

Grammar Engineering

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Tense and aspect

Overview

- What are tense and aspect?
- How are tense/aspect marked?
- Constraints on the distribution of particular tenses/aspects
- (If time) implementation details

Definitions

- Eventuality: a cover term of events and states
- Tense: relation of eventuality of speech time
 - Past, present, future
 - “Perfect tense” (possibly not a tense, not on the menu)
- Grammatical aspect: information about the viewpoint on an eventuality

Kinds of aspect

- Perfective: Eventuality viewed from outside
- Imperfective: Eventuality viewed from the inside

Continuous, progressive (*I am eating*)

Generic (*Rabbits eat peas*)

Habitual (*I eat yogurt every day*)

Note: Habitual might be best analyzed as belonging to a separate dimension.

Not all tenses/aspects are marked

- Some languages primarily mark tense, others aspect, others both
- Different languages have different grammaticized categories for tense and aspect
- What do your languages do?

Marking strategies

- Lexical specification

- Verbal inflection

Portmanteau morphemes with agr or other

- Periphrasis (auxiliary + verb)

Inflection on auxiliary and/or verb

Main verb in specific form depending on auxiliary

- Adverbs

With specific time reference (“yesterday”)

Pure tense/aspect markers

- Verb + particle

Examples: Lexical specification

Russian:

Ja yel gruši/tort

1 SG.NOM eat.PAST.1 SG pears.ACC/cake-ACC

‘I was eating (some) pears/cake. (Imperfective, atelic)’

Ja s-yel gruši/tort

1 SG.NOM eat.PAST.1 SG pears.ACC/cake-ACC

‘I ate all the pears/the whole cake. (Perfective, telic)’

Examples: Verbal inflection, portmanteau

French:

Je mangeais des poires.

1SG.NOM eat.IMPARGAIT.1SG of.the pears

‘I was eating some pears.’ (Past imperfective)

Nous mangions des poires.

1PL.NOM eat.IMPARGAIT.1PL of.the pears

‘We were eating some pears.’ (Past imperfective)

Examples: Aux + verb

English:

Toby is studying Japanese

Toby be.3SG.PRES study.PROG Japanese

(Present progressive/imperfective)

French:

Nous avons mangé le poire.

1PL.NOM have.1PL.PRES eat.PERF the pear

‘We ate the pear.’ (Past, perfective)

Examples: Adverbs/serial verb constructions

Tok Pisin:

Meri i kuk i stap

Woman ?COP cook ?COP PROG

‘The woman is cooking.’

(*stap* is also the verb ‘to stay’.)

Examples: Adverbial

Tok Pisin:

Bai ol i wokim house

FUT they ?COP build house

‘Sometime in the future, they will build a house.’

Ol bai i wokim house

They FUT ?COP build house

‘Sometime in the future, they will build a house.’

(Tok Pisin examples from Holm 1989)

Over to you

What strategies do your languages use to mark aspect?

Constraints on distribution

- Not all tenses/aspects can appear in all combinations
- Not all tenses/aspects can appear in all constructions
- We're particularly interested to learn what constraints there are in your languages.

Examples of constraints

- *I am knowing the answer. (No progressive of stative verbs)
- No present tense counterpart of *used to*
- ?*I used to be running every day.
- cf: I was running every day until the accident.
- Russian present tense forms of perfective verbs \Rightarrow future interpretation

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