Bundling perfect and perfective: the Atayal wal

This study offers a semantic analysis of the preverbal aspectual marker wal in Atayal (Austronesian), which has been described as a past tense or a perfective aspect (Egerod 1965, Huang 1993). I show that neither proposal captures the properties of wal; instead, wal shares with the English perfect the anteriority, as well as the pragmatic effects—result state and current relevance. I propose that wal is a perfect aspect bundled with perfective aspect, and I show how this proposal in conjunction with pragmatic competitions of wal and other operators in the language explains the absence of universal and experiential perfect readings, and adverbial restrictions. The finding provides cross-linguistic evidence that languages vary in how they combine perfect with other aspect (Iatridou et al. 2001, Pancheva 2003, a.o.).

Interaction with lexical aspect. The Atayal wal has been described as a past tense (Egerod 1965) and a perfective aspect (Huang 1993), but a close examination shows that wal doesn’t behave like either. The event in the scope of wal can be anterior to a future or past time in addition to the present (1-2), which falsifies the past-tense hypothesis. Wal also cannot be analyzed as a simple perfective aspect which places ET inside RT, because wal has a back-shifting effect, shown not only in (1) but also in the contrast in (2): Without wal, the matrix drinking event is consecutive to the subordinate coming event, but with wal, the former is anterior to the latter. This holds for every lexical class. The anteriority effect correlates with the fact that wal doesn’t move RT forward in narratives, another difference from perfective (Partee 1984, Kamp and Reyle 1993).

1. ... p-k-rima’=nya’ wal thk-un qu yapit la.
   FUT-STA-already=3S.ERG WAL cook-PV ABS flying.squirrel PRT
   ‘(By the time you visit Grandpa,) he will have (already) cooked the flying squirrel.’

2. m-wah=saku’ lga, nbun ni tali’ qu qwaw qasa la.
   AV-come=1S.ABS PRT.TOP drink.PV ERG Tali’ ABS wine that PRT
   ‘When I came, Tali’ drank the wine.’ (w/ wal: ‘When I came, Tali’ had drunk up the wine.’)

On the other hand, wal behaves as a perfective aspect: Wal ensures that the described event terminates or culminates. This holds for all the eventive classes. Continuing the event or canceling the completion of the event results in a contradiction (3-5). Stative verbs, which are ambiguous between homogeneous and inchoative readings in Atayal, are only interpreted as inchoative when marked with wal (6).

3. wal=saku’ m-aniq (#ga cyux=saku’ m-aniq).
   WAL=1S.ABS AV-eat (#TOP PROG.DIST=1S.ABS AV-eat)
   ‘I ate (#and I am still eating).’

4. wal kblayun ni watan sa kawas wayal (#ga ini’ tmasug na’).
   WAL make.PV ERG Watan LOC year last (#TOP NEG finish.AV still)
   ‘Watan built the house last year (#but didn’t finish it).’

5. wal m-huqil qu mlukuy=nya’ la (#ulung ini’ huqil).
   WAL AV-die ABS man=3S.GEN PRT fortunately NEG die.AV
   ‘Her husband (almost) died (#but fortunately he didn’t die).’

6. kt-an=maku’ tali’ sa kawas wayal lga, wal qthuy la.
   WAL AV-die ABS man=3S.GEN PRT fortunately NEG die.AV
   ‘When I saw Tali’ last year, he had become fat.’ / ‘When I saw Tali’ last year, he was fat.’

A restricted type of perfect. Considering the strong anteriority effect, I pursue a perfect analysis of wal. However, wal is only partially similar to the English-type perfect. Like the English perfect, wal bears certain relevance effects to the current context (indicated in brackets) (7); wal is infelicitous in a context taking about a past situation (8).

7. Context: You heard that Tali’ is asking people for some bamboo. You told him:
   wal=maku’ tt-un shera’ mpuw msyaw runa’ la.
   WAL=1S.ERG chop-PV yesterday ten rest bamboo PRT
   ‘I have chopped more than ten pieces of bamboo yesterday.’ [if you want some from me]

8. Context: Chatting with your son, you mentioned you chopped some bamboo yesterday.
   #wal=maku’ tt-un shera’ mpuw msyaw runa’ la.
   WAL=1S.ERG chop-PV yesterday ten rest bamboo PRT
   Intended for ‘I chopped more than ten pieces of bamboo yesterday.’

Also, wal is not accepted when the relevant result state is not obtained at RT (9). Current result state, however, doesn’t guarantee the use of wal: The progressive is preferred over wal in (10).
not detected morphologically. When in a present tense context, the non-final subinterval of the PTS

By Grice’s Quantity Maxim, some epistemic states are compatible with the past tense

The lack of universal perfects follows the perfective component. This analysis also predicts that wal cannot co-occur with the progressive; this is borne out:

This finding supports the proposal in Iatridou et al. (2001) and Pancheva (2003) that ambiguity in the perfect comes from the embedded aspectual composition, and the source of the universal perfect is (marked) unboundedness (also cf. Guekguezian 2015). I also discuss in this paper potential alternatives such as a (relatively) past perfective (e.g., Lin 2006) and an aspect ambiguous perfective.

Concluding remarks. This finding supports the proposal in Iatridou et al. (2001) and Pancheva (2003) that ambiguity in the perfect comes from the embedded aspectual composition, and the source of the universal perfect is (marked) unboundedness (also cf. Guekguezian 2015). I also discuss in this paper potential alternatives such as a (relatively) past perfective (e.g., Lin 2006) and an aspect ambiguous perfective (e.g., Condoravdi and Deo 2014), which I ultimately reject.