

Tense or Aspect in Manipuri

著者(英)	Chungkham Yashawanta Singh
journal or publication title	Senri Ethnological Studies
volume	41
page range	143-151
year	1995-07-17
URL	http://doi.org/10.15021/00002994

Tense or Aspect in Manipuri

Chungkham Yashawanta SINGH*

In light of the general definition of Tense and Aspect, this paper makes an attempt to see whether tense and aspect are found in Manipuri (Meiteilon). Secondly I investigate which one, aspect or tense, is predominant.

1. CONCEPT OF TENSE

The term tense derives (via Old French) from the Latin translation of the Greek word for "time" [Greek *khronos*, Latin *tempus*] (Lyons 1968). Tense is a category used in the grammatical description of verbs, referring primarily to the way the grammar marks the time at which the action denoted by the verb took place. In the very short and precise words of Comrie, "tense is grammaticalized expression of location in time" (Comrie 1985a). One can look at a particular form in a language, determine whether or not it is a grammatical category, and then pronounce it to be tense or something different. The difference between *Jack goes* and *Jack went* in English is one of tense, whereas that between *Jack goes* and *Jack is going* is rather one of aspect.

It is an empirical claim that tense is expressed by means of grammatical categories, for instance, in English, Hindi etc. It is also an empirical claim that, in fact, tense is not found in all languages (Lyons 1968).

In some instances, the claim that a certain culture lacks a concept of time is based simply on the fact that the language in question has no grammatical device expressing location in time, i.e., has no tense. Perhaps the most famous such equivocation is in Whorf's account of Hopi, where absence of straightforward past, present and future categories, and the overriding grammatical importance of aspect and mood is taken to be indicative of a radically different conceptualization of time¹⁾.

Ullian has a slightly different view and uses specific terms to express tense. In order to refer to time or sequence of events or states—in natural languages, one or more points of reference are required. There are two types according to Ullian (1978). They are (1) the moment of speech (MOS) and (2) relative time.²⁾ In

*Manipur University

1) Carroll (1956). For a thorough refutation of Whorf's views on Hopi time, see Malotki (1983).

case the relation between the two is linguistically grammaticalized in a language then there is tense otherwise there is no question of tense. Here it will be more relevant to consider aspect.

2. GENERAL CONCEPT OF ASPECT

In the words of Holt (1943) "aspects are a different way of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation." In other words, aspect indicates the internal structure of an event or situation. A well studied "aspectual" contrast between perfective and imperfective is found in many Slavic languages. In Russian, for example, there is a perfective/imperfective contrast. For instance, the perfective form *on pročital* "he read (some)," and the imperfective form *on čital* "he used to read/was reading (something)." The former refers to the completion of an action while the latter expresses duration without specifying completion.

Because of this, it can be easily maintained that tense is a deictic category, i.e. locates situations in time, usually with reference to the present moment, though also with reference to other situations. Aspect is not concerned with relating the time of the situation to any other time point, but rather with the internal temporal constituency of the one situation. One could state the difference as one between situation—internal time (aspect) and situation—external time (tense). Tense locates the event in time while aspect characterises the internal temporal structure of the event (Chung and Timberlake 1985). In a more elaborate manner, this can be seen in the words of Givón.

"Tense involves primarily our experience/concept of time as points of a sequence, and thus the notions of precedence and subsequence. Aspect of various kinds involves our notion of the boundedness of time-spans, i.e. various configurations of beginning, ending and middle points. But in the semantic space of aspect, nearly always some element of tense is also involved, in terms of establishing a point of reference along sequential time."

(Givón 1984: 272)

We can give favourable consideration to Sino-Tibetan linguists' opinion that tense is not distinct in Tibeto-Burman languages. This indistinctiveness of tense is one of the structural features of the Tibeto-Burman (TB) languages. Bauman (1975) remarks that morphologically unmarked status of tense is a feature of TB. Again Zograph (1980) remarks that tense (a relative time) is usually expressed by the addition of supplementary focussing words.

The indistinctiveness of tense, without any exception, is also seen in the Kuki-Chin sub-group of the TB family. In the study of tense in Meiteilon, a major

2) The moment of speech (MOS), that point or span of time in which the speaker produces an utterance. Relative time (R), any point or span of time that occurs before, after or contemporaneously with the MOS and functions as a surrogate MOS which serves as the basis for predications involving time (or sequence) relative to itself.

language of the sub-group, we can see two diametrically opposed opinions. The traditional Manipuri Sanskrit scholars³⁾ have held firmly that Manipuri has tense—present, past and future; one, present, past and future, respectively, is again analysed into four units, indefinite, continuous, perfect and perfect continuous. Thoudam (1988) gives as his view that the tense system found in Greek, Latin and Sanskrit is not found in this language. Tense, in this language, is shown by an adverbial time element, not by morphological markers. He further strongly claimed that the markers—present:-y: past:-rəm-, -khi; future: gəni/kəni etc. (regarded as tense markers by the traditional scholars)—are not tense, but aspect markers. He shows, for instance, that in a given verb form it is possible for two ‘tense-markers’ (past + future) to occur together, as in the following example (1–4):

- (1) V + Past + Future
iroy-khi-gəni
swim-past-future
- (2) phu-rəm-gəni
beat-past-future
- (3) ca-khi-rəm-gəni
eat-past-past-future
- (4) ca-khi-rəm-khi-gəni
eat-past-past-future

3) There is a group of grammarians namely, Kalachand Shastri, Nandalal Sharma, Dwijamani Dev Sharma and others. No doubt, they were the pioneers and made great contributions. They knew Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali etc., but they were not actually trained in linguistics. They analyzed Manipuri through the eyes of those languages they knew. They were convinced that Manipuri has tense, each present, past and future, each again analyzed into four units—indefinite, continuous, perfect and perfect continuous.

<i>PRESENT</i>	<i>MARKERS</i>	<i>PAST</i>	<i>MARKERS</i>
1. Indefinite	-y, -ŋi, -pi, -mi, -li	1. Indefinite	-rəmi/ləmi, -khi
2. Continuous	-ri/-li	2. Continuous	-rəmli/-ləmli
3. Perfect	-re/le	3. Perfect	-rəmle/ləmle -khre
4. Perfect Cont.	-rəkli/ləkli	4. Perfect Cont.	-dunə + rəmi -khi, rəmi/ləmi

<i>FUTURE</i>	<i>MARKERS</i>
1. Indefinite	-gəni/kəni
2. Continuous	-dunə + gəni, tunə + təni
3. Perfect	-rəgəni/ləgəni, -khrəgəni
4. Perfect Cont.	-dunə + ləythəkhrə + gəni

The meanings of the above examples (1-4) do not specifically indicate tense but rather give the meaning of 'doubt' to the action.

Another scholar, Mahabir (1988), in one of his seminar papers, mentioned "Meiteilon as a tenseless language." A verb form can occur with different temporal adverbs that refer to different times without any change, in other words, time reference is not grammaticalized. This is supported by the following examples:

- (5) mähak kophi thək-y
 he coffee drink
 "He drinks coffee."
- (6) mähak ṅəraṅ kophi thək-y
 "Yesterday he took coffee."
- (7a) nəṅ-nə ṅəsi ca-məna ləy-drə-bədi
 you-nom today tea-leaf buy-not-if
 həyeṅ kophi thək-y
 tomorrow coffee drink
 "If you don't buy tea today, then tomorrow we will naturally take coffee."

The fact of "have not" is that a verbal form can go with different temporal adverbs that refer to different times without any change in it, in other words time reference is not grammaticalized. This is supported by the following sentences:

- (7b) mähak hidak thək-y
 he medicine drink
- (7c) mähak ṅəraṅ kophi thək-y
 "Yesterday he took coffee."
- (7d) nəṅ-nə ṅəsi hidak ləy-drə-bədi
 you-nom today medicine buy-not-if
 həyeṅ ədum si
 tomorrow die
 "If you don't buy medicine today, then tomorrow naturally he will die."

The verb *thək-y* remains in all the sentences without even a change to the suffix *-y*. The meaning of sentence (5) is "He has the habit of drinking coffee," or it may be a simple statement, "He takes coffee." The same suffix *-y* occurs with the adverbial time *nəraṅ* "yesterday" in sentence (6). In the case of (7a), the same suffix *-y* can occur with the adverbial time *həyeṅ* "tomorrow." Some more sentences can be studied with the different markers *-re/le* or *-khre*, which express 'completion of the action'. These markers can grammatically occur with various adverbs of time, e.g. *həyeṅ* "tomorrow," *həṅcit* "the day after tomorrow," *məsem* "in two days' time."

- (8) nəŋ həyeŋ phawbə lak-trə-bədi əykhoy
 you tomorrow till come-neg-if we
 ədum cət-le
 naturally go-
 “In case you don’t come till tomorrow we will naturally go the day after tomorrow” (we have decided to be leave after tomorrow).

- (9) məhak həyeŋ lak-lə-bədi əy khudəktə
 he tomorrow come-asp-if I at once
 cət-khre haynə khəl-lo
 go- connector think-comd. mk.
 “In case he comes tomorrow think that I left the place at once” (you should take into account that I had left the place at once).

The argument put forward here is that in these three conditional clauses (7), (8) and (9), the future adverbs of time (*həyeŋ* “tomorrow” etc.) are grammatically allowed to occur with the “action completed marker” *-re/le* or *-khre*. But in simple sentences occurring with future temporal adverbs, say *həyeŋ* “tomorrow,” *həŋcit* “day after tomorrow” etc., the suffix *-gəni/ -kəni* is added to the verb, as in:

- (10) məhak həyeŋ imphal cət-kəni
 he tomorrow go-
 “Tomorrow he will go to Imphal.”
- (11) məkhoy həŋcit-ti nəla seŋdok-kəni
 they day-after tomorrow drainage clean-
 “They will clean the drainage the day after tomorrow.”
- (12) əykhoy həyeŋ ciŋ ka-gəni
 we tomorrow mountain climb-
 “Tomorrow we will climb the mountain.”

It is certain that the question of absolute tense—past, present, and future—does not arise. In this language one might say that the only tense distinction grammatically is future and non-future. On the contrary most European languages have a clear grammatical distinction between past and non-past. In many European languages the so-called present tense is in fact the normal verb form used to indicate future time reference, as for instance, German *ich gehe morgen* “I will go (literally—I go) tomorrow.” One might argue that while the difference between past and present is indeed one of tense, that between future on the one hand and past and present on the other should be treated as a difference of mood rather than one of tense. In other words, the use of distinct forms for present and future time reference is not due to the tense system of the language in question but rather to its modal system or aspect system.

Some languages have a basic modal or aspect distinction between *realis* for what has actually taken place or is actually taking place, and *irrealis* used for more

hypothetical situations including inductive generalizations or predictions about the future. We can mention Dyirbal as one language of this kind. Another example is Burmese, where the sentence final particle—*te/-tha/-ta/-hma* is used for *irrealis*. The two languages, Dyirbal and Burmese, are treated as tenseless languages. This can be seen from some Burmese sentences:

- (13) saneineita in mye hpya -te
 Saturday every grasscut-
 "He cuts the grass every Saturday."
- (14) da-caunmou ma-la-ta
 that because of not come
 "Because of that (they) did not come."
- (15) mane hpan sa-me
 tomorrow begin
 "(we) will begin tomorrow."
- (16) macithi sa-hpu-me htin-te
 tamarind fruit eat ever think-
 "I think he must have eaten tamarind before."

What we can see here is that in (14) the *realis* particle *-ta* is used (where the act has taken place) and in (15) the *irrealis* particle *-me* is used (where it is in a hypothetical action). But in (16) the two different particles (*-me* and *-te*) occur together, *realis -te* to indicate what "I" actually think and *irrealis -me* to indicate a supposition as to what he may have done. The time reference of the *irrealis -me* is in fact prior to that of the *realis -te*, indicating clearly that time reference is not basic to the opposition between these particles. This clearly shows that time reference per se is not grammaticalized, that is, there is no tense. It is, of course, possible for time reference to be expressed in other ways (lexically for instance, by the use of adverbials like *mane hpan* "tomorrow" and *maniya* "yesterday"). Aspect seems more relevant than tense in this language.

3. PREDOMINANCE OF ASPECT

Thus it would be more feasible to discuss aspect in Manipuri, not tense. It would be more convincing to say that there are four aspects. They are discussed below.

a. Simple aspect: this expresses simple statement or habitual meaning. The markers are *-y*, *-mi*, *-ni*, *-pi* etc. in Manipuri, as in:

- (17) mähak lay yek-y
 he picture draw-
 "He draws a picture."

- (18) sima-nə sa thoŋ-ŋi
 sima-nom meat cook-
 "Sima cooks the meat."
 (19) əŋaŋ-du kənnə kəp-pi
 baby-det. seriously cry-
 "The baby cries seriously."

b. Continuous aspect: this is denoted by *-ri/li* as in the following sentences.

- (20) məhak həwjik layrik pa-ri
 he now book read-
 "He is now reading."
 (21) john lay yek-li
 picture draw-
 "John is painting a picture."
 (22) əykhoy isəy ta-ri
 we song hear-
 "We are hearing the song."

c. Perfect aspect: this is indicated by *-re/-le* or *-khre*, as in sentences (23-25):

- (23) məkhoy philəm-du yeŋ-le
 they film-det. see-
 "They have seen the picture."
 (24) məhak cak ca-khre
 he rice eat-
 "They had taken their meals."
 (25) nupaməcha-siŋ skul cət-khre
 boy-pl. school go-
 "The boys had/have gone to school."

d. *Irrealis* or unrealized aspect: this is used for actions which will take place in the near future. Manipuri uses a suffix *-gəni/-kəni* as in sentences (26-28):

- (26) əy kəythel cət-kəni
 I market go-
 "I shall/will go to market."
 (27) əy-nə Tomba-bu phu-gəni
 I-nom. Tomba-acc. beat-
 "I will/shall beat Tomba."
 (28) əykhoy-nə məkhoy-bu təmbi-gəni
 we-nom. they-acc. teach-
 "We will teach them."

4. CONCLUSION

From all this analysis, what we have learnt is that aspect is more predominant than tense in Manipuri. It is also found that in Manipuri, there are four aspects, —simple, continuous, perfect and unrealised. Other languages, like English have a two aspect opposition that pervades the whole verbal system, that between progressive (verb *to be* and verbal form *-ing*) and non-progressive. As for Russian, there is a broad aspectual opposition between perfective and imperfective. In the past tense also there is an aspectual opposition. In the non-past there is a distinction in the imperfective between present and future.

A more complex situation is found in Bulgarian. In addition to the opposition between perfective and imperfective, there is an opposition in the past tense only between imperfective and aorist. The imperfective has imperfective meaning and the aorist has perfective meaning. Such combinations as perfective-imperfective and imperfective-aorist are possible, and represent either combinations of different submeanings of perfective and imperfective meaning, or in the case of the imperfective aorist, can also represent a combination of perfective meaning with aspectually unspecified meaning. In addition, there is an opposition between perfect and non-perfect in all tenses. Manipuri is less complex in its aspectual system. Like Chinese, which has a limited number of verbal suffixes with aspect, Manipuri has a limited number of verbal suffixes to indicate different types of aspect.

REFERENCES

- Bauman, J. John
 1975 Pronouns and Pronominal Morphology in Tibeto-Burman. Unpublished thesis, University of California, Berkeley.
- Bhat, D.N.S. and M.S. Ningomba
 1966 *Chapters from a Manual of Manipuri Grammar (Monography)*. Manipur: Department of Manipuri Language and Literature, Manipur University.
- Carroll, John B. (ed.)
 1956 *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Chung, Sandra and Alan Timberlake
 1985 Tense, aspect and mood. In Timothy Shopenn (ed.), *Language Typology and Syntactic Description*, Vol. III. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 202-258.
- Comrie, Bernard
 1985a *Tense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 1985b *Aspect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Givón, Talmy
 1984 *Syntax: A Fundamental Typological Introduction*, Vol. I. Amsterdam: John Benjamin's Publishing Company.
- Holt, J.
 1943 *Etudes d'Aspect*. Acta Jutlandica 15.2.

Lalngawrlein

1988 A Descriptive Grammar of Hmar Language. Unpublished thesis, Manipur University.

Lyons, John

1968 *An Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mahabir, Laishram

1988 Manipuri as a tenseless language. (MS)

Malotki, Ekkehart

1983 *Hopi time*. Trends in Linguistics Studies and Monograph 20. Berlin: Mouton.

Thoudam, P.C.

1988 *TDC Remedial Manipuri Grammar*. Imphal: Book Land.

Ultan, Russell

1978 The nature of future tenses. In J.H. Greenberg (ed.), *Universals of Human Language*, Vol. 3. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, pp. 83-124.

Zograph, G.A.

1980 *Languages of South Asia: A Guide*. London: Longman.

