How Languages Express Time Differently

We are accustomed to the idea that it is necessary to indicate tenses in a sentence in order to put the narrated event in the proper time frame. This is not, however, a universal practice among language users, as witnessed by so-called ‘tenseless’ languages found in the world. Using examples from my own research, I will illustrate how these languages manage to express time without resort to a tense marking system, and try to provide an answer to the question why they don’t behave the way the Western languages do.

By Kuang Mei

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time is the essence of events. No language is capable of describing an event if it is not equipped with the means to express time. Traditional grammars refer to the verbal category in terms of which time is expressed in speech as tense. The tense system in a language assumes a tripartite structure of time; that is, it divides time into past, present and future, called the three times, and events into three basic temporal sets accordingly. In the Western languages in general, the correspondence of tense to events in their temporal dimension is straightforward. For each temporal set of events there is a special linguistic form, a tense marker, that serves to denote it: sometimes more than one form, the irregular forms, exists due mainly to historical development. Thus, French and Italian both use verbal suffixes to mark the past and the future (the present is left unmarked or marked with a null form).

In the Western languages, however, the basic tenses are not the only way to indicate the time of events. Aspect, another verbal category, also contributes to event description. Aspect expresses ways an event may be looked at. The perfective aspect represents an event as completed, while the imperfective aspect takes an event as an ongoing happening. In either case, aspect delineates an event along the temporal dimension, though unlike tense, it does not directly relate the event to the real time. And yet, aspect in language is also employed to indicate time. In classical grammars, what is called the aorist tense is actually an aspect - the perfective aspect - and not tense. Likewise, the French passé composé, though it is used like a past tense in the colloquial speech, is not a tense either; but a perfective form. One may wonder why the perfective aspect can also indicate the past time, very much like a past tense. The reason is actually quite simple. Since the notion completion in its natural interpretation means done prior to the time of speaking, an additional dimension of temporal reference may be injected into the meaning of the perfective by its association with past events. In fact, this is how the past time is expressed in Chinese, a language among the numerous other non-Indo-European languages that make no formal distinction of tenses in their verbs.

Studies of so-called tenseless languages in the world have thrown new light into the nature of the expression of time in language. Surprisingly, these languages are found to have developed other verbal categories than tense and aspect, in terms of which the time of an event may also be determined. These categories are alien to the Western tongues, and yet they play a central role in organizing the grammar, as much as tense does in those languages that we are better acquainted with. I mention three of them in this brief report. They are found in Austronesian and Tibeto-Burman languages, the two language stocks that my linguistic research has concentrated on for the past ten years. It is a common feature found in Tibeto-Burman languages that the verb (or the predicate) is marked for what we have called the locational stance. By this I mean the binary basis on which persons, things, and events or situations are classified by comparing their distance to the speaker: proximal or distal. If the scene of putting on one’s shoes is remote from where the speaker is at the speech time, it has to be construed as a past event. On the other hand, if putting on one’s shoes is a scene in front of the speaker, then the event is marked as proximal (having a presence in the center of orientation). A second category is the modal dichotomy between reality (realis) and non-reality (irrealis), in terms of which present and past are related to the realiz mode whereas future, to the irrealis mode. Again, there is no place for tense markers. One may raise the question why all these roundabout ways of expressing time are necessary in languages that just adopted a system to mark tenses directly, i.e. the way the Western languages do? Note, first, that these languages show a different future from the Western languages in being more speaker-oriented. They have developed various verbal categories that all take the speaker as the center of orientation. A second characteristic that sets them apart from the more familiar languages is that the concept of space plays a prominent role in their syntax. Spatial notions enter into the constitution of the verb phrase, to the subjugation of time. Thus, it is a choice between space and time, either of which can be used as an organizing principle for grammar.

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This collection of texts presents an in-depth discussion of some of the most important questions at present faced by Muslim society and discussed by specialists of Islam. These questions have been arranged around three core themes, namely globalization, modernity, and identity. Going beyond a popular and superficial understanding of these issues, this volume elaborates them both in the form of more general and theoretical developments as on the basis of relevant case studies. Among the themes treated are the global and local dimensions of religious and intellectual discourse or dress codes, the complicated – but not necessarily problematic – relationship between Islam and modernity, the role of religious education in the construction of identity, the interaction of state and ‘civil society’ in religious education and justice, and the relationship between religious and other factors in processes of social transformation. The case studies cover an area stretching from China and Southeast Asia to the Caribbean.

Apart from its subject matter, this publication is of particular interest because it represents a step towards a new synthesis in Islamic Studies, namely the cooperation of scholars representing diverse disciplinary traditions and various theological or philosophical specializations, including both Muslims and non-Muslims.

The book will draw the attention of specialists and students of Islamic Studies, social sciences, and the humanities as well as the general educated public interested in subjects so diverse as development, modernization, globalization, inter-cultural contacts, intellectual discourse, gender, religious education, or religious authority.