Variation in aspect and modality in Borneo

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The high variation of languages in Borneo is well represented by the different aspect and modality markers that occur in the various languages. Nevertheless precise information on the TAME markers in most of the languages of Central Borneo is lacking due probably to the fact that in most of the cases they are optional. Aspect and modality are hardly expressed morphologically but mostly lexically and often seem to be non obligatory if context and semantics of the verbs contribute to the expression of this feature.

This paper illustrates the wide range of strategies used in particular by Pnan languages to express TAME as compared to the languages of the close neighbors Kayan and Kenyah employing narrative texts and elicited material.

The aspect markers of the languages investigated occur in specific positions in the verbal complex and interact with modals, auxiliaries, negators and main verbs to create a range of aspectual and modal meanings.

Perfective action is marked in the various Pnan languages by different lexemes that generally occur before the verb and can be omitted in some pragmatic situations or when some adverbs or adverbial phrases indicate the time of the action like ‘yesterday, some time ago, earlier’ etc, mainly pengah in Penan Benalui (1), belum in Punan Tubu’ (2), nga in Punan Malinau (3), compared to lepek or tene in Kenyah (4), uh in Kayan (5).

1. kekat sakai pengah masek bibi
   all guest PFCT go.in whole
   all the guests have come in

2. belum kou moru?
   PFCT 2SG N-bathe
   have you bathed yet?

3. guhngan kiq nga mun
   rice 2SF PFCT eat
   you ate all the rice

4. a’eng tene ki tèsen je lepek ta’eng kanane tene re
   NEG PFCT 1SG know because PFCT NEG use-3SG PFCT PRTCL
   I don’t know because it has not been used any more

5. uh ateng nah ihaq
   PFCT arrive PRTCL 3SG
   he has arrived

On the other hand, for imperfective action the spatial expressions dalew (inside) in Penan Benalui, an tang (in the middle), an luang (inside) in Punan Tubu, mai (<amai inside) in Punan Malinau are employed, but these seem to be not always necessary. Data from elicitation sessions gives indication that imperfective action can be unmarked and when is expressed is conveyed through the use of spatial lexemes. Imperfective action is better expressed by the use of the deictic ‘this’, or the adverb meaning ‘still’ like in the following examples (6 and 7) from Punan Tubu:

6. kekat sakai pengah masek bibi
   all guest PFCT go.in whole
   all the guests have come in

7. belum kou moru?
   PFCT 2SG N-bathe
   have you bathed yet?

8. guhngan kiq nga mun
   rice 2SF PFCT eat
   you ate all the rice

9. a’eng tene ki tèsen je lepek ta’eng kanane tene re
   NEG PFCT 1SG know because PFCT NEG use-3SG PFCT PRTCL
   I don’t know because it has not been used any more

10. uh ateng nah ihaq
    PFCT arrive PRTCL 3SG
    he has arrived
6. hok ini mom
   1SG this bathe
   I am bathing

7. nak inah lela keman
   child that still eat
   the child is (still) eating

   How imperfective action is really conceptualized in these languages? Does the answer lie
in other domains, like in the semantics of verbs, in the syntax of sentence constituents or in
their combination?

   Other aspects like iterativity or continuous action are expressed through reduplication of
the verb or other constituents.

   What is peculiar is the great amount of particles employed in the different languages with
the purpose of expressing modality or other kind of evidence in the source of information in
statements. These particles that are not grammatical and seem to be optional occur all over the
data in recorded texts but hardly in elicitations. A description of these particles will be
provided together with the analysis of their distribution and combination with other aspect
and modality markers.