The temporal and modal semantics
of the perfective/imperfective distinction in Tzotzil (Mayan)

Tzotzil is one of the 30 modern Mayan languages and is spoken by approximately 250,000 people in southwestern Mexico. The core of Tzotzil's verbal grammar is the perfective/imperfective distinction (traditionally labeled "completive/incompletive" in Mayan descriptive grammars). However the semantics of these categories differ from what could be called a "typological standard" (if any could be drawn at all). In Tzotzil, the aspectual opposition between perfective and imperfective also includes temporal and modal meanings. There is no category of tense in the grammar of Tzotzil; although there are categories of the imperative and irrealis, they do not fill entirely the vast semantic domain of modality. Therefore temporal and modal meanings tend to be expressed jointly with aspectual ones.

The study is based on the fieldwork data and analysis of published texts.

The imperfective, being primarily an aspectual category that expresses the duration of an action, habituality or iterativity, is always used in relation to every action that describes an unrealized event and belongs to the future (1).

(1) ok'ob   **ch**-i-k'ot   xchi'uk   **ta**   j-mil-ot
      tomorrow   **IPFV**-1.ABS-come   and   **IPFV**   1.ERG-kill-2SG.ABS
      '*I'll come tomorrow and I'll kill you*' (fieldwork)

The perfective normally expresses instantaneous events or the completeness of a continuous action. In Tzotzil, the perfective is also used in order to express a past action regardless of its aspectual nature (2).

(2) volje   **l**-i-ak'otaj-otik   s-junul   k'ak'al
      yesterday   **PFV**-1.ABS-dance-1PL.INCL   3.POSS-all   day
      '*Yesterday we danced all day long*' (fieldwork)

The only case in which the perfective can be applied to an incomplete event is that of a conditional clause. It marks a supposed event located in the future on the temporal scale relative to the moment of speech, but in the past relative to the action described in the main clause (3).

(3) mu   onox   j-na'   k'usi   ch-i-s-nop-be   ti
      NEG   still 1.ERG-know   what   IPFV-1.ABS-3.ERG-think-APPL   DEF
      a-malal   timi   **i**-yul-e
      2.POSS-husband   if   **PFV**-return-ENCL
      '*I do not know what your husband think if he will return*' (Pérez López *et al*. 1994: 150)

So, in the terms of Comrie (1985), the *relative past tense* is expressed by the perfective marker in Tzotzil. Naturally there are more "irregular" uses of the perfective/imperfective distinction in Tzotzil (as well as in some other languages of the Mayan family) that contradict the aspectual semantics of these categories.

It is generally known, that the semantics of perfective and imperfective vary from languange to language (Dahl 1985; Smith 1991; Gvozdanović 2011). The verbal system of Tzotzil provides evidence that the categories of perfective and imperfective should not be considered as entirely aspectual, but rather as part of the complex *tense-aspect-mood (TAM) system*. The semantics of the perfective/imperfective distinction could rarely be limited to an aspectual opposition, and therefore the Tzotzil material corroborates to a certain degree Bache's (1982) idea that "a 'subjective' choice between a perfective or an imperfective

representation of a particular situation is dependent on this situation being *distant* from the concrete present either temporally or modally".

In Tzotzil, the temporal and modal semantics of the perfective/imperfective distinction consist principally in the addition of the relative past tense meaning to the perfective cluster and in the addition of irreal meaning to the imperfective one. These two semantic components should not be treated as definitely temporal or modal (*cf.* Vet 1983). The past tense includes the modal semantics of certainty and undoubtedness, while the irreal meaning can be considered as the future tense. This is another reason to consider verbal systems with the binary perfective/imperfective opposition, like Tzotzil, as complex TAM-systems without compulsory differentiation between aspectual, temporal and modal subdomains.

<u>Abbreviations</u>: ABS − absolute, APPL − applicative, DEF − definite article, ENCL − enclitic, ERG − ergative, INCL − inclusive, IPFV − imperfective, NEG − negative, PFV − perfective, PL − plural, POSS − possessive, SG − singular.

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