Temporal Remoteness and the Perfect in Chácobo (Pano, Bolivia)

This paper provides the first formal analysis of the tense-aspect system of Chácobo, a southern Panoan language, spoken by approximately 1200 people in the department of Beni in the northern Bolivian Amazon. Previous accounts describe a basic and obligatory aspectual distinction between completive and incompletive events. Tense markers are described as optional and graded, meaning that they express how distant in the past or future an event took place (e.g. recent past versus distant past) (Prost 1967: 350; Loos 2005: 47; Córdoba et al. 2012:42). In our paper, we present a complete reanalysis of Chácobo’s tense-aspect system. We then use this analysis as a basis for understanding the strategies for encoding the perfect in Chácobo. The data for this paper are from context-induced elicitation (cf. Bochnak and Matthewson 2015, inter alia) and over 17,000 sentences from naturalistic speech gathered during 12 months of original fieldwork on the language.

First, we reanalyze the incompletive/completive distinction, encoded by the enclitics =ki and =kɨ respectively, as a non-past/past tense distinction in a Kleinian (1994) perspective. Evidence for this reanalysis comes from the fact that the morpheme =ki (the so-called “incompletive”) cannot combine with predicates that denote events in the past and =kɨ (the so-called “compleive”) cannot combine with predicates that denote events in the present of the future with respect to utterance time. (1) shows that ki cannot combine with the morpheme =fari ‘tomorrow’, even where there is a completive interpretation.

(1) a. *bama=fari=ki
    harvest=TOMORROW=PAST
    ‘Tomorrow he will finish harvesting.’

Next, we consider the morphemes that had previously been described as graded tense markers. In a previous paper, we provided detailed evidence to support our reanalysis of these morphemes as temporal remoteness morphemes (TRMs), following Cable’s (2013) analysis of similar morphemes in Gíkũũ (Bantu). TRMs are aspectual in that they relate topic time to the event time rather than relating the topic time to the utterance time as in the aforementioned tense enclitics =ki ‘nonpast’ and =kɨ ‘past’. For instance, in (2b) the recent past =pita has a past perfect reading, which relates the event of transforming to the topic time of the discourse which is in the remote past (the event time of (2a)).

(2) a. oshi tɔtsiki=ta=no=tsi kia hawi naabo ka=ni=ki
    moon leave=NOW=WHEN=TOP REPORTED 3SG:GEN family go=REMPAST=PAST

b. naama pi ʃɨ ño ʃɨ ʃɨ ʃɨ ʃɨ
    already FRUSTR monkey transform=TELIC=3PL=RECPAST=PAST
    ‘As soon as it was day break (lit. the moon left), his family went [to see their parents], but they [their parents] had already transformed completely into a monkeys by then.’

According to Cable (2013), TRMs are presuppositional in Gíkũũ, and we have evidence to support this analysis for Chácobo as well. Unlike temporal adverbs, their usage is not governed by the Gricean Maxim of Quantity (Grice 1975). If the distant past TRM =yamit was really a temporal adverbial it would not surface obligatorily in (2). We argue that =yamit surfaces obligatorily in (2a) due to Maximize Presupposition (Sauerland 2008, inter alia). Under Maximize Presupposition, when given more than one presuppositional alternative, the utterance which encodes the strongest presupposition will always be used and will block the usage of other possible weaker alternatives, such as (2b), which contains no TRM.

(3) Context: You haven’t seen Gere in months. You notice that he has a new motorcycle. Your wife calls you and asks you how Gere is, and you want to tell her that he bought a new motorcycle.

a. moto ʃɨ paʃa hiri ʃɨ kopi=yamit=ki
    motorcycle new Gere:ERG buy=DISTPAST=PAST
    ‘Gere bought a new motor cycle (between one week and a few months ago).’

b. # moto ʃɨ paʃa hiri ʃɨ kopi=Ø=ki
    motorcycle new Gere:ERG buy=CURR_PAST=PAST
    ‘Gere bought a new motor cycle. (time either happened today or is unknown).’
Abstract

The third and final part of our paper provides a description of perfect encoding strategies in Chácobo and relates them to the interpretation of TRMs. There are two strategies for marking the perfect in Chácobo. One strategy is already exemplified in (3). The speaker switches to a TRM, which calculates a temporal distance (between event time and topic time) distinct from the temporal distance between topic time and utterance time already established in the discourse context. For instance in (3), =ʔita ‘recent past (one day to a week ago)’ receives a past perfect interpretation because the surrounding discourse is in the remote past (encoded by the combination of =ni and =ki).

The second strategy Chácobo uses for encoding the perfect involves word order. In the past tense the subject (SUBJ) precedes the tense enclitic (T) by default (e.g. (2a); (3)). However, when the order between these elements is reversed (T-SUBJ rather than SUBJ-T), a perfect tense is encoded. Clear evidence for this is provided in (4). The SUBJ-T order in (4b) is incompatible with the adverbial naama ‘already’, which presupposes that an event took place in the past and has relevance to the topic time.

(4) a. naama tirisa=ki kamašoa b. *naama kamašoa tirisa=ki
already decapitate=PAST panther already panther decapitate=PAST
‘The panther had already decapitated him.’

Word order differences also encode more fine-grained details in the interpretation of TRMs. In T-SUBJ order, a given TRM encodes the temporal distance between the end point of the event time and the topic time. In SUBJ-T order, however, a given TRM encodes the temporal distance between the starting point of the event and the topic time. Evidence for this is provided from the text example in (5). (5) is from a narrative where a speaker quotes one of the protagonists of a folk story who arrives at his house from a long journey to find that everything has been burnt down. In (5a), the subject ia ‘first person’ appears after the tense enclitic =ki. As a consequence, the TRM relates the topic time (the time of speech in this case) to the end point of the event. Since the protagonist states (5) upon his arrival, the null current past TRM is used. Notice that in (5b), he refers to the same event of coming/arriving to his home, but with a SUBJ-T order. The distant past TRM =yamit encodes the temporal distance between the initiation point of the coming/arriving and the topic time.

(5) a. ho=0=ki i=ν=ra ka=tapi=ɾá
come=CURRPAST=PAST ISG SUBJ-EPEN=FRUSTR go=NOW=FRUSTR
i=tsi= kiá ha= niki
say=FOC-REPORT 3=REMPAST
‘Even though I have just arrived, I’m now going!’ he said’

b. habi niá tsi i ho=yamit=ki
surely here FOC ISG SUBJ come=DISTPAST=PAST
txt 06:250-251
‘It’s this way (here) from which I have come.’

This paper provides evidence for a complete reanalysis of the Chácobo tense-aspect system as it has been described in current literature. Furthermore, the study contributes to the small but growing body of literature on the crosslinguistic variation for encoding tense and aspect in understudied languages.