TENSELESSNESS IN HNARING LUTUV

October 2022

Grayson Ziegler

Indiana University Department of Linguistics

1. INTRODUCTION

Languages vary cross-linguistically in their reference to temporality; while some languages directly convey an action’s place in time via grammatical tense (cf. he walk-s, he walk-ed), other languages lack overt tense and encode temporality by other means. The data presented below suggest that Lutuv belongs to the second category. Sentences with present or past time reference are identically unmarked for tense. Future constructions differ from the past/present construction due to the addition of the post-verbal morpheme(s) (te) aa. While this could suggest a future–nonfuture tense distinction, neither te nor aa appears to function as a discrete tense marker. I argue instead that aa is an irrealis-marking particle with a default future interpretation, and te is a modal particle.

2. TENSE AND TENSELESSNESS

Comrie (1985:viii) defines tense as “the grammaticalized expression of [an event’s] location in time.” Tense can therefore be contrasted with modality or aspect by its direct reference to temporal information; that is, tense is not concerned with an action’s nature (internal structure, basis in reality, etc.) but only with its location in time. In contrast with the lexical expression of temporal information (e.g., via temporal adverbs, such as “I saw him yesterday”), tense primarily uses inflectional verbal morphology, affixes, auxiliaries, particles, or vowel alternations (Bittner 2005, Lin 2012). Tenselessness, therefore, is the absence of grammatical markers which refer only to an event’s location in time.

3. TENSELESSNESS IN LUTUV

Lutuv does not appear to have any grammatical inflection that exclusively references an event’s location in time. Translations of simple past and present constructions in Lutuv are identical, as observed in (1). The lack of expression of tense on the verb remains unchanged when the action overtly makes a past time reference using adverbials as in (2).

(1) Saaphaw na i ning.
   papaya FOC 1SS eat
   “I eat a papaya. / I ate a papaya.”

(2) Avuochaning na saaphaw i ning.
   yesterday FOC papaya 1SS eat
   “Yesterday I ate a papaya.”

Contrary to past and present action, sentences involving future action are consistently marked using the post-verbal morphemes (te) aa, as in (3). At first, this would appear to indicate a grammatical future–nonfuture contrast; however, I will argue below that both the te and aa morphemes are markers of mood/modality, not tense.
(3) Saaphaw na i ning (te) aa.
    papaya FOC 1SS eat MOD IRR
    “I will eat a papaya.”

The *aa* morpheme appears to be a general irrealis marker (i.e., a marker of unreal events or situations; see von Prince, Krajinović and Krifka 2022) instead of a future tense marker, as *aa* also appears with nonreal situations such as expressions of potentiality. Potential sentences like (4) can also be contextually interpreted as occurring in the future or past, which is unexpected if *aa* is purely a future marker.

(4) Caauv na i cape thluo aa.
    book FOC 1SS read might IRR
    “I might write the book. / I might have written the book.”

The default interpretation of irrealis mood-marking with *aa* in Lutuv may be future action, which has precedent. Irrealis constructions and future tense have significant theoretical overlap. De Haan (2010) refers to the future as a prototypical irrealis category, as it refers to events that have not yet happened and are therefore unreal. A realis–irrealis distinction for past/present versus future interpretation has also been proposed in related languages, such as Burmese (Comrie 1985) and other Chin languages (Singh 1999; Zakaria 2018).

A primary justification that *te* is a modal marker is its position within the verbal complex. Morphosyntactic information in Lutuv is strictly ordered within several pre- and post-verbal slots available within the verbal complex (Ziegler, this issue). Specific slots exist for mood (post-verbal, but pre-irrealis particle) and aspect (post-irrealis particle) marking. *Te* seems to inhabit the modal slot, as it appears in complementary distribution with other modal particles such as *thluo* (expressing possibility) and *khu* (expressing ability). *Te* also functions more like a mood marker than a tense marker, as the contrast between *te aa* and *aa* alone is based not on time, but on speaker commitment and possibility. *Te aa* is used to indicate propositions that are less certain to occur and/or will occur at an undetermined time compared to propositions with *aa* alone. A similar contrast has been observed in the Hakha Lai constructions *laay* and *tee laay* (Kavitskaya 1997).

4. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This squib argues that Lutuv appears to be tenseless; that is, there are no exclusive overt markers of temporality. While a grammatical distinction does exist between future and non-future constructions, further investigation shows that *te* and *aa* can be more aptly described as modal markers, not tense markers. However, the rest of the grammatical tense/aspect/mood-marking system provides ample areas for future research in this topic. Lutuv also contains upwards of 10 post-verbal aspectual morphemes, several of which have temporal information built-in: for example, *taw* and *buo*, the habitual and experiential perfect markers, respectively, are both always translated with past time reference.

(5) Caauv na i ri buo.
    book FOC 1SS read PRF
    “I have read the book (before).”
(6) Caauv na i ri taw.
book FOC 1SS read HAB
“I used to read the book.”

Lutuv also has a series of pre-verbal deictic directional particles (see Smith, this issue). One such marker, *za*, which generally indicates downward movement toward the deictic center, can be used non-directionally to indicate a sentence is necessarily past tense, as in (7). A more in-depth discussion of *za* can be found in Smith & Ziegler, this issue.

(7) “Saruopa hraw lie hing, kama na, aruo khu ce ang,” a za ta.
animal among LOC this I FOC run can
SUP 1SS 3SS DNW say
“‘Among the animals, I can run the most,’ he (*says) said.”

Use of *za* appears to be optional and, when compared to its use as a directional marker, rare; therefore, *za* is not indicative of a larger tense system. Temporality instead appears to be conveyed through a complex combination of lexical, modal and aspectual encoding in Lutuv. The interaction between these three forms of temporal expression is an important area for further research in the language.

5. REFERENCES