
Probing Akan *ná*. Tense or linking marker?

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The Akan particle *ná* has been analysed as either a past tense, a future tense, or a logical connective. More recent proposals argue for a unified account, treating *ná* as an intensional **linking marker** (Hatav & Essegbey 2024) or as a distal tense (Armenante & Lecavelier 2024; Zimmermann & Duah 2022). This talk presents new empirical evidence and theoretical arguments supporting a **tense-based analysis**, and highlights the importance of theory-building grounded in *independently elicited data*, in contrast to the literature-based methodology of Hatav & Essegbey (2024).

Hatav & Essegbey claim that *ná* is confined to embedded, tenseless domains, serving as a temporal/modal link to the main clause. Thus, *ná*-marked clauses strictly receive temporally dependent interpretations. From a methodological standpoint, Hatav & Essegbey (2024) base their claims on examples conveniently selected from the literature, often taken out of context. This raises issues of reproducibility and runs counter to established best practices, such as the guidelines outlined in Matthewson (2004). Empirically, a linking-marker analysis fails to account for four robust observations from controlled elicitations: (i) *ná* is incompatible with independent past morphology; (ii) it displays an anti-present restriction; (iii) it occurs naturally in main clauses when its temporal antecedent is salient; and (iv) *ná*-under-past in attitude reports yields both simultaneous and backward-shifted interpretations. Additionally, the optionality of *ná* in conditional constructions—contrasting with the non-optional status of genuine logical connectives—suggests that connective uses are not part of its core meaning.

We argue instead that *ná* is a **deictic distal tense**: it introduces a contextually salient time that necessarily differs from that of the utterance. This analysis requires no special clause-type restrictions and predicts the limited distribution of *ná* in out-of-the-blue main clauses as a pragmatic effect of its salience condition.

The tense-based account also derives the two readings of *ná* in attitude reports: as a deictic tense, *ná* can be interpreted *de re* with respect to the reported context, yielding either overlapping or shifted times, in line with general patterns of deictic tense in attitude contexts (Armenante 2024; Ogihara & Sharvit 2012). The linking-marker analysis, by contrast, predicts only simultaneous, present-oriented readings and wrongly permits co-occurrence with other tense markers.

Overall, the data thus support analysing *ná* as a distal deictic tense and underscore the need for controlled primary data when advancing new theoretical claims.