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ARTICLE

The Concept of Time in Assamese

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Abstract

The paper is primarily concerned with the concept of time that underlies the expressions of temporal relations in natural human languages. We attempt to present in this paper the concept of time in natural human languages in general and in Assamese in particular. Every natural language that we know of employs different ways and means to represent the concept of time. The six types of devices that are often used to express time in natural languages are tense, aspect, aktionsart, temporal adverbials, temporal particles and discourse principles (Klein 1994, 2009). It may be pointed out that time at the conceptual level is structured in terms of spatial experience such as motion through space (see Smart 1949; Clark 1973; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Evans 2004). We observe that the expression of time in Assamese is mandatory that is marked grammatically by tense and is conceptualized as deictic. The paper claims that Assamese uses linear concept of time based on a horizontal time-line with its front-back orientation to capture our experience of time. We argue that time in Assamese is viewed as moving through space without any boundary and hence is perceived and conceptualized as a motion through space.

Keywords: concept of time, society and culture, grammatically, conceptualization, deictic, linear and cyclic, horizontal, motion through space.

1. Introduction

It has been noticed that there are numerous concepts and notions of time, such as physical time, biological time, Newton's absolute and relative time, Kantian time, subjective time, linguistic time

and so on. These notions of time may be interrelated to one another in some ways but also differ in many ways and cannot be reduced to one concept of time. However, we are concerned in this paper only with the concepts of time which underlie the expressions of temporal relations in natural human languages. Aristotle as early as in (350 BC) defined time as “a number of motion with respect to before and after”. He made a clear distinction between time and change; and also characterized time as something that can be counted.

2. Concepts of time

Klein (2009) claims that the expression of temporal relations in natural languages is based on a ‘basic time structure’ that consists of six indispensable characteristics namely (a) Segmentability: Time can be divided into smaller segments such as time spans or temporal intervals; (b) Inclusion: If there are two time spans, one may be included in the other and this inclusion may be full or partial (i.e. overlapping); (c) Succession: If the two time spans are not fully or partly included in each other, then both can precede each other; (d) Duration: It is a property of time spans which may be long or short and is indicated by adverbials, such as *three days, for a while*; (e) Origo: It is “the time of present experience or deictic origo or the moment of speech” that indicates temporal relations; (f) Proximity: If there are two time spans, then one is nearer to or far from the other; and (g) Lack of quality: Time spans have no qualitative properties. It is noticed that time is marked in some languages whereas it is not marked in some other languages. However, all languages have developed different devices to express time. The six types of devices that are often used to express time in natural languages are tense, aspect, aktionsart, temporal adverbials, temporal particles and discourse principles (Klein 1994, 2009).

It is often observed that time at the conceptual level is structured in terms of spatial experience such as motion through space (see Smart 1949; Clark 1973; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 1999; Evans 2004). Evans (2004) claims that time is conceptualized in terms of spatial relations and motion through space; and it is structured at the conceptual level in terms of content which relates ultimately to sensory domains which are not primarily temporal in nature. He observes that the English lexical item *time* is conventionally associated with eight distinct lexical concepts namely the duration sense, the moment sense, the instance sense, the event sense, the matrix sense, the agentive sense, the measurement-system sense and the commodity sense. These lexical concepts

are distinct in terms of meaning, concept elaboration and grammatical representation. These concepts relate to our experience of time and are distinct mental representations which indicate the complexity and diversity of the way we conceptualize time. This conceptualization of time results in two cognitive models for time such as ego-based cognitive models for time and time-based cognitive models for time. Ego-based cognitive models take the experience of 'now' or ego as their reference point whereas time-based cognitive models take a particular temporal event as their reference point.

It has been observed that different societies and cultures have different concepts of time and this concept of time is expressed through language. All human languages that we know employ different ways and means to express time. The notion of time is conceptualized and developed on the basis of our experiences of time; and our experience of time is fundamental to human cognition and also for expression of time. It has been claimed by many linguists that societies and cultures have either linear concepts of time or cyclic concepts of time. The linear concept of time is viewed and conceptualized as a time line which includes three concepts of time such as horizontal concept of time, vertical concept of time and lateral concept of time. Horizontal concept of time has front-back orientation; vertical concept of time has up-down orientation; and lateral concept of time has right-left orientation. The motivation for horizontal concept of time with its front-back orientation is derived from the unbounded nature of passing time whereas the motivation for vertical concept of time with its up-down orientation is determined by the force of gravity towards earth. Vertical motion is therefore bounded by the surface of the earth and hence is less suited to express the infinity of passing time (Haspelmath 1997). The lateral concept of time is determined relative to the frontal orientation of time and does not have any independent properties of its own. Hence, it is hardly used to express the concepts of time in natural languages. Radden (2011) claims that the horizontal concept of time with its front-back orientation is probably universally applied in expressing concepts of time and is the predominant pattern of oriented time in Western cultures. He further observes that Eastern cultures, on the other hand, tend to make much more use of vertical concepts of time with its up-down orientation. Western languages such as English and Spanish make use of horizontal concepts of time whereas East Asian languages such as Mandarin Chinese, Southern Min, Korean, and Japanese make use of vertical concepts of time. The possible reasons behind conceptualization and use of the vertical concepts of time in East Asian languages may be the traditional vertical writing direction of Chinese and other East Asian languages, and the

river model of flowing time. Evans (2004) suggests that our experience of downward motion on slopes may have motivated the vertical conceptualization of time.

According to Thapar (2010), an eminent historian, ancient India had both the cyclic concept of time and linear concept of time. She explained both the concepts and said that the cyclic time might be described as cosmological and the linear time, also called historical, was functional and dependent on human activity. She observed that though both were carefully constructed, the cosmological time was a conscious fantasy of time and reflective of authors and their mythologies, whereas the historical time reflected more manageable concerns. She pointed out that the two concepts did not exhaust variations of time and they did intersect on some occasions. She also observed that different segments of society viewed their past in different ways as there was simultaneous use of more than one form of time.

Some cultures like Australian Aboriginal cultures have cyclic concepts of time. It may be pointed out that Toba, an Amerindian language spoken in South America, and Australian Aboriginal languages express the cyclic concept of space and time. It may, however, be noted that the conceptualization of cyclicity is less pronounced in Western cultures and European languages. Comrie (1985) claims that even in societies that have cyclic concepts of time, the individual cycles are viewed as chronologically arranged so that the cyclicity is viewed and conceptualized as superimposed on an overall linear conceptualization of time in a time line. One can relate a situation to the time line by means of locating the situation somewhere on the time line in relation to some other specified point of time and by relating a situation to the time line to discuss the internal temporal contour of the situation. The deictic time concerns the three time spheres of present, past and future, and relates them to the moment of speaking (i.e. the speech time) as a reference point.

3. Concept of time in Assamese

Like other cultures in the world, Assamese culture also has the concept of time which is expressed through Assamese language. Unlike Chinese where time is expressed through adverbials and particles, and is not marked grammatically; the expression of time in Assamese is mandatory and is marked grammatically. Let us examine the following sentences to know more about time.

1. a. *tumon gharat āse*

tumon ghar-at ās-e
tumon home-loc be-agr

‘Tumon is at home.’

b. *tumon gharat āsil*

tumon ghar-at ās-isil
tumon home-loc be-past

‘Tumon was at home.’

c. *tumon gharat thākiba*

tumon ghar-at thāk-ib-a
tumon home-loc stay-fut-agr

‘Tumon will be at home.’

It is noticed that each of the three sentences in (1) presents a particular situation, ‘Tumon’s being at home’, around or simultaneous, before and after the moment of speech. Assamese uses speech time or the moment of speech as the reference point to locate a situation in three time spheres namely past, present and future; and to indicate whether a situation occurs before, after or simultaneously with the speech time. Hence, time in Assamese is conceptualized as deictic and is marked by tense.

It may be observed that Assamese uses linear concept of time based on a horizontal time-line. Horizontal concept of time has front-back orientation and captures our experience of time in a better way compared to vertical or cyclic concept of time. An earlier time in Assamese is described as ‘before’ and a late time is described as ‘after’. The expressions such as *pās basar āgat* (five years before) and *pās basar pisat* (five years after), *āgata din* (days to come) referring to the front and *bigata din* (days gone by) referring to the behind, *ahā māhat* (next month) and *jowā māhat* (last month) show the front-back orientation of horizontal concept of time. The experience of time is understood and conceptualized to have occurred as ‘before and after’ or ‘front and back’ orientation. So, the concept of time in Assamese is horizontal with its front-back orientation and captures our experience of time.

The speakers of Assamese visualize time spans or time units as moving forward or backward either to, from or across the reference point. Time in Assamese is also perceived and conceptualized as a motion through space. The following examples illustrate this point.

2. *tumonar janmadin āhi āse*
 tumon-ar janmadin āh-i ās-e
 tumon-gen birthday come-prog be-agr

‘Tumon’s birthday is coming.’

3. *xamoy gatixil*
 xamoy gatixil
 time motion

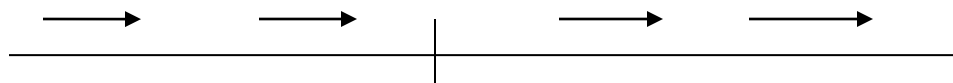
‘Time is motion.’

4. *atitar parā ei paramparā chali āhise*
 atit-ar parā ei paramparā chal-i āh-is-e
 past-gen from this tradition continue-prog come-result-agr

‘This tradition has been continuing from the past.’

The event in (2) is situated sometime in future and is viewed as if it is coming to the moment of speech. In (3), time is viewed as moving through space without any boundary and is thought to have no beginning, middle and end. The event in (4) is situated sometime in the past and is viewed as coming down to the present and is likely to continue in future. It has been observed from (2) – (4) that time is viewed and conceptualized as moving through space without any boundary. The expressions like *xamayar xot* (current of time) and *xamayar xar* (arrow of time) also confirm this and show that time is conceptualized as flowing and moving through space in Assamese.

The concept of time in Assamese that we have discussed so far can be represented through the following diagram.



Past

Present

Future

Figure-1. Representation of time in Assamese

Figure-1 indicates that the present or the moment of speech is the deictic point based on which an event is located either before, after or simultaneous with the speech time. The experience of time is conceptualized as linear (i.e. horizontal) with front-back or before-after orientation and the linear time line is viewed as unbounded at both the ends. The pointed arrows also show that time is conceptualized as motion (i.e. moving object) through space on the horizontal time line.

4. Conclusion

It has been observed from the above discussion and analysis that time in Assamese is deictic and marked by grammatical means. The concept of time is horizontal with its front-back orientation on a time line. Time is also conceptualized as motion through space and is unbounded in nature.

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