

TENSE AND ASPECT IN KUKI-CHIN

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1. GENERAL CONCEPT OF TENSE

In modern Western society, people are accustomed to very accurate specifications of time location and of other phenomena relating to time. Many are at home talking of very small stretches of time, such as minutes, seconds, etc. When the linguistic possibilities are combined with those of standard mathematical motion, an infinite degree of precision is in principle attainable. In many other cultures, however, such precision is not possible, except perhaps by direct borrowing of expressions from the languages of more advanced societies. Indeed, in some cultures, very little value is attached to precision in temporal location, so that in Yidiny, for instance, it is impossible to distinguish lexically between the concept of 'today' and 'now' (Dixon 1977:498-499).

In many Tibeto-Burman (TB) languages, it is possible to distinguish lexically between 'today' and 'now'. For instance, in Meiteilon there are ten lexicalized temporal adverbs, while Kom has eight, and Tangkhul, Hmar, and Lhota have seven, nine, and five, respectively. (See Table 1.) It should be noted that such expressions do not impinge at all on the grammar of the languages in question; rather, they use existing grammatical patterns. No language has grammatical devices to mark the exact location of an event in time. But in English, it is possible to locate a situation before the present moment or point of speech (by using the past tense) and even to locate a further situation prior to that first situation (by using the pluperfect). However, there is no way of quantifying grammatically the time lapse between the first and second situations, or between either of them and the present moment or point of speech.

The term "tense" derives (via Old French) from the Latin translation of the Greek word for "time" (Greek *khronos*, Latin *tempus*) (Lyons 1979:304). 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 pithy formulation of Comrie (1985a:9), "tense is the grammaticalized expression of location in time." One can investigate whether a particular form in a language does in fact express location in time and whether it

<i>gloss</i>	<i>Meiteilon</i>	<i>Kom</i>	<i>Hmar</i>	<i>Lhota</i>	<i>Tangkhal</i>
<i>day before yesterday</i>	-ṅəhan	-təniṅ	zaniməsak	oraṅ	əcomthanṅ
<i>yesterday</i>	-ṅəraṅ	-yaniṅ	zani	—	əya
<i>that moment before present</i>	-ṅəsai	-tuyelkhən / nəkakhən	—	—	—
<i>now</i>	-həwjik	tul	tuhin	anthoyin	əthəṅ
<i>today</i>	ṅəsi	—	byoisun	nəṅṅa	əruy
<i>that moment after present</i>	-horen	əkinle	nəke / nəke(le) əsgaro	fəloco	khənaw
<i>tomorrow</i>	-həyeṅ	ziṅṅa	ziṅṅa	fəloco	əkhəma
<i>day after tomorrow</i>	-həṅcit	ətip	ziṅnok	ratfə	khənawthəṅ
<i>3rd day from today</i>	məsem	—	ziṅnok	—	—
<i>4th day from today</i>	mərəw	—	—	—	—

Table 1.

is indeed a grammatical category, and then pronounce it to be tense or not. The difference between *Mary writes* and *Mary wrote* in English is one of tense, whereas the difference between *Mary writes* and *Mary is writing* involves not tense, but aspect.

It is an empirical claim that tense does exist, i.e., that there are languages (e.g., English and Hindi) that express location in time by means of grammatical categories. It is also an empirical claim that, in fact, tense itself is not found in all languages (Lyons 1968:304).

In some instances, the claim that a certain culture lacks any concept of time is based simply on the fact that the language in question has no grammatical device for expressing location in time, i.e., has no grammaticalized tense. Perhaps the most famous such formulation is in Whorf's account of Hopi, where the 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

2. TIME AND TENSE

Time itself does not provide any landmarks in terms of which one can locate situations. If time had a beginning, we do not know where that beginning was (other than, trivially, by saying that any situation is posterior to that beginning). If time has an end, again we do not know its location, so again no non-trivial location is possible relative to that end point. Therefore, it is necessary to establish some arbitrary reference point, with reference to which we can then locate situations in time.

What one finds most typically is the choice of the speech situation as the reference point, i.e., the present moment (for time), the present spot (for space), and the speaker and hearer (for person). As far as tense is concerned, the reference point is typically the present moment, and tenses locate situations either at the same time as the present moment, or prior, or subsequent to it, with further categories possible if degrees of remoteness from the present moment are distinguished grammatically.

Given the present moment as deictic center, it might seem trivially easy to define the three basic tenses that have formed the backbone of much linguistic work on time reference, i.e. present, past, and future. As is generally accepted, present tense means coincidence of the time of the situation and the present moment, past tense means location of the situation prior to the present moment, and future tense means location of the situation after the present moment.

¹ Carroll 1956; for a thorough refutation of Whorf's views on Hopi time see Malotki 1983.

Ultan (1978) has a slightly different view and uses more specific terms to express tense. In order to refer to time—or the sequence of events or states—in a natural language, one or more points of reference are required. There are two types according to Ultan:

- I. The moment of speech (MOS), that point or span of time in which the speaker produces an utterance;
- II. 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.

The tenses referred to so far have all related the time of the situation described to the present moment. Such tenses are termed absolute tenses. Another kind of time reference is relative reference, where, instead of the time of a situation being located relative to the present moment, it is related to the time of some other situation.

3. GENERAL CONCEPT OF ASPECT

The difference in French between *il lisait* and *il lut*, or in English between *he was writing* and *he wrote*, does not involve tense, since in both cases we have absolute past tense. Again, the difference in Meiteilon between **mohak cak ca-ri** 'he is taking his meal' and **mohak cak ca-re** 'he has taken his meal', is a matter of imperfective vs. perfective aspect, even where the grammatical terminology of an individual language might traditionally refer to them as tense. In the words of Holt (1943:6), "aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation." In other words, aspect indicates the internal structure of an event or situation. The two sentences of Meiteilon just cited show "the continuation of taking his meal" and "completion of taking his meal", respectively. That is why it is categorized as aspect, not as tense.

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. The former often refers to completion (*on procital* 'he read' [something]) and the latter expresses duration without specifying completion (*on cital* 'he used to read/was reading' [something]). The English verb phrase makes a formal distinction which is usually analyzed as aspectual: the contrast between progressive (or continuous) and non-progressive (or simple) duration of action. Other English constructions have sometimes been analyzed in terms of aspect, e.g., involving "habitual" contrasts (as in 'used to'); and in other languages further aspectual distinctions may be

found, e.g. "iterative" or "frequentative" (referring to a regularly-recurring action), "inchoative" or "inceptive" (referring to the beginning of an action).

From all this, it is clear that tense is a deictic category, i.e., it locates situations in time, usually with reference to the present moment, although 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 unitary situation; one could state the difference as one between internal time (aspect) and external time (tense). Tense locates the event in time, while aspect characterizes the internal temporal structure of the event (Chung and Alan 1985). In a more elaborate manner, this can be seen in the words of Givón (1984:272):

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.

4. MORPHOLOGICALLY UNMARKED STATUS OF TENSE IN KUKI-CHIN

Among students of tense in Meiteilon specifically, we can see two different opinions: those who believe Meiteilon *does* have tense, and those who maintain it does not. Traditional Manipuri Sanskrit scholars² have so firmly regarded Meiteilon as having tense that each Present, Past, and Future is further analyzed into four units: Indefinite, Continuous, Perfect, and Perfect Continuous, according to the following scheme:

- I. Present Tense
 - a) Present Indefinite: **-i, -ŋi, -pi, -mi, -li, -y, etc.**
 - b) Present Progressive: **-ri ~ -li**
 - c) Present Perfect: **-re ~ -le**
 - d) Present Perfect Continuous: **-rəkli ~ -ləkli**
- II. Past Tense
 - a) Past Indefinite: **-rəmi ~ -ləmi, -khi**

² This is a group of grammarians, including Kalachand Shastri, Nandalal Sharma, and Dwijamani Dev Sharma. No doubt they are pioneers, with a deep knowledge of Sanskrit, Hindi, and Bengali, but they are not actually trained in linguistics. They analyzed Manipuri (Meiteilon) from the perspective of the languages they knew.

- (2) məhak ɲəraŋ kophi thək-y
 he yesterday coffee drink-ASP
 'Yesterday he drank coffee.'

- (3) nəŋ-nə ɲəsi ca-mana ləy-drə-bədi
 you-NOM today tea-leaf buy-not-if

həyeŋ ədum kophi thək-y
 tomorrow so coffee drink-ASP

'If you don't buy tea-leaf today, then tomorrow naturally we will drink coffee.'

The verb form **thək-y** remains the same in all the sentences, without even changing the suffix **-y**. The meaning of sentence (1a) is 'He has the habit of drinking coffee.' The same suffix **-y** occurs with the time adverb **ɲəraŋ** 'yesterday', in sentence (1b), and with the time adverb **həyeŋ** 'tomorrow' in sentence (1c). But in a simple sentence containing future temporal adverbs, such as **həyeŋ** 'tomorrow', **həŋcit** 'day after tomorrow', etc., the suffix **-gəni / -kəni** is added to the verb, as in (2) and (3):

- (2) məhak həyeŋ Ukhrul cət-kəni
 he tomorrow Ukhrul go-ASP
 'Tomorrow he will go to Ukhrul.'

- (3) əy həyeŋ layrik-du pa-gəni
 I tomorrow book-DET read-ASP
 'Tomorrow I shall/will read that book.'

From the above examples, it can be inferred that tense is not distinctive. This nondistinctiveness of tense is one of the key structural features of TB languages (Bauman 1975). Similarly, Zograph (1980) remarks that tense is usually expressed by the addition of supplementary focusing words.

As in Meiteilon, other TB languages (e.g., Kom, Hmar, Paite, Tangkhul, and Lhota), use the same verb form in all the time-frames without any morphological marking for tense, as in the following sentences:

Kom:

- (4a) John-in lekha ə-sun
 John-NOM letter PRO-write
 'John writes a letter.'
- (4b) yaniŋ John-in lekha ə-sun
 yesterday John-NOM letter PRO-write
 'Yesterday John wrote a letter.'
- (4c) ziŋŋə John-in lekha ə-sun-sik
 tomorrow John-NOM letter PRO-write-FUT
 'Tomorrow John will write a letter.'

Hmar:

- (5a) lekha ka jiek
 letter I write
 'I write a letter.'
- (5b) jani lekha ka jiek
 yesterday letter I write
 'Yesterday I wrote a letter.'
- (5c) ka lekha jiek diŋ
 I letter write FUT
 'I shall write a letter.'

Tangkhu:

- (6a) John-nə letər kapi-ya
 John-NOM letter write-ASP
 'John writes a letter.'
- (6b) əyya John-nə letər kapi-ya
 yesterday John-NOM letter write-ASP
 'John writes a letter.'

- (6c) John-nə əkhəma letər kapi-ra
 'John-NOM tomorrow letter write-FUT
 'Tomorrow John will write a letter.'

Lhota:

- (7a) əmbo-nə kakoci aran-fo
 I-NOM letter write-ASP
 'I write a letter.'
- (7b) əmbo-nə kakoci əntfo aran-fo
 I-NOM letter yesterday write-ASP
 'Yesterday I wrote a letter.'
- (7c) əmbo-nə kakoci atfiya aran-ka
 I-NOM letter tomorrow write-FUT
 'Tomorrow I shall write a letter.'

From the above sentences one notices two things: first, the same form of the verb is used in all the tenses except future; second, futurity is indicated by a suffix **-gəni** / **-kəni** in Meiteilon, **-sik** in Kom, **-ra** in Tangkhul, and **-ka** in Lhota.

It is clear that the question of absolute tense—Past, Present, and Future—does not arise. In these languages, one might say that the only tenses distinguished grammatically are future and non-future, so that there is no specifically “past” tense. One might claim that these languages have a grammaticalized future tense, contrary to Comrie’s opinion that “no language has a grammaticalized future tense” (Comrie 1985:43).

The converse of the above observation is that a number of languages do not allow use of the same form for expressing present and future time reference. This might seem to establish future tense as a separate grammatical category for such languages. However, this is not necessarily the case. In many such instances, the use of distinct forms for present vs. future time reference is not due to the tense system of the language in question, but rather to its modal system or aspectual system.

5. QUESTIONS ON THE EXISTENCE OF TENSE IN KUKI-CHIN.

Some languages have a basic modal or aspectual distinction between *realis* and *irrealis*, where “realis” refers to situations that have actually taken place or are actually taking place, while “irrealis” is used for more hypothetical situations, including inductive generalizations and predictions, including predictions about the future. We can mention Dyrbal as one language of this kind.

Another example is Burmese, where the particles **-te / -tha / -ta / -hta** are used for *realis*, while **-me / -ma / -hma** are used for *irrealis*. Since future time reference in these languages is subsumed under *irrealis*, it is indeed the case that present and future time reference will have different grammatical realizations, but without it being the case that these languages have a distinct future tense. Rather, future time reference is just one of the interpretations possible for the *irrealis*.

Other TB languages can also be described in terms of the *realis-irrealis* distinction. What is significant in TB is aspectual systems, not tense systems. This can be seen from the following evidence.

First, we have shown that a verbal form can be used with different temporal adverbs that refer to different times, without undergoing any morphological alteration (examples 1-7). In other words, there is a lack of morphologically marked tense.

Second, how could a single verbal form contain two different tense markers? The Manipuri Sanskrit scholars have treated the suffixes **-rəm / -ləm, -khi** as morphological past tense markers, so that by their analyses a verb-form can take two markers of tense simultaneously:

A. Past + Present combination

1.	thək- drink	ləm- past	mi present	=	thək-ləm-mi
2.	ca- eat	rəm- past	mi present	=	ca-rəm-mi
3.	yek- draw	ləm- past	mi present	=	yek-ləm-mi
4.	iroy- swim	ləm- past	mi present	=	iroy-ləm-mi

B. Past + Future combination

1.	cət- go	ləm- past	gəni future	=	cət-ləm-gəni
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2.	phu- beat	rəm- past	gəni =	phu-rəm-ni
3.	pha- arrest	-rəm- past	gəni =	pha-rəm-gəni

It is not possible to express two tenses in a single verbal form. Furthermore, the respective markers seem to be losing their respective tense meanings and to be taking on some additional aspectual meanings; for instance, **ca-rəm-mi** (past + present) shows the simultaneous occurrence of two actions, i.e. the speaker's arrival at one's house and the action of eating one's meal; the marker **-rəm** never indicates completion of the action of eating the meal.

Third, the marker **-rəm** / **-ləm** has different meanings according to its cooccurrence with other suffixes. For example, if it occurs with **-i**, **-mi**, or **-li**, it then carries a definite meaning: definite performance of the action or the speaker's witness of the action. If the marker occurs with **-gəni** / **-kəni**, it indicates a meaning of uncertainty or doubt about the action.

The marker **-khi**, traditionally treated as a past tense marker, expresses completed action, or a definiteness of the action (e.g., an action witnessed by the speaker). Therefore, it can be treated as aspectual, not as a tense marker:

- (8) məhak kəythel cət-khi
 he market go-ASP
 'He has gone to market.' [definite]

- (9) məhak pukhri-si-də iroy-khi
 he pond-DET-DAT swim-ASP
 'He has swum in this pond.' [definite]

The actions 'going to market' in (8) and the 'swimming' in (9) are definite or are witnessed by the speaker. These two sentences differ from the following:

- (10) məhak kəythel cət-li
 'He goes to market.'

- (11) məhak pukhri-si-də iroy
 'He swims in this pond.'

The two sentences (10) and (11) express habitual activities, and are general statements. Such differences are also found in other languages, such as Lhota:

Lhota:

- | | | | |
|------|-----------------------|--------|--------|
| (12) | əmbo-na | kakoci | aranfo |
| | he-NOM | letter | write |
| | 'He writes a letter.' | | |

- | | | | |
|------|----------------------------|--------|-----------|
| (13) | əmbo-na | kakoci | aranfo-ka |
| | he-NOM | letter | write-ASP |
| | 'He has written a letter.' | | |

Sentence (12) expresses a simple or habitual statement while sentence (13) expresses completion and definiteness of the action by the suffix **-ka**. Similarly, Tangkhul has a suffix **-hayra**, indicating completion and definiteness of the action, as in sentence (14):

Tangkhul:

- | | | | |
|------|-------------------------|--------|------------------------------------|
| (14) | John-nə | letər | kapi-hayra [definite + completion] |
| | John-NOM | letter | write-ASP |
| (15) | John-nə | letər | kapi-ya [simple] |
| | John-NOM | letter | write-ASP |
| | 'John writes a letter.' | | |

This is also the situation in Kom:

Kom:

- | | | | |
|------|----------------------------|--------|----------------------------------|
| (16) | əma-n | lekha | ə-sun-jo [definite + completion] |
| | he-NOM | letter | PRO-write-ASP |
| | 'He has written a letter.' | | |
| (17) | əma-n | lekha | ə-sun |
| | he-NOM | letter | PRO-write |
| | 'He writes a letter.' | | |

In Meiteilon, when the marker **-ləm** occurs with **-gəni**, it conveys the meaning of 'doubt' or 'uncertainty', as in (18) and (19):

- (18) mähak cithi i-rəm-gəni
 he letter write-ASP-ASP
 'He might have written a letter.'
- (19) mähak pukhri-si-də iroy-rəm-gəni
 he pond-DET-DAT swim-ASP-ASP
 'He might have swum in this pond.'

6. PREDOMINANCE OF ASPECT IN KUKI-CHIN

It is clear, then, that we are dealing with aspect in TB, not with tense. Yashawanta Singh (1995) has also expressed the opinion that in Manipuri aspect is more significant than tense. Hoshi (1994:685) has held that the Lhasa dialect of Modern Tibetan has non-perfect continuative aspect with four usages (durative, static, iterative, and prospective), with the usages differentiated by auxiliary verbs.

The aspectual categories we have identified in Kuki-Chin so far include:

1. *Simple aspect*: expressing general or habitual statements. In Meiteilon the markers of this aspect include **-y**, **-li**, **-mi**, **-ŋi**, and **-pi**, as in (20) and (21):

- (20) mähak lay yek-y
 he picture draw-ASP
 'He draws a picture.'
- (21) əŋaŋ-si həwnə kəp-pi
 child-DET loudly cry-ASP
 'The child cries loudly.'

In Tangkhul, the markers are **-ya** and **-ha**:

- (22) i-nə səŋkhə thəy-ya
 I-NOM tiger see-ASP
 'I see a tiger.'

- (23) simji əhəklak-ha
 house big-ASP
 'The house is big.'

In Lhota, the markers are **-fo**, **-na**:

- (24) əmbo-na Jack-ci phəri-na nutuk-fo
 I-NOM Jack-ACC garden-in meet-ASP
 'I meet Jack in the garden.'
- (25) thera sitfo amho-na
 flower be nice-ASP
 'The flower is nice.'

2. *Progressive aspect*: marked by **-ri** / **-li** in Meiteilon:

- (26) məhak həwjik iryjə-ri
 he now bath-ASP
 'He is now taking a bath.'
- (27) noŋ ta-ri
 rain falling-ASP
 'It is raining.'

In Lhota, the corresponding aspect marker is **-la**:

- (28) əmbo-na kakoci aran-la
 he-NOM letter write-ASP
 'He is writing a letter.'
- (29) Jack-na sapatə yo-la
 Jack-NOM tea drink-ASP
 'Jack is drinking tea.'

Tangkhum uses **-dələy** for this aspect, as in (30) and (31):

- (30) məhak letər kapi-dələy
 he letter write-ASP
 'He is writing a letter.'

- (31) Jack ca məŋ-dələy
 Jack tea drink-ASP
 'Jack is drinking tea.'

Kom uses a marker **-lə-**, which is prefixed to the verb, for indicating continuous aspect, as in (32) and (33):

- (32) əma ca ə-lə-in
 he tea PRO-ASP-drink
 'He is drinking tea.'

- (33) əma-n thiŋ ə-lə-ten
 he-NOM log PRO-ASP-cut
 'He is cutting a log.'

Hmar uses **-lay / -jin** for progressive aspect:

- (34) bu ka fak-lay / -jin
 rice I eat-ASP
 'I am eating my meal.'

- (35) tuy ən don-lay / -jin
 water they drink-ASP
 'They are drinking water.'

3. *Perfective aspect: -re / -le or -khre* in Meiteilon, as in (36) and (37).

- (36) məkhoy philəm-du yeŋ-le
 they film-DET see-ASP
 'They have seen the movie.'

- (37) ima kəyθel cət-khre
 my mother market go-ASP
 'My mother has gone to market.'

Kom has **-jo** for indicating this aspect:

- (38) əma-n θiŋ ə-ten-jo
 he-NOM log PRO-cut-ASP
 'He has cut the log.'

- (39) əma-n ca ə-in-jo
 he-NOM tea PRO-drink-ASP
 'He has drunk tea.'

Unlike these languages, Hmar has two types of perfect: simple perfect, indicated by the particle **car / hlol / hlim**, and perfective of remoteness, indicated by **day-ta?**, as in (40) and (41), respectively:

- (40) bu ka fak car / hlol / hlim
 rice I eat ASP
 'I have eaten my meal.'

- (41) lekha ə-jiek day-ta?
 letter PRO-write ASP
 'He had written a letter.' [remote]

Tangkhum uses **-hayra** or **-hayra-say** for perfective aspect, as in (42) and (43):

- (42) i-na saŋkhə θəy-hayra / hayra-say
 I-NOM tiger see-ASP
 'I have seen a tiger.'

- (43) Jack-li yamkui-li samphəŋ-hayra / hayra-say
 Jack-ACC garden-LOC meet-ASP

'I have met Jack in the garden.'

4. *Action that will take place in the near future.* This type of aspect may be labelled as irrealis or unrealised. Meiteilon here uses the suffix **-gəni** / **-kəni**, as in (44) and (45):

(44) əy khəyθel cət-kəni
I market go-ASP
'I shall go to market.'

(45) əy kəyəŋ məhək-ki luhonbə yaw-gəni
I tomorrow he-GEN marriage attend-ASP
'Tomorrow I shall attend his marriage.'

For this aspect, Hmar uses **diŋ**, which can cooccur with **ani?** to express definiteness, as in (47). There is also another morpheme, **ti?**, which must occur alone, and which requires that the verb precede the subject, as in (48).

(46) ka fe diŋ
I go ASP
'I shall go.'

(47) ka fe diŋ ani?
I go ASP DEFINITENESS
'I will go.' [definitely]

(48) fen ka ti?
go I ASP
'I will go.'

Lhota uses a suffix **-ka**, as in (49):

(49) kakoci əmbo-na aranso-ka
letter he-NOM write-ASP
'He will write a letter.'

Tangkhul uses **-ra**:

- (50) John-nə letər kapi-ra
 John-NOM letter write-ASP
 'John will write a letter.'

Kom uses **-sik**:

- (51) John-in lekha ə-sun-sik
 John-NOM letter PRO-write-ASP
 'John will write a letter.'

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it seems clear that aspect (rather than tense) is the salient grammatical category in the TB verb-phrase. The four principal aspectual categories are Simple, Progressive, Perfect, and Unrealized.

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