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

gloss	Meiteilon	Kom	Hmar	Lhota	Tangkhul
day before yesterday	-ŋəhan	-təniŋ	zaniməsak	oraŋ	əcomthaŋ
yesterday	-ŋəraŋ	-yaniŋ	zani	—	əya
that moment before present	-ŋəsay	-tuyelkhən / nəkakhən	—	—	—
now	-həwjik	tul	tuhin	anthoyin	əthəŋ
today	ŋəsi	—	byoisun	nəŋŋa	əruy
that moment after present	-horen	əkinle	nəke / nəke(le) əsgaro	fəloco	khənaw
tomorrow	-həyeŋ	ziŋŋa	ziŋŋa	fəloco	əkhəma
day after tomorrow	-həŋcit	ətip	ziŋnok	ratfə	khənawthəŋ
3rd day from today	məsem	—	ziŋnok	—	—
4th day from today	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.

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[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 **məhak cak ca-ri** 'he is taking his meal' and **məhak 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