How Languages Express Time Differently

Research >
East Asia

We are accustomed to the idea that it is necessary to indicate tenses in a sentence in order to put the narrated event in the proper time frame. This is not, however, a universal practice among language users, as witnessed by so-called 'tenseless' languages in the world. Using examples from my own research, I will illustrate how these languages manage to express time without resort to a tense marking system, and try to provide an answer to the question why they don't behave the way the Western languages do.

By Kuang Mei

Time is the essence of events. No language is capable of describing an event if it is not equipped with the means to express time. Traditional grammars refer to the verbal category in terms of which time is expressed in speech as tense. The tense system in a language assumes a tripartite structure of time; that is, it divides time into past, present and future, called the three times, and events into three basic temporal sets accordingly. In the Western languages in general, the correspondence of tense to events in their temporal dimension is straightforward. For each temporal set of events there is a special linguistic form, a tense marker, that serves to denote it (sometimes more than one form, the irregular forms, exists due mainly to historical development). Thus, French and Italian both use verbal suffixes to mark the past and the future (the present is left unmarked or marked with a null form).

Even in the Western languages, however, the basic tenses are not the only way to indicate the time of events. Aspect, another verbal category, also contributes to event description. Aspect expresses ways an event may be looked at. The perfective aspect represents an event as completed, while the imperfective aspect takes an event as an ongoing happening. In either case, aspect delineates an event along the temporal dimension, though unlike tense, it does not directly relate the event to the real time. And yet, aspect in language is also employed to indicate time. In classical grammar, what is called the aorist tense is actually an aspect - the perfective aspect - and not a tense. Likewise, the French *passé composé*, though it is used like a past tense in the colloquial speech, is not a tense either, but also a perfective form. One may wonder why the perfective aspect can also indicate the past time, very much like a past tense. The reason is actually quite sim-

ple. Since the notion *completion* in its natural interpretation means *done prior to the time of speaking*, an additional dimension of temporal reference may be injected into the meaning of the perfective by its association with past events. In fact, this is how the past time is expressed in Chinese, a language among the numerous other non-Indo-European languages that make no formal distinction of tenses in their verbs.

Studies of so-called tenseless languages in the world have thrown new light into the nature of the expression of time in language. Surprisingly, these languages are found to have developed other verbal categories than tense and aspect, in terms of which the time of an event may also be determined. These categories are alien to the Western tongues, and yet they play a central role in organizing the grammar, as much as tense does in those languages that we are better acquainted with. I mention three of them in this brief report. They are found in Austronesian and Tibeto-Burman languages, the two language stocks that my linguistic research has concentrated on for the past ten years.

It is a common feature found in Tibeto-Burman languages that the verb (or the predicate) is marked for what I have called the locational stance. By this I mean the binary basis on which persons, things, and events or situations are classified by comparing their distance to the speaker: proximal if they are considered in the same place as the speaker, distal if not in the same place. Interestingly, when events are so indicated in the sentence, it becomes possible to determine their 'tenses'. Here we see one instance of tense being determined by a factor orthogonal to the temporal notion. In the following sentences of Nusu, one of the three TB languages spoken along the Nu River valley in northwestern Yunnan province, China, the locational distance of the event is indicated by a postverbal particle, *u* if distal to the speaker, and *ja*

if proximal (I will come to the realis marker *a* in the (a) sentence in a moment):

a. nga golaba tho   u   a
  I   shoes put on DISTAL REALIS
  I put on my shoes,
         —I have my shoes on.
b. nga golab tho   ja
  I   shoes put on PROXIMAL
  I am putting on my shoes.

If the scene of putting on one's shoes is remote from where the speaker is (at the speech time), it has to be construed as a past event. On the other hand, if putting on one's shoes is a scene in front of the speaker, then it is also something that is happening at the time of the remark.

The Austronesian Tsou, an aboriginal language spoken in Ali Mountains in central Taiwan, has the locational stance obligatorily marked on all nouns. Every noun in a sentence carries a preposition-like determiner with Case and locational information: It is either proximal or distal, with further differentiation of distance within the proximal category. Consider the celebrated sentence of the great American linguist Edward Sapir: The farmer kills the duckling.

In Tsou, if both the farmer and the duckling are marked as proximal, then the sentence is interpreted as present progressive: The farmer is killing the duckling - right here. If the farmer is marked as proximal (having a presence in the speech situation) and yet the duckling as distal, then the sentence is given the past tense reading. If, however, both the subject and object are marked as distal, then the preferred reading is that the sentence is about a past event, but a second reading taking it to be about a concurrent happening known to, though not being seen by, the speaker is also possible.
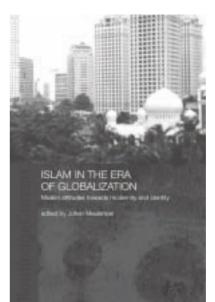
Another verbal category that the Tibeto-Burman languages are known for is so-called evidentiality. This gram-

matical feature expresses the speaker's cognitive relation to the event he describes, characterizing the latter as seen or unseen by the speaker, and so on. Some TB languages spoken in Sichuan, China, such as rGyalrong (Jiarong), have developed an elaborate, encompassing evidential system. When an event is marked as unseen (by the speaker) in the sentence, such as raining in the midnight, we have a situation called inferential. Needless to say, all inferential sentences have past tense interpretation. Even evidentiality may contribute to the determination of time.

What about future? Do these languages need a tense marker to indicate the futurity of events? No. To the speakers of these languages futurity is a modal rather than a temporal concept: it belongs to the realm of non-reality and sits side by side with modalities such as possibility, necessity, and obligation, and so on. All the languages I have investigated in my research have developed a verbal category of the modal dichotomy between reality *(realis)* and non-reality *(irrealis)*, in terms of which present and past are relegated to the *realis* mode whereas future, to the *irrealis* mode. Again, there

is no place for tense markers.

One may raise the question why all these roundabout ways of expressing time; why haven't these languages just adopted a system to mark tenses directly, the way the Western languages do? Note, first, that these languages show a different nature from the Western languages in being more speaker-oriented. They have developed various verbal categories that all take the speaker as the center of orientation. A second characteristic that sets them apart from the more familiar languages is that the concept of space plays a prominent role in their syntax. Spatial notions enter into the constitution of the verb phrase, to the subjugation of time. Thus, it is a choice between space and time, either of which can be used as an organizing principle for grammar. ◀

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INIS Publication

This collection of texts presents an in-depth discussion of some of the most important questions at present faced by Muslim society and discussed by specialists of Islam. These questions have been arranged around three core themes, namely globalization, modernity, and identity. Going beyond a popular and superficial understanding of these issues, this volume elaborates them both in the form of more general and theoretical developments as on the basis of relevant case studies. Among the themes treated are the global and local dimensions of religious and intellectual discourse or dress codes, the complicated – but not necessarily problematic – relationship between Islam and modernity, the role of religious education in the construction of identity, the interaction of state and 'civil society' in religious education and justice, and the relationship between religious and other factors in processes of social transformation. The case studies cover an area stretching from China and Southeast Asia to the Caribbean.

Apart from its subject matter, this publication is of particular interest because it represents a step towards a new synthesis in Islamic Studies, namely the cooperation of scholars representing diverse disciplinary traditions and various geographical origins and specializations, including both Muslims and non-Muslims.

The book will draw the attention of specialists and students of Islamic Studies, social sciences, and the humanities as well as the general educated public interested in subjects so diverse as development, modernization, globalization, intercultural contacts, intellectual discourse, gender, religious education, or religious authority. ◀