

Maximize Presupposition in the Temporal Domain? On Optional Past in Forest Nenets

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Problem. In this talk we discuss the temporal system of Forest Nenets (<Samoyedic<Uralic, further FN). where past tense marking (-š) is sometimes optional and can be replaced by an aorist (-Ø, non-future). We show that distribution of tenses in FN can be accounted for by a Maximize Presupposition-driven analysis of optional tense unlike that of Bochnak (2016). The data were collected during fieldtrips to Kharampur village in YaNAO, 2023-2024.

Background. Tundra Nenets tense has been studied thoroughly (Nikolaeva 2014, Urmanchieva 2016 and links therein), including semantic accounts (Kusliy & Vostrikova 2024). FN past tense has not yet been subject to dedicated research in the same way. Moreover, our data show that the FN system differs from that of Tundra Nenets.

Bochnak (2016) examines optional past in Washo and suggests that, due to lack of Maximize Presupposition (MP) effects in the temporal domain, past and non-future tenses in Washo are not structural alternatives and occupy different syntactic projections. We show that, even though the FN temporal system is quite similar to the distribution of tenses observed in Washo, FN data can be accounted for while preserving the structural uniformity between two temporal operators. We argue that Bochnak's account wrongly ignores the aspectual difference between predicates. As an alternative, we propose an analysis that predicts the patterns of temporal MP in FN via aspectual properties of a predicate while maintaining pst and aorist as alternatives.

Tense system of Forest Nenets. Telic predicates that refer to an event that happened before Speech Time appear in aorist or past interchangeably, see (1). Atelic ones, however, can only be marked for past tense, see (2).

- (1) čuku d'olnu okos'ko næ-ŋa-t / næ-ŋa-ta-s'
DEM morning window open-GFS-1SG / open-GFS-1SG-PST
'This morning I opened the window' [I should close it, so it wouldn't rain on my curtains]

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- (2) s'ajnd'et loxo-mp'i-s' / *loxoxo-mp'i
 teapot boil-PROG-PST[3SG] / *boil-PROG[3SG]
 'The tea pot boiled' [Then cooled down]

Account. Suppose that past tense and aorist are temporal pronouns with presuppositions that restrict the time period they can refer to, see denotations in (3).

- (3) $\llbracket \text{PST} \rrbracket = \lambda t. t < \text{tc. } t$
 $\llbracket \text{AOR} \rrbracket = \lambda t. t \leq \text{tc. } t$

Note that presuppositions of the aorist are weaker than in PST, as aorist includes the speech time, while PST excludes it. Therefore, in a generalized scenario, MP is expected to render aorist infelicitous when it is used to describe events in the past. That is what can be observed with atelic predicates in (2).

However, telic predicates differ from atelic ones. They cannot be true at Speech Time, see (4). This property has been much discussed in research on English Present, and Aoun (2021) labels it as Bennett-Partee effect (Bennett & Partee 2004). Therefore, telic predicates render PST and aorist truth-conditionally equivalent, which makes MP inapplicable. Due to that, both PST and aorist are felicitous.

- (4) (with an episodic reading) #Blake arrives.

Besides the telicity contrast, Bochnak's model also fails to capture the obligatoriness of past that arises with definite temporal adverbials like 'yesterday'. In the context where both competitors are felicitous, the modification by definite past adverbials is predicted to be acceptable for both of them. Nonetheless, in sentences with definite past adverbials, as in (5), only PST is felicitous (in contrast to TN). We suggest that this contrast can also be accounted for in terms of a MP-driven theory.

- (5) čen s'ičaλ s'i-m næ-ŋa-ma-s' / *næ-ŋa-m
 yesterday window-ACC open-GFS-1SG-PST / open-GFS-1SG
 'I opened the window yesterday' [Then went to work]

Conclusion. Summing up, we show that taking into account aspectual properties feeds the MP account. Past and aorist in Forest Nenets are structural alternatives and have competing presuppositions.

Glosses

ACC – accusative,

GFS – general finite stem,

PROG – progressive,

PST – past tense;

SG – singular number.

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