

ASPECT AND TENSE IN THE BISU LANGUAGE¹

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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 ASP²), which consists of one or more independent syllables following verbs or adjectives functioning as predicates.

1. Immediate aspect. Marker: ni⁵⁵a³¹

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) zaŋ³³ la⁵⁵ ni⁵⁵a³¹
 he come ASP
 ‘He will come.’

- (2) a³¹mjaŋ³¹ aŋ³³za³¹ kɿt⁵⁵ lu³³ ni⁵⁵a³¹
 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) va³¹za³¹ vai³¹ nen³¹ da⁵⁵ ni⁵⁵a³¹
 piglets soon jostle injure ASP
 'The piglets will soon be injured by the jostling.'
- (4) zum⁵⁵ aŋ³³sɿ³¹ vai³¹ tsho³³ pɿn⁵⁵ ni⁵⁵a³¹
 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: ne⁵⁵.*

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) luŋ⁵⁵tsha⁵⁵ loŋ⁵⁵ o³³mu⁵⁵ba³¹kuaŋ³¹ tsho³¹
 sky hot CONJ cold
 o³³mu⁵⁵ba³¹kuaŋ³¹, gu³³ za⁵⁵ɣ³³ e⁵⁵ ne⁵⁵
 CONJ we field go ASP
 'We go to work in the fields whether it is hot or cold.'
- (6) za³¹maŋ³¹ (ne³³) za³¹ki³³ (ne³³) zaŋ³³
 old men AUX children AUX he
 taŋ³¹an³¹ kuaŋ³¹ne³¹ na⁵⁵ ɕi⁵⁵ ne⁵⁵
 story tell listen like ASP
 'Old men and children all like to listen to his story.'
- (7) zaŋ³³ kha³¹toŋ³¹ pe³³le³³ po³³ ne⁵⁵
 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) zan³³ xau³³x³³ kha³¹lau³³ na³³ tum³³ ne⁵⁵
 he other people overcoat PRT wear ASP
 'He is wearing another person's overcoat.'

- (11) ni⁵⁵ u⁵⁵ kan³¹pha³¹ 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:

	<i>Durative</i>	<i>Punctual</i>
kha ³³	'grow'	'plant'
tum ³³	'wear'	'put on'
xau ⁵⁵	'name'	'call'

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) $\text{mu}\eta^{31}\text{xo}^{31}$ $\text{a}^{55}\text{mu}^{55}$ lu^{33} **ne^{55}**
 rain (N) now rain (V) ASP
 'It is raining now.'
- (13) $\text{la}\eta^{55}\text{ba}^{33}\text{tha}\eta^{33}\text{x}^{33}$ $\text{pa}\eta^{31}\text{na}^{33}$ $\text{a}\eta^{33}\text{tsa}^{55}$ tsa^{31} **ne^{55}**
 beach bull grass eat ASP
 'The bulls are eating grass on the beach.'
- (14) $\text{za}^{33}\text{it}^{31}$ $\text{me}^{31}\text{tho}^{31}$ tx^{33} e^{55} **ne^{55}**
 both firewood cut go ASP
 'Both of them are going to cut firewood.'

3. *Progressive aspect. Marker: $\text{prn}^{33}\text{ne}^{55}$*

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) gu^{33} tsa^{31} **$\text{prn}^{33}\text{ne}^{55}$**
 we eat ASP
 'We are eating.'
- (16) $\text{za}^{31}\text{ki}^{33}$ $\text{tsha}\eta^{55}$ **$\text{prn}^{33}\text{ne}^{55}$**
 children sing ASP
 'Children are singing.'
- (17) $\text{za}^{33}\text{bu}^{55}\text{za}^{31}\text{ba}^{31}$ na^{31} thai^{55} vau^{55} **$\text{prn}^{33}\text{ne}^{55}$**
 farmers field plow busy ASP
 'The farmers are busy ploughing their fields.'
- (18) $\text{na}\eta^{33}$ $\text{a}^{55}\text{ma}\eta^{55}$ xa^{33} **$\text{prn}^{33}\text{ne}^{55}$** x^{31}
 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-