

Spatial Absence in Lamnso': A Preliminary Description of the Absentive Morpheme *siiy*

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1. Introduction

This paper provides an initial description of the absentive morpheme *siiy* in Lamnso', a Grassfields language (East Ring Narrow Grassfields) with over 125,000 speakers spoken primarily in the Bui Division of Cameroon (Lewis 2009). The central claim is that *siiy* is used to indicate someone's physical absence, and is commonly used in requests, but is also used in reporting and narrative contexts. In requests with *siiy*, the requester must be the absentee (i.e. the absent person) who makes the request in the presence of the requestee before leaving. Importantly, in both requests and reporting/narrative contexts the absentee remains unexpressed in the clause where the absentive morphology appears, and is understood from the context. Accordingly, the translations, in which the absentee is made explicit, reflect the fact that the absentee varies with the context. The data relating to spatial absence that are presented here introduce a previously undescribed aspect of Lamnso' grammar. Additionally, this is a type of absence that has not been discussed in the literature of areally and genetically related Bantoid languages, and differs from most other forms of grammatical absence attested cross-linguistically.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In Section 2, I briefly sketch some background information pertaining to Lamnso' syntax. Section 3 presents the core cases of spatial absence and shows how *siiy* is used in requests and reporting/narrative contexts. Section 4 illustrates some semantic and syntactic restrictions on the use of *siiy*, and Section 5 concludes with a comparison of Lamnso' to other languages that grammatically encode absence.

2. Situating Lamnso'

In this section I briefly outline some basic syntactic features of Lamnso'. Lamnso' has a canonical word order of SVO, although in *wh*-questions, all *wh*-words occur post-verbally, as do the questioned constituents in responses to questions. Additionally, in focus constructions, subjects are focused post-verbally, whereas non-subjects can be focused both pre and post-verbally (Moghaddam 2010). Polar yes/no questions are formed by placing the question particle *a* clause-finally; this question particle is not used in *wh*-questions except for echo questions.

Lamnso' has a number of noun classes that participate in concord. As nouns in isolation often have null noun class morphology, the noun class can be determined by looking at nominal modification. All such modification (e.g. demonstratives, numerals, adjectives, and relative clauses) is post-nominal. See McGarrity and Botne (2002) for a review of the noun class system.

There are three simple past and simple future tenses that refer to more immediate and distant reference times from the present: immediate past and future (PST1/FUT1), medial (PST2/FUT2), and

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distant (PST3/FUT3). Tense morphology occurs pre-verbally. Aspect is split between the perfective and imperfective. Tone on the verb plays an important role in distinguishing various tenses and aspects (Grebe and Grebe 1975). For example, in the perfective for PST1 and PST3 the verb has a lower tone, while in the imperfective it has a higher tone. For an overview of various additional syntactic phenomena in Lamnso' such as pronominalization, quantifier float, and conjunct raising, see Grebe (1976b).

3. Spatial semantics of *siiy*

There are two spatial uses of *siiy*: (i) in requests to indicate the requester's absence; (ii) in reporting/narrative contexts to indicate someone other than the subject's absence. I discuss these uses in the following two sub-sections, where I make more precise what is meant by absence, especially with respect to spatial orientation, and who can be understood to be absent.

3.1. Absence in requests

The primary use of *siiy* is for a requester to make a request that something be done in his absence. Thus the truth conditions of the imperative in (1a) differ non-trivially from those of the requests in (1b, c). The imperative in (1a) does not presuppose anyone's absence, but the requests with *siiy* in (1b, c) presuppose that the *drinking* or *cooking* occur in the requester's absence.^{1, 2}

- (1) a. (Wo) No coffee vøy. Imperative
 (2.SG) drink coffee that
 'Drink that coffee.'
- b. A **siiy** no coffee vøy. Request
 2.SG ABT drink coffee that
 'Drink that coffee while I'm away.'
- c. A **siiy** a naa nyam. Request
 2.SG ABT AUX cook meat
 'Cook the meat while I am away.'

In requests, the absentee must be the requester. Thus in Scenario 1 in (2), it would be infelicitous for Mary to request that Joe do something in Fred's absence.

- (2) a. Scenario 1: Mary, Joe, and Fred are all together, and Fred is very protective of his coffee – he doesn't want anyone else to touch it. Then Fred leaves, and Mary, coming up with a plan to annoy Fred, makes the request in (2b).

¹ Unless noted otherwise, all data come from consultants living in the Toronto and Montréal areas. Examples taken from texts comprise a mini-corpus of 32 tokens of *siiy* extracted from 10 oral texts. In all examples I follow the orthographic conventions for consonants and vowels of the Nso' Language Organization (see Grebe 1974 [2008]), which roughly correspond to those of the IPA. Significant differences are as follows: <y> is [j]; <sh> is [ʃ]; <j> is [dʒ]; <gh> is [ɣ]; <c> is [tʃ]; and <'> is [ʔ]. Tones, which are an important part of the language, are for the most part not included in the transcriptions. For more on tones see the end of Section 2 and Grebe and Grebe (1975). Abbreviations used are as follows: 1—First Person; 2—Second Person; 3—Third Person; ABT—Absentive; AGR—Agreement; ASP—Aspect; AUG—Augmentative; AUX—Auxiliary; COMP—Complementizer; EVID—Evidential; FUT1—Future1; FUT2—Future2; FUT3—Future3; IMPRF—Imperfective; NEG—Negation; PST1—Past1; PST2—Past2; PST3—Past3; PL—Plural; PRF—Perfective; Q—Question; SG—Singular.

² When forming the imperative as in (1a), it is natural not to include the second-person singular subject. Its inclusion seems to be emphatic. The fact that it surfaces as the object pronoun *wo* instead of the subject pronoun *a* (cf. (1b)), is interesting but will not be investigated here.

- b. A **siiy** no coffee vøy.
 2.SG ABT drink coffee that
 # ‘You (Joe) drink that coffee while Fred is away.’

As for the spatial orientation of absence, *siiy* is used most felicitously when the requester *leaves* the requestee; for requests such as those in (1), this is shown schematically in (3a), where arrows indicate moving to a different location. (3b) is out, trivially, since no one has left, and (3c) is out because it is the requestee and not the requestor that has left. The requestee can, in fact, leave the site where the request was made, so long as he carries out the request in a location where the requester is not present (3d, e). And it is strange for the requester to make the request if he is not in the presence of the requestee (e.g. on the phone), regardless of whether he actually meets with the requestee after the request has been carried out (3f, g). On this last point, it is important to note that whenever a request with *siiy* is made, there is no implication that the requester will return, although he may. Lastly, to count as absent, the absentee must no longer be *visible*. So, for example, if the putative absentee can be seen through a window, then he does not count as being absent.

(3) A=requester; B=requestee

- a. A ←----- A B
 b. # A B
 c. # A B -----> B
 d. A ←----- A B -----> B
 e. # A B -----> A B
 f. ?? A -----> A B
 g. ?? A B

A request can be made “indirectly” such that the requestee is a 3rd-person subject, as in (4).

- (4) M-ta’ i John **siiy** no coffee vøy.
 1.SG-want and J. ABT drink coffee that
 ‘I want John to drink that coffee while I am away.’

It is also possible to report a request after it has been completed. For instance, if the requester returns and asks whether his request has been completed, then the requestee must use *siiy* to report what he has done, as in (5c).

- (5) a. Request: A **siiy** a no coffee vøy.
 2.SG ABT AUX drink coffee that
 ‘Drink that coffee while I’m away.’
- b. Question: A **siiy** bey no coffee vøy?
 2.SG ABT as drink.PST1.PRF coffee that
 ‘Did you drink that coffee while I was away as I told you to?’
- c. Report: M- #(siiy) no coffee vøy.
 1.SG- (ABT) drink.PST1.PRF coffee that
 ‘I drank that coffee while you were away.’

Further, the absentee need not be a discourse participant provided that he is salient enough in the discourse. The report of a request in (6) as described in Scenario 2 has a 3rd-person absentee. Note that in (6) we can see that *siiy* occurs between the tense morphology and the verb.

- (6) a. Scenario 2: The speaker sees his friend Mary, and is reminded that Mary had asked Sandy to clean Mary's house in her absence. Later, he goes to his friend Sandy and begins, "I saw Mary..." and continues with (6b).
- b. M-kuum-i ji wo-o **siiy** a su a lav.
1.SG-remember-ASP(?) COMP 2.SG-PST2 ABT AUX clean.PST2.PRF EVID house
'I remember that you cleaned the house (while Mary was away).'

In sum, there are few restrictions between the subject and absentee with respect to grammatical person: (i) the absentee must be the requester; (ii) the subject and the absentee cannot be the same (i.e. one cannot make a request of oneself with *siiy*). This is summarized in the table in (7), where X indicates an impossible combination, and the shaded cells indicate the possibilities for requests (i.e. not just the reports of requests).

(7) Table of grammatical person combinations in requests and reports of requests

Subject	Absentee ³		
	1 st	2 nd	3 rd
1 st	X		
2 nd		X	
3 rd			

3.2. Absence in reporting/narrative contexts

Even when there is no request, *siiy* can be used when the speaker simply wants to report what has happened/will happen in someone else's absence, as the dialogue in (8) shows.⁴

- (8) Question: A **siiy** a yii ka?
2.SG ABT AUX do.PST1.PRF Q
'What did you do while I was away?'

Response: M-**siiy** ayon ndrə, i kiy kiban, i su wan.
1.SG-ABT iron.PST1.PRF clothes and pound fufu and clean child
'While you were away, I ironed the clothes, made corn fufu, and washed the baby.'

The generalizations about spatial orientation in (3) hold for non-requests as well. Thus the construal in (9) is infelicitous because the absentee (i.e. the questioner) does not leave (cf. (3c)):

- (9) A wiy **siiy** a yii le?
2.SG FUT3 ABT AUX do how
'What will you do (in Germany, while I stay behind)?'

However, there is one class of verbs, that of verbs of inherently directed motion (e.g. *come*, *go*) where the orientation somewhat changes. With these verbs, in addition to the absentee changing location, the subject must as well. An example with *wiy*=come is given in (10).⁵

³ It does seem possible in an example like (6b) for the requester/absentee to be part of the conversation and thus a discourse participant. A paraphrase of (6b) would then read as "I remember that you (Sandy) cleaned the house (while you [Mary] were away)." In this case, then, a 2nd-person subject and 2nd-person absentee would be possible.

⁴ In elicited speech for some of my consultants, the auxiliary *a* does pop up in Past1. Further, Past2, it seems, can appear without *a*. Nevertheless, when going through inflectional paradigms, they say that *a* does not occur in Past1 and must occur in Past2 just in case *siiy* is used.

(10) a. Scenario 3: John has just left Mary, and then Sandy arrives. Mary reports this to John afterward.

- b. Wu **siy** wiy.
 3.SG ABT come.PST1.PRF
 ‘She came while you (John) were away.’

The use of verbs of inherently directed motion with *siy* is particularly common in stories and narratives, and appears to be a technique to reiterate that characters are coming and going from the scene. (11) is an example of this from a passage in the story “The Calabash Bowl of Shee and Nyushav”:

(11) a. Scenario 4: In the story, an old lady has told a girl to go to a house and enter it. After the girl leaves, the old lady follows. Then...

- b. Wù lòo dù, e yèn lav yaàya, e nòó sho.
 3.SG as go and see house mother and enter to.it
 ‘On her way the girl saw the old lady’s house and entered it.’

Yaàya nèn **siy** wiy fo bà.m.
 mother then ABT come from behind
 ‘The old lady then followed her (the girl) after she (the girl) had left.’
 (Grebe 1976a [2008]: 5)

It is clear from the context in (11) – and to a lesser extent in (8) – that the relevant absentee was in fact absent at the time the reported/narrated events took place, even if *siy* is not used. The use of *siy* in non-requests as observed in texts and based on my consultants’ intuitions, then, can be seen as an optional way of emphasizing known information; this contrasts with its use in requests where it crucially specifies a spatial orientation that *should* exist. This perhaps reflects a difference between a realis use in narratives and reports, and an irrealis use in requests.

Lastly, there is an exceptional class of examples in narratives where the “absentee” can be a stranger; this is thus a loosening of the concept of absence from (3) in that the absentee has not previously left a shared deictic centre. Here the effect seems to be to emphasize the fact that the addressee was not present at the time of the events of the story. (12) illustrates this with a passage from “The Story of the Ground Squirrel and the Rat Mole”, where the rat mole relates his troubles to an assemblage of new characters in the story. In (12) the rat mole is indicating that at the time he greeted his friend the ground squirrel, the animals in the audience were not present.

(12) a. Scenario 5: The rat mole gathers all the animals together, presumably strangers and acquaintances alike, to tell them about the problems he is having with his friend the ground squirrel.⁶

⁵ Verbs of inherently directed motion can also be used in requests, but a number of details concerning this use are still not clear at this point.

⁶ The fact that there might be acquaintances in the rat mole’s audience is incidental. Furthermore, it is possible to have an audience of addressee(s) that is completely made up of strangers.

- b. ... wù ghán, e bà'ti nyám sidzèm, sí kaári.
 3.SG walk and gather meat all IMPRF(?) go.around
 ‘...he (rat mole) went and gathered all the animals, and they came together.’

Wù suúy jii ee wun siíy dù kíngàn e ñkar rə la', kinyo
 3.SG say COMP oh 3.SG ABT go greet at friend of house something
 ki koóy á wun.
 AGR happen EVID 3.SG
 ‘...he (rat mole) said that, oh dear him!, he had gone to visit his friend (ground squirrel),
 and something had happened to him (rat mole).’ (Grebe 1976c [2007]: 7)

4. Semantic and syntactic restrictions on *siiy*

In this section I first look in more detail at who/what can be a subject as well as an absentee with *siiy* before turning to the range of predicates that *siiy* appears with. I then introduce an aspectual restriction with *siiy*. Finally I consider some scope restrictions of *siiy*.

I begin with subjects. Requests are made to humans (or anthropomorphic things), thereby restricting the subject, but in reporting/narrative contexts there do not appear to be any restrictions. (13) gives examples with various animate and inanimate subjects.

- (13)a. Jui-yi siiy kpu.
 dog-PST3 ABT diePST3.PRF
 ‘A dog died while you were away.’
- b. Rəə riy-i siiy ke'.
 war that-PST3 ABT begin.PST3.PRF
 ‘That war began while you were away.’
- c. Wuu siiy a lo.
 rain ABT AUX fall.PST2.PRF
 ‘It rained while you were away.’

As for the absentee, in addition to the human absentees we have seen in previous examples, (14b) shows that (14a) can be construed as having a non-human, animate absentee. Absentees are restricted to being animate, though, as (14c) shows.

- (14)a. Wu-u siiy kiy kiban.
 3.SG-PST2 ABT pound.PST2.PRF fufu
- b. ‘She prepared corn fufu after the dog left.’
- c. # ‘She prepared corn fufu after she lost a mango.’

Turning now to predicate type, *siiy* can occur freely with a variety of different predicates. The sentences in (15) show an accomplishment, activity, and achievement respectively. These examples contain transitive and unergative verbs, but unaccusatives are also possible, as shown in (16).

- (15)a. Wo-o siiy bəm lav. *Accomplishment*
 2.SG-PST3 ABT build.PST3.PRF house
 ‘You built a house while I was away.’

- b. Wu-u **siiy** a le'. *Activity*
 3.SG-PST2 ABT AUX run.PST2.PRF
 'He ran while you were away.'
- c. Mo-o **siiy** kiisi yowni. *Achievement*
 1.SG-PST3 ABT cough.PST3.PRF yesterday
 'I coughed yesterday while you were away.'
- (16)a. Wu **siiy** gbu.
 3.SG ABT fall.PST1.PRF
 'He fell while you were away.'
- b. Wu **siiy** lay.
 3.SG ABT disappear.PST1.PRF
 'He disappeared while you were away.'

The sentences in (15) and (16) all involve some sort of change after the absentee's departure; similarly with the stative(-like) predicates in (17), *siiy* coerces an inchoative sense of change/becoming.

- (17)a. Wu-u **siiy** a koj wun.
 3.SG-PST2 ABT AUX love.PST2.PRF 3.SG
 'He fell in love with her while you were away.'
- b. A **siiy** a dzə cia a?
 2.SG ABT AUX be teacher Q
 'Will you (get your education and) become a teacher while I'm away?'

But in other stative examples such as (18), the effect of *siiy* is more accurately described as belonging to a dynamic predicate (*sensu* Comrie 1976: 49), such that a constant input of energy is required in order for the state to hold. One possible restriction on *siiy*, then, is in predicates where this dynamic reading does not obtain, as in (19). However any tendencies such as change of state or dynamicity should merely be taken as rough generalizations until further work is done on the lexical semantics of predicates and on properties of the subjects (e.g. whether they are mass or count).

- (18) A **siiy** a waa dzə (i) lav.
 2.SG ABT AUX should be (in) house
 'Stay/remain in the house while I'm away.'
- (19) # Shota **siiy** dor.
 sweater ABT small.PST1.PRF
 'The sweater was small/remain small/got smaller while you were away.'⁷

What appears to be a more syntactic restriction is the fact that in past tenses at least, *siiy* is restricted to occurring only in the perfective aspect. This is illustrated in the paradigm in (20) where tone plays a crucial role in distinguishing aspect; note that the auxiliary *a* is necessary in PST2 just in case *siiy* is used (but cf. note 4). Also, when *siiy* is used in the past perfective, it seems that the action

⁷ One could get a change of state reading by changing the predicate. (i) has the augmentative verb extension, which has a causative meaning (see Yuka 2008 and Mba and Ndzenyuy 2003).

- (i) Shota **siiy** cəm-ir.
 sweater ABT shrink-AUG
 'The sweater got smaller while you were away.'

must have been begun and completed (i.e. reach its natural endpoint) in someone's absence, whereas the use of the perfective alone does not necessarily indicate such completion.

- (20) a. Wan-i **siiy** (*a) yí kiban. b. *Wan-i **siiy** yí kiban.
 child-PST3 ABT (AUX) eat.PST3.PRF fufu child-PST3 ABT eat.PST3.IMPRF fufu
 'The child ate fufu while X was away.' 'The child was eating fufu while X was away.'
- c. Wan-i **siiy** *(a) yí kiban. d. *Wan-i **siiy** yí kiban,
 child-PST2 ABT (AUX) eat.PST2.PRF fufu child-PST2 ABT eat.PST2.IMPRF fufu
 'The child ate fufu while X was away.' tóŋ-í.
 cry-ASP(?)
 'The child was crying while eating fufu while X was away.'
- e. Wan (ki) **siiy** (*a) yí kiban. f. *Wan (ki) **siiy** yí kiban.
 child (PST1) ABT (AUX) eat.PST1.PRF fufu child (PST1) ABT eat.PST1.IMPRF fufu
 'The child ate fufu while X was away.' 'The child was eating fufu while X was away.'

In the final set of data, I introduce some scopal properties of *siiy*. First, the scope of *siiy* is clause-bound. In (21) there is a clear difference in what *siiy* takes scope over: *siiy* cannot scope out of the embedded clause. That is, it cannot take scope over the selecting verb *remember*.

- (21) a. M-kuum-i ji wo-o **siiy** yen a film vøy.
 1.SG-remember-ASP(?) COMP 2.SG-PST2 ABT see.PST2.PRF AUX film that
 'I remember that it was the case that I was away when you watched that movie.'
- b. M-**siiy** kuum-i ji wo-o yen a film vøy.
 1.SG-ABT remember-ASP(?) COMP 2.SG-PST2 see.PST2.PRF AUX film that
 'Now that I'm away from you, I remember that you watched that movie (with me).'
 [said e.g. on the phone]

A more subtle example is in (22). In (22a) *siiy* takes scope over *ta'*=want and can be used to report to the addressee what the speaker wanted to do in the addressee's absence. In (22b) *siiy* takes scope below *ta'*=want and can be used to report to the addressee why the speaker did not want to go out and leave with the addressee.

- (22) a. Mo-o **siiy** a ta' yí nyam.
 1.SG-PST2 ABT AUX want.PST2.PRF eat meat
 'While you were away, I wanted to eat meat.'
- b. Mo-o ta' **siiy** a yí nyam.
 1.SG-PST2 want.PST2.PRF ABT AUX eat meat
 'I just wanted to stay home and eat meat.'

Finally, negation scopes over *siiy*. Thus (23a) unambiguously means (23b) with NEG > *siiy*, and not (23c).

(23)a. Wu yo' siiy le film(...wu siiy a yi a dzə kiban).
 3.SG NEG ABT watch.PST1.PRF film(...3.SG ABT AUX eat.PST1.PRF but be fufu)

b. 'It was not the case that he saw the film when I was away (...rather he ate fufu).

c. # 'He saw the film when I wasn't away (i.e. I was there when he saw the film).'

Based on the data in (21-23), then, the tentative conclusion is that *siiy* rigidly takes scope based on its surface position.

5. Remarks

In this paper I have introduced the morpheme *siiy* in Lamnso' and claimed that its primary function is to express absence. I have shown how it is used in requests and reporting/narrative contexts, in particular detailing the spatial orientation that is relevant for absence, as well as outlining some ways that *siiy* interacts with other components of the semantics and syntax in the grammar. Areas that require a more detailed empirical investigation include refining what restriction(s) exists with respect to *siiy* and predicate type, whether there are preferences or additional factors involved in the apparently more optional use of *siiy* in non-requests (e.g. I have not looked at when *siiy* is not used in narratives), more precisely how *siiy* is used in tenses other than the past, and what the relation between *siiy* and perfective aspect is.

Typologically, although the concept of absence is unquestionably a grammatical property of language and can be found in a number of unrelated languages in diverse ways, it is not entirely clear how to incorporate *siiy* into existing linguistic models or theories. Some examples of languages and their strategies to express absence are the following: (i) an infinitival construction in various European languages (e.g. German, Dutch, Italian, and Hungarian; see Abraham 2007 and Haslinger 2007); (ii) a relinquitive applicative in Hakha-Lai (Tibeto-Burman, spoken in Burma, India, and Bangladesh; see Peterson 2003); and (iii) determiners that encode absence in St'át'imcets Salish (Salishan, Canada; see van Eijk 1997 and Matthewson 2005). Importantly though, the absentive construction in all of these languages differs from that in Lamnso' in that in all of these languages the absentee is overt in the clause where the absentive morphology appears, whereas in Lamnso' the absentee remains unexpressed and must be determined from the context.⁸ It would be instructive to see whether areally/genetically-related languages have a similar phenomenon or have lexical cognates with *siiy* that could shed light on the historical development of the functional role of this morpheme.

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⁸ Meithei (Tibeto-Burman, spoken in India, Burma, and Bangladesh) is one language that may have a morpheme similar to *siiy* (see Chelliah 1997: 221-224). Data is limited, though, and further research is necessary to compare the languages.

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