



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

### A Theoretical Account of Grammatical Tense and Aspect in Kirundi

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This article aims to account for the Kirundi language temporal categories, i.e. grammatical tense and aspect, and starts with background information on the Kirundi verbal domain as well as the role of the noun class system in the subject-verb-object morphosyntactic agreements. We argue that a conjugated verb in Kirundi is always separately marked in both tense and aspect, with the former occupying the prefixed infix position while the latter is a suffix at the verb ending. The language has five tenses enumerated as the immediate, recent past, remote past, conditional, and future tenses. With regard to aspects, they include the imperfective *a*, the perfective *ye*, and the prospective *e*. While both tense and aspect are always separately marked on any conjugated verb in Kirundi, the tense-aspect interaction is governed by agreement constraints: the imperfective *-a* agrees with all the five tenses, the perfective *-ye* goes with all tenses except the future, while the prospective *-e* agrees with only the immediate and future tenses. This article contributes to bridging the gap existing in the Bantu linguistic literature in general, and in Kirundi linguistics in particular.

**Keywords:** African Languages, Bantu Linguistics, Kirundi Morphosyntax, Tense, Aspect, Semantics.

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## Introduction

Kirundi is a major language used in Burundi, which belongs to the Bantu language family. With an S-V-O basic word order, it is written from left to right and employs the Latin script in its writing system. Like most of other Bantu languages, Kirundi is agglutinative morphosyntactically as one invariant root morpheme can connect to a number of affixes to give birth to new word structures. Kirundi is also referred to as a tone-based language, given that the length of vowel tone in that language (Low versus High tone) is linked to semantic differentiation. This special feature of the language contributes to making its morphosyntax and phonology the two inseparable linguistic modules, as they together constitute the locus of structural variation and, therefore, new meaning generation. Another feature characteristic of Kirundi is the existence of a noun class system whose noun classifiers govern the subject-verb-object agreements.

In this article, we explore the Kirundi tense-aspect, one of the under-studied grammatical categories in that less-explored Bantu language. The article is organized in five sections: given that the tense-aspect category is often marked in the verbal domain, this introductory section is followed by the section that provides a grammatical description of the Kirundi verbal domain. The third section deals with the Kirundi noun class system, as well as its role in the Kirundi verbal morphology. The fourth section, core to the present article, is dedicated to the Kirundi grammatical tense and aspect: the different tense types, namely the immediate, the recent past, the preterit, the conditional, and the future tenses are presented with notes on their distribution across the three aspectual categories, namely the imperfective aspect, the perfective aspect, and the prospective aspect. The contents in this article are hoped to contribute to bridging the gap in the Bantu linguistic literature in general and in the Kirundi linguistics in particular.

### The Kirundi verbal domain

#### 1. Uninflected infinitive in Kirundi

The uninflected infinitive form of the Kirundi verb has three units, namely the infinitive marker (INF) *ku*, the verb stem which carries the main verb idea, and the so-called final vowel *a* that marks the imperfective aspect (IMPERF).

(1) *ku-*            *gend-* *a*  
 INF            go IMPERF  
 ‘to go’

Though, theoretically, the uninflected infinitive marker is *ku*<sup>1</sup>, the latter undergoes variation depending on its phonological environment: when *ku-* is followed by a voiceless sound, the voiceless /k/ in *ku-* becomes voiced and, therefore, the abstract infinitive marker *ku* becomes *gu* in realization as in (2).

<sup>1</sup> The dash indicates that there is at least one morpheme adjacent to the item. Its position on the right shows that the morpheme(s) come(s) next while its position on the left indicates that the morpheme(s) precede(s) the item.

- (2) *gu-            tamb- a(\*ku-tamb-a)*  
 INF            dance   IMPERF  
 ‘to dance’

One of the remarkable characteristics of the Kirundi uninflected infinitives is that they are in two main categories with regard to the tonality of the verb stem: there are infinitives with Low tone verb stem and those with High tone verb stem as can be seen from the examples in (3)a and (3)b taken from Goldsmith and Sabimana (1989).

(3) a. Infinitive with Low tone verb stem

- *ku- rim- a*  
 INF cultivate IMPERF  
 ‘to cultivate’
- *ku-    rer-    a*  
 INF    raise   IMPERF  
 ‘to raise a child/children’
- *ku-    rab-            a*  
 INF   look at   IMPERF  
 ‘to look at’

b. Infinitives with High tone verb stem

- *ku-    bón-    a*  
 INF    see    IMPEFR  
 ‘to see’
- *ku-    búr-    a*  
 INF    lack   IMPERF  
 ‘to lack’
- *Ku-    báag-    a*  
 INF    butcher IMPERF  
 ‘to butcher’

(Goldsmith and Sabimana 1989, 24)

Note that the basic tone of the verb is placed on the first mora of the verb stem. As infinitives in most Bantu languages can be inflected, Kirundi is no exception; and we provide below a brief description of the Kirundi inflected infinitive.

2. *Inflected infinitive in Kirundi*

While there are languages such as English where verbs in the infinitive form cannot be inflected, Kirundi presents a different scenario. A number of affixes can come between the infinitive marker *ku-* and the verb stem on the one hand, and between the verb stem and the final vowel (aspect marker) on the other hand. Affixes between the infinitive marker *ku-* and the verb stem (root) are called prefixed infixes, while those between the verb stem and the aspect marker are referred to as suffixed infixes (Nkanira 1984), as is the case in (4).

- (4) *ku- ha- ba- rim- ir- a*  
 INF CL16 CL2.PL cultivateEXT IMPERF  
 ‘to cultivate it (the land) for them’

The infinitive in (4) has two prefixed infixes, namely the locative *-ha-* of the sixteenth noun class and the second noun class object marker *-ba-* of the plural second noun class which refers to the people benefiting the *rim*-ing (cultivating) act. The same infinitive in (4) has one suffixed infix, namely the extension marker *-ir-* which extends the meaning of the main verb root *-rim-* (cultivate) from a simple cultivating act to a cultivating act for the third party. The last grammatical marker on the verb in (4) is the final vowel *-a* which marks the imperfective aspect. It is worth noting that there are three aspects in Kirundi, namely the imperfective aspect marked by *-a*, the perfective aspect marked by *-ye*, and the prospective aspect instantiated by *-e* (Ntahokaja 1969 and Nkanira 1984). Of all those three aspect markers, only the imperfective *-a* goes with the infinitive, whether uninflected or affixed.

### 3. The Kirundi conjugated verb

Except for the imperative mode, the Kirundi uninflected conjugated verb has at least four morphemes namely the subject marker, the tense marker, the main verb root, and aspect marker as can be seen from the sentence in (5).

- (5) *Ba- Ø- ig- a icongereza.*  
 3PL Pres. study IMPERF English  
 ‘They study English.’

The verbal domain *Biga* ‘They study’ contains the subject marker *ba-* of the third person plural, the empty set marker which is in the simple present slot as that tense is phonetically null, the verb stem *-ig* which carries the main idea of studying, and the imperfective aspect marker *a*. It should be noted that *ba-Ø-ig-a* is, in connected speech, realized as *biga*: the vowel *a* in *ba*, when in contact with the initial vowel *i* of the verb stem *ig*, undergoes elision.

In addition to the four basic morphemes mentioned above, other affixes (suffixed infixes and prefixed infixes) can be inserted in the verbal domain with more information being encoded therein. Kirundi sentences which allow the encoding of most information in the verbal domain are one-word sentences: words which express a full sentence idea. For instance, the Kirundi equivalent of the six-word English sentence *I will keep them for him/her* is just one-word sentence in (6).

- (6) *N- zo- bi- mu- bik- ir- a.*  
 1SG will CL8.PL CL1.SG keep EXT IMPERF  
 ‘I will keep them (things) for him/her.’

Languages with the one-word sentence feature such as Kirundi as illustrated in (6) have been categorized as polysynthetic languages (Mattissen 2004; Kelly et al. 2014), i.e. languages “in which words are highly morphologically complex, expressing in a single word what in English takes a multi-word clause” (Kelly et al. 2014, 53). Still, with regard to the sentence in (6), we realize that the four obligatory



The initial vowel or augment (AUG) in Kirundi nouns is always identical to the vowel of the noun class marker (Edenmyr 2002; Ndayiragije et al. 2012) as it can be noticed in (8) where the augment /a/ at the initial position of the noun *amashure* ‘schools’ is identical to the vowel in the third plural noun class marker *-ma-*. The initial vowel of a noun in Kirundi plays the role of determiner whose definiteness is unspecified (Ndayiragije et al. 2012).

(8) *a- ma- shure*  
 AUG CL3.PL school  
 ‘schools’

But, what is the relevance of noun classifiers in the Kirundi verbal domain? We have already made mention of the polysynthetic nature of Kirundi verb, i.e. the capacity of the language to encode pieces of information in the verbal domain with the result being that the idea expressed in a multi-word sentence in English can be encoded in a one-word Kirundi sentence. Among the pieces of information that can be encoded in a Kirundi one-word sentence, there are various grammatical object complements that are marked by the different noun classifiers (see details on Kirundi noun classifiers in *Table 1*). The morphemes, including noun classifiers, which mark the different grammatical categories in the verbal domain come in predictable positions. With regard to the order of different morphemes in the Kirundi one-word sentence, Goldsmith and Sabimana (1989, 21) provide the order *Subject marker-tense marker-focus marker-object marker-radical-extension-final vowel (aspect marker)* which is illustrated in the sentence *Baárabimurihiye* ‘They paid them for him/her’ in (9).

While the subject marker, the tense marker, the verb radical, and the aspect marker can appear only once in a grammatical one-word sentence, the object morpheme and extension marker can occur more than once in the same one-word sentence as is the case in (9) where two object markers are instantiated.

(9) *Ba- á- ra- bi- mu- rih- ir- ye*  
 3PL Far Past Focus CL8.PL CL1.SG pay EXT PERF  
 ‘They paid them for him/her’

The role of noun classifiers in the Kirundi verbal domain is of importance: each noun class has a subject marker, and the latter must agree with the noun phrase which it substitutes (Goldsmith & Sabimana 1989). The noun classifiers also play a role in grammatical object marking, as they occupy the left position adjacent to the radical where they mark the person, object, or place benefiting from or undergoing the action expressed by the verb radical. For example, in (9), there are two noun classifiers which substitute the implicit object noun phrases: on the one hand, there is *-bi-* which substitutes the implicit object noun phrase (direct object) with the features [+plural, -human] and, on the other hand, there is *-mu-* which replaces the absent object noun phrase with the features [+human, -plural]. The subject marker *ba-* in (9) has also something to do with noun classification as it corresponds to the

gender-neutral plural second noun class *-ba-* which agrees with the implicit subject noun phrase with the features [+human, +plural].

Now that we have some background knowledge on the Kirundi verb and how it interacts with other grammatical categories in a sentence, the remainder of this article will focus on the two important, yet understudied, grammatical categories in the Kirundi verbal domain which: grammatical tense and aspect.

### **Tense and aspect in Kirundi**

#### *1. Background to the concepts of tense and aspect*

Everything takes time. Time is a concept that permeates every aspect of human experience. Given that humans cannot come in contact with time directly through their sense organs, they encode it through linguistic means as they conceptualize and/or recount their daily experiences. Languages throughout the world have come up with various means through which temporal relations are encoded. Those linguistic means are universally known under the umbrella terms of tense and aspect. Tense is “the grammaticalized expression of time” (Eibensteiner 2019, 69) or “the representation of location of an event in time” (Nurse 2008), while aspect is defined as “different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation (Comrie 1976, 3). Aspect is said to be of two categories, namely morphological aspect represented by a morpheme attached to the verb, and lexical aspect also referred to as inherent aspect.

With regard to morphological aspect, while in French, for example, we can distinguish between the imperfective aspect and the perfective aspect through the inflectional morphemes of the *passé composé* and the *imparfait* respectively, English realizes the aspectual distinctions along the lines of progressivity through the structure *to be+verb+ing* (Ayoun and Salaberry 2008). As an illustration, the sentences *He is speaking* and *He was speaking* contrast in tense given that the speech time for the former is in the present (present tense), while the speech time for the latter is located in the past, thus the past tense. While the above-mentioned two sentences differ in tense, they both have the verb marked with the same progressive aspect through the suffix *-ing* attached to the verb.

Speaking of inherent aspect, verbs are said to be grouped in four aspectually inherent categories: states, activities, achievements, and accomplishments (Vendler 1967). Achievement and accomplishment verbs are grouped together in telic verbs as they denote an event with a final endpoint, while activity verbs and static verbs are categorized as atelic verbs given that they describe situations without an end point (Jabbari 2004). The relationship between grammatical (or morphological) aspect and inherent aspect has been the topic of interest in different linguistic studies. While the study of this relationship in a given language is always of importance, the present article, descriptive in nature, focuses on the exploration of grammatical tense and aspect in the rarely studied Bantu language, namely Kirundi. The next subsection deals with the Kirundi tense.

2. Tense in Kirundi

As is the case in most human languages, the concept of grammatical tense in Kirundi is marked in the verbal domain. The Kirundi tense morpheme is in the slot between the subject marker and the focus marker as is already illustrated in (9) (see Section 3). However, in a conjugated verb with the most minimal marking, i.e. the one with just the subject marker, the tense marker, the verb root and the aspect marker, the tense marker appears between the subject marker and the verb radical as can be seen in (10).

(10) *tu- Ø- gend- a- bukebuke.*  
 1PL Pres go IMPERF slowly  
 ‘We go/move slowly.’

In (10), the sentence is in the simple present tense whose marker is overtly null. As can be observed from (10), the Kirundi tense marker is theoretically placed right after the subject marker, thus the empty category symbol Ø in its marking slot.

While English, for instance, locates actions and events in three main time points (see Table 2), namely the past, the present, and the future, Kirundi disposes of a different set of tenses. Meeussen (1959) distinguishes between seven tenses in Kirundi, namely, to observe his terminology, the immediate tense, the recent, the preterit, the conditional, the persistive, and the inceptive.

**Table 2 The English tense-aspect system (Allard & Mizoguchi 2021)**

Tense	Aspect			
	Simple (inflected)	Perfect have (inflected) + past participle	Progressive be (inflected) + <i>ing</i> form	Perfect progressive have (inflected) + been + <i>ing</i> form
Present	walk/walks	has/have walked	am/is/are walking	has/have been walking
Past	walked	had walked	was/were walking	had been walking
Future	will walk	will have walked	will be walking	will have been walking

Nkanira (1984) reduced the Meeussen’s tense categorization from seven to five tenses by rightly proposing that the persistive and the inceptive tenses be integrated in the immediate tense. Therefore, the five Kirundi tenses as illustrated in Table 3 are the immediate, the recent past, the preterit, the conditional, and the future.

The Kirundi immediate tense is roughly the equivalent of the simple present tense in English. Given that it does not have the overtly realized morphological marker as pointed out earlier, its grammatical marker becomes the empty category symbol -Ø-. With regard to the recent past, it describes an action that takes place prior to the speech time, but within the same day as the speech time. It is marked by the morpheme -ā- which carries a low tone in phonetic realization. As far as the preterit is concerned, it describes an action that took place in the past, but at least one day prior to the speech time. In the Bantu terminology, the preterit is usually referred to as the far or remote past in order to distinguish it from the recent past



tense. The conditional tense, marked by the morpheme *-ō-*, serves to hypothesize an action which would take place in the present moment under a certain condition. Finally, the future tense which indicates an action that takes place after the speech time is marked by the morpheme *-zō-* though there are regional/contextual variants of Kirundi whereby the future marker becomes *-rō-*. *Table 3* presents the above-stated tenses.

**Table 3 Kirundi tenses (Adapted from Nkanira 1984)**

Tense	Marker	Example
Immediate	-Ø-	Batamba neza (They dance well)
Recent	-ā-	Baātamvye neza (They danced well-the dancing act happened in the past, but within the same day)
Preterit	-á-	Baátamvye neza (They danced well-the dancing act happened at least one day before in the past)
Conditional	-ō-	Bōtamba neza (They would dance well)
Future	-zō-/-rō-	Bazōtamba/barōtamba neza. (They will dance well)

In some languages, the concepts of tense and aspect generally happen to merge and overlap in the verbal domain (Lindfors 2003; Guéron 2007). In Kirundi, however, tense and aspect are always marked by separate morphemes in the verbal domain. But, the interaction of those two morphemes on the verb is governed by constraints which we discuss in the next subsection on the Kirundi grammatical aspect.

### 3. *The Kirundi grammatical aspect*

Any verb in Kirundi, whether conjugated or not, takes at its end a morpheme called in the traditional Bantu terminology the final vowel, which is in fact the grammatical aspect marker. There are three possible final vowels in Kirundi and, therefore, three grammatical aspects: the imperfective aspect marked by *-a*, the perfective aspect marked by *-ye*, and the prospective aspect instantiated by *-e* (Meeussen 1959; Ntahokaja 1969; Nkanira 1984). The present section describes the said aspects. Furthermore, as already mentioned, the Kirundi grammar has constraints that underlie the interaction of the above-mentioned aspects with tense types in the verbal domain. We also look into these constraints in this section.

Starting with the imperfective aspect, it is marked by the final vowel *-a* which comes at the end of the verb as can be noticed in (11). It indicates that the action which is being described through the verb has started but is yet to be completed (Nkanira 1984).

- (11) *A- Ø- gend- a bukebuke.*  
 3SG Pres. go IMPERF slowly  
 'He walks/goes slowly.'

In (11), the conjugated verb *agenda* 'he walks' has four grammatical subcategories, namely the third person subject marker *a-* which is gender-unspecified as it stands for either *he* or *she* depending on the context, the immediate

(simple present) tense category marked by the empty category symbol given that it is not overtly grammaticalized, the verb root *-gend-* representing the *gend-*ing (going) idea, and the final vowel *-a* which marks the imperfective aspect. Also called cursive aspect by Nkanira (1984), the Kirundi imperfective aspect interacts with all the five tenses as can be seen in *Table 4*.

As for the perfective aspect, it is marked by the morpheme *-ye* which appears at the end of the verbal domain and indicates that the action expressed by the verb is complete prior to the speech time. The perfective *-ye* always drives the phonological phenomenon of regressive assimilation of the preceding sound whenever the verb radical ends in a consonant which is distant from /y/ with regard to the manner of articulation. For instance, the final sound /b/ in the verb radical *-tamb-* (the idea of dancing) is distant from the sound /y/ contained in the perfective aspect marker *-ye* in terms of its manner of articulation. Therefore, when *-tamb-* takes the perfective aspect *-ye*, the final bilabial consonant /b/ turns into the labiodental /v/ which is rather closer to /y/ in terms of how the vocal track realizes them, thus the perfective form *-tamvye* in *Table 4*. The perfective aspect agrees with four tenses, namely the immediate tense, the recent past, the remote past, and the conditional tense while it does not go with the future tense (see *Table 4*).

Finally, the prospective aspect, which does not exist in English, is marked by the final vowel *-e* in the verbal domain. It is called pre-cursive aspect by Nkanira (1984) in that it indicates a situation where the assertion time comes before the described action takes place. The prospective aspect is marked in sentences that express, among other things, a future-based directive as in (12), a suggestion or piece of advice as in (13), and an invitation to action as in (14).

(12) *Ba- zō- tamb- e neza.*  
 3PL will dance PROSP well  
 ‘Make sure that they dance well.’

(13) *Tu- Ø- gend- e bukebuke.*  
 1PL Pres go PROSP slowly.  
 ‘We should go slowly.’

(14) *Tu- Ø- rab- e ico amategeko avuga.*  
 1PL Pres. consider PROSP what laws say  
 ‘Let’s consider/see what the regulation says.’

In (12) through (14), the prospective aspect is marked by the vowel *-e* at the end of the verb radicals *-tamb-* ‘dance’, *-gend-* ‘go’, and *-rab-* ‘see/consider’. It has been mentioned earlier that tense and aspect are always separately marked on any Kirundi conjugated verb, and that there are constraints with regard to which aspect goes with which tense. Thus, as is illustrated in *Table 4*, the prospective aspect interacts with only two tenses, namely the immediate tense (simple present tense) and the future tense. For instance, in (12) the verb *-tamb-* that takes the prospective *-e* is also

marked in the future tense by *-zō-*. The verbs in (13) and (14) are, in terms of tense, marked by present or immediate tense empty category symbol while they take the prospective *-e* as an aspect marker. *Table 4* illustrates the above-stated tense-aspect agreement constraints with the verb *gutamba* ‘to dance’ taken as an example of illustration.

**Table 4 Distribution of aspects across tense types**

Tense		Aspect		
Type	Marker	Imperfective <i>-a</i>	Perfective <i>-ye</i>	Prospective <i>-e</i>
Immediate	<i>-Ø-</i>	batamba	batamvye	batambe
		ba-Ø-tamb-a	ba-Ø-tamb-ye	ba-Ø-tamb-e
Recent past	<i>-ā-</i>	batamba	batamvye	Inexistent
		ba-ā-tamb-a	ba-ā-tamb-ye	
Remote past	<i>-á-</i>	batamba	batamvye	Inexistent
		ba-á-tamb-a	ba-á-tamb-ye	
Conditional	<i>-ō-</i>	botamba	botamvye	Inexistent
		ba-ō-tamb-a	ba-ō-tamb-ye	
Future	<i>-zō-/rō-</i>	bazotamba	Inexistent	bazotambe
		ba-zō-tamb-a		ba-zō-tamb-e

Each conjugated verb in *Table 4* has four morphemes (grammatical subcategories), namely, from left to right, the third plural subject marker equivalent to the English *they*, the tense marker, the main verb idea of *tamb-ing* (dancing), and the aspect marker. As an analogy to the English tense-aspect system illustrated in *Table 2* and following the contents in *Table 4*, I propose the even more detailed Kirundi tense-aspect system in *Table 5*.

**Table 5 Detailed Kirundi tense-aspects**

Tense		Aspect				
Type	Marker	Simple	Perfect	Progressive	Perfect progressive	Prospective
Immediate	<i>-Ø-</i>	Mvuga ‘I say’	Mvuze ‘I have said’	Ndiko mvuga ‘I am saying’	Nari ndiko mvuga ‘I have been saying’	Mvuge ‘Let me say’
Recent past	<i>-ā-</i>	Nāvuze ‘I said’	Nari navuze ‘I had said’	Nariko mvuga ‘I was saying’	Nari nariko mvuga ‘I had been saying’	-
Remote past	<i>-á-</i>	Nāvuze ‘I said’	Nari navuze ‘I had said’	Nariko mvuga ‘I was saying’	Nari nariko mvuga ‘I had been saying’	-
Conditional	<i>-ō-</i>	Nōvuga ‘Suppos e that I	Noba mvuze ‘Suppos	Noba ndiko mvuga	Noba nari ndiko mvuga	-

Tense Type	Marker	Aspect				
		Simple	Perfect	Progressive	Perfect progressive	Prospective
		say'	e that I have said'	'Suppose that I am saying'	'Suppose that I have been saying'	
Future	-zō-	Nzōvuga 'I will say'	Nzoba navuze 'I will have said'	Nzoba ndiko mvuga 'I will be saying'	Nzoba nariko mvuga 'I will have been saying'	Nzovuge 'Let me say (future)'

It is worth noting that, as Kirundi is a tone-stressed language, the tone becomes a distinctive feature and is, therefore, a source of new meaning generation in that language. It is in that perspective that the recent past tense marked by *-ā-* and the remote past tense marked by *-á-* differ only in terms of tonality: for the former the tense marker carries a low tone while the tense marker is high-toned for the latter. Note that Kirundi native speakers do not have to use, in the written language, the tone, diacritics mentioned in *Table 3*, *Table 4*, and *Table 5* which are used to distinguish tenses since they can naturally distinguish them considering the context of language use.

### Conclusion

The present article intended to provide a descriptive study of the Kirundi tense and aspect categories, and departed from some background information on the Kirundi verbal domain as well as the role of the noun class system in the verbal morphosyntax of that less-studied Bantu language.

We demonstrated that a conjugated verb in Kirundi is always separately marked in both tense and aspect, with the former occupying the prefixed infix position while the latter is a suffix morpheme at the verb ending.

While both tense and aspect are always separately marked on any conjugated verb in Kirundi, the tense-aspect interaction is governed by agreement constraints: the imperfective *-a* agrees with all the five tenses, the perfective *-ye* goes with all tenses except the future, while the prospective *-e* agrees with only the immediate and future tenses.

Despite the fact that tonality exerts an important role in the Kirundi tense and aspect categories, this article did not go in depth of that influence due to time and space constraints, and the topic may be of interest for future research on this topic.

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## زمان و نمود فعل در زبان کیروندی

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**واژه‌های کلیدی:** زبان‌های آفریقایی، زبان‌شناسی بانتو، زبان کیروندی، زمان و نمود فعل، نحو واژگانی.

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