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The speaker as point of reference in Naxi

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Abstract

This paper provides detailed descriptions of the morphosyntactic and semantic properties of aspectual, directional and evidential expressions in Naxi, a minority language spoken in Yunnan, China. Although all these expressions develop from verbs, they retain the property of having the speaker as point of reference of the original verbs. The fact that this property is retained regardless of their aspectual or non-aspectual use shows that the speaker as point of reference is an essential part of language.

Keywords: Aspectual morphemes, directionality, evidentiality, grammaticalization, verbs of motion,

1. Introduction

It is quite common, perhaps universal, that language has some expression or other whose meaning is related to discourse participants. Most prominently all languages have pronouns for reference to the speaker, the hearer or a third party, as well as verbs that are used for motion that is to the speaker e.g., English come, or away from the speaker e.g., English go.

Some of these basic expressions develop over time into expressions differing from the original ones with respect to the core meaning, but still retaining the reference point. For instance, the verb go in English has developed into a (functional) auxiliary verb indirectly related to motion for the prospective aspect. Thus, the verb go in it is going to rain no longer expresses motion but prospective aspect, i.e., an event named by the verb has the prospect of taking place after the reference time that is expressed by the auxiliary verb, in this case, present. If we think of the speaker as a reference point in space as well as in time, then the auxiliary verb go expresses that the prospect of the event taking place is after the time when the speaker makes the utterance, i.e., now. Taking ‘now’ to be the reference to the speaker, then an event taking place later would be away from the speaker. From this perspective, the auxiliary verb go is related to the verb go for motion in the sense that both express the notion of ‘away from the speaker’. Development from a full verb to an auxiliary verb such as this is quite common across languages. Linguists call processes like this grammaticalization [4].

Particular languages do not have the same degree of grammaticalization for all lexical items. For instance, the verb go for motion has developed to a morpheme for the prospective aspect as in it is going to rain. But the verb come has not. It is not possible to express any aspectual notion with come, expressions like *it came to rain being impossible. It is against this backdrop that aspectual expressions in Naxi are interesting, for the language has quite a

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few verbs of this sort. For reasons of space, we will only look at eight of them here.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, it provides detailed descriptions of the morphosyntactic and semantic properties of the aspectual expressions in Naxi, complementing the two published grammars [3] and [2], which only have a few examples of these and do not describe their morphosyntactic and semantic properties in detail. Our work here can thus be considered to be part of the effort to enrich the documentation of the language. Second, we consider some non-aspectual expressions for directionality and evidentiality. We show that these latter are very similar to aspectual expressions in that they make reference to the speaker as well. The general conclusion that we draw is that the point of view of the speaker is an essential part of language. From the cognitive point of view, this is unsurprising, for the expression of language invariably involves discourse participants including the speaker.

### Nomenclature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACC</td>
<td>accusative</td>
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<tr>
<td>ADV</td>
<td>adverb</td>
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<td>AUX</td>
<td>auxiliary</td>
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<td>CL</td>
<td>classifier</td>
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<td>NOM</td>
<td>nominative</td>
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<td>PFTV</td>
<td>perfective</td>
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<td>PL</td>
<td>plural</td>
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<td>PROS</td>
<td>prospective</td>
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<td>Q</td>
<td>question</td>
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<tr>
<td>SG</td>
<td>singular</td>
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### 2. Expressing aspect in Naxi

Naxi is a minority language spoken by around 307,477 people (2000 census, http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/纳西族), most of whom live in the province of Yunnan, China. Aspectual notions like perfective, prospective, inchoative, punctual and experiential are expressed by a morpheme occurring after the verb:

---

1. The precise grouping of Naxi in the large Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family is apparently undecided [7]. As the issues that we are concerned with here are not directly related to the subgrouping of Naxi, we will not pursue this issue here.

2. Aspect is clearly different from tense [1] & [5]. For our purposes here, we take aspect to be the way the event unfolds and has relevance to the current situation, e.g., whether it takes place in a continuous manner (I was eating) or has run its course (I have eaten), or not (I will still be eating). As our interest here is the similarity between aspectual morphemes and verbs of motion, we will not pursue here the various issues that arise in connection with the analysis of aspect. For this reason, we will not be very precise about how the different notions of aspect are distinguished. The crucial point that we would like to make is that there is a principled reason for why certain aspectual morphemes are closely related to verbs of motion.
As we will see, the aspectual morphemes in (1)-(3) are related to the independent verbs of motion (some speakers prefer to add the hearsay morpheme $\gamma^5$ at the end of sentence (2b) (see (9) below) and the modal $\theta^5$ ‘can, possible’ as the end of sentence (3a)).

According to He [3] and He and Jiang [2], the morpheme $\eta^5/\eta^2$ appearing after the verb in (4) is a morpheme indicating the progressive aspect. This is most probably incorrect, for it may occur in non-progressive, generic sentences, as shown in (5):

(4) a. $\xiu^3\ gu^3\ ne^3$
    rain drop $+\text{EVID}$
    ‘It’s raining.’

b. $\theta^4\ u^3\ t^3\ ne^3$
    3SG cigarette smoke $+\text{EVID}$
    ‘He/she is smoking a cigarette.’

(5) a. $\theta^4\ gu^3\ m\ b^3\ k^3\ ho^3\ nu^3\ dz^3\ dz^3\ ne^3$
    3PL usually ditch LOC water swim $+\text{EVID}$
    ‘They usually swim in the ditch.’

b. $fe^2\ t^1\ ze^3\ ts^3\ m^3\ b^3\ ne^3$
    airplane very fast ADV fly $+\text{EVID}$
    ‘The airplane flies very fast.’

The morpheme $\eta^5/\eta^2$ is most appropriately taken to be a marker indicating that the speaker has first-hand knowledge of what the utterance expresses, a marker of evidentiality of sort (see section 5).

In this section, we will look at the morphosyntactic and the semantic properties of the six aspectual morphemes in (1)-(3). We mostly put aside the evidential morpheme $\eta^5/\eta^2$, for it is not aspectual and has no independent status as a verb.

2.1. The morphosyntactic properties of aspectual morphemes

The occurrence of the aspectual morphemes next to the verb in (6) gives the impression that they are suffixed to
the verb, much like English -s or -ed. Their occurrence separated by the verb shows that this is not the case:

(6) a. tʰu³³ tʰu³¹ ko³¹ xə³¹
   3SG drink drunk PFTV
   ‘He got drunk from drinking.’

b. ȵə³³ nu³³ se³³ su⁵⁵ tʰ³³ pʰ⁵⁵ za⁵⁵ na³¹ mbu³³
   1SG NOM paper this CL paint black PROS
   ‘I will paint the paper black.’

(7) a. tʰu³¹ ȵə³¹ ku³³ tʃu³¹ mbə⁵⁵ tʰ³¹
   3SG up speak AUX INCHO
   ‘He/she started talking (and continued talking).’

b. ȵə³³ nu³³ se³³ su⁵⁵ tʰ³³ pʰ⁵⁵ za⁵⁵ na³¹ lu³³
   1SG NOM paper this CL paint black PROS
   ‘I will paint the paper black.’

(8) a. tʰu³³ ru³³ tʰu³¹ nu³¹ ko³¹ ko⁵⁵ tʰv³³
   3SG wine drink LOC drunk ACC PUNC
   ‘He/she has gotten drunk, lit. He/she drank wine until he got drunk.’

b. tʰu³³ tʰu³¹ ko³¹ dzi³³
   3SG drink drunk EXP
   ‘He got drunk before.’

Naxi has morphemes for questions and evidentiality appearing at the end of a clause (see also section 5). The aspectual morphemes occur before them and after the verb:

(9) a. u³³ ja³³ xo³³ pe⁵⁵ xa³³ xo³¹ ts¹⁵
   Wuyong vegetable buy PERF -EVID
   ‘Wuyong reportedly bought vegetables.’

b. u³³ ja³³ xo³³ pe⁵⁵ xa³³ mbu³³ tʃ¹⁵
   Wuyong vegetable buy PROS -EVID
   ‘Wuyong is reportedly going to buy vegetables.’

(10) a. xu³¹ gu³¹ tsʰ³¹ la⁵⁵?
    rain fall INCHO Q
    ‘Did it start to rain?’

b. nu³¹ se³³ su⁵⁵ tʃʰ³⁵ pʰ⁵⁵ za⁵⁵ lu³³ la⁵⁵?
   2SG paper this CL paint PROS Q
   ‘Will you paint this piece of paper?’

(11) a. tʰu³³ ho³³ ndʒ₁³³ tʰv³¹ xə³¹ me⁵⁶
    3SG rice eat PUNC PERF +EVID
    ‘He definitely has finished eating.’

b. tʰu³³ gu³¹ ñə³³ ndʒ₁³³ dzi³³ me⁵⁵
    3PL fish eat EXP +EVID
    ‘They have definitely eaten fish before.’

---

Some speakers prefer the morpheme ʐə³³ instead of xə³¹ in (6a), the former expressing more certainty than the latter. There is a subtle difference between the prospective aspect mbu³³ in (6b) and the prospective aspect lu³³ in (7b). The former expresses that the event will take place some time after speech time without regard to the current situation, while the latter implies that the current state of affairs has some bearing on the event that will later take place, e.g., the preparation for the painting of the paper.
Repositioning of the aspectual morphemes in (9)-(11) in any other position would render the examples ungrammatical. This indicates that aspectual morphemes occur in specific positions between the verb and clause-final morphemes for questions and evidentiality.

2.2. The semantic properties of the aspectual morphemes

That the aspectual morphemes $x_{w}^{33}$, $mb_{w}^{33}$, $t_{s}^{h_{1}}^{34}$, $lu_{w}^{33}$, $t_{b_{v}}^{33}$ and $d_{gi}^{33}$ express the various notions of perfective, prospective, inchoative, punctual and experiential can be observed in their non-co-occurrence, in cases where reference time is anchored to speech time, with adverbials that are aspectually incompatible with them:

(12) a. *(so$_{3}^{31}ni_{3}^{33}$ $x_{w}^{31}$ gu$_{3}^{33}$ xo$_{3}^{31}$) tomorrow rain fall PFTV
   ‘It rained tomorrow.’
   b. *(v$_{3}^{33}ni_{3}^{33}$ $x_{w}^{31}$ gu$_{3}^{33}$ mbu$_{3}^{33}$ jo$_{3}^{33}$) yesterday rain fall PROS AUX
   ‘It is going to rain yesterday.’

(13) a. *(v$_{3}^{33}$ sar$_{55}^{33}$ be$_{3}^{33}$ $x_{w}^{31}$ gu$_{1}^{33}$ ts$_{1}$^{31}) two years ago rain fall INCHO
   ‘It started raining two years ago.’
   b. *(v$_{3}^{33}$ ji$_{3}^{33}$ t$_{b_{v}}^{33}$ ts$_{2}^{h_{1}}^{33}$ u$_{55}^{33}$ ngu$_{3}^{33}$ lu$_{3}^{33}$) now 3SG this place visit PROS
   ‘He will come visit this place now.’

(14) a. *(so$_{3}^{31}ni_{3}^{33}$ p$_{3}^{31}$ mbe$_{3}^{33}$ t$_{v_{3}}^{33}$) tomorrow 1SG do PUNC
   ‘I did it tomorrow.’
   b. *(so$_{3}^{31}ni_{3}^{33}$ t$_{b_{v}}^{33}$ gu$_{3}^{31}$ ni$_{3}^{33}$ ndzi$_{3}^{33}$ dgi$_{3}^{33}$) tomorrow 3PL fish eat EXP
   ‘They have eaten fish tomorrow.’

The example in (12a) is impossible, since the temporal adverb for the future so$_{3}^{31}ni_{3}^{33}$ ‘tomorrow’ is in conflict with the perfective aspect. A past temporal adverb v$_{3}^{33}ni_{3}^{33}$ ‘yesterday’ is not compatible with the prospective aspect in (12b). The temporal adverb for a distant past v$_{3}^{33}$sar$_{55}^{33}$ be$_{3}^{33}$ ‘the year before’ is incompatible with the inchoative aspect in (13a). The inchoative aspect expresses a change of state from a time shortly before the utterance is made and the state that continues until the present. Example in (13b) is ungrammatical, since the morpheme lu$_{3}^{33}$ for the prospective aspect is not compatible with the temporal adverb v$_{3}^{33}$ji$_{3}^{33}$ ‘now’. The examples in (14) are excluded, the punctual and experiential aspect being incompatible with the temporal adverb for the future (see also section 3).

Aspect can be thought of as the way the event evolves (cf. note 2) from a beginning point toward an endpoint. An event in the perfective aspect can be taken as an event whose beginning is located before reference time. An event in the prospective aspect is an event that evolves from a point located at a point after reference time. An event in the inchoative aspect is an event that begins shortly before speech time, but is not yet completed at speech time and leaves some relevant result. A punctual event is an event whose completion is instantaneous and has a culmination point. An experiential event is an event that takes place in the course of other events.

All these notions of aspect are not particularly precise to differentiate them, what is most relevant to our concerns here is the way they are similar to verbs of motion. If we relate speech time to the time the speaker makes the utterance, then aspect is clearly related to motion. For the perfective, prospective and inchoative aspect, the course of an event evolves either toward or away from the speaker. For the punctual and experiential aspect, the course of event is separate from the speaker in that it is neither toward or away from him or her.
3. Verbs of motion in Naxi

The aspectual morphemes \( xu^{33} \), \( mbu^{33} \), \( ts^{33} \) and \( lu^{33} \) can be used independently as verbs of motion, as shown in (15)-(16):

\[
\begin{align*}
(15) & \text{a. } t^3u^{33} \, s^{55}t^{b,33} \, u^{55} \, x^33 \\
& \text{3SG that place go} \\
& \text{‘He/she went to that place over there.’} \\
& \text{b. } t^3u^{33} \, s^{55}t^{b,33} \, u^{55} \, mbu^{33} \\
& \text{3SG that place go} \\
& \text{‘He/she will go to that place over there.’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
(16) & \text{a. } t^3u^{33} \, t^{b,33} \, u^{55} \, t^{b,31} \\
& \text{3SG this place come} \\
& \text{‘He/she came to this place.’} \\
& \text{b. } t^3u^{33} \, t^{b,33} \, u^{55} \, lu^{33} \\
& \text{3SG this place come} \\
& \text{‘He/she will come to this place.’}
\end{align*}
\]

These verbs of motion have specific lexical property with respect to the direction of motion. The verbs \( xu^{33} \) and \( mbu^{33} \) are for the direction away from to the speaker, while the verbs \( ts^{33} \) and \( lu^{33} \) are for direction toward the speaker. As can be seen in (15) and (16), a notable feature of the verbs for motion toward or away from the speaker is that they come in pairs. One of them is for motion made in the past and the other is for motion made in the future.

The examples in (17)-(18) are impossible, for the co-occurring adverbials are not compatible with the lexical property of the verbs with respect to the direction of motion:

\[
\begin{align*}
(17) & \text{a. } *t^3u^{33} \, t^{b,33} \, u^{55} \, x^33 \\
& \text{3SG this place go} \\
& \text{‘He/she went this place here.’} \\
& \text{b. } *t^3u^{33} \, t^{b,33} \, u^{55} \, mbu^{33} \\
& \text{3SG this place go} \\
& \text{‘He/she will go to this place here.’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
(18) & \text{a. } *t^3u^{33} \, s^{55}t^{b,33} \, u^{55} \, t^{b,31} \\
& \text{3SG that place come} \\
& \text{‘He/she came to that place over there.’} \\
& \text{b. } *t^3u^{33} \, s^{55}t^{b,33} \, u^{55} \, lu^{33} \\
& \text{3SG that place come} \\
& \text{‘He/she will come to that place over there.’}
\end{align*}
\]

The contrast between the examples in (15)-(16) and those in (16)-(17) clearly indicates that the direction of motion must be part of the meaning of these verbs of motion.

The verbs \( ts^{33} \) and \( dz^{33} \) mean essentially ‘reach’ and ‘walk, leave’ respectively. The motion they express are compatible with any direction with respect to the speaker:

\[
\begin{align*}
(19) & \text{a. } t^3u^{33} \, t^{b,33} \, s^{55}t^{b,33} \, u^{55} \, t^{b,33} \\
& \text{3SG this/place reach} \\
& \text{‘He/she reached this/place.’} \\
& \text{b. } t^3u^{33} \, gs^{33} \, t^{b,33} \, s^{55}t^{b,33} \, u^{55} \, nu^{33} \, dz^{33} \\
& \text{3PL this/place loc walk} \\
& \text{‘They walked to this/place.’}
\end{align*}
\]
Given the contrast between (15)/(16) and (17)/(18), the lack thereof in (19) can be understood in terms of lexical semantics. Specifically, the motion verbs \( t^h \) for ‘reach’ and \( d^l \) for ‘walk, leave’, in contrast with the motion verbs \( t^h \) and \( l^u \) for ‘come’ and \( m^b \) for ‘go’, have no inherent semantics indicating the direction of motion; they hence may co-occur with adverbs of any direction.

4. Relating aspect and verbs of motion via the speaker

As pointed out above, verbs of motion come in pairs, one for motion made in the past and one for motion made in the future. These co-incide fairly closely to the perfective and prospective aspect respectively (see (1)), insofar as events with these two notions of aspect unfold from a moment before or after speech time. An event in the inchoative aspect is related to motion made in the past in that the state of affairs in the event undergoes change at a moment before the reference time and eventually comes to be in a different state. An event in the punctual aspect resembles motion with a culmination point like reaching in that the event is completed much the way as the motion ends at the culmination point.

If we take the location and time of the speaker as a point of reference, then we can also see that aspect, as a property of how an event unfolds, is related to motion, insofar as both involve direction. For the perfective aspect \( x^a \) and the prospective aspect \( m^b \), the unfolding of the events is away from the speaker, much the same way as the motion expressed by the motion verbs \( x^a \) and \( m^b \) is away from the speaker. If we take the speaker as the reference point for the state of affairs resulting from change, then the inchoative aspect \( t^h \) and the prospective aspect \( l^u \) are much like the motion toward the speaker that is expressed by the motion verbs \( t^h \) and \( l^u \). With the punctual aspect \( t^h \), the event is instantaneous and culminates at a point much like the endpoint of the motion expressed by the achievement verb \( t^h \) [8]. The experiential aspect \( d^l \) is like the activity verb [8] \( d^l \) in that it ascribes a property to an individual at a point in time, much the same way that the property of walking true of an individual at a point in time in the context of other events. In these latter two notions of aspect, the speaker is not part of the way the event unfolds or the path of motion.

From this perspective of taking the speaker as reference, we have an explanation for how independent verbs of motion develop into aspect. In a sense, then, aspect and verbs of motion are deictic in relation to the speaker as a reference point. This should come as no surprise, for tense, a notion related to aspect [1] (see note 2), is deictic as well [6:pg. 275-281].

5. Directionality and evidentiality

Expressions for directionality and evidentiality also take the speaker as a point of reference. The morphemes \( f^a \) and \( l^u \) can be used by itself or in conjunction with another verb in an imperative addressing the hearer. The former implies a direction away from the speaker and the latter toward the speaker:

(20) a. \( n^u^3 / n^h^3 / t^h^3 \) fa!  
2SG/1SG/3SG go  
‘Go!’

b. \( n^u^3 / n^h^3 / t^h^3 \) mu\( ^3 t^y^5 \) fa!  
2SG/1SG/3SG out go  
‘Go out!’

(21) a. \( n^u^3 t^h^3 \) m\( b^3 \) lu!  
2SG this side come  
‘You come here!’

b. \( n^u^3 \) z\( y^5 \) t\( s^3 \) k\( v^5 \) s\( 1^3 \) lu!  
2SG child this CL take toward  
‘Get the child here, please!’

The morphemes \( m^e \) and \( t^s \) appearing at the end of the clause express evidentiality; the first one represents the
speaker’s first-hand knowledge, while the second implies that the speaker has no personal knowledge or experience of what the content of the utterance says [3:pg. 64]. This explains on the one hand why the first person subject in the matrix clause in (22a) is compatible with me⁵⁵ but not with be⁵⁵; and why the third person subject in the matrix clause in (22b) is compatible with be⁵⁵ but not with me⁵⁵:

(22) a. ITHER NOM think that Wuyong Naxi language very know +EVID/-EVID
‘I think that Wuyong knows Naxi language very well.’

b. 3PL NOM say that Wuyong Naxi language very know +EVID/-EVID
‘They say that Wuyong knows Naxi language very well.’

When the speaker makes the assertion in (22a), he or she necessarily has first-hand knowledge of what he or she thinks; hence, the use of the morpheme me⁵⁵ is appropriate. It is not possible for him or her to report his or her own thought as a hearsay; hence, the use of be⁵⁵ is inappropriate. Conversely, when the speaker reports the statement in (22b), he or she necessarily has no first-hand knowledge of the proposition; therefore, the use of be⁵⁵ is appropriate but that of me⁵⁵ is not. Again, we can see that the speaker as a point of reference is quite prevalent in Naxi.

6. Conclusion

It is clear from the discussions in the foregoing sections that aspectual morphemes are closely related to verbs of motion. Despite their difference in the time or space dimension to which they are related, all these expressions have in common the property that they take the speaker to be a point of reference. Expressions of directionality and evidentiality, too, define the speaker as the point from which an event unfolds or as the source of knowledge or experience.

From the cognitive point of view, the fact that the speaker’s point of view is taken to be an essential part of language is hardly surprising, for language begins with the speaker.

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