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Towards a comprehensive time–aspect–model for Bengali

Zusammenfassung

Unterschiedlichste natürliche Sprachen liefern immer wieder Indizien dafür, daß die Sprecher dieser Sprachen als Wesen einer dreidimensionalen Welt die Zeit als eine weitere vierte Dimension offenbar nur zweidimensional begreifen können. Die Zeitachse scheint daher am ehesten geeignet, sowohl in der Forschung als auch in der Lehre eine Modellierung dieses Phänomens vorzunehmen. Dies um so mehr, als es am konkreten Beispiel des Bengali, einer neuindoarischen Aspekt-Sprache, dadurch möglich wird, Temporalität mit Aspektualität anschaulich zu verbinden. Letztendliches Ziel ist, in das Wesen der einzelnen Tempus-Modus-Formen dieser Sprache vorzudringen, um ausgehend von der jeweiligen Hauptfunktion auch die entsprechenden Nebenfunktionen im Gesamtrahmen des temporalen Feldes besser zu verstehen. Der Artikel gibt prinzipielle Überlegungen wieder, die der Autor bei der Abfassung einer Grammatik des Bengali zur Anwendung bringen will.

Time is a very peculiar phenomenon. As a rule, human beings are able to percept light within a certain range of the spectrum, the very same pertains to sound and smell, we can more or less successfully estimate distances, but our sense of time is rather rudimentary. In happy hours, time can fly, in awkward moments, seconds become hours.

Strictly speaking, our sense of time is limited to a feeling of what is now, before now and after now. But already a good definition of what 'now' really is proves to be difficult. We are possibly more likely to reach a satisfactory definition of what could be understood by immediately before now or immediately after now or far before now and far after now. Obviously, for understanding time, we always need an auxiliary device of, for example, geometrical dimension. Passing time is, therefore, very often felt like a geometric line or time-axis on a sheet of paper, with the now-point being thought incessantly moving towards the afterwards-direction.

before	*now*	*afterwards*
	✕	
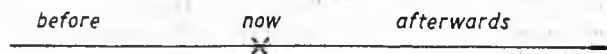
One tradition of defining passing time starts from this now-point—commonly called 'moment of speaking' (MS; German: Sprechmoment)—and views an event (action, process, state or relation) before, simultaneously with or after that now-point. Such an event (German: Geschehen) has always a more or less defined extension on the time-axis, starting from point-like till infinite. The more or less expanded extension of the event on the time-axis requires a passing time of its one, traditionally called 'time of action' (German: Aktzeit), although in my view more suitably called 'time of event' (TE; German: Geschehenszeit) since not only actions occur.

In this connection, the more or less expanded extension of an event seems to be located on the time-axis basically in a twofold way: Either
(i) the extension of the event is implicitly limited both towards the before- and the afterwards-direction (like for example in the case of the preterite tense in its main function)

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before                    MB        afterwards
────────┬───────────┬────×──────────────────────▶
        └───────────┘
             TE
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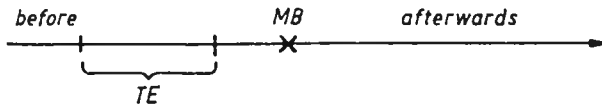
or

(ii) the more or less expanded extension of an event is implicitly not limited towards the two time-directions (then and later) but seems to fade out in both directions (as in the case of the Bengali present tense in its main function)

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before              MS          afterwards
──────────── ─ ─┬─ ─×─ ─┬─ ─ ───────────────────▶
               └───────┘
                  TE
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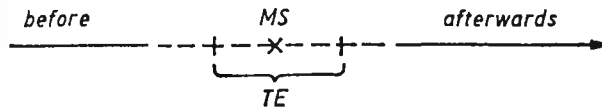
In case (i) the event happens as an accomplishment on the time-axis, whereas in case (ii) the event is simply indicated as existing on the time-axis. While realizing events, this obviously fundamental difference between the accomplishment (German: Vollzug) and the mere existence (German: Vorhandensein) of an event can be traced through all the time-mood-meanings of the Bengali tense-system.

The traditionally used terms of completedness (German: Abgeschlossenheit) instead of accomplishment and non-completedness (German: Nichtabgeschlossenheit) instead of existence of an event seem to me not comprehensive enough to denote this decisive difference of temporal realization. I comprise these two basic phenomena by the term of 'general realization of event', in clear contrast to such 'special realizations of events' like duration, proceeding, habitualness etc. The latter ones must again be differentiated from the various modes of action (German: Aktionsarten) since they are deeply inherent in the different verbal meanings themselves.

Althoug in a very specific way, there is in Bengali the possibility to express verbal aspectualness within the respective verbal compound itself. In this language, verbal aspect has the character of a grammatical category since it possesses regularly used, stabilized formal means to denote perfective verbal aspect. It is typical of this language that in Bengali we get aspectual couples where one partner of this couple can signalize verbal perfectiveness whereas the opposite one maintains in this respect a neutral attitude, i.e. under certain contextual conditions either non-perfectiveness or perfectiveness is meant (for further details cf. BAGANZ 1986: 19 ff.).

Verbal perfectiveness means that the speaker/writer (and consequently the listener/reader) views an event as a complete whole, as a monolithic unit. In contrast to this, verbal non-perfectiveness shows an event in its development, in its characteristic features, as a process. It is in this connection very important to differentiate strictly between the general realization of event and aspectualness, on the one hand, and aspectualness and the different modes of action, on the other. We must not mix up perfective completeness of an event with temporal accomplishment or non-perfec-

tiveness with the mere existence of an event, respectively. The first-mentioned pheno-
menon belongs to the sphere of verbal aspectualness whereas the latter one remains
always within the framework of temporalness.

Thus, the preterite tense, for example, does not automatically signalize perfec-
tiveness—as it is sometimes maintained—because the main task of this Bengali
tense-mood-form is to denote the accomplishment of an event on the time-axis in the
above-mentioned temporal sense. Completeness of an event is an additional feature
added independently but of course in close connection with the temporal capacity of
the preterite — to show an event as accomplished.

The different modes of action, on the other hand, are, like temporalness, a very
important component part of verbal aspectualness, but they, too, must again not be
identified with perfectiveness or non-perfectiveness, respectively. In Bengali, verbal
aspectualness is always an independent phenomenon of its own since it has developed
'perfective—aspectually neutral' couples in the sense of a grammatical category, a
striking feature the modes of action do not possess.

A third element, traditionally used to describe temporal meaning, is the so-called
'time of viewing' (TV; German: Betrachtungszeit), which is defined as „time of
viewing (angle) of the verbal act by the speaker (cf. HELBIG, BUSCHA 1984: 144: „die
Zeit der Betrachtung (die Perspektive) des verbalen Aktes durch den Sprecher.").
In terms of a time-axis-model: The distance between the moment of speaking (MS) and
a certain 'point of reference' (PR) within or outside the distance denoting the respec-
tive time of event (TE).

gatakāl se deri kare velā daśtāy pãuchla.
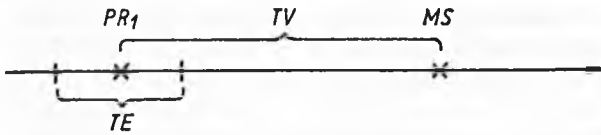
Yesterday, he arrived belated at ten.

It is, in this connection, taken for granted that one can dispute about which angle
is meant while 'viewing the verbal act'. In the above-mentioned example, the distance
of the time of viewing could also comprise the whole event:
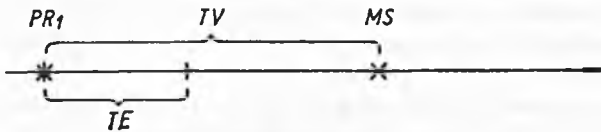
But this is of minor importance.

While dealing with temporal meaning, grammarians use to confine not seldom only
to those communicative situations where the speaker is always present (the so-called
presence of speaker, German: Sprechergegenwart). Taking into account that a compre-
hensive definition of temporal meaning should not only consider the production of
spoken texts where the speaker is present but also of written texts where the writer is
not present, G. HELBIG and J. BUSCHA define the moment of speaking — in their terms
the 'time of speaking' (German: Sprechzeit) — as „the time during which the given

sentence is really uttered by the speaker or writer" (ibid.: „die Zeit, in der der gege-
bene Satz tatsächlich vom Sprecher oder Schreiber geäußert wird.").

As starting-point of a time-axis-model, the term of 'moment or time of speaking'
may hold true for the case of actual dialogues where the hearer decodes the respective
sentence of the speaker while uttered and/or immediately after. This term can, how-
ever, already not be applied anymore for spoken texts on sound carriers to be broadcast
or televized some time or other. And this term 'moment or time of speaking' is of no
use in the case of written texts, even if the writer exactly knows when the reader will
decode this text.

One can elucidate this problem by an everyday example. Parents come home and
find a short notice of their children: āmrā bāgāne khelchi. 'We are playing in the
garden'. When the children wrote this short notice they were still at home and not
playing in the garden. But, nevertheless, writing this little text, they already imagin-
ed, anticipated the situation when the parents will come home. Expecting the parents
back while playing in the garden, they chose the present continuous tense to indicate
the situation of playing simultaneously with the arrival of the parents (main function
of the present continuous).

Thus, besides the moment of speaking or writing, the producer of a written and
also of a spoken text takes first of all the moment into account when the addressee
decodes the text while reading or hearing, respectively. It is, therefore, not the mo-
ment or time of actual speaking, let alone of actual writing that matters for selecting
appropriate temporal means but first of all the 'moment of decoding' (MD) by the
addressee the text-producer must always bear in mind. The difference between the
time of encoding (speaking) and the time of decoding (listening) is, of course, in most
cases neglectable in actual dialogues. But not so as to written texts. Nevertheless, in
both cases the procedure is on principle the very same and starts from the moment of
decoding by the addressee.

For this reason, I prefer to use the comprehensive term 'moment of decoding'
(MD, German: Dekodiermoment) instead of 'moment or time of speaking'. As to the
time of viewing (TV) and the respective points of reference (PR), the text-producer
must again first of all think of the view-point the text-addressee is expected to
have. For selecting appropriate temporal means, it is, therefore, always the time of
viewing (TV) and the points of reference (PR) of the receiver that matters and not
vice versa.

Ending this paper, I like to show four examples of how one could define the differ-
ent temporal meanings of the Bengali tense-mood-forms on the basis of a time-axis-
model. We have to differentiate between a main function of the respective tense-mood-
form and one or more secondary functions of it. It is advisable to examine first of
all the aspectually unmodified neutral forms and afterwards the modified ones, for
example:

Past perfect tense (PP)
The main function of the PP is to state the accomplishment of an event as a fact far
before a second PR (PR_2) which itself is located distinctly before the MD. The PP is,
therefore, characterized as a dependent tense-mood-form which can only exist on
cardinal tense-mood-forms (like the preterite, for example):
gatakāl amal sahar theke esechila.
(1st event, PR_1)

se prathame māke dekhte gela.
(2nd event, PR₂, preterite tense)
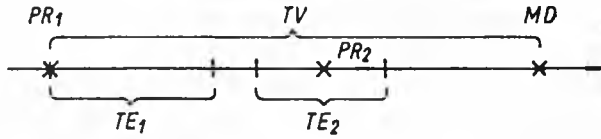
Yesterday, Omol came from town.
First he saw his mother.
1st secondary function
aspectually unmodified: PP – 0
The PP – 0 denotes the accomplishment of an event as a fact far before a second PR
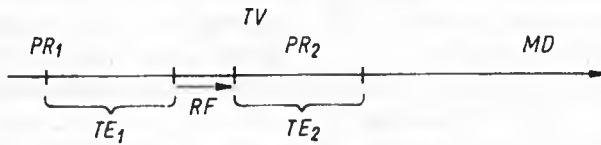(PR₂) and derives from this a reference to this PR₂ (the so-called resulting factor, RF).
The PR₂ itself is located far before the MD.
gatakāl amal āmāder kāche esechila.
(1st event, PR₁)
phale āmrā e kathā niye balte perechi.
(2nd event, PR₂, perfect tense)

Yesterday, Omol came to us.
We could, therefore, talk about this
matter (because he was there).
The reference of the PP – 0 to the MD itself is always indirect. This indirect refe-
rence is facilitated by different verbal and lexical means.
gatakāl amal āmāder kāche esechila,
(past perfect)
phale āmrā e kathā niye balte perechi.
(perfect)
āmrā du ghaṇṭā dhare kathā ballām.
(preterite)
ekhan sab kichu spaṣṭa.
(present tense)
Yesterday, Omol came to us.
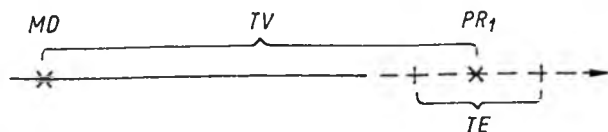We could, therefore, talk about this matter.
We were talking for two hours.
Now everything is clear.

Future I (F I)
The main function of the F 1 is to announce the existence of an event far behind
the MD.
parśu āmāder dekhā habe.

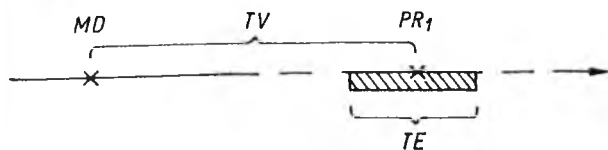We will meet the day after tomorrow.

1st secondary function

aspectually modified: F I − m

The F I − m announces in a way the accomplishment of an event far behind the MD. The capacity of the perfective verbal aspect to view an event as an indivisible unit brings the F I − m close to temporal accomplishment, although not being the same.

sab thik thāk haye ɣābe!

Everything will be all right, (definitely)!

References

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HELBIG, G./BUSCHA, J. (1984): *Deutsche Grammatik: Ein Handbuch für Ausländer,* Leipzig, 144.

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