

Mongolian Converbs and the Macro-Event Property

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Bohnenmeyer et al. (2007) introduce the Macro-event Property (MEP) – a property of a predicate subsuming constituent sub-events into a single macro event, over which scope all temporal operators related these subevents. The present study examines this property with respect to Mongolian converbial clauses and the matrix predicates they modify, detailing the correlations between the MEP and the semantics of various converb suffixes. Specifically, I posit that among the roughly 16 converb types in the language (Janhunen, 2012, p. 164), there are those which lack the ability to independently temporally anchor the events they describe instead receiving their temporal ‘locus’ from the matrix verb, and that these are the same converbs which must appear in configurations exhibiting the MEP. This is evidenced by their incompatibility with matrix tenses which do not provide real-world reference times, cases of apparent aspectual concord between the converbial predicate and the matrix verb, as well as restrictions in separate temporal adverbial modification.

In Mongolian, events in series or in other spatiotemporal relations are often expressed monocausally through the use of converbs, whereas their English equivalents employ coordinators like ‘and, then’ etc. or are expressed with multiple clauses. Ujyediin (1998) defends an analysis of Mongolian converbs in line with Haspelmath’s definition as nonfinite forms in the inflectional paradigm of a language’s verbs “whose main function is to mark adverbial subordination” (Haspelmath, 1995, p. 3). An important feature of converbs is their inability to appear independent of a matrix verb (in either a finite tense, a ‘verbal noun’ (Poppe, 1951), or with a tensed auxiliary), upon which they are dependant “for mood and tense interpretation” (Ujyediin, 1998, p. 78). Yet, this dependence is not equal and universal across all converb types. The data in (1) and (2) presents some of the stereotypical uses of Mongolian converbs, and contrasts elucidating their analysis:

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| (1) a. Bolod bos- umagca Sudu saγu-jai
Bold arise-CVB Sudu sit-PST
‘Bold stands up and Sudu sits down.’ | (2) a. Bolod bos- uγod Sudu saγu-na
Bold arise-CVB Sudu sit-NPST
‘Bold stands/stood up and Sudu sits/will sit.’ |
| b. Sudu daγu sonos- cu saγu-na
Sudu song listen-CVB sit-NPST
‘Sudu is listening to a song (staying / sitting)’ | b. *Bolod bos- umagca Sudu saγu-na
Bold arise-CVB Sudu sit-NPST
(Intended: ‘Bold stands up and Sudu sits.’) |

Firstly, in some Mongolian converbial sentences, aspect is at times coerced to match between the two predicates. Consider (1) above. The verb *saγu-* may either mean ‘to sit’ or ‘to stay’, and (like the English verb ‘to sit’) may be a state, activity, or an achievement in the former meaning. In (1a), only an achievement reading (i.e. ‘sit down’) is available, as it must match the aktionsart of *bos-* ‘arise’. However, in (1b), *saγu-* may be a state or an activity, and it describes an eventuality that is simultaneous with ‘listening to a song’. Secondly, in (2a) the converb *-γod* is compatible with a matrix verb in the non-past tense *-na*, but in (2b), a converb representing immediate succession is incompatible with the non-past tense *-na*. I argue that this is due to the fact that some converb suffixes require that the main verb pick out a real-world reference time, and are therefore incompatible with main verbs in *-na* which is a “bleached imperfective marker that has lost its ability to relate to a specific point in time” (Brosig, 2009, p.87). Crucially and additionally, with converbs like *-magca*, speakers reject temporal adverbial modification of the converbial clause independent of the matrix predicate – a hallmark of predicates with the MEP.

The present study demonstrates that in Mongolian converbial clauses, those converb suffixes which exhibit the MEP in their use – exemplified by *-magca* in (1a) and (2b) above – likewise have similar properties to those laid out above: they force a sort of aspectual concord with their matrix verb, and are incompatible with matrix tenses which do not provide reference times. While Bohnemeyer et al. (2007) make careful distinctions between the MEP and syntactic facts in their descriptive cross-linguistic study of motion verbs, I argue here that in a given individual language, the MEP may in fact be associated with certain structural configurations, e.g. the height of subordinated clauses relative to projections introducing aspect, from which phenomena like aspectual concord arise. The notion that in a given language syntactic height determines the temporal relations between events in subordinate and matrix predicates is not entirely novel: Bary & Haug (2011) suggest a linear correlation between structural height relative to IP and the temporal relations between Greek participles and their matrix predicates. However, this study goes beyond this to both unify facts about aspectual and temporal relations in complex predicates with the notion of a Macro-Event Property, and furthermore to take on the case study of converbs, whose properties with respect to temporal sequencing and event-mereology have been understudied.

References

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