

Aspectual stem distinctions in the Mian verb

This paper makes a contribution to the typology of aspect marking by presenting new data on the morphological indication of stem aspect, viz. perfective vs. imperfective, in Mian (Papuan, Ok family, spoken in Sandaun Province, Papua New Guinea) and by examining some morphological consequences which stem aspect has on further inflection of a given verb stem.

Typologically, aspect is most commonly expressed periphrastically or inflectionally (Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca 1996; Bybee and Dahl 1989). Papuan languages typically convey aspectual distinctions by means of (periphrastic) serial verb constructions with verbs like ‘hold’, ‘take’, or ‘hit’ for perfective aspect and ‘stay’, ‘stand’, ‘lie’, or ‘do’ for imperfective aspect (cf. Foley 1986). This is the case in Kalam (Pawley 1966, ex 1).

In those Papuan languages which mark aspect morphologically, this happens mostly through affixation. Marind has a suffix *-(t)a*, which for some verbs derives imperfective from perfective stems, e.g. *sinik* ‘take on the back’ vs. *sinika* ‘carry on the back’ (Drabbe 1955).

Mian, on the other hand, and indeed several Ok languages (cf. A. Healey (1964) on Telefol, P. Healey and Steinkraus (1972) on Tifal) show an unusually rich morphological repository to mark aspect distinctions in the verb stem. Many stems which are marked for aspect can be further inflected with an aspect suffix. While approximately half of the Mian verb vocabulary is trans-aspectual, i.e. there is only one aspect-neutral form, the other half is bi-aspectual and overtly encodes either perfective aspect for bounded events whose internal temporal structure is disregarded or imperfective aspect for unbounded, i.e. continuous or habitual events (Comrie 1976, Dahl 1985). The morphological means are: (a) suffixation, e.g. *go* ‘cut skin (pfv)’ vs. *go-ka* ‘cut skin (ipfv)’ and *dei-la* ‘remove hair (pfv)’ vs. *dei* ‘remove hair (ipfv)’, where neither the form of the suffix nor the direction of the derivation are predictable, (b) apophony, e.g. *tana* ‘comb (pfv)’ vs. *tunu* ‘comb (ipfv)’ and *ge* ‘say (pfv)’ vs. *ga* ‘say (ipfv)’, and (c) suppletion, e.g., *dowôn* ‘eat (pfv)’ vs. *wen* ‘eat (ipfv)’ and *-ûb*- ‘give (pfv)’ vs. *-ka-* ‘give (ipfv)’. While reduplication is not productive in deriving imperfective forms, as for example in Tagalog, it is conspicuous that all lexical verb reduplications are defective, in that they only have an imperfective stem, e.g. *fufun* ‘blow into the fire (ipfv)’ and *sasan* ‘moan (ipfv)’.

Aspectual stem alternation has two important ramifications for further inflectional possibilities of a verb stem. First, in the perfective, a recipient argument has to be introduced by means of a serialization with *-ûb*- ‘give (pfv)’ in a quasi-applicative function (ex 2). In the imperfective, the recipient suffix is appended to the verb stem directly (ex 3).

Second, stem aspect determines whether a verb stem can be directly inflected for various tense and mood categories or whether it needs to enter a periphrastic construction with an auxiliary. For instance, direct inflection with *-s* ‘remote past’ is possible for perfective stems (ex 4), whereas imperfective stems need the auxiliary to bear the inflection (ex 5).

Thus, Mian provides a typologically interesting example of an aspect system with a wide range of morphological possibilities to encode the crucial aspectual distinction made in the language.

Examples¹

(1) *b yob ag md-p-ay*
KAL man big sound stay-PRES-3PL
'The big men are talking.'

(2) *éil=e mak=e*
MIN pig=SG.M other=SG.M

a-na-ûb'-e-Ø-ib=a
3SG.M.O-kill.PFV-give.PFV-PL.AN.R.PFV-DS.SEQ-2/3PL.AN.SBJ=MED
'They₁ killed another pig for them_k, and then they_k ...'
[Mianmin and Telefomin]

(3) *nakamín=e imen=o éil=e*
MIN man=SG.M taro=PL.N1 pig=SG.M

wen-ha-b-e=a
eat.IPFV-3SG.M.R.IPFV-DS.SIM-3SG.M.SBJ=MED
'While a pig was eating taro from a man (, the man...)' [Pig story]

(4) *yōle éil=e a-nâ'-s-ib=e?*
MIN well pig=SG.M 3SG.M.O-kill.PFV-RPST-2/3PL.AN.SBJ=Q
'Well, did they kill the pig?' [Mianmin and Telefomin]

(5) *wen-bi-s-e=be /*wen-s-e=be*
MIN eat.IPFV-AUX.IPFV-RPST-3SG.M.SBJ=DECL
'He was eating.' [Elicited]

¹ Glosses: 2 - 2nd person, 3 - 3rd person, AN - animate, DS - different subject, IPFV - imperfective, M - male, MED - medial verb, N1 - neuter 1, O - object, PFV - perfective, PL - plural, PRES - present, Q - question, R - recipient, RPST - remote past, SBJ - subject, SEQ - sequential, SG - singular, SIM - simultaneous, SS - same subject.