

The Syntax of Tense: Evidence from Inuktitut

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Abstract

We discuss tense morphology and tense semantics in Inuktitut and provide evidence that Tense is a morphosyntactic feature in Inuktitut, indicating that Inuktitut is not tenseless, as previously argued for by Bittner (2005) for West Greenlandic, for Inuktitut and West Greenlandic (Shaer (2003)), and for Inuktitut (Nowak (1994)). Furthermore, we show that Tense and finiteness do not correlate in Inuktitut as they do in English. Thus, we conclude that Tense is a separate projection from Agreement in Inuktitut.

0 Proposal

Tense as a morphosyntactic feature is often implicitly taken to be part of the agreement system of a language. Conversely, temporal adverbials are either PP's or adverbs but never assumed to be part of the agreement system. They add the semantics of temporal evaluation but have no correlation with syntactic features. The fact that Tense and agreement are correlated is expressed in the Minimalism framework by naming the subject case assigning head T(ense) (Chomsky (1995)), taking advantage of the fact that nominative case assignment and finiteness correlate in English and many other languages (Wiltschko (2003)).

Arguing from a non-generative point of view, Inuktitut has been claimed to have no Tense at all (Nowak (1994)), thus treating tense morphemes as temporal adverbials (Shaer, 2003). Our proposal argues against the notion that Tense is not a morphosyntactic feature in a language when it does not interact with finiteness. We argue that the morphosyntactic feature Tense may still be present although interacting with other syntactic properties. We argue that tense interpretation in Inuktitut is dependent on tense markings and is thus not an optional occurrence as previously argued (Shaer (2003), Nowak (1994)). The fact that Tense in Inuktitut is not correlated to finiteness requires Tense to be a separate projection from agreement.

0.1 Outline of the paper

The first section discusses tense morphology and tense semantics in Inuktitut and provides evidence for Tense as a morphosyntactic feature in Inuktitut. Section two discusses empirical and conceptual issues in favour for a separate Tense projection. In the third section, we propose a clause architecture that accounts for the empirical and conceptual factors discussed in section two. We further support our analysis with data from morpheme order and discuss a few consequences and predictions of our analysis in the conclusions.

1 Tense marking is not optional

Inuit languages have often been claimed to have no Tense in the sense of grammatical Tense (Shaer (2003) and Bittner (2005)) for West Greenlandic¹, and for Baffin Island Inuktitut (Nowak, 1994)). Most of the arguments put forward in support of an analysis of Inuktitut as tenseless are based on the fact that a past tense morpheme is not necessary even when past interpretation is required and translated.² For example, in West Greenlandic, a sentence without a temporal morpheme is interpreted ambiguously, either as being present or past (1a). In (1b), a past-oriented adverbial *juuli-up aappa-a-ni*, ‘July 2nd’) specifies a temporal location of situation denoted by the sentence and no temporal morpheme is needed.

- (1) a. *aggir-puq*
come.IND-3s
‘He is/was coming’ (Shaer, 2003: 146)
- b. *juuli-up aappa-a-ni Nuum-miip-punga*
July.ERG second.its.LOC Nuuk.be-in-IND.1s
‘I was in Nuuk on the second of July 2nd’ (Shaer, 2003: 147)

Shaer (2003) further argues that, in West Greenlandic, adverbial and aspectual information of the stem determines the temporal interpretation; a sentence with an achievement verb (2), *tikit* (‘arrive’), is interpreted as expressing a past situation.

- (2) *tikit-puq*
have-arrived.IND.3s
‘He has come/came’ (Shaer, 2003: 146)

Hence, Shaer (2003) argues that temporal interpretation is determined by a combination of context, aspect and other non-temporal information in West Greenlandic (See Shaer (2003) and Bittner (2005) for further support), and that there is no evidence for a Tense projection in West Greenlandic.

We argue that, contrary to West Greenlandic, Inuktitut³ does have obligatory past tense morphology (Hayashi and Spreng (2005)). Therefore, examples like (1) and (2) cannot be obtained in Inuktitut, and the claim that Shaer (2003) and Bittner (2005) have made for West Greenlandic cannot be extended to Inuktitut.

In Inuktitut, it is necessary that a sentence has a past tense morpheme to express past eventualities, either *-qqau* ‘earlier today (recent past)’ or *-lauq* ‘earlier than today (general past)’ (Harper (1979)). In (1a), John’s dancing was in this morning, hence *-qqau*

¹ Bittner (2005) refers West Greenlandic as Kalaallisut, the official name for West Greenlandic.

² We discuss only past tense morphemes here since we believe morphemes with future meaning may have more than just temporal components in their meaning, i.e. evidentiality and/or modality. Bittner (2005) explicitly denies the existence of future tense in West Greenlandic, arguing that futurity is expressed by more than thirty different lexical and grammatical means in this language.

³ The dialects of Inuktitut we focus on are the ones spoken in South Baffin and Igloodik, Nunavut, Canada.

must be used, whereas in (1b), where John's dancing was yesterday, *-lauq* is required (Hayashi (2005a)).

- (3) a. jaan mumi-**qqau**-juq ullaq
 John dance-**PAST-PAR**⁴.3s this.morning
 'John was dancing / danced this morning'
- b. jaan mumi-**lauq**-tuq ippatsaq (SB) / ippaksaq (IG) ⁵
 John dance-**PAST-PAR**.3s yesterday
 'John was dancing / danced yesterday'

Importantly, unlike in West Greenlandic, with a past-oriented temporal adverbial, (1ab) are ungrammatical without a past morpheme.

- (4) a. *jaan mumiq-tuq ullaq
 John dance-PAR.3s this.morning
 'John was dancing / danced this morning'
- b. *jaan mumiq-tuq ippatsaq (SB) / ippaksaq (IG)
 John dance-PAR.3s yesterday
 'John was dancing / danced yesterday'

Not only activity verbs but also stative (5) and accomplishment verbs (6) require a past morpheme to express past eventualities. These belong to a category of durative verbs. Their unmarked forms (the form with no temporal morpheme) are always interpreted as on-going at the moment of speech.

- (5) a. jaan ilinniarti-u-lauq-tuq 1990-mit
 John student-be-PAST-PART. 3s 1990-in
 'John was a student in 1990'
- b. *jaan ilinniarti-u-juq 1990-mit
 John student-be-PART. 3s 1990-in
 'John was a student in 1990'
- (6) a. jaan iglu-liuq-qau-juq ullaq
 John house-build-PAST-PART.3s this.morning
 'John was building / built a house this morning'
- b. * jaan iglu-liuq-tuq ullaq
 John house-build-PAST-PART.3s this.morning(5)(5)
 'John was building / built a house this morning'

⁴ The participial mood, glossed as PART, is a basic declarative in Inuktitut, while it is indicative in West Greenlandic, glossed as IND.

⁵ SB: South Baffin; IG: Igloodik. All data in this paper are from these two dialects of Inuktitut. We would like to express our gratitude to our consultants Saila Michael and Sandra Uvilluk.

As with West Greenlandic, achievement verbs yield a past interpretation in the unmarked form (7).

- (7) jaan tikit-tuq
 John arrive-PAR.3s
 ‘John just arrived’

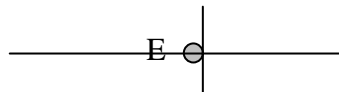
However, the interpretation of unmarked achievement verbs is restricted to immediate past, an event that just occurred, a moment ago. In combination with a past-oriented temporal adverbial, the sentence is ungrammatical without a past tense morpheme (8).

- (8) a. *jaan tikit-tuq ullaq
 John arrive-PAR.3s this morning
 ‘John arrived this morning’
- b. jaan tiki-**qqau**-juq ullaq
 John arrive-PAST-PAR.3s this.morning
 ‘John arrived this morning’

Based on the above facts, we claim that past morphemes are obligatory. Past interpretations are dependent on these morphemes and are obtained independently of context or aspect of the stem (for more discussion, see Hayashi (in prep.)). Furthermore, we claim that the immediate past interpretation of the zero-marked form of achievement verbs is *not* an indication of the past tense morpheme being optional. Adopting the theory of tense proposed by Reichenbach (1947), we argue that the immediate past interpretation is aspectual because of the punctual nature of achievement verbs.

In this framework, the relationship between the R(eference time) and the E(vent time) determines aspectual interpretation, and the relationship between the R and the S(peech time) determines tense interpretation. As for achievement verbs, R cannot be included in E, due to their punctual nature. The contradiction is resolved by R being pushed ahead by one moment into the post-state of E. The absence of tense morphemes is interpreted as present, thus $S = R$. The resulting relation among E, R and S is $E \leq R = S$ (\leq indicates that there is no intervening t between E and R), which can be schematized as follows:

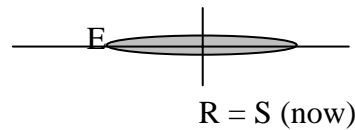
- (9) $V_{\text{punctual}} + \emptyset$



$R = S$ (now)

Durative verbs are always interpreted as on-going at the moment of speech. In this case, E can properly include R, the punctual reference time; hence $E \subset R = S$. This can be schematized as follow:

(10) Vdurative + \emptyset



The apparent past tense interpretation for achievement verbs can thus be explained by Reichenbach's theory. Furthermore, we could show that the immediate past interpretation of zero-marked achievement verbs (7) is aspectual, as schematized in (9).

In summary, we showed that Inuktitut is not tenseless. The past morphemes, *-lauq* and *-qqau*, are necessary to express past eventuality. We argue that the immediate past interpretation of the zero-marked form of achievement verbs is aspectual; hence, it is not an indication that a sentence can be ambiguously interpreted between present and past.

2 Tense and Finiteness

For English and other Germanic languages, it is generally taken for granted that only finite sentences have Tense (Wiltschko, 2003)). Thus, in a non-finite sentence, there is no case assigning head T and thus no nominative case assignment.

In Inuktitut, conjunctive sentences marked with *-llu-* have traditionally been analysed as non-finite (Lowe (1985), Bobaljik (1993), Bittner (1994), Murasugi (1992), Harper (1974), Manning (1996)). Despite this, in Inuktitut, tense marking does occur in these constructions (Harper, (1979), Hayashi (2005b)), being interpreted under the scope of the matrix tense.

(11) When S1, S2

- | | S1 | | S2 |
|----|---|--|-------------------------|
| a. | jaan niri- \emptyset -tillugu | | miali uqalimaa-lauq-tuq |
| | John eat-PRES-CONT.3s | | Mary read-PAST-part.3sg |
| | ‘When John was eating Mary was reading’ | | |

- b. PAST [Mary read PRES [John read]]

(11) shows the scope relation between the two tenses. The matrix past tense has scope over the subordinate tense; therefore, S1 (the embedded clause) is interpreted as simultaneous with respect to the time of John's eating, the matrix event in S2. This yields the simultaneous interpretation of the embedded eventuality as the matrix event, which results in the translation of *when* or *while*.



(12) After S1, S2

- | | S1 | | S2 |
|----|----------------------------------|--|------------------|
| a. | iquma-lauq-tillunga | | qia-lauq-tuq |
| | wake.up-PAST-CONT.3s | | cry-PAST.PART.3s |
| | ‘After Mary woke up, she cried.’ | | |

b. PAST [I wake up PAST [I cry]]

In (12), S1 is marked as past, which is interpreted under the scope of the matrix tense, which is past. This results in the interpretation that the subordinate eventuality, *Mary's waking up* is the time of the matrix eventuality, *Mary's eating*.

(13) Before S1, S2

- | | |
|---|---|
| S1 | S2 |
|  |  |
| a. miali mumi-lau-ngit-tillugu | niri-qqau-juq |
| Mary dance-PAST-NEG-CONT.3s | eat-PAST-part.3sg |
| ‘Before Mary danced, she ate.’ | |

b. PAST [Mary eat – PAST [Mary dance]]

In (13), S1 is marked as past with *-lauq* with negation. This is again interpreted under the scope of the matrix tense. This yields the interpretation that, literally: *Mary's dancing was not before Mary's eating*, which is semantically equivalent to *Mary's eating is before Mary's dancing*.

The above examples demonstrate that tense markings do appear in the conjunctive clause, and they function as relative tense (Comrie (1985), Ogihara (1996)), playing an essential role to determine the order of the matrix and subordinate eventualities.

Thus, the non-finite clause is marked for Tense obligatorily. This however contradicts the notion that non-finite clauses should not have Tense at all. The question then arises whether the conjunctive clause is finite or non-finite. Johns and Smallwood (1999) have shown that the conjunctive clauses display properties of non-finite clauses as well as properties of finite clauses. One of the properties that may indicate non-finiteness would be that conjunctive clauses do not allow ergative case assignment.⁶ If we assume that ergative case is the subject case, the argument for conjunctive clauses to be non-finite seems conclusive as argued for by Bobaljik (1993).

However, we find that ergative case as a factor in determining finiteness may not be such a good diagnostic. Previous treatments of ergativity in Inuit languages show that the ergative case is not the subject case and thus not assigned by T (Bittner and Hale (1996a, b), Bok-Bennema (1991), Johns (1992), Bittner (1994)). Furthermore, data from some variants of Inuktitut casts doubt on the assumption that the ergative is even a structural case. For example, in the Eastern dialects of Canadian Inuktitut⁷, the ergative case is not allowed for third person arguments with transitive achievement verbs (Spreng (2005)) in simple transitive declarative clauses. Thus, ergative case is not allowed on full DP's.

(14) Person combinations allowed with the ergative

ERG/ABS

1/2; 1/3

2/1; 2/3

*3/1; *3/2; *3/3

no ergative possible

⁶ This applies to relative clauses as well. (Creider (1978), Johns (1987), Gugeler (1994).

⁷ Most notably Igloolik.

- (15) South Baffin/Iglulik
- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>a. 1/2 aqtuq-tagit touch-part.1sg/2sg (I-erg) touched you</p> | <p>b. 1/3 aqtuq-tara Piita touch-part.1sg/3sg Peter(abs) (I-erg) touched her/Peter</p> |
| <p>c. 2/1 aqtuq-tanga touch-part.2sg/1sg (you-erg) touched me</p> | <p>d. 2/3 aqtuq-tait Piita touch-part.2sg/3sg/Peter(abs) (you-erg) touched her/Peter</p> |
| <p>e. 3/1 aqtuq-si-juq uvan-nit touch-AP-part.3sg me-mik (s/he-abs) is (touching)/stroking me</p> | <p>f. 3/2 aqtuq-si-juq illinnit touch-AP-part.3sg you-mik (s/he-abs) is (touching)/stroking you</p> |

As shown in (15), whenever the agent argument is third person ((15)e., (15)f.), the verb does not allow double agreement morphology (a sign that ergative case is assigned) and requires the Antipassive morpheme.

Furthermore, the ergative may be retained in Passive constructions in these dialects ((16)c) further indicating that either the ergative marked DP is not a subject or at least not a structural case.⁸

- (16) a. anguti-**up** arnaq kunik-**taa**
man-erg woman(abs) kiss-part.3sg/3sg
The man kissed the woman.
- b. arnaq kunik-tau-juq anguti-**mut**
woman(abs) kiss-PASS-part.3sg man-**abl**
'The woman was kissed by the man.'
- c. arnaq kunik-tau-juq anguti-**up**
woman(abs) kiss-PASS-part.3sg man-**erg**
'The woman was kissed by the man.'

Again, this data casts doubt on the reliability of ergative case presence as a diagnostic for finiteness. We therefore follow (Wharram (1996) in assuming that the absence of ergative case is not a criterion for non-finiteness.

However, this leaves us with something of a conundrum. If we assume conjunctive and relative clauses to be finite and to have Tense, we have no correlation between finiteness and Tense as is so evident in a language like English where non-finiteness correlates with the absence of Tense. We thus conclude that finiteness and Tense have nothing to do with each other in Inuktitut. However, this does not provide us with clear evidence for our second proposal, i.e. that Tense is a separate projection from agreement

⁸ The passive construction as in (16)b. can be found in Western variants of Inuit languages.

in Inuktitut. So far, our evidence shows us that Tense may be separate from agreement simply because we cannot find a correlation that shows us otherwise.

3 The Position of the Tense morpheme

The tense morphemes usually occur adjacent to the left of the agreement morpheme which may be used to argue that it is in fact part of the agreement head.

- (17) jaan mumi-**lauq**-tuq
John dance-PAST-PAR.3s
'John was dancing / danced (yesterday or earlier)'

However, the negation morpheme *-ngit-*, may always occur between past tense morphemes and the agreement morpheme regardless of the scope of the negation.

- (18) jaan mumi-**lau-ngit**-tuq
John dance-PAST-NEG-PAR.3s
'John was not / did not dance (yesterday or earlier)'

- (19) Pisurajaa-guma-lau-**ngit**-tuq ippaksaq
walk.around-want-PAST-NEG-PAR.3s yesterday
He didn't want to walk around yesterday

In (18), the negation always precedes the agreement morphology, further providing evidence that Agreement and Tense are separate heads, even with a negation projection between them.

Furthermore, the order of morphemes in the verbal complex thus indicates that the Tense projection is lower than the Agreement projection but between the aspectual domain and Agreement.

- (20) Peter piruqsianit anaanaminut tuni-si-lauq-tuq
Peter flower-mik.PL mother.3sg.POSS.ABL.SG give.about to.PAST.PAR.3sg
Peter was giving his mother flowers.

As (20) in addition, morpheme order also shows proximity of the aspectual and the Tense domain just like on other languages, thus providing further support for the notion that the Tense head is between Agreement and the aspectual domain.

4 Clause architecture

The clause architecture we propose for Inuktitut takes into account the following facts discussed in the previous sections.

Morpheme order and semantics indicate proximity between Tense and aspectual projection. Since aspectual projections have traditionally been located in the *vP* domain (VoiceP in the tree in (20) (Benua (1995), Travis (2000), Borer (1993), and many others),

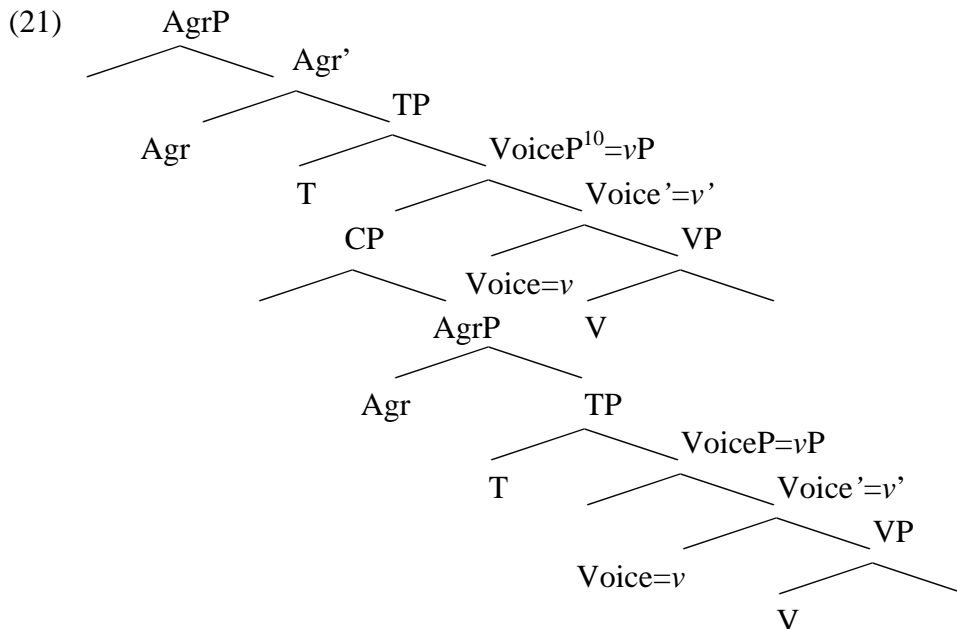
we follow that tradition.⁹ This means, the Tense projection is below the Agreement projection.

Case and Agreement facts show that Tense in Inuktitut does not correlate with finiteness (in fact, a finite vs. non-finite contrast still needs to be shown) (Wharram, 1996)).

Tense interpretation in embedded clauses is however dependent on Tense in the main clause which in turn is dependent on the vP domain (Voice or aspectual domain). Therefore, we tentatively suggest adjoining the embedded CP to the aspectual domain.

Morpheme order indicates further that Tense and Agreement projections are separate projections since other morphemes may interfere.

Furthermore, the Tense projection has no specifier position since there is no reason to assume that it has anything resembling an EPP feature or has case assigning abilities that may even coincide with the movement of a DP to that position. The above conclusions are thus illustrated in (21).



5 Conclusions

If the ergative case is not a structural case and not the subject case, then the Inuktitut VoiceP (vP) is not a phase when there is ergative construction. At this point, we assume that the ergative marked argument does not move out of its base position for case. (Spreng, 2006). Since ergative case is assigned (checked) within vP, it is not available for the probe from Agr. However, default word order seems to suggest otherwise since the ergative argument generally occurs clause-initially. This issue certainly requires further investigation.

⁹ We assume that the aspectual domain is more complex than just one projection (we call it Voice here) but since this is not relevant to this paper, a simplified structure is sufficient.

¹⁰ Voice (i.e. *v*) has two functions in Inuktitut. It introduces an external argument and hosts the default ergative case feature unless occupied by the Antipassive morpheme *-si-* (Spreng (2006)).

We provide evidence that Tense in Inuktitut is a grammatical feature based on the fact that tense marking is not optional and directly correlated to aspect. We further propose that Tense is a separate projection from Agreement. The proposal is based on evidence that finiteness and Tense are not correlated in Inuktitut as they are in English. Furthermore, we support the view in accordance with previous work that absence of ergative case and double agreement are unreliable diagnostics to account for non-finiteness in Inuktitut. Thus, finiteness is not a diagnostic for the presence or absence of Tense. Data from Baffin Island Inuktitut show that Tense morphology is not optional but dependent on lexical aspect. The apparent absence of Tense morphology on achievement verbs is due to the punctual nature of these verbs and is not an indication of a past tense that is not marked as such. Thus, Tense, although not dependent on finiteness, is nevertheless a grammatical feature in Inuktitut.

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