

ASPECT IN ASSAMESE: SOME REMARKS

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ABSTRACT

An attempt is made in this paper to analyze and examine more systematically the Aspect system and how it functions in Assamese¹ based on the insights drawn from the cognitive linguistics framework. The paper makes some seminal claims regarding aspect in Assamese. We observe that there is no aspect marker for habitual action in Assamese. The progressive and iterative use the same aspect marker, that is, *-i a:s*. It is noticed that Assamese allows only progressive aspect marking and not other forms of aspect marking within imperfective. We believe that the perfect marker is *-il* in Assamese following Borah (2010) but would like to claim that Assamese employs *-is* to express resultative actions instead of ingressive actions as claimed by Borah (2010, 2011). We would therefore like to propose that Assamese follows the basic aspectual distinction as progressive vs perfective.

The paper further points out that there is future progressive aspect in Assamese marked by the *-i tha:k* periphrastic form along with the already traditionally accepted present progressive and past progressive aspect marked by the *-i a:s* periphrastic form. We would like to argue that there is present perfect progressive aspect in Assamese marked by the *-i a:h is* periphrastic form to express an action that started in the past and is still continuing.

KEYWORDS: Aspect, Cognitive Linguistics, Grounded, Imperfective, Perfective, Progressive, Resultative, Maximal Viewing Frame, Restricted Viewing Frame, State

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we make an attempt to analyze and examine the Aspect system in Assamese from the cognitive linguistics framework. Aspects have to do with the 'temporal distribution or contour' of an action, event or state of affairs, rather than with its 'location in time' (Lyons 1968). Aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation. Aspect is situation-internal (Comrie 1976). Aspect is the grammatical form used by a speaker in viewing an action with considerations as duration and completion (Dahl 2000). Aspect is the grammatical form used by a speaker in taking a particular view of a situation. Aspect pertains to ways of viewing (Radden and Dirven 2007). This makes it clear that aspect is not concerned with relating the event time to the utterance time, but rather with the internal structure of the event or action.

A basic aspectual distinction is that of perfective and imperfective. In case of perfective, the situation is viewed externally and as a complete whole with maximal viewing frame. On the other hand, in case of imperfective, the situation is viewed internally and as an action in progression with restricted viewing frame. Imperfective mainly includes habitual,

¹Assamese is an Indo-Aryan language spoken in Assam, a North-eastern state of India, and is the mother tongue of the Assamese. It is also the official language of Assam and is spoken by more than 20 million people.

progressive, iterative actions etc. Another aspectual distinction is that of progressive and non-progressive. The progressive aspect is characterized by a restricted viewing frame and applies to unbounded events and temporary states whereas the non-progressive aspect is characterized by a maximal viewing frame and applies to bounded events and lasting states.

It may be noted that English has two forms of aspect: the non-progressive and the progressive aspect. The non-progressive aspect is characterized by a maximal viewing frame, the progressive aspect by a restricted viewing frame. Non-progressive aspect applies to bounded events and lasting states whereas progressive aspect applies to unbounded events and temporary states. Bounded events are described as perfective and unbounded events are described as imperfective (Radden and Dirven 2007). Taylor (2002) points out that the perfective – imperfective distinction can be made on the basis of – homogeneity, divisibility, replicability and boundedness. A perfective process is temporally bounded – that is, its characterization makes reference to its beginning and end-point. An imperfective process is one whose characterization does not make reference to its beginning or end. Crucial for the perfective – imperfective distinction is that for a process to be viewed as perfective, its temporal boundary has to be part of the profiled process. The termination point has to feature as an integral component of the designated concept. The perfective – imperfective distinction is only really applicable to a process that has been specified, instantiated and grounded.

The paper primarily focuses on the basic aspectual distinction as progressive vs perfective, as well as on perfect, resultative, future progressive and perfect progressive aspect in Assamese.

ASPECT IN ASSAMESE

In this section, we shall discuss some of the important features of the aspectual system in Assamese. In the existing literature of Assamese language, two aspects are recognized. They are (a) present progressive and/or present perfect and (b) past progressive and/or remote past.

According to Goswami (1982), the present progressive and/or present perfect inflection is ‘-is’ (e.g. kar-is-e) and the past progressive and/or the remote past tense inflections are ‘-is’ plus ‘-il’ (e.g. kar-is-il) in Assamese. In Assamese, there is only one periphrastic tense which functions both as present progressive and present perfect with reference to the setting in which it is placed (Kakati 1941). Borah (2010, 2011) claimed that Assamese has ingressive progressive aspect and the ingressive progressive aspect marker is *-is*.

Assamese, like English, does not have imperfective aspect. The imperfectivity of an action includes habitual, iterative, progressive, ingressive, egressive etc. It is evident from (1) that the imperfectivity of habitual aspect is unmarked in Assamese.

1. arune kabita likhe
 arun-e kabita likh-e
 arun-nom poem write-agr
 Arun writes poems.

It is noticed from (1) that the sentence is in habitual aspect but does not use any aspect marker. Let us consider (2) for iterative aspect.

2. arune xaghana:i ka:hi a:se
 arun-e xaghana:i ka:h-i a:s-e
 arun-nom frequently cough-prog be-agr
 Arun is frequently coughing.

(2) tells us that the action occurs repeatedly for a period of time and is marked by the periphrastic structure *-i a:s*. Now, consider (3) for progressive aspect.

3. arune eta kabita likhi a:se
 arun-e eta kabita likh-i a:s-e
 arun-nom one poem write-prog be-agr
 Arun is writing a poem.

The action in (3) is in progression and the focus is on the ongoing process. This is marked by the periphrastic form *-i a:s*.

It is observed from (1) – (3) that habitual aspect is not marked in Assamese. Iterative aspect uses the same periphrastic form as is used in progressive aspect. Progressive is marked by the periphrastic form *-i a:s*. It appears that Assamese allows only progressive aspect marking and not other forms of aspect marking within imperfective. So, it may be said that the progressive is the basic aspect within imperfective in Assamese.

Perfectivity in Assamese is marked by the morpheme *-il* which combines with verbs. Thus, *-il* is the perfect marker in Assamese which is evident from (4).

4. arune kita:pkhan parhile
 arun-e kita:p-khan parh-il-e
 arun-nom book-class read-perf-agr
 Arun has read the book.

The perfect morpheme *-il* in (4) indicates the completion of an action and shows a relation between two points of time – one belonging to the past and the other belonging to the present. The speaker in (4) emphasises what the event means to the moment of speaking. Thus, perfect basically indicates that a completed action has relevance in the present and it points to the action itself.

Now, let us examine (5) and (6) for resultative aspect marked by *-is* in Assamese:

5. moi xarutei mahabharata parhiso
 moi xarutei mahabharata parh-is-o
 I childhood mahabharata read-result-agr

I have read the Mahabharata in my childhood (= I read the Mahabharata in my childhood)

6. anusandhanat ei tathya poharaloi a:hise
 anusandhan-at ei tathya pohara-loi a:h-is-e
 investigation-loc this information light-dat come-result-agr

This information has come to light in the investigation.

The utterances in (5) and (6) refer to a state that exists as a result of a past action and here the focus is on the present state. The action in (5), for example, means ‘I read the epic long ago and still have some knowledge of the epic’. On the other hand, the action in (6) means ‘The information is available now and some action can be initiated against those involved’. A resultative denotes a state that was brought about by some action in the past and it consistently signals that the state persists at reference time. Resultatives are used only with telic verbs, that is, verbs which describe events which have inherent endpoints. Borah (2011) claimed that Assamese has ingressive progressive aspect and the ingressive progressive aspect marker is *-is*. Here we would like to disagree with the claim of Borah (2011) and following Bybee et al. (1994), would like to claim that Assamese has resultative aspect and *-is* is the resultative aspect marker in Assamese. It is observed from (4) - (6) that Assamese allows perfect and resultative within perfective.

Based on the analysis of (1) – (6), we would like to claim that Assamese follows the basic aspectual distinction as progressive vs perfective.

The traditional grammarians of Assamese are of the view that only present progressive and past progressive are found in Assamese. According to them, there is no future progressive aspect in Assamese. Compare (3), reproduced below as (7), with (8) for present and past progressive.

7. arune eta kabita likhi a:se
 arun-e eta kabita likh-i a:s-e
 arun-nom one poem write-prog be-agr
 Arun is writing a poem.

8. arune eta kabita likhi a:sile
 arun-e eta kabita likh-i a:s-isil-e
 arun-nom one poem write-prog be-past-agr
 Arun was writing a poem.

Notice that (7) is in present progressive and (8) is in past progressive. The actions in (7) and (8) are grounded in present and past respectively. The periphrastic form *-i a:s* is used to mark both present and past progressive aspect. It is evident from (9) that there is future progressive aspect in Assamese. Compare (7) & (8) with (9) for future progressive.

9. arune eta kabita likhi tha:kiba
 arun-e eta kabita likh-i tha:k-ib-a
 arun-nom one poem write-prog be-fut-agr
 Arun will be writing a poem.

Notice that the action in (9) is grounded in future and the focus is on the progression of the action and therefore it is in future progressive. The periphrastic form *-i a:s* is used for present and past progressive whereas *-i tha:k* is used for future progressive. The view that Assamese has no future progressive aspect originates from the consideration of *a:s* as an auxiliary and non-consideration of *tha:k* as an auxiliary.

The auxiliary *a:s* and its occurrence has been considered whereas the auxiliary *tha:k* and its occurrence has not been considered. Nayak (1987) and Mahapatra (2002) claim that Oriya has the auxiliary *tha:*. We propose here that *tha:k* is an auxiliary in Assamese and is used in future progressive. Contrary to Goswami (2000), we argue that there is future progressive aspect in Assamese which is expressed by the *-i tha:k* periphrastic form.

We would, therefore, like to claim that Assamese has present progressive, past progressive as well as future progressive aspect following Sarma (2003).

Consider (10) & (11) for perfect progressive aspect in Assamese:

10. teo jowa: pancha:s basare xangitar jagatkhanat barangani joga:i a:hise
 teo jowa: pancha:s basar-e xangit-ar jagat-khan-at barangani joga:-i a:h-is-e
 he last fifty year-emph music-gen field-class-loc contribution do-prog come-asp-agr
 He has been contributing to the field of music for last fifty years.
11. teo jowa: dah basare ei ghartot ba:x kari a:hise
 teo jowa: dah basar-e ei ghar-tot ba:x kar-i a:h-is-e
 he last ten year-emph this home-class live do-prog come-asp-agr
 He has been living in this house for last ten years.

The utterances in (10) and (11) express an action that started in the past and is still continuing. They tell us about the start of an action but do not tell us about the end of the action. This is expressed by the periphrastic form *-i a: h is* which could be called the perfect progressive aspect marker. We would like to claim that Assamese has present perfect progressive aspect and *-i a:h is* combination expresses it.

CONCLUSIONS

It is noticed from the above discussion and analysis that Aspect is a complex system in a morphologically rich language like Assamese. We have observed that Assamese follows the basic aspectual distinction as progressive vs perfective and not as perfective vs imperfective. It is found that the progressive aspect is marked by the periphrastic construction *i-a:s* and the perfective aspect is marked by *-il* in Assamese. Assamese is found to have resultative aspect and it is marked by *-is* inflection. It is proposed that there is future progressive aspect in Assamese. The auxiliary *tha:k* is used for future progressive instead of *a:s* and *i-tha:k* is the form for future progressive. It is found that there is present perfect progressive aspect in Assamese and *i-a:h-is* is the form for it.

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