Narrative tense in Khalkha Mongolian

Overview. In narrative contexts, the interpretation of tenses can differ from their canonical uses. For example, present tense morphology in English possesses a non-indexical use in narratives (the "historical present", or HP), describing eventualities as holding at a time of assessment rather than the utterance time (UT) (Schlenker, 2004; Zucchi, 2005; Anand & Toosarvandani, 2017; 2018; 2021). However, semantic accounts of narrative tenses vary in the formal mechanisms that underlie assessment time shifting, deriving it either via a temporal operator (Zucchi, 2005), a bicontextual semantics (Schlenker, 2004; Anand & Toosarvandani, 2017; 2018), or a modal operator (Anand & Toosarvandani, 2021). In the current work, I present novel data on the tense suffix *-v* in Khalkha Mongolian (Eastern branch, Mongolic), which I identify as a dedicated narrative tense marker. Delineating between past accounts of narrative tenses, I motivate an analysis of *-v* as a modal operator.

The temporal properties of *-v*. Previous grammatical descriptions of Khalkha Mongolian have observed that *-v* is typically used in narrative contexts (e.g., Street, 1963; Binnick, 2011). In line with these descriptions, I'll now show that the temporal contribution of *-v* parallels the English HP. To start, *-v* is not indexical to the UT like a canonical present tense (1a). Instead, it describes the temporal orientation of eventualities relative to the time of a story (1b). The felicity of *-v* with future narratives like (1b) indicates that its temporal reference isn't restricted to times preceding the UT.

(1) a. *Context: You're describing what Erdenechimeg is doing right now.*
Erdenechimeg khos beelii nekh-ej {bai-**n** / #bai-**v**}.
Erdenechimeg pair glove knit-CVB {AUX-PRS / AUX-*v*}
'Erdenechimeg is knitting a pair of gloves.'

b. *Context: You're reading a science fiction novel that is set in the far future. The novel says:*
Namuun sansr-iin khölög-t or-**ov**. Genet ter robot khar-**av**.
Namuun space-GEN craft-LOC enter-*v* suddenly 3.SG robot see-*v*
'Namuun enters the spacecraft. Suddenly, she sees a robot.'

Next, like the English HP (Anand & Toosarvandani, 2018), *-v* prohibits temporal backshifting (2). In (2a), the only possible reading is one where Sarangerel's falling precedes Tuyaa's pushing. For a backshifted reading to arise (i.e., Tuyaa's pushing precedes Sarangerel's falling), it is necessary to use the past tense *-sAŋ* (2b).

(2) a. Sarangerel un-**av**. Tuyaa tüün-iig tülkh-**ev**.
Sarangerel fall-*v* Tuyaa 3.SG-ACC push-*v*
'Sarangerel falls. Tuyaa pushes her.' **(Backshifted #)**

b. Sarangerel un-**saŋ**. Tuyaa tüün-iig tülkh-**seŋ**.
Sarangerel fall-PST Tuyaa 3.SG-ACC push-PST
'Sarangerel fell. Tuyaa pushed her.' **(Backshifted ✓)**

The data in (2) do not reflect an incompatibility between *-v* and discourse relations like Explanation (Lascarides and Asher, 1993). Statives, which permit temporal overlap between the two eventualities, render *-v* felicitous in Explanation relations (3). Based on these properties, I conclude that *-v* is a narrative tense marker, akin to the English HP.

(3) Sarangerel un-**av**. Ter sogtuu bai-**v**.
Sarangerel fall-PST 3.SG drunk AUX-*v*
'Sarangerel falls. She is drunk.'

***-v* in embedded contexts.** *-v* diverges from the English HP in embedded contexts. While the English HP has been argued to be embeddable under attitude verbs (Anand & Toosarvandani, 2021),

-v can only embed as a quotative (4a). *-v* cannot appear in non-quotative complements (4b), unlike the present tense *-n*, which results in a "double-access" reading (Abusch, 1997), or past tense *-sAŋ*.

(4) a. *Context: Oyuun just recited a story that her mother used to tell her. You're now reporting one of the sentences that Oyuun said during the storytelling.*
Oyuun "Gal-t uul delber-**ev**" gej khel-seŋ.
Oyuun fire-DAT mountain erupt-*v* COMP say-PST
'Oyuun said, "The volcano erupts."'

b. Khulan khaniaga-saŋ. Ter övchtei {bai-**n** / bai-**saŋ** / *bai-**v**} gej khel-seŋ.
Khulan cough-PST 3.SG sick {AUX-PRS / AUX-PST / AUX-*v*} COMP say-PST
'Khulan coughed. She said she is/was sick.'

I argue that sentences with quotation marking like (4a) are genuine instances of quotation due to the binding contrasts in (5). Because it is not possible to bind into quotations (Partee, 1973), the third person pronoun *ted* cannot be bound by the subject in (5a), whereas it can be bound in (5b).

(5) a. [Bükh okhid-uud]$_i$ "Enkhjin {bid-end$_i$ / #ted-end$_i$} tusal-saŋ" gej khel-seŋ.
all girl-PL Enkhjin {1.PL-DAT / 3.PL-DAT} help-PST COMP say-PST
'All the girls$_i$ said, "Enkhjin helped us$_i$/#them$_i$."'

b. [Bükh okhid-uud]$_i$ Enkhjin ted-end$_i$ tusal-saŋ gej khel-seŋ.
all girl-PL Enkhjin 3.PL-DAT help-PST COMP say-PST
'All the girls$_i$ said Enkhjin helped them$_i$.'

Analysis. I give a semantic entry for the narrative tense *-v* in (6a). I assume a bicontextual semantics, wherein interpretation is relative to a context of utterance (*u*) and a context of assessment (*a*) (Schlenker, 2004; Sharvit, 2004; 2008; Anand & Toosarvandani, 2017; 2018; 2021). Because the use of *-v* in declarative sentences is restricted to narrative contexts, I analyze it as a modal operator rather than treating it as a consequence of freely shifting the assessment time at the root level (cf. Schlenker, 2004; Anand & Toosarvandani, 2017; 2018). In (6a), *-v* quantifies over worlds compatible with the relevant narrative *g(n)*, evaluated with respect to the local world w_j and time t_i. A time *t'* is identified over which the events of the narrative unfold. This modalized semantics reflects the narrative operator of Lewis (1978) and Anand & Toosarvandani (2021).

(6) a. $[\![\text{-}v_n{}^{t_i,w_j}]\!]^{u,a,g} = \lambda p.\ \forall w'$ s.t. w' is compatible with g(n) in w_j at t_i and t' is the smallest interval containing the events of g(n) in w_j at t_i, TIME(a) = t' & $\exists t''[\ t'' \subseteq t'$ & p(t'')(w')]

b. $[\![\text{PRS}]\!]^{u,a,g} = \lambda p.\ \exists t'[\ t' \subseteq$ TIME(a) & p(t')]

I trace the other semantic properties that *-v* shares with the English HP, such as its restriction against backshifting, to the temporal contribution of (6a): like a canonical present tense (6b), *-v* introduces a time *t"* that is contained within the assessment time. This containment relation is what results in the aforementioned temporal properties (see Anand & Toosarvandani, 2018 on the English HP). To derive its inability to embed, I propose that in contrast with the English HP (cf. Anand & Toosarvandani, 2021), *-v* occupies a higher structural position than other tenses in Khalkha Mongolian. Like how tense morphemes that encode an evidential meaning have been argued to occupy an EvidP projection above TP (Cinque, 1999; Speas, 2004), I suggest that tense morphemes that encode a narrative meaning are likewise syntactically higher than canonical tenses.

Theoretical implications. The current work contributes to our cross-linguistic understanding of temporal meaning in narratives by identifying the Khalkha Mongolian suffix *-v* as a dedicated narrative tense marker. The provided analysis of *-v* as a modal operator captures parallels between the temporal properties of *-v* and the English HP, as well as *-v* being unable to embed.

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