Tenselessness in Kapampangan: A Closer Look

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June 11, 2024

Abstract

This paper examines the tenseless nature of Kapampangan, a major language in the Philippines, by applying tests to identify the presence or absence of tense in its verbal system. Drawing on analyses by (Hayashi and Spreng, 2005), (Comrie 1985), and (Cihlar 2004), the study contrasts Kapampangan with Tagalog, another Philippine language often described as tenseless. Tagalog verbs exhibit aspectual distinctions—perfective, imperfective, and contemplated—rather than tense, which influences how temporal information is conveyed. Similarly, Kapampangan verbs inflect for aspect, not tense, as demonstrated through examples illustrating completed, ongoing, and future actions. The study finds that temporal markers in Kapampangan are not obligatory inflections but rather contextually inferred or introduced via adverbials. This aligns with the notion that Kapampangan, like Tagalog, lacks a dedicated tense node in its inflectional system. The findings underscore the need for further exploration into the relationship between tense, aspect, and modality in Philippine languages, suggesting potential areas for future research to enrich the understanding of temporal expressions in Kapampangan.

1.0 Introduction

A language is considered tenseless if its inflectional systems do not allow a node for encoding the relationship between the utterance time and the topic (reference) time. This phenomenon is not an indication that this relationship cannot be expressed. (Hayashi & Spreng 2005), suggest that several properties have to apply to test a language to have tense, such that, if the morphology of tense is inflectional by means paradigmatic it is usually found far from the root, part of a closed class, obligatory, and marked only on the verb. Another test by (Comrie 1985) is that, with respect to semantics, tense locates events in time. Lastly, (Cihlar 2004), proposes that to test is to combine the verbs with adverbs that encode with temporal information and check if it is contradictory or not.

The Kapampangan a major language in the Philippines, that belongs to the Central Luzon Languages, is the subject of this brief study. This language is under the Austronesian-type or the Philippine-type languages that are often described as ‘tenseless’. It is argued that there is no temporal marking in Philippine languages similar to that in the past, present, and future tenses that exist in English. It is assumed that the encoding of tense is not explicit neither a morpheme allows the sentence to mark this at all. But, similarly, it is not conclusive if the Philippine-type does not encode temporal information.

2.0 Tagalog as a Tenseless Language

The Tagalog, being one of the most described language in the Philippine language family, can be the perfect source of identifiable characteristics of temporal information when it comes to the description of Kapampangan. A brief overview of mechanics of encoding of the temporal relations in Tagalog can be the suitable departure of analysis in terms of the encoding of time relations in Kapampangan.

(Schachter & Otanes 1972) described that the Tagalog verbs system is tenseless because it has no genuine parallel counterpart in the English tense. Further, they posed that instead of tense distinction like in English, the Tagalog encodes the distinction of [±completed] and [±begun] which is a distinction of ASPECT. This
also shared the views in the notion of ‘completed’ and ‘on-going’ in English. Therefore, verbs are inflected in PERFECTIVE ([+completed], [+begun]), IMPERFECTIVE ([−completed], [+begun]), and CONTEMPLATED ([−completed], [−begun]). The aspeutal forms are marked with two explicit morphemes, variants of the infix -in- and reduplication of the first CV sequence of the verbal root. The infix -in- are used with events that have begun. Reduplication signals events that are not yet completed.

Also, temporal distinctions in nonverbal predicates are not grammatically encoded, but may be introduced via the addition of adverbial or adjunct material, or inferred from the context (Coon 2013).

3.0. Sketch of Temporal Notion in Kapampangan (Mirikitani 1972)

Moving to Kapampangan literature about TENSE and ASPECT, (Mirikitani 1972) describes the relation of tense and aspect as V - (Asp) (Tns) W_base. She also claims that most verbs fully inflect for aspect, tense, and case, the latter through incorporation (49). According to her description, ASPECT is the one that encodes the basis of the semantic characteristics of verbs whether expressing state or quality, or action, and their potential for occurring with these affixes. In fact, she enumerated these aspects as: general, reciprocal, causative, aptative, unintentional, and recent completive.

On the other hand, TENSE include future, which denotes action to be performed in the future; present which denotes the current state of condition, quality, or action; progressive, which denotes action going on; iterative, which denotes action performed repeatedly; and past, which denotes action already completed or performed in the past. Both of these are inflection of the word base (Wb).

Her so-called aspects are termed more appropriately in recent literature as MODALITY. Similarly, her definition of TENSE in Kapampangan can be revisited. This is in conflict with the definitions of TENSE and ASPECT of Schachter and Otanes in Tagalog.

4.0 Test of Tenselessness

(Shaer 2003) and (Bittner 2005) asserts that in tenseless language, the overt temporal vocabulary of a language does not behave as unique, obligatory verbal inflection. This is the evidence in Kapampangan:

(1) basan ke ing libro.
   read.CONT I the book.

   ‘I will read the book.’

(2) babasan ke ing libro
   read.IMPF I the book

   ‘I am reading the book’

(3) binasan ke ing libro
   read.PERF I the book

   ‘I read the book’

In this case, overt temporal markers of time such as time adverbials are NOT obligatory inflection of the verb. In (1) – (3), changes in the temporal meaning are expressed without being dependent on time adverbials. Here we can see a close similarity between the Tagalog and Kapampangan. Based on my informants, these inflections in the three verbs in the sentences encode what Schachter and Otanes termed as ASPECT. Shaer also claimed that the inflectional system contains no node dedicated to the encoding of relations between speech time and reference time.

Another evidence is to distinguish tense and aspeutal marking in the Kapampangan. According to (Cihlar 2004) the default temporal readings for the aspeutal forms are entailed in the logical content of the verb or
are assigned somewhere else after the verb root composes with its aspectual marking. This is the evidence in Kapampangan (Mirikitani 1972):

(4a) mipagkanta la reng anak bukas
    sing to each other.PERF they the children tomorrow
    ‘The children will sing to each other tomorrow.’

(4b) mipagkanta la reng anak napun
    sing to each other.PERF they the children yesterday
    ‘The children sang to each other yesterday.’

(5a) mipapagkanta la reng anak aldoaldo
    sing to each other.IMPF they the children everyday
    ‘The children is singing to each other everyday.’

(5b) mipapagkanta la reng anak ngeni
    sing to each other.IMPF they the children now
    ‘The children is singing to each other now.’

(6a) ati yu ing lalaki king eskwela napun
    is here.IMPF he the boy at school yesterday
    ‘The boy was at school yesterday.’

(6a) ati yu ing lalaki king eskwela ngeni
    is here.IMPF he the boy at school now
    ‘The boy is at school now.’

(Cover & Tonhauser 2015) distinguishes that TENSE encodes the temporal relation between the evaluation time (EvT) or utterance time (UT) and the topic time (TT) of a clause. Whereas the temporal relation between the topic time (TT) and the eventuality time (ET) of the clause constitute its aspectual reference the relation.

Semantically, (4a) and (4b) is not constrained by the topic time (the interval the uttered clause is about) of the matrix clause whether the ‘singing to each other’ is before or after the utterance time. Because, if it is a tense, the expression that was formed will be constrained by the temporal reference in the clause in which it occurs. The basic semantic criterion for identifying tenses is that they serve to locate situations in time, and such are distinguished from aspect which describe the ‘internal temporal constituency’ of a situation (Comrie 1985). The same scenario goes for (5a-b) and (6a-b). These sentences encodes aspectuality reference instead of temporal reference.

5.0 Conclusion

In this brief study, I have applied several tests to check the tenselessness of Kapampangan. I have utilized three tests in terms of identifying the existence of the tense category in the said language. This study may be limited in terms of the volume of data but it clarified several hypotheses in terms of temporal relationships of Philippine languages specifically the Kapampangan. A further exploration is deemed necessary in terms of the relation of Tense, Aspect, and Modality to enrich the dearth of literature in the language in study. Given the fact that Kapampangan and Tagalog belong to the same language family. An investigation of differences in terms of temporal expression syntactic or semantic can still be an interesting venture to explore.
References


