ASPECT AND TENSE IN THE BISU LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION

Bisu is a Burmese-Yipho language spoken in southwestern China and northern Thailand. This paper is a preliminary study of aspect and tense in the dialect of Bisu spoken in Lancang County, Yunnan Province, China.

ASPECT

There are six aspects in Bisu: immediate, habitual, progressive, continuous, conclusive, and experiential. Each aspect is expressed by a different aspectual marker (glossed as ASP\(^2\)), which consists of one or more independent syllables following verbs or adjectives functioning as predicates.

1. Immediate aspect. Marker: ni\(^{55}\)a\(^{31}\)

This aspect denotes an action or event that will occur soon, or that represents a change in the existing conditions, or that will happen in the near future:

(1) zaŋ\(^{33}\) la\(^{55}\) ni\(^{35}\)a\(^{31}\)
    he         come       ASP
    'He will come.'

(2) a\(^{31}\)mjaŋ\(^{31}\) aŋ\(^{33}\)za\(^{31}\) ky\(^{t55}\) lu\(^{13}\) ni\(^{55}\)a\(^{31}\)
    calf    little  bear  come down  ASP
    'A little calf will be born.'

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2 Abbreviations: ASP = aspect marker; AUX = auxiliary; CLASS = classifier; CONJ = conjunction; N = noun; PRT = particle; Q = question; V = verb
(3) \( \text{va}^{31} \text{za}^{31} \text{ vai}^{31} \text{ nen}^{31} \text{ da}^{55} \text{ ni}^{55a}^{31} \)  
  piglets soon jostle injure ASP  
  ‘The piglets will soon be injured by the jostling.’

(4) \( \text{zum}^{55} \text{ an}^{33s}^{31} \text{ vai}^{31} \text{ tsho}^{33} \text{ p\gamma n}^{55} \text{ ni}^{55a}^{31} \)  
  house new soon build finish ASP  
  ‘The new house will soon be all built.’

These sentences do not express established facts, but merely possibilities or predictions, which may become reality in the future.

2. Habitual aspect. Marker: \( \text{ne}^{55} \).

This aspect denotes an actual state. It is used more often than the other aspects, chiefly in three circumstances.

First, it is very often used to indicate habitual actions:

(5) \( \text{lun}^{55} \text{tsha}^{55} \text{ lo}^{55} \text{ o}^{33} \text{mu}^{55} \text{ba}^{31} \text{kuan}^{31} \text{ tsho}^{31} \)  
  sky hot CONJ cold  
  \( \text{o}^{33} \text{mu}^{55} \text{ba}^{31} \text{kuan}^{31}, \text{ gu}^{33} \text{ za}^{55} \text{e}^{55} \text{ ne}^{55} \)  
  CONJ we field go ASP  
  ‘We go to work in the fields whether it is hot or cold.’

(6) \( \text{za}^{31} \text{ma}^{31} \text{ (ne}^{33}) \text{ za}^{31} \text{ki}^{33} \text{ (ne}^{33}) \text{ za}^{33} \)  
  old men AUX children AUX he  
  \( \text{ta}^{31} \text{an}^{31} \text{ kuan}^{31} \text{ne}^{31} \text{ na}^{55} \text{ ci}^{55} \text{ ne}^{55} \)  
  story tell listen like ASP  
  ‘Old men and children all like to listen to his story.’

(7) \( \text{za}^{33} \text{kha}^{31} \text{to}^{31} \text{ pe}^{33} \text{le}^{33} \text{ po}^{33} \text{ ne}^{55} \)  
  he himself sheep herd ASP  
  ‘He herds the sheep himself.’
Some of these examples indicate actions that may not be occurring at present, but are long-established habits.

Secondly, the habitual aspect may describe a present condition:

(8)  ni55 za55 ko33 kha33 ne55
this field rice grow ASP
‘The rice is growing in this field.’

(9)  gu33 zum55tun31 fu33 xan55 sha33 ne55
we family CLASS four there are ASP
‘There are four members in our family.’

(10) zaŋ33 xau33xv33 kha31lau33 na33 tum33 ne55
he other people overcoat PRT wear ASP
‘He is wearing another person’s overcoat.’

(11)  ni55 u55 kaŋ31pha31 a55me33 xau55 ne55
this kind vegetable how call ASP
‘What is this kind of vegetable called?’

In the above cases, the action often spans such a long period of time that it becomes a state. Therefore, when a verb in the predicate can be used to express more than one type of action, it is the durative rather than the punctual action that is indicated, as shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Durative</th>
<th>Punctual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>kha33</td>
<td>‘grow’</td>
<td>‘plant’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tum33</td>
<td>‘wear’</td>
<td>‘put on’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xau55</td>
<td>‘name’</td>
<td>‘call’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is the durative meanings which are understood in examples 8, 9, and 11 above.

Third, habitual aspect is used to describe long-lasting actions that are obviously taking place:
(12) muñ31 xo31 a₅₅ mu₅₅ lu₃₃ ne₅₅
rain (N) now rain (V) ASP
‘It is raining now.’

(13) lañ₅₅ ba₃₃ than₃₃ x₃₃ pañ₃₃ na₃₃ an₃₃ ts₅₅ tsa₃₁ ne₅₅
beach bull grass eat ASP
‘The bulls are eating grass on the beach.’

(14) za₃₃ it₃₁ me₃₁ tho₃₁ tr₃₃ e₅₅ ne₅₅
both firewood cut go ASP
‘Both of them are going to cut firewood.’

3. Progressive aspect. Marker: prn₃₃ ne₅₅

This aspect denotes an action that is being performed. It emphasizes the action in itself, and usually refers to a short point of time, as exemplified below:

(15) gu₃₃ tsa₃₁ prn₃₃ ne₅₅
we eat ASP
‘We are eating.’

(16) za₃₃ ki₃₃ tshan₅₅ prn₃₃ ne₅₅
children sing ASP
‘Children are singing.’

(17) za₃₃ bu₅₅ za₃₃ ba₃₁ na₃₁ th₅₅ vau₅₅ prn₃₃ ne₅₅
farmers field plow busy ASP
‘The farmers are busy ploughing their fields.’

(18) na₃₃ a₅₅ ma₅₅ xa₃₃ prn₃₃ ne₅₅ tr₃₁
you what do ASP PRT
‘What are you doing?’

Although the habitual and progressive aspects both refer to the present, there is a major difference in their function. The habitual aspect applies to long-