Tense or Aspect in Manipuri

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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, refering 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 time[1].

Ultan 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 Ultan (1978). They are (1) the moment of speech (MOS) and (2) relative time.[2] In

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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 se-
> quence, 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

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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 scholars[3] 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

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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.

	PRESENT	MARKERS		PAST	MARKERS
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

	FUTURE	MARKERS
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)   məhak   kophi   thək-y
       he   coffee   drink
       "He drinks coffee."

(6)   məhak   ŋəraŋ   kophi   thək-y
       "Yesterday he took coffee."

(7a)   nəŋ-nə   ŋəsi   ca-məna   ləy-drə-bədi
       you-nom   today   tea-leaf   buy-not-if
       həyeŋ   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)   məhak   hidak   thək-y
       he   medicine   drink

(7c)   məhak   ŋəraŋ   kophi   thək-y
       "Yesterday he took coffee."

(7d)   nəŋ-nə   ŋəsi   hidak   ləy-drə-bədi
       you-nom   today   medicine   buy-not-if
       həyeŋ   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 *nəraŋ* "yesterday" in sentence (6). In the case of (7a), the same suffix *-y* can occur with the adverbial time *həyeŋ* "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. *həyeŋ* "tomorrow," *həŋcit* "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)   mǝhak   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.

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