Tense, Aspect and Situation Types in Mech

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Abstract

This paper provides a detailed account of the tense and aspect features marked on the verbs of the Tibeto-Burman language known as Mech [met/]. The language is mood-prominent with a primary distinction between realis and irrealis. Mech also has a rich aspectual system. In addition to tense and aspect, the paper describes the morphology of verbs according to Vendler's Aktionsart and the various situation types found in the language.

Key words: Tense, Aspect, Mech language.

Introduction

The Mech community belongs to the Bodo-Kachari group of tribes belonging to the northern part of the state of West Bengal in India. The Bodos of North Bengal (Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar and Terai regions) who settled along the banks of the river Mechi (which flows across India and Nepal) call themselves Mech. The Mech language has been classified as a severely endangered language by UNESCO (2010), and belongs to the Tibeto-Burman sub-family of languages under the Sino-Tibetan language family.

This paper is based on the variety of Mech spoken in Alipurduar District in West Bengal. For this study, primary data has been collected from the native speakers of Mech residing in Chhekamari village in Madarihat Tehsil, Alipurduar District, West Bengal. Tense and aspect are the two major categories of grammar which characterize the nature of events and states in the domain of human cognition, namely, time. The paper focuses on how the categories of tense and aspect are marked on the verb in case of the endangered language, Mech.

Research Objectives

The aim of this paper is to make a comprehensive study of the distribution of Tense and Aspect features in Mech language. The primary objectives of this paper are listed as follows—

(i) To give an account of how tense and aspect features are expressed in the language.
(ii) To identify the morphemes (free and/or bound) and separate lexical items (if any), which mark the tense and aspect in the language.
(iii) To identify the morphological differences (if any) based on the aspectual classification of Vendler's Aktionsart and situation types.

Research Methodology

Since the language under study, Mech, is an undocumented language, no secondary data was available. Primary data was collected from native speakers of Mech residing in Chhekamari village in Madarihat Tehsil, Alipurduar District, West Bengal. Initially, a native speaker of Mech who is also fluent in Bangla, was consulted before the field visit and a basic word list of 200 words (Swadesh, 1952) and a few basic phrases were noted. Mech was found to be inflectional in nature, and the community is multilingual with knowledge of Bangla, Hindi, Rajbangshi, Rabha and Nepali. The young generation understands and speaks English as well. The use of their mother-tongue Mech is restricted to a few basic domains like home, market, etc. while they use the other languages (primarily Bangla and Hindi) in the other social domains.

Questionnaire Design

On the basis of the above information, the contact language was chosen as Bangla, and a questionnaire was designed, which was aligned with the research objectives of this paper. A detailed questionnaire was made with separate sections on all possible tense and aspect types to investigate these categories in the verbal morphology of the language. The questionnaire also focused on Vendler's aspectual classification of verbs and situation types, and four verbs were chosen for the study, one of each type. For studying situation types, various verbs which demonstrate typical situation types cross-linguistically were chosen. The questionnaire contained a total of 250 sentences, with 50 sentences for each of the four verbs based on Vendlerian classification ranging across all tense and aspect categories. Remaining 50 sentences, focused on the different verbs based on the various possible situation types.

Data Collection

Ten sets of the questionnaire were taken to the field and ten language consultants were selected by means of voluntary participation. Their consent was taken before collecting data and it was clearly stated that the language data will only be used for research and academic purposes. Initially, morpheme analysis was conducted based on data collected from eight language consultants. Average interview time was 1.5 hours per session per language consultant, and multiple sessions were scheduled on separate days for collection of the entire range of data. An initial analysis was made and the requisite morphemes were identified. After the initial analysis, data was collected from two language consultants and cross-checked. The analysis was thus cross-validated with other native speakers and was found to be consistent in nature. The analysis has been presented in detail in the next section.

Data & Discussion

In this section, the tense and aspect features of the Mech [meʧ] language has been described in detail, as observed from the data collected based on the methodology outlined in section 3.

Tense in Mech

In the case of Mech, tense is not marked on the verb. It was observed that Mech is an Aspect & Mood prominent language. The temporal structure of an event is specified by Aspect & Mood markings on the verb. The language marks irrealis and realis and through that, the distinction between future vs non-future is maintained.

1. əŋ kʰamani məu-**wə**
   1SG work do-HAB
   'I do the work.' (Present Tense)
2. əŋ kʰamani məu-**wə-mɯn**
   1SG work do-HAB-REALIS
   'I did the work.' (Past Tense)
3. əŋ kʰamani məu-**nəi**
   1SG work do-IRR
   'I will do the work.' (Future Tense)

According to traditional classification between present, past and future tenses, sentences 1, 2 and 3 have been taken respectively. The verb does not show any marking with respect to tenses but uses aspect and mood markers to specify the location of the event in time. There is no separate marking for present tense. In order to mark the past tense, the realis marker (*-mɯn*) is used, whereas future tense is marked using the irrealis marker (*-nəi*).

Aspect in Mech

The aspect gives the internal temporal structure of an event—it highlights the unfolding of the predication, i.e., whether the event denoted by the verb is completed or in progress. Aspect marking is present on the verb. Among the viewpoint aspects, there are three types: habitual, progressive, and perfective aspects. In addition to these, we see a type of imperfective aspect which is specified by using Habitual & Progressive markers. Other Aspect Types studied are the situation aspect types, like inchoative, resultative, iterative aspect, etc. The following subsections will discuss the aspect types in detail:

Habitual Aspect

The habitual aspect characterizes a situation as occurring regularly or habitually. Two bound morphemes {***-wə, -nə***} are used as suffixes to the verb root to indicate habitual aspect. These allomorphs are phonologically conditioned. The default marker for habitual aspect is ***–wə***. The allomorph ***–nə*** occurs due to assimilation in place of articulation with verb roots ending with alveolar consonants, for example, *litʔ* 'Write' in sentence 5. Realis marker (***-mɯn***) is added to indicate that the event is in the past. Habitual aspect is not marked in Irrealis [example 6].

4. əŋ ʃʌmpʰrəmbə pʰuŋa-o kʰamani məu-**wə**
   1SG daily morning-LOC work do-HAB
   'Every morning I do work.'

5. əŋ ʃʌmpʰrəmbə pʰuŋa-o laiɟəm litʔ-**nə**
   1SG daily morning-LOC letter write-HAB
   'Every morning I write a letter.'

6. əŋ ʃʌmpʰrəmbə pʰuŋa-o kʰamani məu-nəi
   1SG daily morning-LOC work do-IRR
   'Every morning I will do work.'

The verb conjugation for habitual aspect is summarized in Table 1 for two different verb roots, *məu* 'Do' and *litʔ* 'Write' showing both allomorphs.

HAB	**məu (Do)**	**litʔ (Write)**	**COMMENTS**
PRS	məu-**wə**	litʔ-**nə**	Allomorphs (assimilation due to preceding alveolar consonant)
PST	məu-**wə**-mɯn	litʔ-**nə**-mɯn	Realis marker (-mɯn) is added to indicate that the event is in past
FUT	məu-nəi	litʔ-nəi	Habitual aspect is not marked in Irrealis

Table 1: *Distribution of Habitual Aspect Markers in Mech*

Progressive Aspect

The Progressive Aspect of a verb expresses an on-going action. It is denoted by suffixing the bound morpheme ***–ɖəŋ***. Realis marker (*-mɯn*) is added to indicate that the event is in past. However, there is no marking for Irrealis. In case of future progressive, the sentence structure always has an embedded clause—the subordinate clause indicates temporal location as future and the verb in the main clause marks progressive aspect, and these two parts together produce the future progressive [example 8].

7. əŋ kʰamani məu-**ɖəŋ**
1SG work do-PROG
'I am doing work.'

8. bi belacʰia-o tʰaŋ-a-nəi nai-nəi əŋ kʰamani-kʰou məu-**ɖəŋ** 3SG evening-LOC go-PERF-IRR see-IRR 1SG work-ACC do-PROG
'In the evening, he will go and see that I am doing work.'

The verb conjugation for progressive aspect is summarized in Table 2 for the verb root *məu* 'Do'.

PROG	**məu (Do)**	**COMMENTS**
PRS	məu-**ɖəŋ**	
PST	məu-**ɖəŋ**-mɯn	Realis marker (-mɯn) is added to indicate that the event is in past
FUT	məu-**ɖəŋ**	No marking for Irrealis, Subordinate clause indicates temporal location as Future.

Table 2: *Distribution of Progressive Aspect Markers in Mech*

Imperfective Aspect

Imperfective aspect indicates an action or condition in which there is no fixed temporal boundary—the event is unfinished, continuous, or in progress. Under a broad classification, habitual and progressive aspects are a sub-type of imperfective aspect. However, the imperfective aspect described here is different in the sense that it is neither habitual nor progressive but continues in action for over a considerable stretch of time. No separate marker is found to be present for marking the imperfective aspect. It is marked by using a progressive marker (***ɖəŋ***) for Process Verbs (as shown in example 9).

9. əŋ ɖa gɔlpo litʔ-**ɖəŋ** ar gabənbə əŋ gɔlpo litʔ nəi
1SG now story write-PROG(IPFV) CONJ tomorrow 1SG story write-IRR
'I am writing a story now and I will write the story tomorrow.'

For other types of verbs like Stative, Accomplishment & Achievement verbs, the habitual marker (***-wə/-nə***) is used as shown in example 10 below.

10. əŋ ɖabənə bi-kʰou məɟəŋ mən-**nə** ar əŋ unnaobə
1SG still 3SG-ACC good love-HAB(IPFV) CONJ 1SG later
bi-kʰou məɟəŋ mən-nəi

3SG-ACC good love-IRR
'I still love her and I will love her later (as well).'

The marking pattern is the same as that of HAB/PROG aspects (c.f. Table 1 and Table 2).

Perfective Aspect

Perfective Aspect denotes viewing the event, which the verb describes, as a completed whole, i.e., the action is complete. In Mech, three allomorphs of the perfective aspect were observed {***-bai, -a, -o***}. The default perfective aspect marker for Non-Future is ***–bai*** (as shown in example 11 below).

11. əŋ kʰamani məu-**bai**
1SG work do-PFV
'I have (just) done the work.'

12. əŋ kʰamani məu-**bai**-mɯn
1SG work do-PFV-REALIS
'I have done the work (long ago).'

The realis marker (*-mɯn*) is added to indicate that the event is in the past (example 12 above). It may be noted that, when the realis marker is used with the perfective aspect, it indicates that the event time is in distant past. Perfective marker for Future is ***–a*** (example 13 below).

13. ɖohonpʰrai əŋ nəŋ-i kʰamani-kʰou məu-n-**a**-nəi ɟɛp-nəi
(By that time) 1SG 2SG-GEN work-ACC do(V)-CP-PFV-IRR drop-IRR
'By that time, I would have done your work.'

It is observed that in the case of non-motion verbs (like BE or STAY), the perfective aspect is marked by using the allomorph ***–o*** (as shown in example 14).

14. əŋ na-o ɖoŋ-**o**
1SG house-LOC be-PFV
'I am in the house.'

It is also observed that the conjunctive participle (*-nɯ*) loses the vowel *ɯ* when the perfective marker (*–a*) is attached to the V1 of the explicator compound verb (ECV); consider the example in 13 above.

Inchoative Aspect

Inchoative aspect refers to the beginning of an activity or state. No specific marker for this aspect was found. The lexical item ***ʃuɾu*** is used to indicate inchoativity. This item is homophonous with the Bangla noun *ʃuɾu* 'start'. This combination of *ʃuɾu* with the verb 'do' forms a verb complex (conjunct verb N+V). This verb complex does not have any separate marking for denoting inchoativity. The noun *ʃuɾu* has an inherent aspectual character indicating inchoativity. The verb complex as a whole serves to denote inchoative aspect.

15. bi kʰamani-kʰou **ʃuru** kʰwaləm-bai
3SG work-ACC start do-PFV
'He started doing the work.'

Here, the regular DO verb root (*məu-*) is not used. It may be noted that in this case, the speaker treats the DO verb to be of an abstract nature since they give priority to the initiation of thought for doing the work—in order to start doing work, one must think of starting it first and then the action initiates. Since a component of thought is associated with the starting of the action denoted by the verb, they use abstract counterparts of the verb for inchoativity. Thus, multiple forms of same verb root DO exists based on semantic distinction by the feature [+/- abstract]: *məu-* [-abstract] & *kʰwaləm-* [+abstract], etc.

Resultative Aspect

It denotes the resulting state of an event. No separate marker was found for this aspect type. Perfective aspect marker **–bai** is used to indicate the Resultative aspect.

16. pʰuld̪ani-a bai-**bai**
flowervase-NOM break-PFV(RES)
'The flower vase broke.'

Iterative Aspect

Iterative aspect denotes 'several' repetitions i.e., it expresses the repetition of an event or state. A separate lexical item ***tʰaije*** is used after the verb to mark Iterative Aspect.

17. bi gabbao dʰore guɟu-bai **tʰaije**
3SG ADV DUR cough-PFV ITERATIVE
'He was coughing for a long time.'

18. bi biɾi cʰəp-bai **tʰaije**
3SG cigarette eat-PFV ITERATIVE
'He kept smoking a cigarette.'

It may be noted from sentence 17, that this usage is different from the Bangla compound verb "kaʃlo" (to have coughed once), used for denoting one-time occurrence of the event (Semelfactive), which is also distinguished in the language. The following example demonstrates this.

19. bi guɟu-nin d̪oŋ-**o**
3SG cough-CP be-PFV

'He coughed (once).'

Vendler's Aspectual Classification of Verbs

According to Vendler's ***Aktionsarten*** (Vendler, 1967), verbs are classified based on the properties or features of dynamism, duration and telicity, into

four classes, namely, State verbs or Statives, Accomplishment verbs, Process verbs and Achievement type verbs.

	Dynamism	**Duration**	**Telicity**
State	-	+	-
Accomplishment	+	+	+
Process	+	+	-
Achievement	+	-	+

Table 3: Classification of verbs based on Vendler's Aktionsarten

For the language under study, four verbs were taken according to this classification:

mən- (to love) [STATIVE VERB]

məu- (to do) [ACCOMPLISHMENT VERB]

litʔ- (to write) [PROCESS VERB]

naigiriʔna- mən- (to find) [ACHIEVEMENT VERB]

Results of the above analysis have been summarized in this work. A few examples of these verbs are shown in the next four sub-sections 4.3.1 to 4.3.4.

Stative Verb *mən*- (to love)

The stative verb *mən*- 'love' shows regular morphology as discussed earlier. An example is provided below for illustration.

20. əŋ biḍoṭ̪ ɟa-nɯ məɟəŋ **mən**-nə
1SG mutton eat-CP good love-HAB
'I love to eat mutton.'

Accomplishment Verb *məu*- (to do)

The accomplishment verb *məu*- 'do' shows regular morphology as discussed earlier (as shown in examples 1, 2, 3 and in tables 1 and 2).

Process Verb *litʔ*- (to write)

The process verb *litʔ*- 'write' shows regular morphology as discussed earlier. An example is provided below for illustration.

21. əŋ laiɟəm **litʔ**-ḍəŋ
1SG letter write-PROG
'I am writing a letter.'

Achievement Verb *naigiriʔna- mən*- (to find)

The achievement verb *naigiriʔna- mən*- 'find' shows regular morphology. However, the only difference is that they show an additional obligatory

mood marker of positive or negative attitude regarding the achievement type event. This has also been discussed in detail by (Chowdhury, 2019). The achievement type verbs are usually compound verbs, and they show an assertive/negative mood in the form of a morpheme bound to the V1 and/or V2 of the explicator compound verb (ECV), i.e., the morpheme marks the status indicating the success or failure of the action involved. In case of a positive attitude indicating the success of the action, the allomorph –**n** is used to mark the mood on V1 of the ECV (example 22). To show negative attitude indicating failure, the negative is doubly marked, i.e., the allomorph -**bə** is marked on the V1 and the allomorph –**khoi** is marked on the V2 (light verb) of the explicator compound verb (example 23).

22. əŋ boi-k^{h}ou naigiriʔ-n-a-**n** mɔn-bai

1SG book-ACC search-CP-PFV-ASSERTIVE get-PFV

'I found the book.'

23. əŋ boi-k^{h}ou naigiriʔ-n-a-**bə** mɔn-a-**k^{h}oi**

1SG book-ACC search-CP-PFV-NEG get-PFV-NEG

'I did not find the book.'

As noted earlier, for compound verbs indicating positive attitude, the perfective aspect marker –*a* is used on V1, while the perfective aspect marker –*bai* is marked on V2. In contrast, for compound verbs indicating negative attitude, the perfective aspect marker –*a* is used for marking both V1 and V2 of the ECV. Thus, achievement type verbs differ in terms of morphology with respect to other three types.

Verbs according to Situation Types

Event verb, Process verb, Durative, Punctuative & Semelfactive verbs, Telic verbs, Atelic verbs (with and without Telic predicates) were studied. No irregularity was found and no additional markers were observed on the verb. It was seen that atelic verbs can be used as telic verbs when supported by a telic predicate (a predicate which limits its atelic nature).

- ***Event Verb***

The event verb *bet* 'explode' is used as follows—

24. bom-ma **bet**-bai

Bomb-NOM explode-PFV

'The bomb exploded.'

- ***Process Verb***

The process verb *ɟ^{h}abəilʌŋ* 'walk' is used as follows—

25. bi iskul-ʃim **ʈʰabəilʌŋ**-ɖəŋ
    3SG school-GOAL walk-PROG
    'He is walking to school.'

- ***Durative Verb***

The durative verb *naihəpʔ* 'gaze' is used as follows—

26. bi cʰobi-kʰou gəbbao nəpʰrai **naihəpʔ**-nə
    3SG picture-ACC long time for gaze-IPFV(HAB)
    'He is gazing at the picture for a long time.'

- ***Punctuative Verb***

The punctuative verb *ɟu* 'hit' is used as follows—

27. bi cʰeima- kʰou latʰi-juŋ **ɟu**-bai
    3SG dog-ACC stick-INS hit-PFV
    'He hit the dog with a stick.'

- ***Semelfactive Verb***

The semelfactive verb *mogon kʰep* 'wink' (compound verb showing noun incorporation) is used as follows—

28. bi əŋ-ni-jəŋ naihotʔ-nɯ **mogon kʰep**-bai
    3SG 1SG-GEN-GOAL look-CP eye close-PFV
    'He winked while looking at me.'

- ***Telic Verb***

The telic verb *guglai* 'fall' is used as follows—

29. bilai-ya ɖoŋpʰaŋ nəpʰrai **guglai**-bai
    leaf-NOM tree ABL fall-PFV
    'The leaf fell from the tree.'

- ***Atelic Verb***

The atelic verb *kʰatʔ* 'run' is used as follows—

30. bi **kʰatʔ**-bai
    3SG run-PFV
    'He ran.'

The same verb becomes a telic verb when supported by a telic predicate as shown in example 31 below—

31. bi mail menc^{h}e **k^{h}at?**-bai
3SG mile one run-PFV
'He ran a mile.'

Summary till now

In this section, we have seen various features associated with tense and aspect which are marked on the verb in Mech. We have seen that tense is ascertained by using a combination of various aspect and mood markers. It was seen that aspect is only marked by bound morphemes in the language, and all aspect markers are suffixes (exceptions being in cases of inchoative and iterative aspect). In the next section, the findings of this paper shall be summarized and a conclusion shall be presented in alignment with our laid down research objectives.

Conclusion

In this section, we summarize the findings as follows—

It was observed that the language does not mark tense, but rather it uses aspect and mood suffixes to indicate the temporal location of the event or action described by the verb. The primary distinction is made between realis and irrealis, and the language marks the past tense by using a combination of aspect marker and realis mood marker. Thus, tense is not directly marked on the verb.

It has been observed that there are three main aspects (Habitual, Progressive and Perfective) which are marked on the verb, whereas the Imperfective aspect is specified by using Progressive marker (*–ɖəŋ*) for Process verbs, and Habitual marker (*-nə*) for Stative, Accomplishment and Achievement type verbs. The Habitual aspect is indicated by two suffixes {*-wə, -nə*}, with *-nə* being phonologically assimilated with respect to the place of articulation of the verb stem ending with alveolar consonant. However, the habitual aspect is not marked in case of irrealis. The Progressive aspect is usually marked by the suffix *–ɖəŋ*, but for Future Progressive, the sub-ordinate clause indicates temporal location as Future and the verb in main clause marks Progressive aspect. There are three Perfective aspect markers {*-bai, -a, -o*}, the default marker for non-Future being *-bai*, and *-a* for Future. Whereas, the marker *-o* is used only for non-motion verbs (like 'be', 'stay', etc.). It is also seen that the achievement type verbs always use the marker *–a* to mark perfective aspect, irrespective of the temporal location of the event. It has been noted that, in case of Explicator Compound Verbs, the conjunctive participle (*nɯ-*) in V1 loses the vowel *ɯ* in presence of Perfective marker *-a*. Apart from these, in studying Inchoative, Resultative & Iterative aspects, it has been found that separate lexical items (*ʃuɾu* for Inchoative and *t^{h}aije* for Iterative) are used. Iteratives are distinguished from Semelfactives by using the participle *-nin* with the verb. The language also marks the assertive and negative attitude

of the speaker on the achievement type verbs by using bound morphemes {*-n* / *-bə* / *-khoi*}.

The verb types of the language were also studied, namely event verbs, process verbs, durative verbs, punctuative verbs, telic and atelic verbs, etc. and they were observed to conform to the regular morphology as discussed in this paper. An aspectual classification of verbs were also made based on Vendler's Aktionsart and it was noted that the achievement type verbs differ from the other types (stative, accomplishment and process verbs) in the sense that, they mark an overall status of result of the activity, i.e., they mark a positive attitude (indicating success) or a negative attitude (indicating failure) on the verb.

A distinction was observed between two forms of the verb 'do' based on the binary feature [+/- abstract] — the (-abstract) verb form *məu* is used when the work is of concrete nature; when the nature of the work is abstract, the (+abstract) verb form k^h*waləm* is used.

Mech has multi-language contact (with Bangla, Hindi, Nepali, Rabha, Rajbangshi, etc.), and thus it has the status of an endangered language due to the dominance of Bangla and Hindi in the region. The morphological analysis presented in this paper can be used for making any computational tool or interface which can help to increase language use among the community, or the analysis may be used for making morphological recognizer, analyzer and generator. There is future scope of work regarding how the language makes semantic distinctions in the choice of verb forms having same meaning (similar to choice of verb roots of 'do' based on +/-abstract feature, etc.).

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