Time without tense in Nyagrong Minyag

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Abstract

This study provides a preliminary report on the tense and aspectual system of the Bangsmad dialect of Nyagrong Minyag, an understudied Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Xinlong County, Ganzi Prefecture, Sichuan. We show that Nyagrong Minyag is typologically a "tenseless language" in the sense of Smith (2008)—it relies on the viewpoint-aspect contrast between imperfective and perfective, which allows temporal inference.

While Nyagrong Minyag remains less studied (only Suzuki 2008 for the rGyarwagshis dialect), extensive research on other rGyalrongic languages has laid a solid foundation for our analyses. Lin (2011:59-60) identifies three major functions associated with the perfective verb form in rGyalrong Proper: a) to denote a single, unified, discrete event (on dynamic verbs), b) to signal a change of state (on stative verbs), and c) to refer to a past situation as related to the present (i.e. the perfect viewpoint). We claim that Nyagrong Minyag employs the same mechanism—in which the prefix $də$- is responsible for the formation of perfective verbs, and serves as the aforementioned functions (see example (1a-c)).

The imperfective verb forms of this language, on the other hand, possess no preverbal morphology—a curious finding which relates to the Qiang language (Lapolla 2003:164) rather than other rGyalrongic languages (e.g. Lin 2003; Sun 2003). As shown in Example (2a), the verb stem by itself carries the prospective aspect, whereas the addition of a sentence-final copula verb can be used to indicate the continuous aspect, as in (2b).

Smith (2008), following Comrie (1976), proposes a three-way classification of the tense and aspectual typology, and maintains that in "tenseless languages", the temporal information is pragmatically inferred from aspectual information—an unbounded situation is by default Present, while a bounded situation is Past. Nyagrong Minyag is arguably a member of this type, which "expresses time without tense". The temporal interpretation is inferred from the verbal morphology of perfective/imperfective counterpart as "past/non-past" (cf. (1a) and (2b). The significant contrast between perfective and imperfective aspect in Nyagrong Minyag is reflected not only by the presence/absence of the perfective marking $də$-, but also by the aspiration alteration in some verb stems, which appears to be conditioned by the perfective morphology (cf. $də$-$tət^hu$ in (1a) and $t^hət^hu$ in (2a)).

The "tense" distinction inferred from the presence/absence of perfective marking ($də$-) is further attested in a specific pair of copula $tɕi$/$də$-$tɕwa$. In this language, $tɕi$ functions as the existential verb and introduces the adpositional predicate. The sentence is interpreted as

Present tense by default, as shown in (3a), whereas the addition of the perfective marker *də-* creates a Past interpretation, as in (3b). When applied to dynamic verbs, this pair of lexical items provides continuous aspect with temporal inferences—*tɕi* implies "future" continuous, whereas *də-tɕwa* for "past" continuous, as in (4a) and (4b), respectively.

(1) a. ŋa   ni-də   də-tətʰu   b. ŋa   də-βdʑwa
    1SG 2SG-OBJ PFV-pull₂.1A   1SG PFV-drunk
    'I pulled you.'   'I am (already) drunk.'

   c. ŋa   tsɨ   də-tsi
    1SG food PFV-eat
    'I have eaten. (I don't want to eat anymore.)'

(2) a. Prospective aspect (neutral):   b. Continuous aspect
    ŋa   ni-də   tʰətʰu   ŋa   ni-də   tʰətʰɔ   ŋə
    1SG 2SG-OBJ pull₁.1A   1SG 2SG-OBJ pull₁   COP.1
    'I am going to pull you.'   'I am pulling you.'

(3) a. ŋa   ɣu   nu   tɕɛ   b. ŋa   ɣu   nu   də-tɕwa
    1SG house LOC EXIST.1   1SG house LOC PFV-EXIST.1
    'I am in the house.'   'I was in the house.'

(4) a. ŋa   ni-də   tʰətʰɔ   tɕɛ
    1SG 2SG-OBJ pull₁   EXIST.1
    'I will be pulling you (some time in the future).'

   b. ŋa   ni-də   tʰətʰɔ   də-tɕwa
    1SG 2SG-OBJ pull₁   PFV-EXIST.1
    'I was pulling you.'

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