Homenaje a Jorge A. Suárez

Garza Cuarón, Beatriz, Levy Podolsky, Paulette

Published by El Colegio de México

Garza Cuarón, Beatriz and Paulette Levy Podolsky.
Homenaje a Jorge A. Suárez: lingüística indoamericana e hispánica.
El Colegio de México, 1990.
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TEMPORAL ORIENTATION WITHOUT TENSES:
THE DEIXIS OF TIME IN ISTHMUS ZAPOTEC

CAROL C. MOCK
Southwest Missouri State University

Introduction¹

One common description of the meaning of ASPECT, as opposed to TENSE, is that it refers to the "temporal contour" of an event without connecting it in some fashion to the moment of speaking. For example, a verbal inflection for inceptive aspect will indicate that an event has begun, or is about to begin, or will have begun (but not ended), without referring to any particular time frame; continuative aspect will denote that an action or relation is, or was, or will be in progress; perfective aspect, that an event is viewed as a whole without consideration of its internal temporal profile.²

In contrast, TENSES tie the temporal contour of an event to the speech act itself, so that the reported events are ordered not only among themselves, but also with reference to the present moment or to some other overtly specified frame of temporal orientation. In literary texts, this is the imaginary time line that the narrative establishes. Bull reminds us that "no tense form locates an event in time."³ Rather, what it does is locate an event according to an axis of temporal orientation, which is usually the deictic "now", the time during which the speaker is actively speaking. Aspects, in that they lack this deictic sense, have a less loaded semantic import than do tenses.

Such morphosemantic choices serve to order events among them-

¹ My thanks go to Velma B. Pickett for her careful reading and criticism of earlier drafts of this paper; any errors of analysis or interpretation which remain are entirely my own responsibility.
² Comrie, 1976, p. 3.
selves within a text, establishing a text-internal temporal orientation that has little or nothing to do with the time of the speech act. Thus the broad issue of temporal orientation has two major parts: first, the ‘internal’ temporal relations expressed among other things by choice of aspect, setting up relations between each finite verb and the others in a given text, such as the relations of sequence, inclusion, simultaneity, and back reference; and secondly, the ‘external’ temporal relation of the event or situation referred to by each finite verb to the time of the speech act itself, expressed in many languages as choices of verbal tense.

Many Meso-American languages have verbal inflections that are more adequately termed ASPECTS than TENSES, because they make no intrinsic reference to the temporal axis of the speech act and are used in a wider range of temporal settings than tenses allow. For a scholar whose native language (e.g. Spanish or English) uses aspects only to modify more pervasive distinctions among tenses, tenseless aspect languages raise pragmatic questions. How does a speaker of one of these languages signal the intended temporal orientation of what is said? Why does the listener know whether the speaker is talking about the past or the present or some future time, relative to the moment of speaking?

The issue of temporal orientation encompasses more than one concern. To begin with, each event expressed by a finite verb presumably does have a temporal orientation: that is, the speaker intends us to understand that the event takes place within a particular time frame, whether or not that fact is conveyed overtly. (If this presumption turns out not to be true, there is more substance to the idea of linguistic relativity than psycholinguists have dared to admit.) Secondly, these putative time frames have a particular relation to the moment of speaking, whether or not this is expressed.

A further concern here is the question of the temporal relations between one event and others in its immediate context. Chronological sequencing is only one of the options available; e.g., *First I put the fabric on the table and then I cut it up*. Another possibility is inclusion, one event taking place while another one is underway: *I cut it up as I listened to my daughter*. A third potential relationship between events is temporal simultaneity, both events occurring within the same time frame: *I listened to her for as long as she talked*. And finally, the speaker can refer back to an event that is out of temporal sequence with the other events being referred to: *I put the fabric away because she (had) asked me to go with her*. This is often called back reference.

I have addressed these concerns by analyzing narrative and conversational texts in Isthmus Zapotec, one of the Meso-American lan-
languages that have aspects rather than tenses. There are at least three linguistic features of Zapotec texts that contribute clues to the temporal orientation of the events being spoken about: for temporal relations among events in a text, the sequencing of verbs and the presence of specifically temporal words at key points in the text; for temporal relations to the actual time of speaking, the unmarked temporal implications suggested by the normal use of each aspect inflection.

**Chronological order**

On the basis of his extensive research into Creole languages, Talmy Givón has proposed a model for the textual strategies that signal the temporal sequencing of events in tenseless languages. He notes that although there is often no verbal inflection in a Creole language that might indicate a time frame for events, the actual sequence of predicates in narrative texts normally reflects the chronological order of events in the story line. This is a very simple and iconic observation, one that directly represents language-external sequencing, so it is not surprising to find it true in non-Creole languages as well. In fact, chronological sequencing of predicates is probably one of the ways in which all languages indicate temporal ordering. One syntactic construction in particular makes extensive use of this tendency toward iconic, chronological order: clause-chaining, which can be defined as an intimate syntactic linkage of two or more clauses having identical agents or actors. Isthmus Zapotec, although it does not have tightly fused clause chains of the sort common in West African languages, tends to string several clauses together without conjunctive particles, in otherwise simple sentences, to indicate events that happen one after another.

Example (1) has two clause-chain pairs. The first pair shares a single actor, Coatlicue, but the second has no overt grammatical subject for either verb. The two verbs in each clause chain share similar transitivity features, too: both 'leave' and 'go' are intransitive verbs of motion, while both 'grasp' and 'sweep' are transitive, although the direct objects of these actions, 'broom' and 'ground', remain unex-

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5 Mock, 1969.
6 Zapotec quotations are presented in the standard orthography of Isthmus Zapotec, which is based on Pickett's phonemic analysis of 1960 and 1967. I have added pitch accent diacritics based on Mock, 1984, 1985a, and 1985b, as well as hyphenation indicating aspect prefixes when necessary. The aspect abbreviations used in word-for-word glosses are listed in Table 1.
pressed. There is also a type of aspectual concord here that makes each clause chain more coherent. Both verbs usually take the same aspect; e.g., perfective (PERF) follows perfective, and habitual (HAB) follows habitual. The occurrence of ‘on-the-wayative’ (OW) aspect in the second verb of example (1) is a special requirement limited to verbs of motion such as ‘go’ and ‘come’.  

1) *Ti siàddò* bi-rèe Coatlcue *z-ë* ra *yù’du’*  
   one morning PERF-leave C. OW-go loc. temple

   *ne casi xpià’* gu-cuàa bi-ndùuba’.  
   and like her-custom PERF-grasp PERF-sweep

   ‘One morning Coatlcue left home, went to the temple, and according to her custom took up [a broom] and swept.’ (*Gubidxa, beeu ne ca belegui*)

A word of explanatory digression is in order here. There are two different modes in Isthmus Zapotec, REALIS and IRREALIS, and nine verbal prefixes as listed in Table 1. The nine prefixes are portmanteau morphemes expressing both modal and aspectual categories at the same time, for mode and aspect intersect as independent morphosemantic features. Perfective aspect, for example, is subdivided into either perfective or contrary-to-fact, depending on whether the concurrent modal choice is realis or irrealis mode. Similarly, the imperfective category is expressed as potential aspect in irrealis mode, while in realis mode it splits into several subaspects: continuative, ambulative and in-completive.

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode/Aspect Choices</th>
<th>Major Allomorphs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Irrealis mode</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperfective aspect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential (POT)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g-ùni be ni ‘he may do it; have him do it (que lo haga).’</td>
<td>gui- gu-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfective aspect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrary-to-fact (CTF)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pa ñ-ouni be ni ‘if he had done it; if he would do it (si lo hiciera)’</td>
<td>ni- ñ- nu-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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7 Pickett, 1976.
Table 1 (continuation)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Realis mode</th>
<th>Imperfective aspect</th>
<th>Perfective aspect</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continuative (CONT)</td>
<td>Simple (PERF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ca-yuni be ni &quot;he is doing it (lo está haciendo)&quot;</td>
<td>bi-'ni be ni &quot;he did it (lo hizo)&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inceptive (INIC)</td>
<td>Habitual (HAB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>z-ùni be ni &quot;he’s about to do it (lo hará)&quot;</td>
<td>r-ùni be ni &quot;he normally does it (lo hace)&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ambulative (AMB)</td>
<td>Perfect (PFT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cana-yùni be ni &quot;he goes around doing it&quot;</td>
<td>hua-yùni be ni &quot;he has done it (lo ha hecho)&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Stative (STAT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>na-ya'qui'ni &quot;it is burnt (está quemado)&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The motion verbs *re* ‘go’ and *reeda* ‘come’ are subject to a further aspectual distinction, which Pickett labels as ‘on-the-wayative’ (OW). Morphologically, this aspect is signalled by z- plus tonal perturbation in the verbal stem. Its meaning is intricately tied to the lexical reference of these two motion verbs, which refer to a complete journey: *re* is ‘go from a home base and return there again’, and *reeda* is ‘come to where we are now and to return again to a home base somewhere else’. Carrying the ‘on-the-wayative’ aspect, *re* becomes *z-é’* ‘has left and not returned’, while *reenda* becomes *z-éeda* ‘is on the way here (within sight or hearing)’. Thus many noniterative uses of ‘go’ and ‘come’ require the selection of the on-the-wayative aspect where other verbs take a perfective aspect, unless a clear return to home base is intended; consider, for example, the second verb in example (1).

Example (2) illustrates the difference between clause chaining and coordination in Isthmus Zapotec. The entire example is a coordinate construction in which the first part is a simple clause-chain sequence, ‘grasp-stretch’ with a single Agent, *Diùxi* ‘God’; the second part of the sentence is introduced by *ne* ‘and’, and has a separate agentive pronoun -be ‘he’, that is actually coreferential with *Diùxi*.

2) *Para gu-cuàa Diùxi làa bi-sìgàa diàga, ne bi-sèenda-be làa.*
then PERF-grasp God him PERF-stretch ears, and PERF-send-he him
zé' ma' na-yû'la' diàga ne ma' na-yânënde ëù.
ow-go already STAT-long ears and already STAT-protrude eyes

Then God grasped him and stretched out his ears and sent him on his way with long ears and protruding eyes.” (Chupa cuentu stì lexu)

So far we have seen that the sequence of verbs in narrative texts usually mirrors the chronological order in which reported events take place. In addition to iconic sequencing, Isthmus Zapotec also has other ways to indicate temporal orientation. The most obvious way to signal temporal orientation is by means of specific temporal morphemes. There are many of them in the examples we have already considered. In example (1), the first two words are an adverbial phrase that establishes a temporal frame for what follows: *ti siâddò* ‘one morning’.

In example (2), a temporal conjunctive, *para* ‘and then’, sequences the whole example to follow an earlier part of the narrative.

In Zapotec, as in most languages, there are many different word classes that signal temporal orientation: adverbs, clause subordinators, temporal conjunctions, and also specifically temporal verbs like *bizulù* ‘began’, *bilùxe* ‘finished’ and *gudi'di'* ‘[time] passed’. There are also certain postclitic particles that can be attached to the verbs to signal the expected temporal orientation without as much prominence as the rhythmically complete words have: *si* ‘only, just then’ as in example (3); *ndâ* ‘right after’ as in example (4); and *ru’* ‘still, yet’ as in example (5).

3) *Bi-lùxe-si* cani gu-ca’...
   PERF-finísh-only PL-that PERF-happen
   ‘as soon as all those things finished taking place...’ (Gubidxa, beeu ne ca belegui)

4) *Bi-dxà-ndâ* -ca’ ndàani-ni.
   PERF-fill -right-away-PL inside-it
   ‘They filled it up right away [by getting inside it].’ (Chupa cuentu stì lexu)

5) *Nëca-si r-ìuyu’ nàa na-yàche xhiàa ri’ là, peru ladxidû’ ri-pàpa- ru’*
   although-just HAB-see-you me STAT-break wing this comma but heart-
   my HAB-fly -still
   ‘Even though you see me [with] this broken wing, my heart still [can] fly.’ (Stiïdxa chupa gubaana’)
We have seen the diverse syntactic classes to which these temporal elements belong, but their discourse function is even more interesting. In narrative texts in particular, the temporal adverbs and temporal subordinators have two major functions: they set up a new time frame at major breaks in the text, focusing attention by being preposed to the verb, as in example (1); or they give an extra temporal punch to dramatic peaks in the plot line. This is especially true of adverbs like máca ‘just then’ and málasi ‘all at once’. Temporal shifts in the narrative texts I have analyzed are almost always introduced by temporal phrases such as ti sià-dò’ ‘one morning’, nagà de ngue ‘some time afterwards’, and stî dxi quèca ‘on another day’.

In conversations, these temporal adverbs are used more for rhetorical effect and nuances of social interaction than for orienting the listener to the times at which reported events took place. Thus yànnna ‘now’ tends to mean ‘let’s talk about something new’ in spontaneous conversations, and laga ‘meanwhile’ carries a nuance of contradiction: ‘but at the same time’. In the interview from which the conversational examples were taken, the interviewer changed the topic of his questioning fully half the time by introducing the new topic with this sort of adverb. The only ploy he used more frequently was to solicit the opinions of the poet in a direct fashion: ¿ra’bu’? ‘do you tell [me]? nûuyalu’? ‘would you see?’ ¿nóu’? ‘do you say?’ and ¿nibée lâlu’? ‘would you call [it]?’ Often both adverbs and this sort of direct appeal to his interlocutor are used in the same question:

6) Yànnna, didxa-zà, ¿xi rà’bu’ làa? ¿Dialéctu la? ¿Idiómà la?
   now   Zapotec   what hab-say- you 3 dialect INTERR language INTERR

‘Well now, what do you say that Zapotec is? A dialect? A language?’
(De la Cruz/Chacón interview)

Simultaneity

As I said earlier, another side of the orientation issue is how to signal simultaneity as the temporal relation between two events. Because the bare fact of speaking one predicate after another implies a natural chronological order to the events being reported, the temporal overlapping of simultaneous events must be explicitly indicated in some way if they are not to be understood as happening in a sequence, one after the other. There are no aspectual inflections that by themselves mark simultaneity. Not even habitual aspect will not do it; in example (7) two
habitual verbs in a sequence do not indicate that both events took place at the same time.

Every day HAB-go-POT-sweep LOC temple also HAB-sweep outside temple

‘Every day she goes/went to sweep at the temple. She also sweeps/swept outside the temple.’ (Gubidxa, beeu ne ca belegui)

The Zapotec word classes for explicitly expressing the simultaneity of two events are syntactically identical to the ones for indicating sequencing, but the lexical items are different. There are adverbs like laga ‘meanwhile’, denominal subordinators like dxi ‘the day [when]’, ora ‘hour [when]’, and ra ‘at [the time/place when/where]’; there is also a postclitic, ru’ ‘still, yet’. There are several such devices in example (8):

8) Orà ma’ caguì’ ba’ nisa xa’ xìuuna’, órà que zanda guxóñeca’.
Hour already CONT-rise water under cots, hour that INC-possible POT-run-PL

‘When the [flood] water is already rising under their cots, that’s when they will be able to run away.’ (Ramírez narrative)

**Back reference**

Finally, there is the question of out-of-sequence temporal reference, which is even less frequent than simultaneous ordering. Back-reference, the out-of-order reporting of an event, is accomplished in one of two ways, either via the preverb augmentative particle ma’ ‘already’ or via the rarely used perfect aspectual inflection hua-. The morpheme ma’ has two fairly distinct usages: it is usually temporal, meaning ‘already, anymore’, as in example (9), but sometimes its modal overtones predominate, as in (10). Example (9) combines the sequencing postclitic si ‘just then, only’ with the particle ma’, but it is the connection of ma’ with the following verb in perfective aspect that gives this clause the sense of a backward-referring temporal shift.

9) Bìiya-sì ma’ gùti came la...
PERF-see-only already PERF-die PL-PN comma

‘As soon as he saw that they had already died...’ (Chupa cuentu sti lexu)
Once in a while *ma'* takes on a modal coloration and comes to mean 'in fact, actually', as in example (10).

10) *Ma’ nà, jnà’, nà —tengo sangre de indígena huave—.
really say emphasis say I-have blood of Indian Huave

‘He *really* says, doesn’t he, ‘I have Huave Indian blood.’’ (De la Cruz/Chacón)

The perfect aspect, *hua-* , which sometimes provides out-of-sequence temporal orientation, apparently conveys a challenge or some sort of contradiction, as well. In example (11), an intention expressed by a powerful social group is being criticized by means of evidence that shows the present relevance of particular actions a political action movement had taken in the past.

11) *R-àca là’dxì ca’ gu-cuéeza ca’lu Aunatamiento Popular.*
HAB-be liver PL POT-detain PL on Union People’s

*peru Aunatimiento Popular ri’ la, pues, hua-yàca ne stale bînni* but Union People’s this comma well POT-be with many people

*para g-ànda gui-ndísa’ ique.... hua-dii nà’ bînni.*
so-that POT-possible POT-lift head POT-give hand people

*hua-càa stàle layù para bînni ra ñàa, para g-ùni dxiiña’.*
PFT-seize many fields for people LOC milpa so-that POT-do work

‘They want to restrain the People’s Union, but it has helped many people to lift their heads. The People’s Union has given a hand to people and has wrested [control of] many fields for the peasants so that they can work.’ (Ramírez)

**Temporal deixis**

We have considered various ways in which Isthmus Zapotec signals the relations of one event to other events within a text, but the other side of the temporal orientation issue is how temporal connections to the moment of speaking are expressed. The major factor here is unmarked usage, the context in which each aspectual prefix is normally used; for the aspect inflections carry temporal implications with respect to the speech act, if only as a statistical tendency. As an example, the normal temporal implication of a verb in PERFECTIVE aspect is that the
event has occurred prior to the moment of speaking, as we saw in the
narrative examples of (1) and (2) above. The various imperfective aspects
in contrast, imply that an event has a close connection to the
moment of speaking: that it is in progress at the moment, or is about
to happen in the near future (see the examples in Table 1 above). The
usual temporal deixis of the CONTINUATIVE aspects is that the event
is underway at the moment of speaking (example 12).

12) Ca-ni’lu’ ca’diidxa’ ca.
 CONT-speak-you PL word that

‘You are speaking those words (or stories).’

Thus each verbal aspect in Zapotec carries real-time deictic impli-
cations as an elusive but useful temporal shadow. But if other mor-
phemes in the sentence signal another temporal frame, these unmarked
temporal meanings are easily overridden. In example (13), for instance,
the continuative ca-ni’lu’ ‘you CONT-speaking’, takes on the tem-
poral orientation of the preceding verb bi-caa ‘PERF-fix’, being linked
to it by the temporal subordinator ora ‘hour when’.

13) Peru nagåsi bi-càa diągadu órà ca-ni’lu’ ca.
 but just-now PERF-fix ears-our hour CONT-speak-you that.

que ni-ni’ diòu’ nin ti poesìä dídxazà ya’.
NEG CTF-speak EMPH-you NEG one poem Zapotec YA’

¿Xinèe? ¿que hua-càalu’ didxazà la?
why NEG PFT-write-you Zapotec INTERR

‘But just now we listened when you were speaking, and you did not
recite even one poem in Zapotec. Why was that? Haven’t you written
any in Zapotec?’ (De la Cruz/Chacón)

Another example of how easily this ‘present time’ orientation can be
wiped out by a specific temporal frame that contradicts the unmarked
temporal implication can be found in example (7) above, which ac-
tually precedes example (1) in a folk tale; in that context its reference
is narrative past time rather than the present moment of speaking.

The italicized portion of example (14) also illustrates how fluid
the implied temporal frames of the aspectual inflections are. The inter-
viewer’s question, ‘How many years ago did you learn Zapotec?’ and
the use of simple perfective aspect in the first part of Chacón’s reply,
together create a past time orientation within which the clauses having habitual aspect are naturally interpreted as also referring to the past.

14) Q: ¿De lu pànda iza bi-zìi'du' didxazà?
   from on how-many year PERF-learn-you Zapotec?

   'How many years ago did you learn Zapotec?'

   A: Nàa de na-huìine'. Ngá nga gú-le' niá'.
   I from STAT-small-I that is PERF-be-born-I with-me

   Qué ri-niè' dià' didxastià. Ngá nga trabájù gú-pa' nàa.
   NEG HAB-speak-I at-all-I Spanish that is/was work PERF-have-I I

   Para nguënga b-fínda' lénìguà y literatúrà,
   for this is/was PERF-study-I language and literature

   para bi-zìide' didxastià. Nàa, que r-ànda ri-niè' didxastià.
   then PERF-learn-I Spanish I NEG HAB-possible HAB-speak-I Spanish

   Didxazà bata nga gu-niè' nàa.
   Zapotec only is/was PERF-speak-I I

   'Ever since I was little. That's [the language] I was born with. I didn't speak Spanish at all. That's what I had to work at. That's why I studied language and literature; then I learned Spanish. I couldn't speak Spanish. Zapotec was all I spoke.' (De la Cruz/Chacón)

Narrative texts have been subjected to much more linguistic analysis than conversations have; but even so, certain conversational patterns are also beginning to emerge. When events are reported within a Zapotec conversation, there are often more references to time than in straight narratives. Notice that in example (13) above, both the temporal adverb nagási 'just now' and the subordinated temporal clause introduced by órà 'when' support the interviewer's reference to a recent event. Example (7) above is somewhat different: there the temporal phrase guirá'dxi 'every day' does not give a specific temporal frame; rather, it reinforces the repetition normally expressed by habitual aspect. In example (14), the question itself is explicitly temporal: ¿De lu pandà iza? 'How many years ago?' In the poet's answer, the temporal preposition de 'from, since' signals that the stative aspect of the following verb is to be interpreted as referring primarily to the past,

8 This tendency has also been noted in English; see Biber, 1986.
although its normal temporal implication overlaps with the moment of speaking.

Conclusions

We have seen that temporal orientation is achieved in Isthmus Zapotec in a variety of ways, most of which are fairly ordinary. The normal sequence of verbs follows the chronological order of the reported events in real time; specifically temporal expressions at key points in the discourse signal temporal breaks in narrative and topic breaks in conversation; and the deictic expectations set up by aspect inflections themselves give an unmarked temporal color to most sentences. These data suggest that temporal orientation is effectively signaled even in languages that do without verbal tenses as such.

The differences that we have encountered between narrative and conversational texts indicate that temporal and modal meanings are much more fluid than linguists have usually conceded. Several adverbs that have temporal reference in narrative texts have modal or rhetorical senses as well, meanings which have a more prominent part to play in the highly interactive context of dialogue. The absence of tenses has little effect on temporal orientation, in and of itself. The verbal inflections for aspect are used very much as tenses are, differing mainly by occurring in a wider set of temporal contexts than the speech-act deixis of tense-based inflections would permit.

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