Tenselessness in Tzutujil

While temporal reference in many Mayan languages can be communicated in many ways, I argue in this presentation that Tzutujil Maya lacks tense markings and instead relies on aspectual markers, context and adverbials to convey temporal reference. In this study, I follow Reichenbach 1947, Dowty 1986, and Klein 1994 (and others) in assuming that temporal reference of an utterance is the time interval at which the event realization is temporally interpreted.

First, I argue that Tzutujil does not have grammatical tense. Using Cover & Tonhauser’s diagnostics (2015), contextually constrained temporal reference and temporal adverbs can be used to limit temporal reference. Similar to Yucatec Maya (Bohnemeyer 2002), Tzutujil uses the aspectual perfective and imperfective markers to trigger completive or incompletive status respectively. According to Klein (1994), grammatical aspect describes the relationship between an utterance’s topic time and event time; imperfective aspect places the topic time of an utterance within the event time while perfective aspect places event time within the topic time. In Tzutujil, the following utterance contains the imperfective marker \(n\)- and can have different temporal reference, but the aspectual reference \([\text{TT} \subseteq \text{ET}]\) remains the same:

\[(1)\] \(n-in\) sek \(waix\) \(tfi\) \(xai\)  
IMPF-1SG cook tortillas at home  
‘I cook tortillas at home.’

While the marker \(n\)- communicates an imperfective aspect, there are no constraints to the temporal reference of this utterance. In contrast, the following sentences are confined past/present/future reference through adverbials.

\[(2)\] \(n-in\) sek \(waix\) \(tfi\) \(xai\) \(ibir\)  
IMPF-1SG-cook tortillas at home yesterday  
‘I was cooking tortillas at home yesterday.’  
\([\text{TT} < \text{UT}]\)

Example (2) consists of an adverbial \(ibir\) ‘yesterday’ that allows the only interpretation of this sentence to have past reference. This adverbial constrains topic time to before the utterance time.

\[(3)\] \(n-in\) sek \(waix\) \(tfi\) \(xai\) \(ka\) \(ri\)  
IMPF-1SG cook tortillas at home right now  
‘I am cooking tortillas at home right now.’  
\([\text{TT} \subseteq \text{UT}]\)

This example allows for only a present interpretation; the adverbial \(ka\) \(ri\) ‘right now’ requires that the topic time and the utterance time occur simultaneously.

\[(4)\] \(n-in\) sek \(waix\) \(tfi\) \(xai\) \(tfwak\)  
IMPF-1SG cook tortillas at home tomorrow  
‘I will be cooking tortillas at home tomorrow.’  
\([\text{TT} > \text{UT}]\)

Example (4) is restricted to a future interpretation by the adverbial \(tfwak\) ‘tomorrow’. Future temporal adverbials like this constrain the topic time to after the utterance time. Temporal reference for these examples is constrained by adverbs, but aspectual reference marked by the imperfective \(n\)- remains the same.

Similarly, the perfective marker \(f\)- is compatible with both past and future temporal reference.

\[(5)\] Context: What did you eat yesterday? (Onions)  
\(f-ka-ti\)\(x\) \(fnakat\) \(i-fiir\)  
PRV-1PL-eat onion yesterday  
‘We ate onions yesterday’  
\([\text{ET} \subseteq \text{TT}]\)
(6) Context: There is a large celebration in town, and your 10 year old daughter is looking forward to the day she gets to participate. She tells you that she will be responsible for the meal when she turns eighteen.

Tok veinte n-juna?, f-t-in-sek na.

When twenty P1SG-year, PRV-POT-1SG-cook IRR

‘When I turn eighteen, I will cook.’

[TT > UT; ET ⊆ TT]

Because utterances containing the imperfective n- and perfective f- markers can have different temporal references according to context and adverbs, I conclude that these markers are not tenses.

While many Mayan languages such Yucatec Maya have a prospective aspect marker, Tzutujil is similar to modern Kiche (Robertson 1992) in that it does not contain a future tense or a prospective aspect marker. Instead, utterances describing future events are marked only with the imperfective marker n-. This is similar to Kiche (Robertson 1992) and differs from languages such as Guarani that use a prospective aspect to mark future reference (Tonhauser 2011). In each of the following cases, temporal reference is set only by future context or use of an adverbial:

(7) Context: Two friends are talking about travel to San Juan. The first asks the second, “Did you go to San Juan last week?” The second has not yet gone, but he plans on going next week. He responds:

N-in-p’e San Juan wuk bif
IMPF-1SG-go San Juan seven day

‘I’m planning on going to San Juan next week’

(8) Context: The same two friends are talking about bus schedules. The first one asks when the second friend plans on leaving for San Juan. The second one answers and says:

ha tsi’f m p’e pasakari
the vehicle leave sunrise

‘The bus is going to leave at sunrise.’

(9) Context: When the man calls his cousin, the cousin tells him that the newspaper said that the weather may not be good tomorrow. He said “It will rain tomorrow.”

k’o hap tfwak
Exists rain tomorrow

‘It will rain tomorrow.’

These contexts clearly demonstrate that the topic time is located after the utterance time [TT > UT], yet there is no overt prospective marker.

To conclude, the data show that Tzutujil is similar to other Mayan languages in its reliance upon context and adverbials to constrain temporal reference instead of a grammatical tense system. However, unlike some Maya languages, Tzutujil does not require a prospective aspectual marker to communicate future temporal reference. This presentation includes discussion of some aspectual and modal markers that occur with future temporal reference.

Selected References


Dowty, D. (1986). The effects of aspectual class on the temporal structure of discourse:

Semantics or pragmatics? Linguistics and Philosophy, 9, 37–61.


