

## ASPECT AND TENSE IN THE BISU LANGUAGE<sup>1</sup>

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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<sup>2</sup>), which consists of one or more independent syllables following verbs or adjectives functioning as predicates.

#### *1. Immediate aspect. Marker: ni<sup>55</sup>a<sup>31</sup>*

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<sup>33</sup>        la<sup>55</sup>        ni<sup>55</sup>a<sup>31</sup>  
          he        come        ASP  
          'He will come.'

- (2)    a<sup>31</sup>mjaŋ<sup>31</sup>    aŋ<sup>33</sup>za<sup>31</sup>        kɣt<sup>55</sup>        lu<sup>33</sup>        ni<sup>55</sup>a<sup>31</sup>  
          calf        little        bear        come down        ASP  
          'A little calf will be born.'

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<sup>2</sup> Abbreviations: ASP = aspect marker; AUX = auxiliary; CLASS = classifier; CONJ = conjunction; N = noun; PRT = particle; Q = question; V = verb

- (3) va<sup>31</sup>za<sup>31</sup>    vai<sup>31</sup>    nen<sup>31</sup>    da<sup>55</sup>    ni<sup>55</sup>a<sup>31</sup>  
 piglets    soon    jostle    injure    ASP  
 'The piglets will soon be injured by the jostling.'
- (4) zum<sup>55</sup>    aŋ<sup>33</sup>sɿ<sup>31</sup>    vai<sup>31</sup>    tsho<sup>33</sup>    pɿn<sup>55</sup>    ni<sup>55</sup>a<sup>31</sup>  
 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: ne<sup>55</sup>.*

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) luŋ<sup>55</sup>tsha<sup>55</sup>    loŋ<sup>55</sup>    o<sup>33</sup>mu<sup>55</sup>ba<sup>31</sup>kuaŋ<sup>31</sup>    tsho<sup>31</sup>  
 sky    hot    CONJ    cold  
 o<sup>33</sup>mu<sup>55</sup>ba<sup>31</sup>kuaŋ<sup>31</sup>,    gu<sup>33</sup>    za<sup>55</sup>ɣ<sup>33</sup>    e<sup>55</sup>    ne<sup>55</sup>  
 CONJ    we    field    go    ASP  
 'We go to work in the fields whether it is hot or cold.'
- (6) za<sup>31</sup>maŋ<sup>31</sup>    (ne<sup>33</sup>)    za<sup>31</sup>ki<sup>33</sup>    (ne<sup>33</sup>)    zaŋ<sup>33</sup>  
 old men    AUX    children    AUX    he  
 taŋ<sup>31</sup>an<sup>31</sup>    kuaŋ<sup>31</sup>ne<sup>31</sup>    na<sup>55</sup>    ɕi<sup>55</sup>    ne<sup>55</sup>  
 story    tell    listen    like    ASP  
 'Old men and children all like to listen to his story.'
- (7) zaŋ<sup>33</sup>    kha<sup>31</sup>toŋ<sup>31</sup>    pe<sup>33</sup>le<sup>33</sup>    po<sup>33</sup>    ne<sup>55</sup>  
 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) ni<sup>55</sup>      za<sup>55</sup>      ko<sup>33</sup>      kha<sup>33</sup>      ne<sup>55</sup>  
 this      field      rice      grow      ASP  
 'The rice is growing in this field.'

- (9) gu<sup>33</sup>      zum<sup>55</sup>tun<sup>31</sup>      fu<sup>33</sup>      xan<sup>55</sup>      sha<sup>33</sup>      ne<sup>55</sup>  
 we      family      CLASS      four      there are      ASP  
 'There are four members in our family.'

- (10) zan<sup>33</sup>      xau<sup>33</sup>x<sup>33</sup>      kha<sup>31</sup>lau<sup>33</sup>      na<sup>33</sup>      tum<sup>33</sup>      ne<sup>55</sup>  
 he      other people      overcoat      PRT      wear      ASP  
 'He is wearing another person's overcoat.'

- (11) ni<sup>55</sup>      u<sup>55</sup>      kan<sup>31</sup>pha<sup>31</sup>      a<sup>55</sup>me<sup>33</sup>      xau<sup>55</sup>      ne<sup>55</sup>  
 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 <sup>33</sup>	'grow'	'plant'
tum <sup>33</sup>	'wear'	'put on'
xau <sup>55</sup>	'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)  $\text{mu}\eta^{31}\text{xo}^{31}$      $\text{a}^{55}\text{mu}^{55}$      $\text{lu}^{33}$      **$\text{ne}^{55}$**   
 rain (N)            now            rain (V)    ASP  
 'It is raining now.'
- (13)  $\text{la}\eta^{55}\text{ba}^{33}\text{tha}\eta^{33}\text{x}^{33}$      $\text{pa}\eta^{31}\text{na}^{33}$      $\text{a}\eta^{33}\text{tsa}^{55}$      $\text{tsa}^{31}$      **$\text{ne}^{55}$**   
 beach                    bull            grass            eat    ASP  
 'The bulls are eating grass on the beach.'
- (14)  $\text{za}^{33}\text{it}^{31}$      $\text{me}^{31}\text{tho}^{31}$      $\text{tx}^{33}$      $\text{e}^{55}$      **$\text{ne}^{55}$**   
 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)  $\text{gu}^{33}$      $\text{tsa}^{31}$      **$\text{prn}^{33}\text{ne}^{55}$**   
 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)  $\text{za}^{33}\text{bu}^{55}\text{za}^{31}\text{ba}^{31}$      $\text{na}^{31}$      $\text{thai}^{55}$      $\text{vau}^{55}$      **$\text{prn}^{33}\text{ne}^{55}$**   
 farmers                    field    plow    busy    ASP  
 'The farmers are busy ploughing their fields.'
- (18)  $\text{na}\eta^{33}$      $\text{a}^{55}\text{ma}\eta^{55}$      $\text{xa}^{33}$      **$\text{prn}^{33}\text{ne}^{55}$**      $\text{x}^{31}$   
 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-

term actions that are more like states, while the progressive aspect focuses on short-term immediate action.

**4. Continuous aspect. Marker:  $ne^{55}s\eta^{33}$  (negative  $s\eta^{55}$ )**

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)  $zan^{33}$        $zo^{31}$        $ne^{55}s\eta^{33}$   
 he            walk      ASP  
 'He is still walking.'

- (20)  $kha^{55}tshan^{55}tshan^{55}$        $tsa^{31}$        $ne^{55}s\eta^{33}$   
 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)  $ga^{33}$        $ts\eta^{31}$        $ne^{55}s\eta^{33}$   
 I            sing      ASP  
 'I want to continue singing.'

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

- (22)  $za^{31}ki^{33}$        $ba^{31}$        $la^{55}$        $s\eta^{55}$   
 children      not      come      ASP  
 'The children have not come.'

- (23)  $gu^{33}$        $ba^{31}$        $tsa^{31}$        $s\eta^{55}$   
 we      not      eat      ASP  
 'We have not yet eaten.'

- (24)  $\text{z}\text{on}^{33}$        $\text{ba}^{31}$        $\text{kju}^{31}$        $\text{phan}^{31}$        $\text{s}\eta^{55}$   
 they      not      cut      begin      ASP  
 'They have not yet begun to harvest [the rice].'

**5. Conclusive aspect. Marker:  $\text{a}\eta^{55}$**

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)  $\text{z}\text{a}^{31}\text{ki}^{33}$        $\text{du}\eta^{31}$        $\text{a}\eta^{55}$   
 children      wake up      ASP  
 'The children have woken up.'
- (26)  $\text{ga}^{33}$        $\text{fu}^{33}$        $\text{z}\text{au}^{33}$        $\text{a}\eta^{33}\text{be}^{33}$        $\text{a}\eta^{55}$   
 I      look      CONJ      know      ASP  
 'I knew it at a glance.'
- (27)  $\text{va}^{31}\text{the}^{31}\text{z}\eta\eta^{33}$        $\text{kha}^{55}\text{khu}^{33}$        $\text{ma}\eta^{55}$        $\text{x}\eta\eta^{31}$        $\text{a}\eta^{55}$        $\text{t}\text{ci}^{55}\text{a}^{31}$   
 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)  $\text{ga}^{33}$        $\text{thi}^{31}\text{du}\eta^{31}$        $\text{z}\text{u}^{31}$        $\text{a}\eta^{55}$        $\text{la}^{33}\text{t}\text{ci}^{31}$   
 I      sleep (N)      sleep (V)      ASP      AUX  
 'I had a sleep.'
- (29)  $\text{z}\text{a}^{31}\text{ki}^{33}$        $\text{z}\text{u}^{31}$        $\text{a}\eta^{55}$        $\text{t}\text{ci}^{55}\text{a}^{31}$   
*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<sup>31</sup>mja<sup>31</sup>      khɿ<sup>33</sup>      aŋ<sup>55</sup>  
autumn      come round      ASP  
'Autumn has come.'
- (31) le<sup>31</sup>tui<sup>31</sup>      ton<sup>31</sup>      aŋ<sup>55</sup>  
rope      snap      ASP  
'The rope has snapped off.'
- (32) a<sup>31</sup>khonj<sup>31</sup>      ŋen<sup>31</sup>      aŋ<sup>55</sup>      tɕi<sup>55</sup>a<sup>31</sup>  
bamboo      break up      ASP      AUX  
'The bamboo has split.'

The conclusive aspect marker aŋ<sup>55</sup> 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 aspectual marker aŋ<sup>55</sup> is inserted between the two verbs, thus preceding the semi-grammaticalized directional verb:

- (33) muwɿ<sup>31</sup>xo<sup>31</sup>      luw<sup>33</sup>      aŋ<sup>55</sup>      le<sup>33</sup>      tɕi<sup>55</sup>a<sup>31</sup>  
rain (N)      rain (V)      ASP      go      AUX  
'It is raining.'
- (34) za<sup>31</sup>ki<sup>33</sup>      xɿ<sup>33</sup>      da<sup>55</sup>      kam<sup>31</sup>kam<sup>31</sup>ne<sup>33</sup>      pju<sup>33</sup>  
child      AUX      illness      gradually      recover
- aŋ<sup>55</sup>      la<sup>55</sup>  
ASP      come  
'The child is gradually recovering from his illness.'

- (35) xa<sup>55</sup>man<sup>55</sup>      to<sup>33</sup>      aŋ<sup>55</sup>      la<sup>55</sup>  
          wind          blow      ASP      come  
          ‘The wind is blowing.’

- (36) tsa<sup>31</sup>zam<sup>31</sup>      khɿ<sup>33</sup>      aŋ<sup>55</sup>      la<sup>55</sup>      la<sup>31</sup>  
          eat time          come round      ASP      come      Q  
          ‘Is it time to eat?’

**6. Experiential aspect. Marker: an<sup>31</sup>.**

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<sup>33</sup>      ni<sup>55</sup>      taŋ<sup>31</sup>      tsɿ<sup>31</sup>taŋ<sup>31</sup>      na<sup>55</sup>      an<sup>31</sup>  
          I          this      piece      music      hear      ASP  
          ‘I have heard this piece of music before.’

- (38) zaŋ<sup>33</sup>      xan<sup>55</sup>      tsan<sup>55</sup>      e<sup>55</sup>      an<sup>31</sup>  
          he          four      times      go      ASP  
          ‘He has been there four times.’

- (39) naŋ<sup>33</sup>      aŋ<sup>33</sup>lai<sup>31</sup>ma<sup>31</sup>fu<sup>33</sup>      ten<sup>33</sup>      an<sup>31</sup>      la<sup>31</sup>  
          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 aŋ<sup>55</sup> is usually placed



between the two verbs (the head verb and the incidental directional verb). In other words, the aspectual marker **aŋ<sup>55</sup>** is in closer relationship with the head verb than with the following semi-grammaticalized verb.

In some cases, the aspectual marker **aŋ<sup>55</sup>** may even be inserted between two parts of a compound word, e.g. **tha<sup>33</sup>la<sup>33</sup>** 'get out of bed', where **aŋ<sup>55</sup>** is not only insertible between **tha<sup>33</sup>** and **la<sup>33</sup>**, but is so closely attached to the first morpheme that sandhi occurs and the two morphemes merge to become one syllable: **than<sup>35</sup>**.

- (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 **prn<sup>33</sup>ne<sup>55</sup>sɿ<sup>33</sup>** to express an action that is in progress and expected to continue, at least for some time into the future:

- (40) **gu<sup>33</sup>      zum<sup>55</sup>tum<sup>31</sup>      paŋ<sup>31</sup>na<sup>33</sup>      za<sup>55</sup>      thai<sup>55</sup>      prn<sup>33</sup>ne<sup>55</sup>sɿ<sup>33</sup>**  
 we      family      ox      field      plow      ASP  
 'Our family's ox is plowing the field.'

- (41) **za<sup>31</sup>ki<sup>33</sup>      tshaŋ<sup>55</sup>      ni<sup>31</sup>      tsy<sup>31</sup>      prn<sup>33</sup>ne<sup>55</sup>sɿ<sup>33</sup>**  
 children      CLASS      two      sing      ASP  
 'Two children are singing.'

Another compound marker, **aŋ<sup>55</sup>ni<sup>55</sup>a<sup>31</sup>**, is composed of the conclusive aspect marker **aŋ<sup>55</sup>** and the immediate aspect marker **ni<sup>55</sup>a<sup>31</sup>**. It lends a strong sense of reality and immediacy to the forthcoming actions, and has a certain rhetorical effect:

- (42) **ʒoŋ<sup>33</sup>      ko<sup>33</sup>      vai<sup>33</sup>      kju<sup>31</sup>      aŋ<sup>55</sup>ni<sup>55</sup>a<sup>31</sup>**  
 they      rice      soon      cut      ASP  
 'They will be cutting rice soon.'

- (43) o            ga<sup>33</sup>        be<sup>33</sup>        aŋ<sup>55</sup>ni<sup>55</sup>a<sup>31</sup>  
 Oh        I        know        ASP  
 'Oh, if only I had known!'

The conclusive aspect marker aŋ<sup>55</sup> can also be associated with either the habitual aspect marker ne<sup>55</sup> or the continuous aspect marker sɿ<sup>31</sup>. Both sequences indicate established facts while at the same time expressing a sense of action:

- (44) xa<sup>33</sup>za<sup>31</sup>    pjam<sup>55</sup>    ne<sup>33</sup>    le<sup>33</sup>    aŋ<sup>55</sup>ne<sup>55</sup>    tci<sup>55</sup>a<sup>31</sup>  
 bird        fly        AUX    go        ASP        AUX  
 'The bird is flying away.'

- (45) za<sup>31</sup>maŋ<sup>31</sup>        ba<sup>31</sup>        oŋ<sup>55</sup>        aŋ<sup>55</sup>sɿ<sup>31</sup>  
 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<sup>33</sup>sɿ<sup>55</sup> 'tomorrow', nau<sup>33</sup>sɿ<sup>55</sup>tha<sup>33</sup> 'tomorrow morning', vai<sup>31</sup> 'soon'. They function as adverbial adjuncts.

- (46) gu<sup>33</sup>        nau<sup>33</sup>sɿ<sup>55</sup>        la<sup>55</sup>        ga<sup>33</sup>le<sup>55</sup>  
 we        tomorrow        come        again  
 'We will come again tomorrow.'

- (47)  $\text{z}\text{o}\eta^{33}$      $\text{nau}^{33}\text{s}\gamma^{55}\text{tha}^{33}$      $\text{thi}^{31}\text{ga}^{33}$      $\text{le}^{33}$      $\text{zau}^{33}$   
 they    tomorrow morning    together    go    CONJ

$\text{ka}\eta^{31}\text{ba}^{33}$      $\text{vu}^{55}$

vegetable    buy

'They will go together to buy vegetables tomorrow morning.'

- (48)  $\text{kha}^{31}\text{lau}^{33}$      $\text{a}\eta^{33}\text{s}\eta^{31}$      $\text{vai}^{31}$      $\text{ku}^{31}$      $\text{p}\gamma\text{n}^{55}$      $\text{ni}^{55}\text{a}^{31}$   
 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  $\text{a}^{55}\text{mu}^{55}$  is regularly used in this case.

- (49)  $\text{gu}^{33}$      $\text{a}^{55}\text{mu}^{55}$      $\text{kju}^{31}$   
 we    now    cut

'We are cutting [rice] now.'

- (50)  $\text{z}\text{o}\eta^{33}$      $\text{a}^{55}\text{mu}^{55}$      $\text{za}^{55}\gamma^{33}$      $\text{e}^{55}$   
 they    now    fields    go

'They are going to the fields now.'

- (51)  $\text{za}^{31}\text{ki}^{33}$      $\text{xa}^{33}\text{s}\eta^{31}$      $\text{a}^{55}\text{mu}^{55}$      $\text{tsa}^{31}$   
 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 **a<sup>55</sup>lo<sup>31</sup>mɿ<sup>33</sup>mu<sup>55</sup>** 'always' is usually used as the adverbial adjunct.

- (52)    zɔŋ<sup>33</sup>            za<sup>55</sup>bu<sup>55</sup>mɿ<sup>33</sup>            a<sup>55</sup>lo<sup>31</sup>mɿ<sup>33</sup>mu<sup>55</sup>            aŋ<sup>33</sup>zam<sup>31</sup>  
           they            time of work            always            time

ba<sup>31</sup>            pu<sup>31</sup>            tɕi<sup>55</sup>  
 not            remember            AUX

'They often forget the time when they are working.'

- (53)    a<sup>55</sup>lo<sup>31</sup>mɿ<sup>33</sup>mu<sup>55</sup>            zaŋ<sup>33</sup>            e<sup>55</sup>            aŋ<sup>33</sup>da<sup>31</sup>  
           always            he            go            early

'He always starts early.'

- (54a)    noŋ<sup>33</sup>    a<sup>55</sup>lo<sup>31</sup>mɿ<sup>33</sup>mu<sup>55</sup>            aŋ<sup>33</sup>mɿŋ<sup>55</sup>ɿ<sup>33</sup>            aŋ<sup>33</sup>e<sup>55</sup>            la<sup>31</sup>  
           you            always            downtown            go            Q

'Do you always go downtown?'

- (54b)    gu<sup>33</sup>            ba<sup>31</sup>            e<sup>55</sup>            a<sup>55</sup>lo<sup>31</sup>mɿ<sup>33</sup>mu<sup>55</sup>  
           we            not            go            always

'No, we don't always go there.'

### 3. 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 **a<sup>31</sup>ɕiŋ<sup>33</sup>** 'just now', often serve as the adverbial adjunct in these sentences.

- (55)    mi<sup>55</sup>nu<sup>33</sup>ɿ<sup>33</sup>            ga<sup>33</sup>it<sup>31</sup>            mjaŋ<sup>55</sup>            laŋ<sup>33</sup>ga<sup>33</sup>  
           last year            both of us            meet            each other

'The two of us met each other last year.'

- (56)  $zan^{33}$      $a^{31}ciŋ^{33}$      $tsa^{31}$      $an^{31}$   
 he            just now            eat            ASP  
 'He ate just now.'
- (57)  $za^{31}ki^{33}$              $tshaŋ^{55}$              $ni^{31}$              $a^{31}ciŋ^{33}$              $tshaŋ^{55}$   
 children            CLASS            two            just now            sing  
 'Two children sang songs just now.'
- (58)  $zan^{33}$      $a^{31}ciŋ^{33}$      $la^{55}le^{31}$      $ci^{55}me^{33}$      $le^{33}le^{31}$      $ci^{55}$      $ni^{55}x^{31}$   
 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)  $xa^{33}za^{31}$              $thi^{31}$              $moŋ^{55}$              $a^{55}mu^{55}$              $pjam^{55}$   
 bird            one            CLASS            now            fly
- $ko^{55}$              $ne^{33}$              $le^{33}$              $aŋ^{55}$   
 off            AUX            go            ASP  
 'A bird flew away just now.'

- (60) xaj<sup>31</sup>phɿn<sup>31</sup>    a<sup>55</sup>mu<sup>55</sup>    cit<sup>33</sup>    saŋ<sup>55</sup>  
          table            now            wipe            clean  
          'The table was wiped clean just now.'

- (61) aŋ<sup>33</sup>lai<sup>31</sup>lin<sup>31</sup>ba<sup>31</sup>    a<sup>55</sup>mu<sup>55</sup>    la<sup>55</sup>le<sup>31</sup>  
          students            now            come back  
          'The students came back just now.'

- (62) ga<sup>33</sup>    tshoŋ<sup>31</sup>koŋ<sup>31</sup>te<sup>33</sup>ɿ<sup>33</sup>    lu<sup>33</sup>le<sup>31</sup>mu<sup>55</sup>    zaŋ<sup>33</sup>    a<sup>55</sup>mu<sup>55</sup>  
          I            mountain            come back            he            now  
  
          na<sup>31</sup>ɿ<sup>33</sup>    la<sup>55</sup>le<sup>31</sup>  
          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, **a<sup>55</sup>mu<sup>55</sup>**, 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. **pjam<sup>55</sup>** 'fly' or **cit<sup>33</sup>** 'wipe', is not the main idea expressed by the sentence; the present condition, i.e. **ko<sup>55</sup>** 'away' or **saŋ<sup>55</sup>** '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 regularly 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.