinyarwanda which express various circumstances such as intentions, causes, objections, etc. It would go too far to list them all; we just give a few interesting examples (some of which occur quite often); others will appear in the later Cox Lessons.

The **object prefix (op)** denotes a direct object of the action. An object may also come as an extra word (noun or pronoun) after the verb, but very often one incorporates a (simple) object in the form of a prefix (**op**) that is situated immediately before the root (and thus after the time prefix). Like the (subject) personal prefix (pp), the (op) may be denoted by (1ps), (2ps) etc. if it refers to persons and by (cl#s), (cl#p) when it refers to objects of classes 2 - 10. As examples we have:

n - zaa - **ku** - vûg - a → 'nzaaku vuga' = 'I will speak of you (sing.)'
(1ps) - (tp) - (2ps) - (rt) - (ea)

ba - ra - **mu** - reeb - a → 'baramureeba' = 'they look at her (him)'
(3pp) - (tp) - (3pp) - (rt) - (ea)

We refer to Lessons 57 and 58 where these object aspects are listed according to persons or non-humans (and classes for the latter).

There is also a **reflexive object prefix (rop)** form **'-iiy'**. For example:

a - zaa - **iiy** - vûg - a → 'aziivuga' = 'he will speak about himself'
(3ps) - (tp) - (rop) - (rt) - (ea)

(note the combination of phonetic rules yielding 'aa+iiy' → 'ii' before a consonant).

There exist many **relative aspect (ra) prefixes** that are placed next to the time prefix (tp), either before or after it, depending on the circumstances. (See also Lesson 122.) Example: **'-kî'** indicates a **continuation**:

a - ra - **kî** - a - vûg - a → 'aracyâavûga' = 'he keeps speaking'
(3ps) - (tp) - (ra) - (tp) - (rt) - (ea)

or: 'he hasn't stopped talking'. (Note that the prefix 'kî' actually has split the time prefix '-ra' in two parts and sits in the middle; there is also the phonetic rule 'kia' → 'cya').

The suffix **'-ag'**, placed after the root (and often followed by **'-ur'**), yields **intensivation**. It may even be repeated to further enhance the meaning and give it a deprecatative value:

'gusoma' = (amongst others) 'to kiss' → 'gusomagura' = 'to kiss passionately'
 'kuvûg**ag**ura' = 'to speak loud' or 'to talk a lot'
 'kuvûg**agag**ura' = 'to say a big lot of nonsense'

The word **'na'** for 'and' can also be used as a prefix in the second of two verbs that describe **simultaneous** actions:

'baravûga bâ**na**sakuza cyaane' = 'they speak and (at the same time) cry very loud'

('gusâkuza' = 'to shout, to cry'), or **consecutive** actions:

'baramûkubita baran**â**mwirukana' = 'they beat him and then chase him away'

Note that here we have twice made use of the object prefix 'mu'='him' (with 'mu-i' becoming 'mwi' in the verb 'ku-îirukan-a' → 'kwîirukana' = 'to chase, run after'), and the first verb is 'gukubita' = 'to beat, strike'.

We finally mention the **subjunctive** (French: **potentiel**) expressing a (real or unreal) **possibility**. Here the prefix **'-aa'** is used between the personal prefix (pp) and the time prefix (tp). Two examples:

'**naak**ôra mbôonye akazi' = 'I would work if I had found a job',

with 'kubôna' = 'to see' or 'to find', 'akazi' (cl7) = 'work, job'.

'**naaza**akora mbishoboye' = 'I would work (in the future) if I could (do it)',

where 'gu-shobor-a' = 'can, to be able to', 'mbi' ← 'n-bi' = (pp)-(op) = (1ps)-(cl4p), and 'bor-ye' → 'boye' have been used.

For other forms of subjunctives, we refer to Lessons 66 and 67.

11. Negation

Most tenses can have a **negative** form. Negation is usually not built with any word like our 'not', but with a prefix (**neg**) that comes in the very front of the verb, i.e., before the personal prefix (pp). Thus we have, e.g.:

nti - tu - () - kôr - a → ntidukorâ = we don't (usually) work
 (neg) - (pp) - (tp) - (rt) - (ea)

For the **first person singular**, this 'negator' (neg) is **'si'**, for all other persons (singular and plural) it is **'nti'** (see the Cox Lessons for explicit conjugations); the tone rules are somewhat involved. Examples are (note the positions of high tones):

si - n - kôr - a → siinkorâ = I don't work
 nti - ba - aa - vûg - ag - a → ntibaavugaga = they (usually) did not speak
 nti - a - aandik - a → ntiyaandîka = he doesn't write
 nti - ba - zaa - kôr - a → ntibazâakôra = he will not work (tomorrow or later)
 si - n - a - aandik - ye → sinaanditse = I haven't written

12. Gerund and Gerundive

There are forms of verbs built with the prefix **'(u)bu-** that turn the verb into a substantive of modality or an adjective of necessity or purpose.

1. **Gerund** (Latin 'gerundium'): The form

ubu - (tp) - (rt) - a

makes from the verb with root (rt) a **substantive** that expresses a **modality**:

kugêenda = go, leave → ubugêenda = way of leaving, means to leave

guhuûmeeka = breathe → ubuhûmeeka = possibility to breathe

gukôra = to work → ubukôra = the way or working

u-bu-aâ-kôr-a → ubwaâkora = the way in which one might work (now)

u-bu-aâ-zaa-kôr-a → ubwaâzaakora = the way in which one might work (in the future)
(-aâ = potential aspect, -zaa = future tense)

2. **Gerundive** (Latin 'gerundivum'): The form

(-rî) **bu** - [(pp)] - (rt) - ê

makes from the verb with root (rt) an **adjective** of being or doing. Practically, it follows a form of the verb **'-rî'** ('to be') to express an action of **necessity, purpose, intention** (or as such, simply a form of **future**), like in the English: 'he is doing, going, about to leave' or in French: 'il est en train de partir' (colloquially: 'il est partant'). Examples:

ndi bugêendê = I must go, I have to leave, I am about to leave, I am leaving, I will go

barî bukorê = they will work (lit: 'they will be working')

ntarî buuzê = I will not come, I don't intend to come, I cannot come

ikiintu turî bukorê = the thing which we want to do

abaantu barî buumpê akazi = the people who are going to give me some work
(bu-n-hâ-ê = bu + personal prefix 'n'='me' + root 'hâ'='give' + ê)
(+phonetic rule: 'nh' → 'mp', but pronounced 'mh')

amagaambo barî bumuvugê = the words which they are going to tell him

13. List of defective verbs

In Kinyarwanda there are four **defective verbs** which are lacking most of the tenses and have no infinitive. We give a list of them here; in parentheses we give the number of the Cox Lessons where they are introduced and discussed. To the right of them we give *alternative* verbs with the same meaning (and optional other meanings separated by ';'), which must be used in all tenses where the defective verbs don't exist.

to be :	-rî ni / si	(12,56) (2)	<i>alt.:</i> kubâ (-bâaye) - to be; become, live (in, at) only for 3rd person: is (are) / is (are) not
to have :	-fîte	(21)	<i>alt.:</i> kugira (-ze) - to have; think, act, say, do
to know :	-zi	(45)	<i>alt.:</i> kumenya (-ye) - to know; recognize
to see :	-ruuzi	(*)	<i>alt.:</i> kubôna (-bôonye) - to see; find, get

(*) -ruuzi exists only in the -ra and the -racyâa tenses: nduuzi; ndacyâaruuzi, etc.