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\textsuperscript{2}), which consists of one or more independent syllables following verbs or adjectives functioning as predicates.

1. Immediate aspect. Marker: ni\textsuperscript{55}a\textsuperscript{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\textsuperscript{33} la\textsuperscript{55} ni\textsuperscript{35}a\textsuperscript{31}

he come ASP

'He will come.'

(2) a\textsuperscript{31}mjaŋ\textsuperscript{31} anŋ\textsuperscript{33}za\textsuperscript{31} kyt\textsuperscript{55} lu\textsuperscript{33} ni\textsuperscript{55}a\textsuperscript{31}
calf little bear come down ASP

'A little calf will be born.'

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\textsuperscript{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 an³³sγ³¹ vai³¹ tsho³³ pγn⁵⁵ 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.

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 o³³mu⁵⁵ba³¹kunŋ⁳¹ tsho³¹
sky hot CONJ cold

o³³mu⁵⁵ba³¹kunŋ⁳¹, gu³³ za⁵⁵γγ³³ 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 ci⁵⁵ 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 zum₅₅ tun₃¹ fu₃₃ xan₅₅ sha₃₃ ne₅₅
    we family CLASS four there are ASP
    ‘There are four members in our family.’

(10) zan₃₃ xau₃₃ x₃₃ kha₃¹ lau₃₃ na₃₃ tum₃₃ ne₅₅
    he other people overcoat PRT wear ASP
    ‘He is wearing another person’s overcoat.’

(11) ni₅₅ u₅₅ kac₃¹ pha₃¹ a₅₃ me₅₃ 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:

\[
\begin{array}{ll}
\text{Durative} & \text{Punctual} \\
\text{Kha}^{33} & \text{grow}^{*} \quad \text{Plant}^{*} \\
\text{Tum}^{33} & \text{wear} \quad \text{Put on} \\
\text{Xau}^{55} & \text{name} \quad \text{Call} \\
\end{array}
\]

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:
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(12) muŋ³³ xo³¹ a⁵⁵ muŋ⁵⁵ luᵲ³³ ne⁵⁵
rain (N) now rain (V) ASP
'It is raining now.'

(13) lan⁵⁵ ba³³ than⁵⁵ a³³ pan⁵¹ na³³ anŋ⁵³ tsa⁵⁵ tsa¹ ne⁵⁵
beach bull grass eat ASP
'The bulls are eating grass on the beach.'

(14) za³³ it³¹ me³¹ tho³¹ tᵲ³³ e⁵⁵ ne⁵⁵
both firewood cut go ASP
'Both of them are going to cut firewood.'

3. Progressive aspect. Marker: por⁵³ 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 por⁵³ ne⁵⁵
we eat ASP
'We are eating.'

(16) za³¹ ki³³ tshan⁵⁵ por⁵³ ne⁵⁵
children sing ASP
'Children are singing.'

(17) za³³ bu⁵⁵ za³¹ ba³¹ na³¹ thai⁵⁵ vau⁵⁵ por⁵³ ne⁵⁵
farmers field plow busy ASP
'The farmers are busy ploughing their fields.'

(18) naŋ³³ a⁵⁵ maŋ⁵⁵ xa³³ por⁵³ ne⁵⁵ xa³¹
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-
term actions that are more like states, while the progressive aspect focuses on short-term immediate action.

4. Continuous aspect. Marker: \textit{ne}^{55}\textit{s1}^{33} (negative \textit{s1}^{55})

Continuous aspect denotes a continuing action that is not about to stop or change. There are two markers, one for affirmation and another for negation. The affirmative marker shows that the action that is now being performed will continue as before:

(19) $\text{za}^{33}$ $\text{zo}^{31}$ $\text{ne}^{55}\textit{s1}^{33}$

he walk ASP

‘He is still walking.’

(20) $\text{kha}^{55}\text{tshan}^{55}\text{tshan}^{55}$ $\text{tsa}^{31}$ $\text{ne}^{55}\textit{s1}^{33}$

all people eat ASP

‘Everybody is still eating.’

If the subject is in the first person, this aspect may express merely the desire of the subject to continue the action, e.g.:

(21) $\text{ga}^{33}$ $\text{tsy}^{31}$ $\text{ne}^{55}\textit{s1}^{33}$

I sing ASP

‘I want to continue singing.’

The negative continuous marker \textit{s1}^{55} is used with the negative adverb $\text{ba}^{31}$ to indicate that the action has not yet taken place:

(22) $\text{za}^{31}\text{ki}^{33}$ $\text{ba}^{31}$ $\text{la}^{55}$ $\text{s1}^{55}$

children not come ASP

‘The children have not come.’

(23) $\text{gu}^{33}$ $\text{ba}^{31}$ $\text{tsa}^{31}$ $\text{s1}^{55}$

we not eat ASP

‘We have not yet eaten.’
(24) zoŋ33 ba31 kju31 phan31 sŋ55
    they not cut begin ASP
    ‘They have not yet begun to harvest [the rice].’

5. Conclusive aspect. Marker: aŋ55

This aspect indicates that an action has already taken place, or an event has already happened. This aspect is used very frequently, and can be considered the most important aspectual category in Bisu. Subtle differences in meaning may occur depending on the type of verb that is used in the predicate. If the verb expresses an action that is of short duration, the use of this aspect will indicate that the action has already been completed or that the event has already ended:

(25) za31ki33 duŋ31 aŋ55
    children wake up ASP
    ‘The children have woken up.’

(26) ga33 fu33 zu33 aŋ33be33 aŋ55
    I look CONJ know ASP
    ‘I knew it at a glance.’

(27) va31the31zyŋ33 kha55khu33 man55 xŋ31 aŋ55 tci55a31
    wild boars all CLASS escape ASP AUX
    ‘All the wild boars have escaped.’

On the other hand, if the verb in the predicate expresses an action that is of long duration, the use of this aspect may have two possible meanings: the action may have already finished, or it may still be continuing. For example:

(28) ga33 thi31duŋ31 zu31 aŋ55 la33tci31
    I sleep (N) sleep (V) ASP AUX
    ‘I had a sleep.’

(29) za31ki33 zu31 aŋ55 tci55a31
    child sleep (V) ASP AUX
    ‘The child has gone to sleep.’
The first sentence indicates that the speaker had a sleep and has now woken up, while the second states that the child has been sleeping and has not yet awakened.

Therefore, it is clear that the conclusive aspect is used to emphasize the action itself. Regardless of the present condition, it can be used to stress that the action has indeed taken place. More examples of its use are given below:

(30) tsho\textsuperscript{31} mja\textsuperscript{31} kh\textsuperscript{33} a\textsuperscript{55} \\
autumn come round ASP \\
‘Autumn has come.’

(31) le\textsuperscript{31} tui\textsuperscript{31} ton\textsuperscript{31} a\textsuperscript{55} \\
rope snap ASP \\
‘The rope has snapped off.’

(32) a\textsuperscript{31} kho\textsuperscript{31} \eta\textsuperscript{31} a\textsuperscript{55} tci\textsuperscript{55} a\textsuperscript{31} \\
bamboo break up ASP AUX \\
‘The bamboo has split.’

The conclusive aspect marker a\textsuperscript{55} is usually used in complex predicates, consisting of two verbs. The first verb carries the main semantic load, while the second, i.e. the directional verb, shows a certain degree of grammaticalization and functions as an auxiliary element modifying the first verb. The aspektual marker a\textsuperscript{55} is inserted between the two verbs, thus preceding the semi-grammaticalized directional verb:

(33) m\textsuperscript{31} xo\textsuperscript{31} lu\textsuperscript{33} a\textsuperscript{55} le\textsuperscript{33} tci\textsuperscript{55} a\textsuperscript{31} \\
rain (N) rain (V) ASP go AUX \\
‘It is raining.’

(34) za\textsuperscript{31} ki\textsuperscript{33} xx\textsuperscript{33} da\textsuperscript{55} kam\textsuperscript{31} kam\textsuperscript{31} ne\textsuperscript{33} pju\textsuperscript{33} \\
child AUX illness gradually recover \\
a\textsuperscript{55} la\textsuperscript{55} \\
ASP come \\
‘The child is gradually recovering from his illness.’
6. Experiential aspect. Marker: an\textsuperscript{31}.

The experiential aspect denotes a completed past experience that has occurred. As the events have already taken place in the past, they are now regarded as accomplished facts or matters of record:

(37) ga\textsuperscript{33} ni\textsuperscript{55} tan\textsuperscript{31} tsx\textsuperscript{31} tan\textsuperscript{31} na\textsuperscript{55} an\textsuperscript{31}
I this piece music hear ASP

'I have heard this piece of music before.'

(38) zan\textsuperscript{33} xan\textsuperscript{55} tsan\textsuperscript{55} e\textsuperscript{55} an\textsuperscript{31}
he four times go ASP

'He has been there four times.'

(39) nan\textsuperscript{33} an\textsuperscript{33} lai\textsuperscript{31} ma\textsuperscript{31} fu\textsuperscript{33} ten\textsuperscript{33} an\textsuperscript{31} la\textsuperscript{31}
you teacher be ASP AUX

'Have you been a teacher?'

The above discussion and examples show that the six aspect markers in Bisu function to describe some of the ways in which an action may be viewed, by expressing the different phases of a whole process. However, the six aspects also share some common features:

(1) Aspectual markers are optional, and are only used when necessary to emphasize the particular way in which an action is being performed, or a particular element of an action.

(2) Aspectual markers are intimately connected to the head constituent in the predicate, and always closely follow the head verbs even in complex predicates. Thus, the conclusive aspect marker an\textsuperscript{55} is usually placed
between the two verbs (the head verb and the incidental directional verb). In other words, the aspectual marker an⁵⁵ is in closer relationship with the head verb than with the following semi-grammaticalized verb.

In some cases, the aspectual marker an⁵⁵ may even be inserted between two parts of a compound word, e.g. tha³³la³³ ‘get out of bed’, where an⁵⁵ is not only insertible between tha³³ and la³³, but is so closely attached to the first morpheme that sandhi occurs and the two morphemes merge to become one syllable: than⁵³.

(3) The six aspectual markers can be combined to express more complex features of an action. In some cases, two aspectual markers may be used in a single sentence to indicate more precisely the way in which the action is being performed or to describe the action more vividly. However, the coexistence of two aspectual markers within one sentence is limited to specific circumstances; they cannot be combined at random. Thus, two contradictory aspects, such as the progressive and the experiential, cannot be used in the same sentence.

It is usual for the progressive and continuous aspects to constitute a compound marker ṭvr³³ne⁵⁵ṣ́³³ to express an action that is in progress and expected to continue, at least for some time into the future:

(40) gu³³ zum⁵⁵tum³¹ pan⁴¹na³³ za⁵⁵ tha⁵⁵ ṭvr³³ne⁵⁵ṣ́³³
we family ox field plow ASP

“Our family’s ox is plowing the field.”

(41) za³¹ki³³ tshan⁵⁵ ni³¹ tsv³¹ ṭvr³³ne⁵⁵ṣ́³³
children CLASS two sing ASP

“Two children are singing.”

Another compound marker, an⁵⁵ni⁵⁵a³¹, is composed of the conclusive aspect marker an⁵⁵ and the immediate aspect marker ni⁵⁵a³¹. It lends a strong sense of reality and immediacy to the forthcoming actions, and has a certain rhetorical effect:

(42) zoṇ³³ ko³³ vai³³ kju³¹ an⁵⁵ni⁵⁵a³¹
they rice soon cut ASP

“They will be cutting rice soon.”
(43) o ga\textsuperscript{33} be\textsuperscript{33} an\textsuperscript{55}ni\textsuperscript{55}a\textsuperscript{31}
Oh I know ASP
‘Oh, if only I had known!’

The conclusive aspect marker an\textsuperscript{55} can also be associated with either the habitual aspect marker ne\textsuperscript{55} or the continuous aspect marker sa\textsuperscript{31}. Both sequences indicate established facts while at the same time expressing a sense of action:

(44) xa\textsuperscript{33}za\textsuperscript{31} pjam\textsuperscript{55} ne\textsuperscript{33} le\textsuperscript{33} an\textsuperscript{55}ne\textsuperscript{55} tci\textsuperscript{55}a\textsuperscript{31}
bird fly AUX go ASP AUX
‘The bird is flying away.’

(45) za\textsuperscript{31}man\textsuperscript{31} ba\textsuperscript{31} on\textsuperscript{55} an\textsuperscript{55}sa\textsuperscript{31}
old man not enter ASP
‘The old man has not come in yet.’

TENSE

The notion of tense applies to the time at which the action denoted by the verb takes place, using the time of speech as the reference point. Tense is usually divided into three categories (future, present, and past), as expressed by temporal nouns, adverbs, or adverbial phrases at the beginning or in the middle of a sentence.

1. Future tense

This tense indicates that the action will take place sometime in the future. In these sentences, certain nouns or adverbs are usually used to indicate the actual time, such as nau\textsuperscript{33}sår\textsuperscript{55} ‘tomorrow’, nau\textsuperscript{33}sår\textsuperscript{55}thå\textsuperscript{33} ‘tomorrow morning’, vaj\textsuperscript{31} ‘soon’. They function as adverbial adjuncts.

(46) gu\textsuperscript{33} nau\textsuperscript{33}sår\textsuperscript{55} la\textsuperscript{55} ga\textsuperscript{33}le\textsuperscript{55}
we tomorrow come again
‘We will come again tomorrow.’
(47) zon³³ nau³³-sa⁵⁵-tha³³ thi³³-ga³³ le³³ zau³³
they tomorrow morning together go CONJ

kan³³-ba³³ vu³⁵
vegetable buy
‘They will go together to buy vegetables tomorrow morning.’

(48) kha³³-lau³³ an³³-si³³ vai³³ ku³³ py³⁵ ni³⁵-a³³
clothes new soon stitch finish AUX
‘The new clothes will soon be made up.’

As these actions have not yet taken place, they are therefore not accomplished fact, but merely expectations, plans, or possibilities.

2. Present tense

The present tense in Bisu is used in the following two circumstances:

(1) When the actions are taking place at the time of speaking, i.e., action and speech coincide. The adverb a⁵⁵-mu²⁵ is regularly used in this case.

(49) gu³³ a²⁵-mu²⁵ kju³³
we now cut
‘We are cutting [rice] now.’

(50) zon³³ a²⁵-mu²⁵ za²⁵-sa³³ e³⁵
they now fields go
‘They are going to the fields now.’

(51) za³³-ki³³ xa³³-si³³ a²⁵-mu²⁵ tsa³³
child banana now eat
‘The child is eating a banana.’

(2) The present tense is also used to express habitual actions, which have been occurring repeatedly over a rather long period of time, including
the time of speaking. In this case the temporal adverb \textit{a}^{55}\textit{lo}^{31}\textit{m}^{33}\textit{mu}^{55} ‘always’ is usually used as the adverbial adjunct.

(52) \textit{zonj}^{33} \quad \textit{za}^{55}\textit{bu}^{55}\textit{m}^{33} \quad \textit{a}^{55}\textit{lo}^{31}\textit{m}^{33}\textit{mu}^{55} \quad \textit{anj}^{33}\textit{zam}^{31}  \\
they time of work always time

\textit{ba}^{31} \quad \textit{pui}^{31} \quad \textit{tci}^{55}  \\
not remember AUX

‘They often forget the time when they are working.’

(53) \textit{a}^{55}\textit{lo}^{31}\textit{m}^{33}\textit{mu}^{55} \quad \textit{zanj}^{33} \quad \textit{e}^{55} \quad \textit{anj}^{33}\textit{da}^{31}  \\
always he go early

‘He always starts early.’

(54a) \textit{noj}^{33} \quad \textit{a}^{55}\textit{lo}^{31}\textit{m}^{33}\textit{mu}^{55} \quad \textit{anj}^{33}\textit{m}^{55}\textit{y}^{55}\textit{n}^{55} \quad \textit{anj}^{33}\textit{e}^{55} \quad \textit{la}^{31}  \\
you always downtown go Q

‘Do you always go downtown?’

(54b) \textit{gu}^{33} \quad \textit{ba}^{31} \quad \textit{e}^{55} \quad \textit{a}^{55}\textit{lo}^{31}\textit{m}^{33}\textit{mu}^{55}  \\
we not go always

‘No, we don't always go there.’

3. \textit{Past tense}

The past tense is used to express an action that had already taken place before the time of speaking. In general, the past tense is used when the time of an action needs to be emphasized or when the order of two reported actions in the same sentence needs to be clearly distinguished. Certain nouns or adverbs referring to past time, especially \textit{a}^{31}\textit{ci}^{33} ‘just now’, often serve as the adverbial adjunct in these sentences.

(55) \textit{mi}^{55}\textit{nu}^{33}\textit{sy}^{55} \quad \textit{ga}^{33}\textit{it}^{31} \quad \textit{mja}^{55} \quad \textit{lan}^{13}\textit{ga}^{33}  \\
last year both of us meet each other

‘The two of us met each other last year.’
(56) zan\(^{33}\) a\(^{31}\)c\(\text{\`i}n\)\(^{33}\) tsa\(^{31}\) an\(^{31}\)
he just now eat ASP
‘He ate just now.’

(57) za\(^{31}\)ki\(^{33}\) tshan\(^{55}\) ni\(^{31}\) a\(^{31}\)c\(\text{\`i}n\)\(^{33}\) tshan\(^{55}\)
c hildren CLASS two just now sing
‘Two children sang songs just now.’

(58) zan\(^{33}\) a\(^{31}\)c\(\text{\`i}n\)\(^{33}\) la\(^{55}\)le\(^{31}\) ci\(^{55}\)me\(^{33}\) le\(^{33}\)le\(^{31}\) ci\(^{55}\) ni\(^{55}\)x\(^{31}\)
he just now come back why return wish AUX
‘Why does he want to go out again so soon after coming back?’

Reviewing the system of tense in Bisu, the following features can be noted:

(1) The means for expression of the tense notions are lexical words and phrases. There are no special markers for tenses, and different tenses are distinguished by means of various temporal nouns or adverbs. Among these words, a\(^{55}\)mu\(^{55}\), derived from the noun meaning ‘now’, and vai\(^{31}\), derived from the adjective meaning ‘quick’, are regularly bound up with the tenses, and are showing a tendency to undergo grammaticalization to become tense markers.

(2) The present tense is the most important of the three tenses, and is used a little more frequently than the other two. The future tense and the past tense are not regarded as important elements of a sentence, and neither is expressed clearly or precisely.

(3) In some cases, the distinction between different tenses does not seem to be very clear and definite, as may be seen in the relationship between the present and the past tense. Although they are usually used to indicate different times, i.e., present and past, the delineation is not always strict, as illustrated by the following examples:

(59) xa\(^{33}\)za\(^{31}\) thi\(^{31}\) mon\(^{55}\) a\(^{55}\)mu\(^{55}\) pjam\(^{55}\)
bird one CLASS now fly
ko\(^{55}\) ne\(^{33}\) le\(^{33}\) an\(^{55}\)
off AUX go ASP
‘A bird flew away just now.’
(60) xan³³ phr³³ n³³ a⁵⁵ mu⁵⁵ cí³³ san⁵⁵
    table now wipe clean
    'The table was wiped clean just now.'

(61) an³³ la³³ lin³³ ba³³ a⁵⁵ mu⁵⁵ la⁵⁵ le³³
    students now come back
    'The students came back just now.'

(62) ga³³ tshon³³ koŋ³³ te³³ lu³³ le⁵⁵ mu⁵⁵ zan³³ a⁵⁵ mu⁵⁵
    I mountain come back he now
    na³³ le³³
    field come back
    'He was just coming back from the field when I came down from the mountain.'

In the above sentences, the reported actions took place over a short period of time in the past, but the typical present tense word, a⁵⁵ mu⁵⁵, is used. Semantically, they are past actions, but according to the tense marker they should be regarded as present. In other words, these sentences are nominally present, but actually indicate past actions. Thus, the present always encroaches upon the territory of the past, as in the above expressions where a present condition has resulted from a recent past action. In the examples, the action itself, e.g. pjám⁵⁵ 'fly' or cí³³ 'wipe', is not the main idea expressed by the sentence; the present condition, i.e. ko⁵⁵ 'away' or san⁵⁵ 'clean', is regarded as more important.

Therefore, when choosing tenses in Bisu, special attention should be paid to the situation at the time of speaking and to established facts, rather than to the actions in themselves. The expression of tense lacks a set of special systematic forms, although there are a few semi-grammaticalized words which are regularaly associated with some tenses. Thus, tense in Bisu is a very simple and sketchy system and perhaps, strictly speaking, should not be regarded as a grammatical system at all.

CONCLUSION

There are some similarities between aspect and tense marking in Bisu, including their optional nature, which means that a sentence can be formed
without expressing either aspect or tense. However, it is evident that there are more differences than similarities between the two grammatical categories. First, aspect is expressed by a set of definite and special grammatical markers, while tense is expressed by words or phrases that are not restricted to their function as tense markers. Secondly, aspect is indicated more frequently than tense, and tends to be more fixed in its expression. In general, the Bisu aspectual system is more efficient and elaborated than its tense system.

The above similarities and differences are also found in many other Burmese-Yipho languages, and they can, to a certain degree, be regarded as general characteristics of the Burmese-Yipho languages.