

# THE SYSTEM OF VERB-ASPECT WORDS IN PALE

Hermann Janzen  
University of Rangoon

## *Definition*

Verb-aspect words in Pale are a closed class of words with grammatical meaning which function as outer expansions on the periphery of the verbal phrase. This class is of particular interest in that its members are unique in phonological shape and in that it forms a system in which grammatical meaning is carried by certain phonemes within the word.

## *Phonological Form*

Phonologically, the aspect word class has a simple syllable structure consisting of an initial consonant followed by a vowel (CV). This structure is present in other lexical items, but the vowels of the aspect word class belong to a separate subsystem consisting of vowels only. The vowels in question are:

i

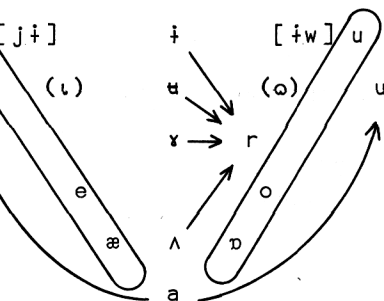
u

ε

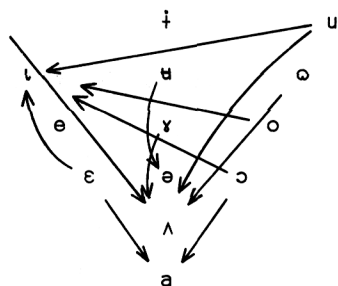
o

a

With this restricted system compare the free system occurring elsewhere:



Open Syllables



Closed Syllables

B.: The encircled vowels glide to the corresponding semivowel; the arrows represent glides.

The most basic difference between the two vowel systems is the presence of [ɛ] and [ɔ] in closed syllables on the one hand and in open syllable perfect words on the other. These are found only in the verb-aspect word class and, outside of this class, in a few grammatical morphemes. They stand out conspicuously from the rest of the vowels in the phonological system. The other vowels occurring in this restricted vowel system of the verb-aspect word class are: [i] [u] and [a]. They too are different from vowels occurring elsewhere in the same syllable structure CV.

Vowels occurring outside the system are all accompanied by other phonological features such as fluctuation between other phonemes, gliding, and tense or lax articulation. To illustrate this point, there are minimal and subminimal pairs which contrast these aspect and grammar words with the rest of the lexicon.

[ɔ], found only in aspect words, contrasting with [ɔ<sup>o</sup>] elsewhere:

- [bɔ] 'immediate future' : [bɔât] 'good';  
 [kɔ] 'action coming to the point of realization' : [gɔât] 'to carry'.

[ɛ], in aspect words, contrasting with [ɛ<sup>l</sup>] elsewhere:

- [hɛ] 'realized action' : [hɛ<sup>l</sup>] 'quick';  
 [pɛ] 'past action nominalizer' : [pɛ<sup>l</sup>] 'to manage'.

[i], in aspect words, contrasting with [i] elsewhere:

- [pi] 'immediate' : [kapit] 'to close'.

[u], in aspect words, contrasting with [u<sup>w</sup>] elsewhere:

- [hu] 'discontinuous action' : [hu<sup>w</sup>] 'bag'

[a], in aspect words, contrasting with [a<sup>u</sup>] elsewhere:

- [da] 'accidental action' : [dwa] 'grandfather'

The same phonological feature is found also with a number of other words having a special grammatical function, but a complete separation of grammar words on the basis of phonological systems is not possible.

According to their phonological components verb-aspect words can be diagrammed as follows:

	i	e	ɛ	ai	a	ɔ	u
p	pi		pɛ	pai	pa	pɔ	
n	ni				na	nɔ	nu
k					ka	kɔ	
d	di				da	dɔ	
h	hi		hɛ		ha		hu
s	si					sɔ	
y	yi	ye		yai			
b		be		bai		bɔ	
ʔ	ʔi	ʔe		ʔai		ʔɔ	ʔau
g		ge	1	gai		2	
t	ti						tu
v	vi 3			vai			

1. pronoun system;
2. aspect system;
3. other grammar words.

### *Grammatical Function and Meaning*

The grammar words shown in the above matrix form different systems having specific grammatical functions. Within each system certain phonological features carry a semantic load equivalent to a mark of grammatical function.

The system which is most clearly and readily recognized is that of the non-singular members of the pronoun word class. This can be diagrammed as:

	1st person		2nd person	3rd person
	excl	incl		=
Dual	yai	?ai	bai	gai
Plural	ye	?e	be	ge

This matrix shows that the consonants mark person and the vowels mark number:

/y/ marks first person exclusive

/?/ marks first person inclusive

/b/ marks second person

/g/ marks third person

/ai/ marks dual number

/e/ marks plural number

2. In the aspect system the same feature is found, most distinct in the vowels. In the aspect system the vowels carry the semantic load of various time aspects, while the consonants have a more or less distinguishable connotative meaning, which could be called mood.

This can be shown in the matrix below:

	i	e	a	o	u
----- Velar h/k -----	hi	he	ha	ko	hu
----- Bilabial p/b -----	pi	pe		bo	
----- Dental t/d -----	di		da		du
----- Alv-Pal s -----	si			so	
----- Pal y/n -----	yi			no	
----- Glottal -----					?au

ə vowel /i/ denotes unrealized (future) action  
/ɛ/ denotes realized (past) action  
/a/ denotes continuing action (process)  
/ɔ/ denotes probable action  
/u/ denotes negation

different initial consonants add to the semantic  
ad of the vowel or modify it in the following way:

/ or /k/ indicates a definiteness of the action.

erefore:

+ ɛ = hɛ, denoting a definite realized action  
or state

*e.g.*, ?ou hɛ hau 'I did go, I went'.

B.: Translations of isolated examples express  
the grammatical meaning of aspect words  
only vaguely.

+ i = hi, denoting a perfected future which could  
be translated 'will have done sth' or  
'having done sth'.

*e.g.*, hi dʒâm singeí khâm s+n ?ou di hau.

having arrived sabbath day I will go

'On the Sabbath day I will go'.

+ a = ha, denoting a definite statement about an  
action in process.

*e.g.*, ?an ha hau doup n ten kheng sudat 'He  
is going on and on walking along the road in  
the sunshine'.

+ u = hu, denoting a definite discontinuation  
of an action. It is usually used together  
with a general negation.

*e.g.*, ?ân ?au hu hau  
he not more goes.  
'He is no longer going'.

$k + \text{ɔ} = k\text{ɔ}$ , denoting the point of change from probability to definiteness, i.e. an action where the probability (shown by  $\text{ɔ}$ ) has come to the point of realization.

*e.g.*, ?ou kɔ ?ung mi 'I have just come to like you'.

The consonant  $t/d$  also connotes definiteness, but on an unrealized level.

Therefore:

$d + i = di$ , denoting a definite action which will take place in the future.

*e.g.*, ?ou di hau 'I will definitely go'.

$t + u = tu$ , denoting a definite negation.

*e.g.*, ?ou tu hau 'I definitely won't go'.

$d + a = da$ , denoting an accidental unintended happening.

*e.g.*, ?ou da kâtux ?ân  
I happen meet him  
'I just happened to meet him'.

The consonant  $p/b$  indicates immediacy.

$p + i = pi$ , having an activating causative function.

*e.g.*, ?ân thšit 'He is good-looking'.  
?ân pi thšit ?ân 'He makes himself look handsome'.

$b + \text{ɔ} = b\text{ɔ}$ , denoting a predictable, highly probable action (in the immediate future).

e.g., ?ou bɔ hau 'I will be going (now) =  
I am going'.

a consonant /s/ denotes an urge, volition or drive.

Therefore:

+ | = s|, indicating an urge or state, still present and reaching into the future.

e.g., ?ân si gɔɛ 'He is still sitting (and will sit there for a while)'.

+ ɔ = ɔɔ, indicating a moral obligation to do something.

e.g., ?ou ɔɔ boung gan tɪ 'I should do this work'.

e consonant /y/ has a speculative connotation.

+ | = y|, marking a conjecture.

e.g., ?ân y| hau 'He then goes'

or: sei ?ân y| hau 'If he should go'.

e consonant /n/ is difficult to define in the terms of its connotative meaning since it occurs only in one combination:

+ ɔ = nɔ, denoting a voluntary probable action.

e.g., ?ou nɔ boung 'I shall be doing it'.

e consonant /ʔ/ is also difficult to determine, at in the combination

+ au = ?au, it denotes a general negation, in contrast to /tu/ 'definite negation'.

e.g., ?ou ?au hau 'I don't go'.



3. The third group of grammar words consisting of demonstratives, connectives, and nominalizing particles does not form a closed system as do the previous two. There are nevertheless similar tendencies to be seen.

In some cases the relationship of these grammar words with certain lexical items, especially verbs, is still recognizable.

*e.g.*, /da/ 'accidental action' and /tâx/  
'to come'.

/ha/ 'continuous action' and /hau/  
'to go'.

Prefix /v|-/ 'reduplication' and /viu/ 'to return'  
/pi/ 'nominalizer' and /pî/ 'to be like'.

Other morphemes seem to be new coinages on the analogy of existing forms, *e.g.*, the double form /pi di/ in which the first morpheme /pi/ represents a nominalizing particle while the vowel /i/ has taken on some of the future-unrealized semantic load. Thus pi di boung 'The things which (you) will be doing'.

The form analogous to this is the double form /pe he/, in which the first morpheme /pe/ again marks nominalization while the vowel /e/ has already linked up with the 'definite-realized' semantic load of /he/. Thus pe he poung 'The things which (you) have done'.

### *Conclusion*

A comparison with other related languages may throw more light on the phenomena reported above. It seems to me that most of these forms have derived from verbs of more complex phonological structure and less abstract meaning. Which of these morphemes are new coinages, however, must be decided against the background of comparison with similar forms in related languages.

