

Time and perspective in a supposedly tenseless language

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Vietnamese



- Dialects divided into southern, middle and northern dialect
- 70 million native speakers in Vietnam und almost 1 million speakers in other countries
- Austroasiatic language family
- Sound system consisting of 6 tones (*giá* „price“; *già* „old“)
- Analytic language
- No marking of case, number and genus

Tense

Tenselessness is understood as the absence of obligatory tense marking in finite clauses.

- (1) a. I went to the university.
b. #I go to the university yesterday.

Tense and aspect in Vietnamese

Vietnamese is known to be a tenseless language. BUT there are tense and aspect markers in Vietnamese:

- (2) Tôi sẽ nấu phở gà.
1.SG FUT cook soup chicken
'I will cook chicken soup.'

- (3) Năm ngoái tôi **đã** đến newyork.
year last 1.SG PST go New.York
'I was in New York last year.'

- (4) Tôi **đang** làm buổi sáng.
1.SG PROG make CLF.day morning
'I'm making breakfast.'

Elicitation study

Do Vietnamese native speakers use tense and aspect markers in spoken conversations?

And if so, are these markers optional or obligatory in contexts which differ in terms of time reference and aspect?

Elicitation study – Participants

- 3 male participants, all Vietnamese native speakers with English as their second language (after the age of 6)
- Age: 18-25 years
- One speaker of the northern dialect and two speakers of the southern dialect

10 contexts in different tense and aspect categories:

- past, present, future
- stative, perfective, progressive, habitual

E.g. for past, perfective context:

- (5) Sarah and Joe are looking through a photo album. Sarah sees a photo of Joe standing in front of the statue of Liberty. Sarah asks Joe: „Did you go to New York last year?“ Joe answers:
„**Yes, I went to New York last year.**“

Elicitation study – Results

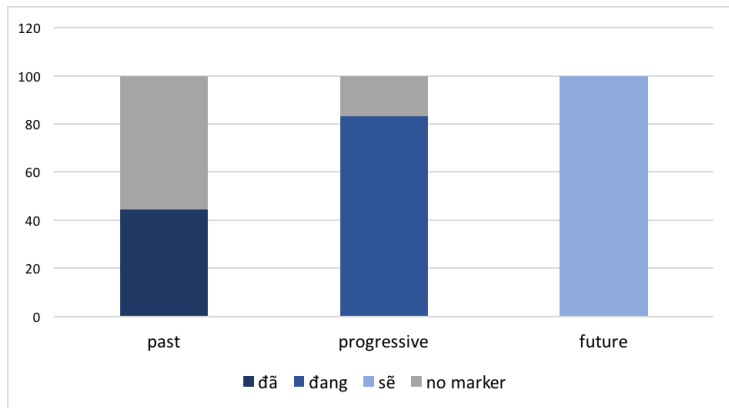


Figure: Results of elicitation study

- ***sẽ*** was used consistently in all contexts with future reference
- ***đang*** was used in almost every context with progressive aspect
- ***đã*** wasn't used consistently throughout different contexts that referred to the past

Conclusion

- optionality of tense and aspect markers in Vietnamese differs clearly between markers
- the marker *đang* is also used in the present, stative context by one participant, therefore it could be an imperfective marker
- further research on the future marker *sẽ* could prove that it is obligatory → supporting the hypothesis that Vietnamese isn't a tenseless language after all

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