Progressive Expressions in the Papiamentu Language

Patricio Varela Almiron, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, Japan

The Asian Conference on Language 2020
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract
Linguists have described the functions of the markers expressing the grammatical categories of tense, aspect, and modality in Papiamentu, a creole language spoken in the Caribbean. However, the connection between these markers and the aspectual meaning of the verbs they modify has not been extensively studied. This presentation addresses this relation by looking at sets of data, focusing on the expressions that code the progressive meaning in Papiamentu. The author examined three expressions taking the imperfective marker "ta". The author picked examples of the two marked expressions among those three from data of spoken Papiamentu collected online. A native speaker looked at the sentences containing these expressions and checked whether they could be replaced by any of the other two progressive expressions. From this examination the following conclusions can be drawn: a) "ta" cannot express a progressive meaning with certain punctual verbs; b) some stative verbs said not to be unable to take the imperfective marker "ta", could take it in the form of a gerund, thus having a progressive interpretation. This research sheds light on the limits of the marker "ta" expressing progressivity on its own and emphasizes the need to look at different constructions expressing the same meaning.

Keywords: Creole Languages, Aspect, Continuity

Introduction

The Papiamentu language[1] is a creole spoken in the ABC Islands (Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao) located on the Caribbean sea north from Venezuela. These three islands are part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. In Papiamentu, preverbal markers are used to express the categories of Tense, Aspect, and Modality (hereafter "TAM"). There is no consensus regarding the exact functions of each of these TAM markers. In this paper, I will start by introducing the main grammatical characteristics of Papiamentu, the TAM markers and their functions, the multiple meanings of "ta", and progressive expressions in Papiamentu. Then we will take a look at the data, methodology, and results of the survey I conducted regarding the progressive expression in spoken Papiamentu. Then we will move on to a secondary survey regarding a specific group of verbs described in some previous research. Lastly, we will see the conclusions that can be drawn from the results of the two surveys.
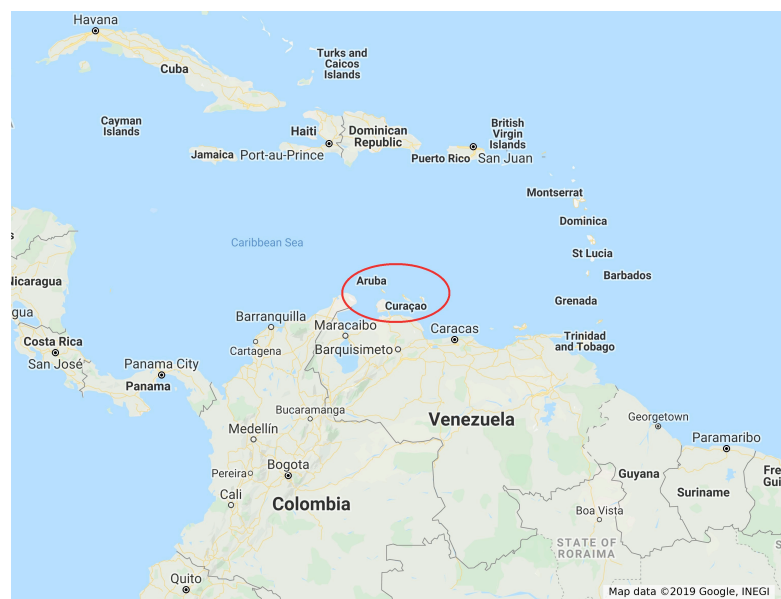

Figure 1: Location of the ABC Islands (made with Google My Maps)

---

[1] Also known as "Papiamento". The spelling "Papiamentu" is used in Bonaire and Curaçao while "Papiamento" is used in Aruba.

Figure 2: The ABC Islands (made with Google My Maps)

In this paper, Papiamentu sentences will be glossed; namely, a simple translation will be provided for every morpheme in a sentence. For words having a grammatical function (rather than lexical), abbreviations in small capitals will be used. I provide a list of the abbreviations below:

1	First-person	NEG	Negative
2	Second-person	PFV	Perfective
3	Third-person	PL	Plural
COP	Copula	PN	Personal name
FOC	Focus	POSS	Possessive
GER	Gerund	PST	Past
IMPV	Imperfective	SG	Singular
IRR	Irrealis		

Characteristics of Papiamentu

Papiamentu has a strict SVO (Subject Verb Object) word order. Munteanu (1996) describes four forms verbs can take in Papiamentu: infinitive, imperative, past participle, gerund. The three first forms are differentiated by their stress and tone structure. In the case of the past participle, a prefix might be used. The gerund is formed by the addition of the suffix "-ndo" to the infinitive form. Nouns mark the Plural with the phrasal enclitic marker "=nan" and Case is expressed primarily by word order (Kouwenberg & Murray, 1994: 32). I present some examples of Papiamentu down below.

	pronoun	TAM	adjective		noun	TAM	verb
1)	Bo	ta	konsiente	ku	bèl	a	bati?
	2SG	IMPV	aware	that	bell	PFV	beat

"Are you aware that the bell rang?"

pronoun+negation	TAM	verb	pronoun	TAM	verb	verb+pronoun
2) Mi=n	ta	kere	nan	ta	bai	tum=e
1SG =NEG	IMPV	believe	3PL	IMPV	go	take=3SG

"I don't believe they'll go take it"

It should be noted that Papiamentu, being a creole language, has vocabulary originally from Spanish and Portuguese (hereafter "Iberian"), Dutch, English, and some other languages. Among these, words of Iberian origin and Dutch origin seem to have some differences regarding the affixes they can take.

TAM markers and their functions

Andersen (1990, p. 67) describes the functions of the TAM markers in Papiamentu in the following way:

Tense-Aspect markers:
ta: "imperfective"
a: "perfective"
tabata: "past imperfective"
sa: "habitual"

Mood markers:
lo: "irrealis"
0:   "subjunctive"

For a different analysis of the TAM markers, see Munteanu (1996. pp. 349-372). Andersen (1990, p. 68) describes "tabata" as being a marked form of "ta" expressing past tense.

Verbs can be categorized based on whether they take "ta" when expressing the Imperfective or not. Andersen (1990, p. 71) provides a list of verbs which cannot take "ta" or "a". These verbs are all stative verbs, namely they do not express actions, only states. The verbs are listed below:

ta   "be"
tin   "have, exist"
por   "can, may"
sa   "know (something)"
konosé "know (someone)"
ke   "want"
mester "have to, must, should"
yama   "be called"

It should be noted that Andersen (1990) does not specify whether this applies to verbs on the infinitive form only or to other forms like the gerund.

Multiple meanings of "ta"

"Ta" in Papiamentu has three functions: as the copula, as a TAM marker, and as a focus marker.

"ta" as the copula:

3) Kachó **ta** mihó amigu di hende
   dog   COP best friend of people
   "Dogs are man's best friend"

"ta"as a TAM marker:

4) E   **ta**   lesa un buki
   3SG IMPV read a book
   "(S)he reads/will read/is reading a book"

"ta" as a focus marker:

5) **Ta** Cuba mi ke   bai
   FOC Cuba 1SG want go
   "Cuba is where I want to go"

There is no consensus on whether these three uses should be treated as the same lexical item or not. In this paper, I will deal with the progressive expression ["ta bezig ta" + verb], in which the first "ta" is usually interpreted as functioning as a copula. In contrast, the second "ta" is said to be the TAM marker expressing the imperfective. For simplicity's sake, I will analyze "ta" as a single lexeme having these three functions, and in the following examples, every "ta" will be glossed as "IMPV" (imperfective).

Progressive expressions

There are three expression in Papiamentu which can express the Progressive. These are: ["ta" + infinitive], ["ta" + gerund], ["ta bezig ta" + infinitive]. Besides the Progressive, ["ta" + infinitive] can be used to express habitual actions or actions that will occur in the future.

6) Semper bo **ta**   **duna**=nos bo   support   (habitual ["ta" + infinitive])
   always 2SG IMPV give=1PL 2SG support
   "You always give us your support"

7) Awe nochi ami ku   bo **ta**   **kome**   (future ["ta" + infinitive])
   today night 1SG with 2SG IMPV eat
   "Tonight me and you will have a meal"

In the examples down below (8-10), the three progressive expressions can be seen. The ["ta bezig ta" + verb] construction seems to be minimally described in the literature[2]. It should be noted that it is not clear whether the verb after "ta bezig ta" can only be an infinitive.

8a) Mi [**ta**   **kome**] bonchi
    1SG IMPV eat   bean
    "I'm eating beans" (but also "I eat", "I will eat")

8b) Mi [**ta**   **komie-ndo**] bonchi

---

[2] Refer to Lang (2000, p. 93) and Ebert (2000, p. 607)

1SG   IMPV   eat-GER   bean
"I'm eating beans"

8c) Mi   [**ta**   **bezig ta**   kome] bonchi
     1SG   IMPV busy IMPV eat   bean
     "I'm eating beans"

The gerund, taking the prefix "-ndo", is used mainly with verbs of Iberian origin while "bezig" has a Dutch origin. It also should be noted that since "tabata" is just an allomorph of "ta" expressing past tense, the ["ta" + gerund] construction can take "tabata" instead of "ta" when occurring in the past. In the case of the ["ta bezig ta" + verb] constructions, only the first "ta" appears to be able to change to "tabata".

Survey data and methodology

I conducted a survey on the three progressive expressions, namely ["ta" + infinitive], ["ta" + gerund], and ["ta bezig ta" + verb]. The objective of this survey was to clarify whether there were cases in which one progressive expression could not be replaced by the other ones.

For this survey, I had a native speaker J.C.[3] transcribe the dialogs of the show "Djis un tiki love". "Djis un tiki love" is a television show filmed in Curaçao in 2016, spoken mostly in Papiamentu. The transcription of the whole series (8 episodes in total, each of an average 25 minutes length) consists of about 40,000 words.

From this data, I looked at all the examples of verbs in the gerund and the construction using "ta bezig ta". J.C. judged whether the progressive expression used in each example could be replaced by the other two.

For every example given, I will use the following symbols:

+	Can be replaced	G	["ta" + gerund]
?	Unsure	B	["ta bezig ta" + verb]
−	Cannot be replaced	I	["ta" + infinitive]

For example, [+ G, - I] means that the example given can be replaced by ["ta" + gerund] but cannot be replaced by ["ta" + infinitive].

Results

There were ten examples of ["ta bezig ta" + verb] in the data. Table 1 shows the results of this construction. The top part of the table shows whether the examples can be replaced by ["ta" + gerund] or not. The lower part of the table shows whether the examples can be replaced by ["ta" + infinitive] or not.

---

[3] J.C. is a native speaker of Papiamentu. Here are the main details regarding his linguistic background: Year of birth: 1990; Sex: male; Place of birth: Curaçao; Second language(s): English, Dutch, Spanish.

Can be replaced by ["ta" + gerund]	6
Cannot be replaced by ["ta" + gerund]	3
Others	1
Total	10
Can be replaced by ["ta" + infinitive]	10
Cannot be replaced by ["ta" + infinitive]	0
Others	0
Total	10

Table 1: Results of ["ta bezig ta" + verb]

We can see that all examples of ["ta bezig ta" + verb] could be replaced by the ["ta" + infinitive] construction. Some examples could not be replaced by ["ta" + gerund], like in (9). The reason for this is because "bèl (to call)" cannot be used in the gerund since it is a verb of Dutch origin. Most verbs of Dutch origin ending in a consonant cannot take the "-ndo" suffix, which forms the gerund. Nevertheless, there are borderline cases like "wak (to watch)". "Wak" can take the "-ndo" suffix forming "wakiendo", although some speakers feel this is an unacceptable form.

9) Rom, ta p'esei mi **ta bezig ta bèl**=bo
   PN IMPV therefore 1SG IMPV busy IMPV call=2SG
   "Rom(Person's name), that's why I'm calling you, you have to come with me"

   [− G, + I]

10) No, mi **tabata bezig ta wak** un par di "location"
    no 1SG IMPV.PST busy IMPV watch a couple of location
    "No, I was looking for some locations for the photoshoot"

    [? G, + I]

There were 66 examples of gerunds in the data. Table 2 shows the results of this construction. The top part of the table shows whether the examples can be replaced by ["ta bezig ta" + verb] or not. The lower part of the table shows whether the examples can be replaced by ["ta" + infinitive] or not.

Can be replaced by ["ta bezig ta" + verb]	55
Cannot be replaced by ["ta bezig ta" + verb]	9
Others	2
Total	66
Can be replaced by ["ta" + infinitive]	56
Cannot be replaced by ["ta" + infinitive]	8
Others	2
Total	66

Table 2: Results of gerunds

Most examples of this construction can be replaced by both ["ta bezig ta" + verb] and ["ta" + infinitive]. Among these, there were some examples of "ta" being used in an unusual place. In these cases, it is not clear whether "ta" is modifying the gerund or not. Example (11) is such an example. Nevertheless, when expressing the same meaning through the ["ta" + infinitive] construction and the ["ta bezig ta" + verb]

construction, the canonical word order is used. According to J.C., the meanings of (11), (11'), and (11") are identical. This fact shows that the gerund has an advantage against the infinitive since it can be used with atypical word orders. Therefore, in this case, using the gerund might be useful when the information structure requires, or at least, prefers a non-canonical word order.

11) Romy gewon **papia-ndo** nos **ta** ku otro
    PN   simple talk-GER   1PL IMPV with other
    "Romy, we're just talking to each other"

                                                                [+ B, + I]

11') Romy gewon nos **ta** **papia** ku otro
    PN   simple 1PL IMPV talk   with other

11") Romy gewon nos **ta** **bezig ta** **papia** ku otro
    PN   simple 1PL IMPV busy IMPV talk   with other

There were as well some examples of gerunds being used without "ta" that could nevertheless be replaced by the other progressive expressions (12).

12) Atrobe **soña-ndo** rib=e mener ei?
    again   dream-GER on=the gentleman there
    "Again, dreaming about that gentleman?"

                                                                 [+ B, + I]

The following examples (13, 15, 16) are interesting because they cannot be replaced with the ["ta" + infinitive] construction. This construction is morphologically the unmarked one among the three. According to J.C., the verb "pasa (to happen)", used in (13), if used in the ["ta" + infinitive] construction, would refer to some hypothetical action. J.C. provided the example (14), showing that "ta pasa" would generally be used in combination with a conditional clause.

13) Bryan kiko **ta** **pasa-ndo**?
    PN   what IMPV happen-GER
    "Bryan, what's going on?"

                                                               [+ B, − I]

14) Kiko **ta** **pasa** **[si ...]**
    what IMPV happen if
    "What would happen if ... ?"

On the other hand, while (15) and (16) also cannot be replaced by ["ta" + infinitive], their meanings are slightly different. According to J.C., "ta bira" and "ta drecha" would express actions occurring in the future, namely "will become" and "will get better".

15) T=ami   òf bo **ta   bira-ndo**   un tiki soft?
    IMPV=1SG or 2SG IMPV become-GER a   little soft
    "Is it me or you are becoming a little soft?"

                                                                    [+ B, − I]

16) Si, mi kurpa **ta   drecha-ndo**, mi tin   hopi migraine ahinda
    yes 1SG body IMPV fix-GER   1SG have many migraine yet
    "Yes, my body is getting better, I still have many migraines though"

                                                                    [+ B, − I]

While the hypothetical interpretation of "ta pasa" and the future meaning of "ta bira" and "ta drecha" may seem to be different, they are not. In Papiamentu, the category of irrealis includes both actions in the future and hypothetical actions. The TAM marker of irrealis "lo" can be translated as "will" or "would", depending on the context. The reason these specific verbs cannot express continuity in the ["ta" + infinitive] construction is probably related to their lexical aspect. In Papiamentu "pasa (to happen)", "bira (to become)", and "drecha (to get better/fix)" seem to have a punctual meaning as a default. Therefore, they express the Progressive only when used with a marked progressive expression like ["ta" + gerund] or ["ta bezig ta" + verb].

Secondary survey

As a secondary survey, I looked at whether there were gerund forms of the verbs which, according to Andersen (1990, p. 71), 'cannot take "ta" '. Those verbs are: "ta (to be)", "tin (to have, exist)", "por (can, may)", "sa (to know)", "konosé (to know)", "ke (to want)", "mester (to have to, must, should), "yama (be called)". All results of this survey were drawn from the "Leipzig Papiamento news corpus"[4].

There was an example (17) of the verb "konosé" being used in the ["ta" + gerund] form. This might be a clear counterexample to Andersen's claim.

17) oumento lo tabata   muchu mas   tantu   ku loke
    raise   IRR IMPV.PST many   more   so_much that which
    nos **ta   konosie-ndo** na e   momento=nan aki
    1PL IMPV know-GER   at the moment=PL   here
    "The raise was supposed to be much more than what we are seeing at this moment"

In (18) and (19), "teniendo" and "sabiendo" are used. These are the gerund forms of "tene (to have, hold)" and "sabi (to know)", respectively. These two verbs have the same meaning and can be considered allomorphs of "tin (to have)" and "sa (to know)". Nevertheless, it is not simple to determine whether they should be analyzed that way.

18) (...) **tenie-ndo** kuenta ku   interes di un i   tur
         have-GER account with interest of one and all
    "(...) taking into account the interest of one and everyone"

---

[4] The Papiamento news corpus based on material crawled in 2011. I consists of: Sentences: 301,921; Types: 111,738; Tokens: 6,183,663.
(https://corpora.uni-leipzig.de/en?corpusId=pap_newscrawl_2011)

spend-GER money know-GER that
gobièrnu   mes tin su   propio edifisio
government self have 3SG.POSS own   building
"(...) spending money, knowing that the government itself has its own building"

Conclusions

This paper looked at three different progressive constructions. Looking at how these expressions are used in natural speech helps clarify not only the function of each expression but also the different lexical aspects of verbs. Overall, based on the results of the two surveys, the following things can be said:

a) While all three progressive constructions use "ta", the unmarked ["ta" + infinitive] construction cannot express progressivity with verbs that tend to have a punctual interpretation. From this fact, we can see that "ta" expresses a general Imperfective as described in Andersen (1990).

b) Gerunds themselves seem to have a continuous meaning, which, when combined with "ta" expresses progressivity.

c) Some stative verbs said to be unable to be used in the ["ta" + infinitive] construction can appear as gerunds. This fact could suggest that there is a distinction between stative verbs that do not have a gerund form and does that do. The ones having a gerund may be less prototypically stative.

Acknowledgments

References

Andersen, R. W. (1990). Papiamentu tense-aspect. In Singler, J. V. (Ed.), *Pidgin and creole tense-mood-aspect systems* (pp. 59–97). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Ebert, K. H. (2000). Progressive markers in Germanic languages. In Dahl, Ö. (Ed.), *Tense and Aspect in the Languages of Europe* (pp. 605–653). Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter.

Kouwenberg, S., & Murray A. (1994). *Papiamentu (Languages of the world/Materials 68)*. München: Lincom Europa.

Lang, G. (2000). *Entwisted Tongues: Comparative Creole Literatures*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Munteanu, D. (1996). *El Papiamento, Lengua Criolla Hispánica*. Madrid: Gredos.

Contact email: varela.almiron.patricio.o0**[at]**tufs.ac.jp (replace **[at]** with "@")