THE ZULU VERB

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I. Introduction

The verb in Zulu is characterized by a root, adorned in all its forms (except perhaps the singular imperative) with one to a number of morphemes. A few of these are attached always directly to the right of the verb root, and act essentially to modify the θ-roles of the subject and/or object by altering slightly the meaning of the verb. These are:

- the applicative
- the causative
- the reciprocal
- the abilitative
- the passive

Another set of affixes exist to mark:

- agreement with the noun class of the subject & an object

  (direct in transitives, and indirect in ditransitives)
- negativity
- finiteness,

  finite verbs also being marked for...
- one of five tenses, and
- one of four (perhaps five) moods.

There are also two very similar constructions which have their origins in one syllable stem auxiliary verbs that take the present participial of their main verbs.[1] One of these denotes what has been called the "Exclusive" implication (whose translation is extremely context dependent). The other is used to make an aspectual distinction of Continuity, but is exclusively a past tense phenomenon.

Verbs in certain tenses have the option of occurring in either a long or short form, the latter signifying that the verb appears as the last element in its syntactic constituent[2]. There is a proclitic *a-* introduced in the formation of some relative clauses. Several enclitics also exist for specific interrogative purposes, as well as conjunctive or rhetorical purposes.

In the case of the negative imperative, there is also a sort of auxiliary verb that stands before the main verb. There are also several particles that may stand as separate words after the verb.

Finally, if a verb stem ends in a consonant and has no suffix attached to it, it acquires the final vowel -*a*. This morpheme signifies the default vowel, signifying that the verb is not either subjunctive, negative, or the recent past.

II. Personal & Noun Class Concord

The subject of a Zulu sentence must either be the first person, the second person, a third-person human referent who has not been described with a noun of a certain class, a non-nominal such as an infinitival phrase, or a noun all of which belong to a specific noun class. The markers for the various persons and classes appear below; Note that aside

1 Buell, 2005
2 ibid.

from the lack in word-initial subject markers of phonological modification (specifically, the addition of a glide form of the vowel) to provide syllable onset in word internal variants (bracketed), and the discrepancy appearing in the variant word-internal subject and object markers in C1 (specifically for animate referents) and the 2PS, the subject and object concord markers are essentially the same in form.

(1)

Pers	SM	OM	Pers	SM	OM
1PS	*ngi-*	*-ngi-*	1PP	*si-*	*-si-*
2PS	*u-* [*-wu-*]	*-ku-*	2PP	*ni-*	*-ni-*

Class	SM	OM	Class	SM	OM
1	*u-* [*wu-*]	*-wu-* / *-m-*[3]	2	*ba-*	*-ba-*
3	*u-* [*wu-*]	*-wu-*	4	*i-* [*-yi-*]	*-yi-*
5	*li-*	*-li-*	6	*a* [*-wa-*]	*-wa-*
7	*si-*	*-si-*	8	*zi-*	*-zi-*
9	*i-* [*-yi-*]	*-yi-*	10	*zi-*	*-zi-*
11	*lu-*	*-lu-*			
14	*bu-*	*-bu-*			
15[4]	*ku-*	*-ku-*			
17[5]	*ku-*	*-ku-*			

3 specifically for animates ; This may be better termed the human 3ps, inhuman nouns (and the 3ps of human nouns, by chance) then being the only ones to play into the noun class paradigm.
4 referring to infinitives
5 for impersonal verbal subjects, ex. "it's raining"

A verb with no other markings but those for its nouns will be in the form:

(2) SM-(OM-)root-*a*[6]

The SM in any finite verbal construction is necessary; the OM on the other hand is optional under certain circumstances. It will always be necessary when the object is not expressed, and on a verb that is an expressed ditransitive as this distinguishes the goal from the theme. If the OM is not present on the verb, the object noun must follow directly after the verb. With an OM, the sentence word order is freed considerably.

III. The Infinitive

The infinitive of a Zulu verb takes the prefix *uku-* attached to the verb stem. In these cases, the verb pre-root morphology is limited to an optional object marker after the *uku-*; so:

(3) *ukushaya* = "to hit" | *uku**m**shaya* = "to hit **him**"

IV. The Derivational Suffixes

The derivational suffixes directly follow the verb root, changing its meaning slightly. All take the form -VC- or -[+glide]-, and so necessitate the addition of a final vowel if they are to be the last morpheme suffixed to the verb (in case of the affirmative, this is -*a*). In the definitions for all the transitive derived verbs, the object is considered direct and may therefor have an object marker before the verb (as shown in examples)

6 unless the verb root ends with another vowel

• The Applicative -*el*-

"to [verb] for OBJ"

(4) *Wabaculela umama abafana.* = "The mother sang for the boys."

(-*cul*- = sing)

• The Causative -*is*-

"to cause OBJ to verb"

(5) *Ngizokulilisa.* = "I will make you cry." (-*lil*- = cry)

• The Reciprocal -*an*-

"to [verb] one another"

(6) *Washayana amaxoxo.* = "The frogs hit one another." (-*shay*- = hit)

This may stack onto the Applicative above:[7]

(7) *Baculelana abafana.* = "The boys sang for each other."

• The Abilitative -*ek*-

"to be [verb]-able"

(8) *Uthandeka usisi wami.* = "My sister is lovable." (-*thanda*- = love)

• The Passive -*w*-[8]

"to be [verb]-ed"

(9) *Ngabulalwa!* = "I was murdered!" (-*bulal*- = murder)

7 Buell, 2005

8 This takes the form -*iwe* when combined with -*ile*, the past tense marker. See section on tense.

This may stack onto the Applicative:[9]

(10) *Sabaculelwa isiculo abafana.* = "The song was sung for the boys."

or the Causative:[10]

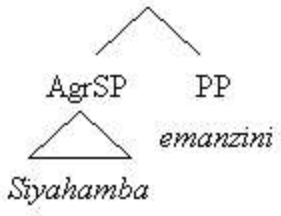
(11) *Ngasiculiswa isculo.* = "I caused the song to be sung (ie. conducted it)."

V. The Short / Long Distinction

Though it is not yet well understood, there is a distinction made in Zulu that is best described as one between a shorter and longer form of the verb. Buell suggests that the difference may be that a verb must be in the long form if it is the last element of a syntactic constituent, AgrSP. So:

(12) *Si-**ya**-hamb-a* *e-manzi-ni.* ("We are walking in the water.") because:

1pp-LONG-walk-FIN.A LOC.A-water-LOC.B

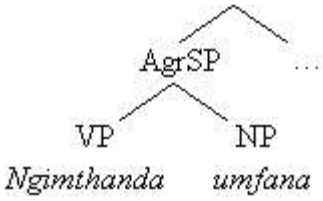


but:

(13) *Ngi-m-thand-a* *um-fana.* ("I love the boy") because:

1ps-3ps/C1$_{anim}$-love-FIN.A C1-boy

9 Buell, 2005
10 ibid.



VI. Tense

• The Present is characterized by a general lack of tense morpheme; There is, however, a possibility of distinguishing between long and short forms using the morpheme *-ya-* that exists only in this tense. So a present indicative could appear as:

(14) *U-ya-hamb-a* *manje?* = "Are you going now?" (long)

2ps-LONG-go-FIN.A now

or

(15) *Um-fana* *u-zi-shay-a* *izin-ja.* = "The boy hits / is hitting the dogs." (short)

C1-boy C1-C10-hit-FIN.A C10-dog

• The Remote Past is characterized by the insertion of an *-a-* after the SM and before the OM. This frequently mutates the SM by either deleting its inherent vowel (if the vowel is an *i*), or turning it into a glide (in the case of *a* or *w*, as long as they don't antecede a bilabial, at which point they too are deleted).

(16) *Um-fana* *w-a-zi-shay-a* *izin-ja.* = "The boy hit the dogs."

C1-boy C1-PST_{remote}-C10-hit-FIN.A C10-dog

(SM_{C1}: $u \rightarrow w$ / _ a)

(17) *Aba-fana b(a)-a-zi-shay-a izin-ja.* = "The boys hit the dogs."

C2-boy C2-PST$_{remote}$-C10-hit-FIN.A C10-dog

(SM$_{C2}$: *a* + *a* = *a*)

• The Recent Past is characterised by the suffix *-ile*[11] after the verb root. Since the suffix itself ends in a vowel, there is no FIN.A added after the verbal construction. The short form of this ending is a long, stressed *-e*.

(18) *Um-fana u-zi-shay-ile izin-ja.* = "The boy hit the dogs." (long)

C1-boy C1-C10-hit-PST$_{recent}$ C10-dog

(19) *Um-fana u-zi-shay-é izin-ja.* = "The boy hit the dogs." (short)

C1-boy C1-C10-hit-PST$_{recent}$ C10-dog

This ending is also used as a stative (to describe current states resulting from past actions), but the forms do not differ in the affirmative.

(20) *Ngi-lamb-ile.* = "I am hungry."

1PS-be.hungry-PST$_{recent}$/STAT

• The Immediate Future is indicated by the insertion of *-zo-* or *-zoku-* after the SM and before the OM. While this morpheme has two forms (one longer than the other),

11 except in the verb *-sho* (say), which appears in this form as *shilo*

there does not seem to be the same syntactic conditioning for the appearance of one form over the other. The distinction is a stylistic one.

(20) *Um-fana u-zo(ku)-zi-shay-a izin-ja.* = "The boy will hit the dogs."

C1-boy C1-FUT$_{immediate}$-C10-hit-FIN.A C10-dog

• The Distant Future involves the insertion of *-yo-* or *-yoku-* after the SM and before the OM. Again, the two morphemes do not exhibit the difference between syntactic long and short forms made in other tenses. [12]

(21) *Um-fana u-yo(ku)-zi-shay-a izin-ja.* = "The boy will hit the dogs."

C1-boy C1-FUT$_{immediate}$-C10-hit-FIN.A C10-dog

VII. Mood

Four (perhaps five) moods exist for the Zulu verb. The indicatives of the various tenses have already been discussed in detail. In addition to it, the following moods appear.

• The Subjunctive is indicated by the replacement of FIN.A (where it exists) with a final *-e*. It also changes the SM_{C1} into *a-*.

(22) *ukuze ba-si-cul-e isi-culo* = "so that they might sing a song"

so.that C2-C9-sing-SUBJ C9-song

12 It is interesting to note that according to Buell, both this tense and the immediate future tense were originally composed of an auxiliary y*a* and an auxiliary z*a* respectively, which combine with the *uku* of the infinitive of the main verb to yield the non-contracted forms of the future markers we see here.

• The Participial, which is used to describe a simultaneous action dependent upon another predicate,[13] is made distinct (in the present) only by a hightening of tone on all the subject markers, and a change in the vowels of the SMs for C1, C2, and C6.

(23) *umu-ntu e-hamb-a* = "while the person walks" (SM_{C1}: *u* → *e*)

C1-person $C1_{participial}$-walk-FIN.A

(24) *aba-fana be-hamb-a* = "while the boys walk" (SM_{C2}: *ba* → *be*)

C2-boy $C2_{participial}$-walk-FIN.A

(25) *ama-xoxo e-hamb-a* = "while the frogs walk" (SM_{C6}: *a* → *e*)

C6-frog $C6_{participial}$-walk-FIN.A

• The Potential and Contingent[14] are both denoted by the presence of the marker *-nga-* after the SM. A Potential reading implies that the SUBJ can perform the action of the verb, a Contingent reading is roughly parallel to the use of the English "if".

(26) (*uma*) *u-nga-buy-a* = "(if) you return" / "you can return"

(if) 2PS-POT/CONT-return-FIN.A

13 Louw, p. 86

14 The forms are indistinguishable in the present, though Buell (2005) asserts that the tone on the Contingent is underlyingly low, and the tone on the Potential underlyingly high.

VIII. The Progressive

The Progressive is formed by adding the morpheme *-sa-* after the SM. There is no long/short distinction in the present progressive.

(27) *ngi-sa-hamb-a* = "I am walking"

1Ps-PROG-walk-FIN.A

IX. The Exclusive and the Continuous

The Exclusive and Continuous are parallel in form: both a monosyllabic auxiliary verb inflected for case, and the main verb in the present participial also in agreement with the subject. Each also has a contracted form[15] where the SM on the auxiliary is dropped and the auxiliary stem treated as a prefix on the main verbal construction. The exception occurrs in C1, C2, and C6, where the SM on the main verb is deleted, and the SM and auxiliary stem form the resultant prefix.

• The Exclusive auxiliary takes the form *se*. Its translation varries greatly depending on context, but a (very) general explanation is that is it corresponds to an English adverbial "already", "now", or "then".[16]

15 Having nothing to do with the long/short distinction found elsewhere (Buell, 2005).
16 Louw, p. 112

(28a) *ngi-se ngi-bon-a* = "I now see" (full form)

1PS-EXCL 1PS-see-FIN.A[17]

b) s*e-ngi-bon-a* (contracted)[18]

EXCL-1PS-see-FIN.A

(29a) *u-se* *e-bon-a* = "He now sees" (full form)

$C1_{anim}$/3PS-EXCL $C1_{participial}$-see-FIN.A

b) *u-se-bon-a* (contracted)[19]

$C1_{anim}$/3PS-EXCL-see-FIN.A

• The Continuous auxiliary takes the form *be*. It indicates roughly that the action of the verb is ongoing. Curiously, the continuous / non-continuous distinction is only present as a past tense.[20]

(30a) *li-be* *li-hamb-a* = "it (C5) was walking" (full form)

C5-EXCL C5-walk-FIN.A[21]

b) *be-li-hamba-a* (contracted)[22]

EXCL-C5-walk-FIN.A

17 Present participial form of main verb not visible in this person.
18 SM_{1PS} on aux deleted.
19 SM_{1PS} on main verb deleted.
20 This makes it function somewhat like the imperfect in a Romance language.
21 Present participial form of main verb not visible in this person.
22 SM_{1PS} on aux deleted.

(31a) *ba-be* *be-hamb-a* = "they were walking" (full form)

C2-EXCL $C2_{participial}$-walk-FIN.A

b) *ba-be-hamb-a* [23] (contracted)[24]

C2-EXCL-walk-FIN.A

X. The Imperative

The singular imperative is simply the root of any verb, plus FIN.A if the root is not vowel-final; the plural imperative simply adds the suffix *-ni* Imperatives can appear with or without an OM.

(32a) *hamb-a!* = "Go!" / "Walk!" (sing.)

b) *hamb-a-ni!* (plur.)

XI. Negation

The morphology for negation on a Zulu verb differs between the various tenses, moods, and aspects. Negation by means of a prefix *a-* is by far the most prevalent method. It is used to negate:

• Present tense verbs, along with a suffix *-i*

(33) *a-ngi-hamb-i* = "I'm not walking" / "I don't walk"

NEG.A-1PS-walk-NEG.I

23 Poulos (via isizulu.net/grammar/) gives an alternate *be-be-* for this set of prefixes, suggesting that the form might in some varieties of Zulu be levelling to the regular paradigm of deleting the SM on aux.

24 SM_{1PS} on main verb deleted.

• Both future tenses, where there is a choice of forms that is again not grammatical, but regional or stylistic. The original auxiliaries *ya* and *za* become negatives *yi* and *zi* (respectively) after the pattern for present tense negatives, before combining with the infinitive of the main verb.

They may do so in two ways. Either by maintaining the full infinitive prefix on the main verb and inserting an epenthetical glide:

(34) *a-ngi-{z / y}-i-y-uku-m-shay-a* = "I will not hit him"

NEG.A-1PS-{FUT$_{\text{immediate / distant}}$}-NEG.I-EPEN-INF-3PS-hit.FIN.A

or by deleting the *-i-* altogether. This alternate form itself has the option of contracting by deleting the *-ku-* prefix of the original infinitive, but interestingly not augment vowel *-u-* of that prefix. Be that as it may, this remnant of the infinitive can only be called a part of a distinct negative future morpheme (*-zu-* or *-yu-* ; here glossed as FUT.U) for the purposes of purely synchronic analysis.

(35) *a-ngi-{zu / yu}-(ku)-m-shay-a* = "I will not hit him"

NEG$_{\text{A}}$-1PS-{FUT.U$_{\text{immediate / distant}}$}-(INF)-3PS-hit.FIN.A

• The Recent Past, where the *-ile* of the affirmative form is also changed to *-anga*.

(36) *a-ba-hamb-anga.* = "They did not walk"

NEG.A-C2-walk-NEG.PST$_{\text{recent}}$

• The Stative, which is only made distinct in this form by its maintaining the suffix *-ile* that it shared with the Recent Past in the affirmative.

(37) *a-ngi-lamb-ile* = "I am not hungry"

NEG.A-1PS-be.hungry-PST$_{recent}$/STAT

• The Remote Past.[25]

(38) *a-ng-a-hamb-a* = "I did not walk"

NEG.A-1PS-PST$_{remotr}$-walk-FIN.A

Another method for negation is emloyed by the Negative Subjunctive and the Negative Participial.[26] This is the morpheme *-nga-* (NEG.NGA).[27]

• In the Negative Subjunctive, this is places after the SM and before the OM, and it accompanies a change from the Affirmative Subjunctive *-e* final vowal to the NEG.I (as in the Negative Present Indicative).

(39) *ni-nga-hamb-i* = "(that) you(pl.) might not walk"

2PP-NEG.NGA-walk-NEG.I

25 NB: Work with a native speaker in Winter 2005 failed to produce a negative for the Remote Past distinct from that of the Recent Past. I have only encountered this form in the literature (namely Poulos).
26 Buell, 2005
27 According to Buell, this is distinct from the NEG.PST$_{recent}$ *-anga* because of tonal contour and the lack of deletion of SM vowels when the morpheme in question appears word-internal, as in (38).

• In the Negative Past Participial, the *-nga-* appears in the same place, and then again as a suffix after the final vowel.[28]

(40) *ni-nga-hamb-a-nga* = "while they were not walking"

2PP-NEG.NGA-walk-FIN.A

A final method for negation is restricted to the Negative Present Potential. It takes the form of not one but two *e* vowels (NEG.E): one after (and due to elision, replacing) the *a* vowel of the POT marker *-nga-*, and one replacing FIN.A as the final vowel.[29]

(41) *ngi-ng-e-hamb-e* = "I can not walk"

1PS-POT-NEG.E-walk-NEG.E

The Negative Imperative is formed with the auxiliary *musa*. That verb is treated as the imperative (unadorned with OM), and followed by the infinitive (which may bare an OM).

(42a) *mus-a* *uku-m-shaya!* = "Don't hit him!" (sing.)

AUX_{musa}-FIN.A INF-3PS-hit

b) *mus-a-ni* *uku-m-shaya!* = "Don't hit him!" (plur.)

AUX_{musa}-FIN.A-PLUR.IMPER INF-3PS-hit

28 Again, according to Buell this final suffix is not the $NEG.PST_{recent}$ *-anga*. I am not convinced that this suffix is not actually *-anga*.

29 Buell, 2005

XII. Verbs in Relative Clauses

One method for forming a relative involves the prefixing of an *a* (REL.A) to the verb in the relative clause. Such verbs also take the suffix *-yo* (REL.YO).

(43) *aba-fana* *a-ba-cul-a-yo* = "the boys who sing"

C2-boy REL.A-C2-sing-FIN.A-REL.YO

XIII. *Wh*-word Enclitics

Two interrogative enclitics may be attached to a verb:

- *-ni*[30] (WHAT)

(44) *w-a-cul-a-ni?* = "What did you sing?"

2PS-PST$_{remote}$-sing-FIN.A-WHAT

- *-phi* (WHERE)

(45) *u-sa-hamb-a-phi?* = "Where are you going (lit. walking)?"

2PS-PROG-walk-FIN.A-WHERE

XIV. *-KE*

The suffix *-ke*, used extensively in story telling, is a rhetorical enclitic meaning something like "and so...".

30 Distinct from the PLUR.IMPER *-ni*.

(46) *aba-fana b-a-hamb-a-ke* = "And so the boys walked..."

C2-boy C2-PST$_{remote}$-walk-FIN.A-KE

XV. The Interrogative Particle *na*

A statement may be made into a question by the addition of the particle *na*.

(47) *u-ya-ngi-thand-a* *na?* = "Do you love me?"

2PS-LONG-1PS-love-FIN.A PART$_{Q}$