

A (morpho- (tonological and))semantic perspective on the tense system of Isu (Grassfields Bantu, Cameroon)¹²

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0 Abstract

Isu, along with the other West Ring languages of the Grassfields Bantu group in Cameroon, presents a highly elaborate tense system which differentiates three degrees of synthetically marked pasts and two distinct futures, thus ranging in the upper field of morphological complexity cross-linguistically, as established by Dahl & Velupillai 2005 and de Haan 2013. Apart from the morphological proliferation of tense contrasts which are conceptually based on the daily cycle and the less specific division of immediacy vs. remoteness (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994: 98, de Haan 2013: 448f.), crucial complexities of the Isu tense system reside in the conflation of purely temporal notions with non-temporal notions such as aspectual focus, evidentiality and offensiveness, i.e. at least two reduced temporal subsystems – offensive pasts and past perfective focus – are superimposed to the basic tense system. Apart from the semantic interest, there is also a morphophonological, or rather morphotonological, challenge, due to the extent to which tone is exploited for exclusively marking grammatical distinctions in this domain. Moreover, the category of “offensive past tenses” raises the typologically relevant issue of the role of intonation in a highly tonal language such as Isu.

Major aim of this contribution is to provide a first description of the Isu tense system within the wider context of the TAM categories and to inform typological research on tense systems at large – which seems to be characterized by a deficient state of the art with respect to Western Central Africa, as attested by the World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS). Its map 66 “The Past Tense” (Dahl & Velupillai 2005) fails to represent a hotbed of complex past tense systems,

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² Due to her general typological orientation beyond German linguistics, Angelika Redder has always taken a keen interest in African languages. Deshalb, liebe Angelika, hoffe ich, dass Dich auch diese, zugegebener Maßen, sehr spezielle strukturlastige Untersuchung anspricht!

misleadingly presenting an embarrassingly blank space in the area of Southern Cameroon which is otherwise surrounded by languages flagged for having no past at all or no remoteness distinction – thus ignoring a linguistic area in the Bantoid zone which comes up with highly elaborate systems of remoteness distinctions in the past, as already pointed out in Watters (2003: 246-7).

1 Introduction

Isu is a Grassfields Bantu language of the Ring subgroup (Watters 2003: 230), spoken by approximately 15,400 people (Lewis, Simons & Fennig 2015) in the North Western province of Cameroon. It is closely related to Aghem spoken mainly in and around the town of Wum (Hyman 1979: ix, Breton & Fohtung 1991: 136-137), even to such an extent that on purely linguistic – albeit not political – grounds, Aghem and Isu might be considered dialects. Actually all of the West Ring varieties, including, beside Aghem and Isu, also Bu, Weh and Zoa, might be considered as a chain of dialects, which is reflected in the practice of Breton & Fohtung (1991: 137 bis) to refer to them as the Aghem dialect cluster.³

Typologically, Isu is remarkable for the following features: a fairly large inventory of vowel and tone contrasts, the presence of floating tones in lexicon and grammar, an incipient transition in the noun class system from prefix marking to enclitic marking which is conditioned by a highly grammaticalised focus system (Kießling 2010b), a distributed predicative syntax with a basic word order S P V O X alternating with S P O V X, an extensive use of verbal serialisation (Kießling 2011), and a highly elaborate tense-aspect system whose temporal component will be analysed in this contribution. In all these features Isu qualifies as a typical Western Ring language and links up fairly well to a linguistic area of which the Cameroonian Grassfields is part.

2 Verbal inflection

The core of the inflected verb consists of the verbal stem (V) which is preceded by a proclitic predicative marker (P) which includes pronominal subject markers (SM) plus various morphemes which mark temporal, aspectual and modal categories (TAM).⁴ This canonical order is illustrated in (1) with the verb stem

³ In order to avoid assigning undue primacy to Aghem and indirectly relegating subordinate ranks to the other linguistic varieties such as Isu, this practice is not followed here, instead the dialect cluster is referred to as the West Ring languages. The prominent position of Aghem simply results from its local demographic dominance, its location at the local administrative centre in Wum and from its advanced state of linguistic documentation. There is neither a linguistic nor a political justification to regard Aghem as superior to the other varieties. In fact, all the linguistic varieties are deeply rooted in their respective villages which form chiefdoms independent of each other.

⁴ Subject and tense markers have to be analysed as proclitics rather than prefixes, since Isu, like other Ring languages, provides the option of shifting direct objects and adjuncts into the position between tense marker and verb.

lámá ‘wait’ which is preceded by two proclitics, i.e. *má* which marks the 1sg subject and *má`* which marks the focalised hodiernal past tense.⁵

(1) Canonical order of markers in the inflected verb

<i>má</i>	<i>má</i>	<i>‘lámá</i>	<i>wá</i>
<i>má</i>	<i>má`</i>	<i>lámá</i>	<i>wá</i>
1sg	P1.FOC	wait.PF	2sg
SM	TAM	V	O ⁶

‘I HAVE waited for you (sg).’

Subject markers given in table (2) could be grouped in two sets: personal pronouns for human referents and pronouns for non-human referents. Personal pronouns for humans are subdivided according to person with specific distinctions such as an exclusive vs. inclusive contrast in 1pl and a set of logophoric pronouns plus an impersonal pronoun which has no distinction for number. 3rd person pronouns for human and non-human referents are distinguished by noun class contrasts given in Roman numbers following the canonical Bantu system according to the Bleek-Meinhof conventions (Katamba 2003).

(2) Subject markers

person	person	sg	pl
human	1	<i>má</i>	<i>γè´</i> (excl.), <i>ngá´</i> (incl.)
	2	<i>wá</i>	<i>γà´</i>
	3	<i>ù</i> (I)	<i>γú</i> ~ <i>wú</i> (II)
	3log	<i>ìyé</i>	<i>ìyú</i>
	IS	<i>á</i>	
non-human	3	<i>ú</i> (III)	<i>í</i> (IV)
	3	<i>í</i> (V)	<i>á</i> (VI)
	3	<i>ká</i> (VII)	<i>ú</i> (VIII)

⁵ In addition, the verbal stem itself undergoes modification by suffixation, infixation plus internal vowel changes which serve aspectual marking for the imperfective and terminal floating tones which serve the marking of aspect cum mood. These distinctions will not be discussed here, since they have no direct bearing on tense.

⁶ The following abbreviations will be used: CF clause focus, CFG centrifugal, CPT centripetal, CPx concordial prefix, D1 proximal demonstrative, D2 distal demonstrative, FOC focus, F1 hodiernal (near) future, F2 definite (distant) future, IMP imperative, IPF imperfective, IS impersonal subject, NEG negative, O object, OF out-of-focus marker, P predicative marker, P0 present/immediate past P1 hodiernal past, P2 hesternal past, P3 remote past, PF perfective, POSS possessive, R root, S subject, SM subject marker, TAM tense, aspect, mood, V verbal stem. Numbers refer to person when followed by sg (singular), pl (plural), incl (inclusive), excl (exclusive) or log (logophoric). Otherwise, they refer to noun classes.

3	ì (IX)	tá (XIII)
3	fá (XIX)	ìn (VIa)

2.1 Aspect

Isu has a distinction of perfective vs. imperfective aspect with a variety of temporal categories – pasts and futures – superimposed on this basic categorial division. Formally, the imperfective aspect is marked by a special verb stem which is derived from the verbal root by various morphological devices whose combination is largely non-predictable and rather lexicalised with the verb. Among the most frequent imperfective markers are a suffix *-ə*, an infix *-i-* which is inserted between the initial root consonant and the first root vowel of the verb (Kießling 2006, 2012) and an alternation of initial consonants (Kießling 2010a).⁷ In (3) which illustrates the contrast of perfective vs. imperfective in the hodiernal past tense (P1), the imperfective verb stem *bvúná*⁸ is derived from the perfective base form *búní* ‘sleep’ by two strategies: replacement of the initial plosive *b* by the corresponding affricate *bv* and by substitution of the final vowel *i* by the imperfective suffix *-ə*.⁹

(3) Aspectual opposition for hodiernal past P1 (*mà*) with *búní* ‘sleep’

	perfective P1: ‘I slept (today)’	imperfective P1: ‘I was sleeping (today)’
1sg	<i>má mâ búní</i>	<i>má mâ bvúná</i>
2sg	<i>wò mà búní</i>	<i>wò mà bvúná</i>
3sg	<i>ù mà búní</i>	<i>ù mà bvúná</i>
1pl.excl	<i>γè mà búní</i>	<i>γè mà bvúná</i>
1pl.incl	<i>ηγά mà búní</i>	<i>ηγά mà bvúná</i>
2pl	<i>γà mà búní</i>	<i>γà mà bvúná</i>
3pl	<i>γύ mà búní</i>	<i>γύ mà bvúná</i>

⁷ This type of deriving an imperfective verb stem by segmental affixes and/or morphophonological alternations is supplemented, in some grammatical subdomains, by a tonal marking strategy involving a circumfix of floating low tones for the imperfective aspect on the one hand and an initial floating high tone for the perfective aspect on the other hand. The distribution of this inflectional marking strategy needs to be investigated more thoroughly.

⁸ In an historical perspective, the imperfective stem form *bvúná* is the result of reduction of a prior reduplication **bi-bún-ə* which also contains the suffix *-ə*. The initial reduplication has been reduced via haplological elision (**biún-ə*) and affrication conditioned by the high vowel before it was dropped, resulting in contemporary *bvúná*.

⁹ While it makes sense to regard the perfective stem form as the base with the imperfective derived from it, synchronically, some perfective stem forms such as *búní* ‘sleep’ provide evidence of a perfective suffix *-i* which has become incorporated into the verb stem via lexicalisation.

2.2 Temporal contrasts

Isu has a comparatively complex synthetical tense system which provides at least three categories of past reference, two categories of future reference and an unmarked present tense. Its most interesting aspect is the proliferation of the past tense subsystem which distinguishes a series of focalised and offensive pasts – which have no parallels in the future tense.

2.2.1 Past tenses

The Isu system of past reference comprises of three remoteness degrees. The first degree (P1) is a hodiernal past which is used to describe events which occurred earlier the same day, while the second degree (P2) is a hesternal past and locates events before the day of reference, and the third degree (P3) locates events on the time axis beyond this in a remoter past. Similar as in Aghem (Anderson 1979: 87), there is also an unmarked zero degree (P0) which straddles the borderline between present and past reference in that acquires a present progressive reading in combination with the imperfective aspect and a “hot news perfect” reading when combined with the perfective aspect. In this latter case it refers to events which have occurred immediately before the reference point in time and thus have a direct bearing on the state of affairs relevant at that point (which often coincides with the time of speaking). Therefore it will be included in this section.

The maximum of these four distinctions operates in the system of plain pasts only which reflect a neutral attitude on the speaker’s side towards the proposition and which are also neutral with respect to focalisation. This four-way split is reduced to three categories in the focalised past system and to two categories in the system of rude or offensive pasts, as outlined in (4).

(4) Past tense markers and categories

	plain pasts	offensive pasts	focalised pasts
immediate (P0)	∅	<i>mâ</i> [mà]	<i>má`</i>
hodiernal (P1)	<i>`mà</i>		
hesternal (P2)	<i>`kà</i>	<i>kâ</i> [kà]	<i>máà</i>
remote (P3)	<i>ká` ~ ^</i>		<i>má^á</i>

This system compares to the other West Ring past systems in (5) in the following way: The focalised past tense systems correspond in a fairly straightforward manner. The offensive past category has no reported parallel in any other West Ring language so far. It seems as if the Isu cognate of the Aghem P2 marker has become reanalysed as P1, while the Isu cognate of Aghem P1 has acquired

offensive connotation. The Isu markers of the remoter pasts P2 and P3 seem to have no parallel in Aghem, but probably in Zoa.

(5) West Ring comparison of past tense systems¹⁰

	Aghem	Isu	Weh	Zoa
P0	∅	∅	∅	∅
P1	<i>m̀̀</i>	<i>̀̀m̀̀</i>	<i>m̀̀</i>	<i>m̀̀</i>
P2	<i>[̣]m̀̀</i>	<i>̀̀k̀̀</i>	<i>m̀̀</i>	<i>ʔk̀̀</i>
P3	?	<i>k̀̀ ~ ^</i>	?	?
P0.FOC	<i>ń̀</i>	<i>m̀̀</i>	<i>ń̀ ~ m̀̀</i>	<i>ń̀ ~ ˘</i>
P1.FOC	<i>m̀̀</i>	<i>m̀̀</i>	<i>m̀̀</i>	<i>m̀̀</i>
P2.FOC	<i>m̀̀</i>	<i>m̀̀</i>	<i>m̀̀</i>	?

2.2.1.1 Plain pasts

The present / immediate past (P0) is unmarked. The marker of the hodiernal past (P1) is *̀̀m̀̀*. The markers of the hesternal (P2) and the remote past (P3) are segmentally identical in *k̀̀* and differ only in tone: while P2 bears a L tone with a preceding floating *L, P3 bears a H tone with a following floating *L, resulting in a surface H tone on the marker and causing downstep in following H tone verbs. Complete inflectional paradigms for all pasts are given for high tone verbs (6) and low tone verbs (7).

(6) Perfective pasts with the H tone verb *b̀̀ǹ̀* ‘sleep’

	P0 ∅	P1 <i>̀̀m̀̀</i>	P2 <i>̀̀k̀̀</i>	P3 <i>k̀̀ ~ ^</i>
1sg	<i>m̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>m̀̀ m̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>m̀̀ k̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>m̀̀ k̀̀ ˀb̀̀ǹ̀</i>
2sg	<i>ẁ̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ẁ̀ m̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ẁ̀ k̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ẁ̀ k̀̀ ˀb̀̀ǹ̀</i>
3sg	<i>ù b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ù m̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ù k̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ù k̀̀ ˀb̀̀ǹ̀</i>
1pl.excl	<i>ɣ̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ɣ̀̀ m̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ɣ̀̀ k̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ɣ̀̀ k̀̀ ˀb̀̀ǹ̀</i>
1pl.incl	<i>ŋ̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ŋ̀̀ m̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ŋ̀̀ k̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ŋ̀̀ k̀̀ ˀb̀̀ǹ̀</i>
2pl	<i>ɣ̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ɣ̀̀ m̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ɣ̀̀ k̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ɣ̀̀ k̀̀ ˀb̀̀ǹ̀</i>
3pl	<i>ɣ̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ɣ̀̀ m̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ɣ̀̀ k̀̀ b̀̀ǹ̀</i>	<i>ɣ̀̀ k̀̀ ˀb̀̀ǹ̀</i>

(7) Perfective pasts with the L tone verb *z̀̀* ‘go’

	P0 ∅	P1 <i>̀̀m̀̀</i>	P2 <i>̀̀k̀̀</i>	P3 <i>k̀̀ ~ ^</i>
1sg	<i>m̀̀ z̀̀¹¹</i>	<i>m̀̀ m̀̀ z̀̀</i>	<i>m̀̀ k̀̀ z̀̀</i>	<i>m̀̀ k̀̀ z̀̀</i>

¹⁰ The Aghem data is from Hyman & Watters (1984: 252) and Hyman & Watters (1979: 164). Weh and Zoa data stem from my own fieldwork.

2sg	wò zù	wò m̀ zù	wò k̀ zù	wò ká zù
3sg	ù zù	ù m̀ zù	ù k̀ zù	ù ká zù
1pl.excl	γè zù	γě m̀ zù	γě k̀ zù	γè ká zù
1pl.incl	ηgà zù	ηgǎ m̀ zù	ηgǎ k̀ zù	ηgà ká zù
2pl	γà zù	γǎ m̀ zù	γǎ k̀ zù	γà ká zù
3pl	γú zù	γú m̀ zù	γú k̀ zù	γú ká zù

These temporal categories are illustrated by minimal opposition in examples (8a-d). The immediate or hot news perfect (P0) in (8a) indicates that the referents are still sleeping at the time of speaking, implying that the night has not yet come to an end. The hodiernal past (P1) in (8b) indicates that the activity has been completed earlier on the same day which includes the time of speaking. Accordingly, the hesternal past (P2) in (8c) projects the sleeping to the day before reference time, while the remote past (P3) in (8d) projects it to a point in time beyond this, typically to a more distant past.

(8) Contrastive examples of all pasts

(a) Immediate “hot news” perfect P0 ∅

γú b́úní
3pl sleep.PF
‘They have slept.’

(b) Hodiernal past P1 `m̀

γú m̀ b́úní [zìy, *ázwá⁺, *á⁺fwó⁺sí]
3pl P1 sleep.PF [today, *yesterday, *day before yesterday]
‘They slept (earlier today).’

(c) Hesternal past P2 `k̀

γú k̀ b́úní [ázwá⁺, *zìy, *á⁺fwó⁺sí]
3pl P2 sleep.PF [yesterday, *today, *day before yesterday]
‘They slept (yesterday).’

(d) Remote past P3 ḱ

γú ḱ b́úní [á⁺fwó⁺sí, *ázwá⁺, *zìy]
3pl P3 sleep.PF [day before yesterday, *yesterday, *today]
‘They slept (some time before yesterday).’

The temporal scope of the past markers is confirmed by their incompatibility with semantically conflicting temporal adverbials. Thus, the hodiernal past (P1) is not

¹¹ The following observations can be made: In all P0 forms except 2sg and 3sg, the lexical L tone of zù ‘go’ could be seen to change to falling which is due to the spreading of a H tone from the subject pronoun (1sg, 3pl) or to the grounding of a floating H tone brought by the pronoun (1pl, 2pl). However, in 2sg and 3sg there is no corresponding L spread from the subject marker to a H tone verb such as ‘sleep’ in (6).

compatible with the adverbials *ázwá'* 'yesterday' and *á'fwó'sí* 'day before yesterday', while the hesternal past (P2) cannot be combined with the adverbials *zìy* 'today' and *á'fwó'sí* 'day before yesterday'. The remote past (P3) is not compatible with *zìy* 'today' and *ázwá'* 'yesterday'.

Beside their purely temporal functions, both P2 and P3 also include evidential notions. The use of P3 in (9a) which is taken from a fictional narrative implies that the reported event has been inferred from indirect experience, as is the typical evidential stance in such narratives. This also matches with the observation that P3 occurs in the opening formula of fictional stories (9c) in general, where it does not only serve to set the time of the narrated events to a distant past, but at the same time signals transition into the realm of indirect experience and second-hand knowledge, framing the narration as a report based on inference without any special commitment to its truth. As soon as P3 was replaced by P2 in (9b), this would imply that the speaker has been present as an eye-witness to the event reported which lends an unusually strong sense of commitment to the truth value of the utterance.

(9) Evidentiality: contrast of inferential P3 *kâ* ~ *^* vs. direct evidential P2 *kà*

(a) Inferential P3 *ká* ~ *'*

zè k-á fàt dìy dzài wò ùtsòd ú 'wé â mbòŋ
 spirit 7-D1.P3 instead cry say CPT trouble 3 3sg.POSS to Mbong
 'This god instead complained about his problems to Mbong.'

(b) Direct evidential P2 *kà*

zè k-à ká fàt dìy dzài wò ùtsòd ú 'wé â mbòŋ
 spirit 7-D1 P2 instead cry say CPT trouble 3 3sg.POSS to Mbong
 'This god instead complained about his problems to Mbong.'

(c) Inferential P3 *kâ* in opening formula of narratives

á ká dâ ká ŋwô á'n-íná?
 1pl P3 be ASS CF in-country
 'We used to be in a country once upon a time ...'

Morphosyntactically, the P3 marker *kâ* frequently undergoes contraction on a scale which ranges from initial consonant deletion, resulting in the form *â* (10a) with the schwa optionally undergoing complete assimilation to the quality of neighbouring vowels (10b)¹², up to the point of complete fusion with a preceding determiner (9a) and complete segmental erosion, leaving a sequence of floating

¹² The retention of schwa seems to be conditioned by preceding nasal consonants, while its total progressive assimilation is licensed by a preceding glottal stop.

*HL (10c). The floating *L could be detected by its downstep effect on lexical H tones in the following verbs *bémá* ‘agree’ (10a, c), *kú* ‘know’ (10b) and *fyí* ‘go out, exit’ (11b), and by the fact that it blocks H tone spreading to L tone verbs such as *ɲwɔ̀* ‘leave’ (11a). The floating *H on the other hand could be seen to be grounded in preceding subject markers (or determiner enclitics) (11b), either merging with a L and creating a rising contour tone as in 2sg, 1pl and 2pl, or completely replacing the basic L tone as in 3sg.

(10) P3 *ká* contraction

(a) P3 reduction to *ʼá*

wúɲ á ʼbémá
Wung P3 agree.PF
‘Wung accepted.’

(b) P3 reduction to *V´*

káʔ á ʼkú wáy nà ...
Ka’ P3 know.PF NEG that
‘Ka’ did not know that ...’

(c) P3 reduction to *^*

síy ʼbémá
Siy P3.agree.PF
‘Siy accepted.’

(11a) Full form vs. contraction of P3 *ká* with L verb *ɲwɔ̀* ‘leave’

	P3 <i>ká</i>	Contraction
1sg	<i>má ká ɲwɔ̀</i>	<i>má ɲwɔ̀</i>
2sg	<i>wɔ̀ ká ɲwɔ̀</i>	<i>wɔ́ ɲwɔ̀</i>
3sg	<i>ù ká ɲwɔ̀</i>	<i>ú ɲwɔ̀</i>
1pl.excl	<i>ɣè ká ɲwɔ̀</i>	<i>ɣě ɲwɔ̀</i>
1pl.incl	<i>ɲgà ká ɲwɔ̀</i>	<i>ɲgǎ ɲwɔ̀</i>
2pl	<i>ɣà ká ɲwɔ̀</i>	<i>ɣǎ ɲwɔ̀</i>
3pl	<i>ɣú ká ɲwɔ̀</i>	<i>ɣú ɲwɔ̀</i>

(11b) Full form vs. contraction of P3 *ká* with H tone verb *fyí* ‘go out, exit’

	P3 <i>ká</i>	Contraction
1sg	<i>má ká ʼfyí</i>	<i>má ʼfyí</i>
2sg	<i>wɔ̀ ká ʼfyí</i>	<i>wɔ́ ʼfyí</i>
3sg	<i>ù ká ʼfyí</i>	<i>ú ʼfyí</i>
1pl.excl	<i>ɣè ká ʼfyí</i>	<i>ɣě ʼfyí</i>

1pl.incl	<i>ɲgà ká 'fyí</i>	<i>ɲgǎ 'fyí</i>
2pl	<i>yà ká 'fyí</i>	<i>yǎ 'fyí</i>
3pl	<i>yú ká 'fyí</i>	<i>yú 'fyí</i>

P3 reduction indicates consecutivisation in a string of narrated events (12a), whereas retention in its full form (12b) entails a loss of a sense of sequentiality, evoking the impression of a report of isolated events.¹³

(12) P3 *kâ*: full segmental retention vs. reduction

(a) P3 segmental reduction for indicating sequentiality

Tsâŋ-Káy' bémá nìy ná wò ùkwáam ú 'wé,
 Tsang-Kay.P3 accept take keep CPT dagger 3 3sg.POSS

yú 'kwé ní yà àwó
 S3pl P3.tie.in.bundle enter CFG hands

'Tsang Kay accepted and brought forth his dagger, and then they started wrestling.'

(b) P3 segmental retention

yú ká 'kwé ní yà àwó
 S3pl P3 tie.in.bundle enter CFG hands

'They started wrestling.'

2.2.1.2 Offensive past tenses

While the plain forms of the past are used in conversation to signalise a neutral or cooperative attitude, e.g. submission to orders of superiors, the offensive forms rather serve to show the opposite: disrespect, rudeness and a lack of cooperation. The offensive past tense system is reduced to a two-way contrast of a recent past (P1) vs. a remoter past (P2) compared to the four-degree distinction in the plain past system. With respect to marking properties, offensive P1 and P2 differ from their plain counterparts only in tone: the basic L in both markers of the offensive pasts corresponds to a L tone with preceding floating *L in the markers of the plain pasts P1 and P2, respectively. These underlying tones are needed, in order to account for the surface forms of H tone verbs such as *búní* 'sleep' and L tone verbs such as *bù* 'come', exemplified for the perfective aspect in (13-14). The basic

¹³ Interestingly, this option allows for a fine-grained distinction of clause linkage types in a spectrum of transitional zones ranging from asyndetic clause juxtaposition (S+P3+V, SM+P3+V) over sequential clause juxtaposition (S+P3+V, SM+[P3]+V) to serialisation with concordial tense marking (S+P3+V+SM+[P3]+V) and to serialisation with single tense marking (S+P3+V+SM+[P3]+V).

L tone of the offensive past tense markers *mà* and *kà* surfaces as such only in 2sg and 3sg. In all the other forms this L tone is changed to a falling contour tone which is the effect of the spreading of a H tone (1sg, 3pl) or the grounding of a floating *H tone (1pl, 2pl) from the preceding subject pronouns. This effect is absent in the corresponding plain pasts where the initial floating *L tone blocks all H tones from spreading from the pronoun to the tense marker. Eventually, the absence of spreading H tones in 2sg and 3sg pronominal proclitics results in a neutralisation of neutral and offensive paradigms in the respective finite forms.¹⁴

(13) Offensive perfective pasts vs. plain pasts with H tone verb *búní* ‘sleep’

	Offensive		Plain (non-offensive)	
	P1 <i>mà</i>	P2 <i>kà</i>	P1 <i>`mà</i>	P2 <i>`kà</i>
1sg	<i>má m̂ búní</i>	<i>má k̂ búní</i>	<i>má mà búní</i>	<i>má kà búní</i>
2sg	<i>wò mà búní</i>	<i>wò kà búní</i>	<i>wò mà búní</i>	<i>wò kà búní</i>
3sg	<i>ù mà búní</i>	<i>ù kà búní</i>	<i>ù mà búní</i>	<i>ù kà búní</i>
1pl.excl	<i>γè m̂ búní</i>	<i>γè k̂ búní</i>	<i>γě mà búní</i>	<i>γě kà búní</i>
1pl.incl	<i>ηgà m̂ búní</i>	<i>ηgà k̂ búní</i>	<i>ηgǎ mà búní</i>	<i>ηgǎ kà búní</i>
2pl	<i>γà m̂ búní</i>	<i>γà k̂ búní</i>	<i>γǎ mà búní</i>	<i>γǎ kà búní</i>
3pl	<i>γú m̂ búní</i>	<i>γú k̂ búní</i>	<i>γú mà búní</i>	<i>γú kà búní</i>

(14) Offensive perfective pasts vs. plain pasts with L tone verb *bù* ‘come’

	Offensive		Plain (non-offensive)	
	P1 <i>mà</i>	P2 <i>kà</i>	P1 <i>`mà</i>	P2 <i>`kà</i>
1sg	<i>má m̂ bù</i>	<i>má k̂ bù</i>	<i>má mà bù</i>	<i>má kà bù</i>
2sg	<i>wò mà bù</i>	<i>wò kà bù</i>	<i>wò mà bù</i>	<i>wò kà bù</i>
3sg	<i>ù mà bù</i>	<i>ù kà bù</i>	<i>ù mà bù</i>	<i>ù kà bù</i>

¹⁴ It might be argued that the opposition of plain vs. offensive pasts is motivated by an iconic value in the realisation of the offensive series such as superimposition of a falling contour tone onto the respective tense marker which is L in the corresponding neutral paradigms. The initial H tone element in the falling contour tone in most of the tense markers of the offensive paradigms has been reported as the point of condensation of the offensiveness, since it is paralleled to the raising of the voice of subordinates in front of their superiors which is regarded as rude and highly offensive. However, this kind of intonational approach to the offensive paradigms does not carry far, since superimposition of a falling contour tone does not apply for 2sg and 3sg. Under an intonational analysis there is no obvious explanation for this exception other than stating that somehow the L tone environment of the respective markers suppresses the H tone in the superimposed falling contour. But exactly this line of argument brings in tonal spreading rules and the postulation of floating tones through the back door, which renders the additional assumption of intonational rules unnecessary.

1pl.excl	<i>yè mâ bì</i>	<i>yè kâ bì</i>	<i>yě mà bì</i>	<i>yě kà bì</i>
1pl.incl	<i>ngà mâ bì</i>	<i>ngà kâ bì</i>	<i>ngǎ mà bì</i>	<i>ngǎ kà bì</i>
2pl	<i>yà mâ bì</i>	<i>yà kâ bì</i>	<i>yǎ mà bì</i>	<i>yǎ kà bì</i>
3pl	<i>yú mâ bì</i>	<i>yú kâ bì</i>	<i>yú mà bì</i>	<i>yú kà bì</i>

2.2.1.3 Focalised past tenses

The subsystem of focalised past tenses (15) conflates past perfective marking and tense-aspect focus. It is restricted to the perfective aspect and operates with three graded categories of pasts, subsuming P0 and P1 of the non-focalised past system.¹⁵

(15) Focalised past tenses¹⁶

	P0 <i>mâ</i> < * <i>mà</i>	P1 <i>mâa</i> < * <i>mà à</i>	P2 <i>má'á</i> < * <i>mà á</i>
1sg	<i>má má 'búní</i>	<i>má mâa búní</i>	<i>má má'á búní</i>
2sg	<i>wò má 'búní</i>	<i>wò mâa búní</i>	<i>wò má'á búní</i>
3sg	<i>ù má 'búní</i>	<i>ù mâa búní</i>	<i>ù má'á búní</i>
1pl.excl	<i>yè má 'búní</i>	<i>yè mâa búní</i>	<i>yè má'á búní</i>
1pl.incl	<i>ngà má 'búní</i>	<i>ngà mâa búní</i>	<i>ngà má'á búní</i>
2pl	<i>yà má 'búní</i>	<i>yà mâa búní</i>	<i>yà má'á búní</i>
3pl	<i>yú má 'búní</i>	<i>yú mâa búní</i>	<i>yú má'á búní</i>

In contrast to term focus, the scope of focus with these markers is not on a specific constituent of the predication, but rather on the aspect of completion, i.e. what is being asserted is the truth value of a former state of affairs, which is in contrast to a later state of affairs or some presupposition or expectation (in the sense of a counter-assertive polar focus), as illustrated in (16).

¹⁵ In terms of internal reconstruction, it seems plausible to isolate a uniform perfective past focus marker *mà* which combines with zero (P0), *à* (P1) and *á* (P2) to derive the surface markers *mâ* (P0.FOC), *mâa* (P1.FOC) and *má'á* (P2.FOC), respectively, by deletion of schwa and by tonal simplification that leads to the formation of distinct falling contour tones – an analysis which is supported by external evidence, e.g. comparison to the other West Ring markers in (5), esp. the ones of Aghem (Hyman 1979: 94ff.).

¹⁶ The focalised pasts do not distinguish neutral vs. offensive attitude on a morphotonological level. However, an offensive overtone comparable to the effect of the tonal changes in the non-focalised pasts (13-14) could be conveyed by an alternative strategy, i.e. the use of the preverb *tsám*, e.g. in (ii-iii).

(i) Focalised P2 with neutral attitude: *yú máa' búní* 'They HAD indeed slept (the other day).'

(ii) Focalised P2 with offensive overtones: *yú máa' tsám búní* 'They HAD indeed slept (the other day), so what will you do now!'

(iii) Focalised P1 with offensive overtones: *yú mâa tsám búní* 'They HAD indeed slept (yesterday), so what will you do now!'

(16) Plain vs. focalised past tense

(a) *γύ κά 'bóní*
S3pl P3 sleep.PF

'They had slept (the other day).' (no specific presupposition)

(b) *γύ má'á bóní*
S3pl P3.FOC sleep.PF

'They HAD indeed slept (the other day).' (denial of contrary presupposition)

2.2.2 Future tenses

Isu distinguishes two categories of future reference: a near future marked by the verbal proclitic *kì* (F1), which may extend up to one week ahead, and a distant future marked by the verbal proclitic *nì* (F2), which locates events at least one week ahead of the point of reference. Both categories are exemplified by full paradigms of H tone verbs vs. L tone verbs for both aspects, perfective vs. imperfective in (17-18).

(17) F1 *kì* and F2 *nì* with the H tone verb *bóní* 'sleep'

	F1 <i>kì</i>		F2 <i>nì</i>	
	Imperfective	Perfective	Imperfective	Perfective
1sg	<i>má kî bvóná</i>	<i>má kî bóní</i>	<i>má nî bvóná</i>	<i>má nî bóní</i>
2sg	<i>wò kî bvóná</i>	<i>wò kî bóní</i>	<i>wò nî bvóná</i>	<i>wò nî bóní</i>
3sg	<i>ù kî bvóná</i>	<i>ù kî bóní</i>	<i>ù nî bvóná</i>	<i>ù nî bóní</i>
1pl.excl	<i>γè kî bvóná</i>	<i>γè kî bóní</i>	<i>γè nî bvóná</i>	<i>γè nî bóní</i>
1pl.incl	<i>ηγà kî bvóná</i>	<i>ηγà kî bóní</i>	<i>ηγà nî bvóná</i>	<i>ηγà nî bóní</i>
2pl	<i>γà kî bvóná</i>	<i>γà kî bóní</i>	<i>γà nî bvóná</i>	<i>γà nî bóní</i>
3pl	<i>γύ kî bvóná</i>	<i>γύ kî bóní</i>	<i>γύ nî bvóná</i>	<i>γύ nî bóní</i>

(18) F1 *kì* and F2 *nì* with the L tone verb *bù* 'come'

	F1 <i>kì</i>		F2 <i>nì</i>	
	Imperfective	Perfective	Imperfective	Perfective
1sg	<i>má kî bèε</i>	<i>má kî bù</i>	<i>má nî bèε</i>	<i>má nî bù</i>
2sg	<i>wò kî bèε</i>	<i>wò kî bù</i>	<i>wò nî bèε</i>	<i>wò nî bù</i>
3sg	<i>ù kî bèε</i>	<i>ù kî bù</i>	<i>ù nî bèε</i>	<i>ù nî bù</i>
1pl.excl	<i>γè kî bèε</i>	<i>γè kî bù</i>	<i>γè nî bèε</i>	<i>γè nî bù</i>
1pl.incl	<i>ηγà kî bèε</i>	<i>ηγà kî bù</i>	<i>ηγà nî bèε</i>	<i>ηγà nî bù</i>
2pl	<i>γà kî bèε</i>	<i>γà kî bù</i>	<i>γà nî bèε</i>	<i>γà nî bù</i>
3pl	<i>γύ kî bèε</i>	<i>γύ kî bù</i>	<i>γύ nî bèε</i>	<i>γύ nî bù</i>

In the imperfective, both future markers bear L tone which surfaces as such only when preceded by another L tone, as is the case in 2sg and 3sg. In all the other

forms, the L tone of the future marker is modified to become a falling contour tone, reflecting the influence of a preceding H tone which either spreads from the subject marker (1sg, 3pl) or attaches as a floating tone brought by it (1pl, 2pl). In the perfective aspect, both tense markers are prefixed by a floating H tone which must be held responsible for the falling contour tones also in 2sg and 3sg.

The perfective future tenses include a subtle notion of deontic modality. The imperfective future in (19a) implies that the event will occur inevitably without any pre-arrangement, simply because present circumstances allow no other conclusion, e.g. the roads might have become impassable because of heavy rain, preventing the addressee from returning home and forcing him/her to stay overnight. By contrast, the perfective future in (19b) implies that the event is rather desirable because it is part of a larger plan or pre-arrangement, e.g. in the context of some festivity. Because of this notion of desirability, the perfective future gets a deontic reading of obligation.¹⁷

(19) Aspect opposition in F1

(a) Imperfective:

wò kî bvúná ηwò fǎ'
 2sg F1 sleep.IPF CF here
 'You will be sleeping here.'

(b) Perfective:

wò kî búní fǎ'
 2sg F1.PF sleep.PF here
 'You will / should sleep here.'

3 Conclusion

Isu presents a highly elaborate tense system with three degrees of synthetically marked pasts, an unmarked present/immediate past and two distinct futures. The subsystem of pasts is further extended by categories such as offensiveness and past perfective focus. Tone contrasts feature prominently in minimally marking most of these categories. In a diachronic perspective, the complete segmental reduction of P2 and P3 markers attest to the relative stability of tone over segmental material in Isu grammar. This is also corroborated by the recurrent observation of effects of floating tones associated with tense markers which still retain segments. All tense markers seem to be fairly advanced in

¹⁷ The delimitation of these perfective futures from categories such as subjunctive or volitional mood has not been established satisfactorily yet. Minimally distinct forms have been found to occur, e.g. *ù kî ntwámá nìy ká 'bwám* 'S/he will then (definitely) take up the half calabash.' vs. *ù kî ntwámí nìy ká bwàm à wè* 'S/he will then (at some time) take up her/his cup.' vs. *ù kî ntwámí nìy ká bwàm à wè* 'S/he should then take up her/his calabash.' However, it has not been possible so far to clearly figure out to what extent they establish (an)other paradigm(s) which is crucially distinct by a systematic minimal tonal contrast.

grammaticalisation, i.e. lexical sources in verbs such as ‘come’, ‘come from’ and ‘pass the night’, as reported for other Grassfields Bantu languages, e.g. Bali-Mungaka (Stöckle & Tischhauser 1993), cannot be recognized, neither at the level of contemporary Isu, nor at the level of Proto-West Ring. The subsystem of the focalized pasts seem to be absent in Central Ring and thus might be established as a West Ring innovation.

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