

Aspect Switching in Tzotzil (Mayan) Narratives

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Tzotzil is a tenseless language; the binary aspect opposition between completive and incompletive makes up the core of its verbal grammar. In narrative discourse, the incompletive aspect is sometimes used instead of the completive, denoting completed events in the past. The function of the incompletive aspect in Tzotzil seems generally very similar to the function of the historical present tense in European languages. Such aspect switching can be explained in terms of ‘grounding,’ or episode highlighting, as has been suggested in works on tense alternation in European narratives. A comparative analysis of Tzotzil and other Mayan languages shows that there are two opposite strategies in the distribution of aspect categories, as both completive and incompletive can play the role of the unmarked member of the opposition; nevertheless, the semantics of aspect switching remain the same.*

Keywords: narrative, aspect, aspect switching, incompletive, Tzotzil, Mayan languages

1. Introduction

The binary aspect opposition between completive and incompletive makes up the core of the verbal grammar of Tzotzil,¹ a Mayan language from Chiapas, Mexico. In narrative discourse, the incompletive aspect can have the opposite meaning of what it would mean in a non-narrative context, and replace the completive aspect. In this case, the incompletive is used in some relatively short sequences of clauses, preceded and followed by the completive. I call this phenomenon ASPECT SWITCHING based on the analogy of TENSE SWITCHING in European narratives.

The narrative as a particular type of linguistic performance has a long research history. As it is constructed according to special rules, a narrative’s grammar differs from what can be called ‘ordinary interactive discourse’ (Fleischman 1991). The usage of tense undergoes a significant and well-studied change in a narrative context (see, for instance, Wolfson 1978, Wolfson 1979, Schiffrin 1981). Fleischman (1991:78) introduces the notion of the NARRATIVE NORM, and attributes to it four major tenets: a) narratives refer to specific experiences that occurred in some past world, and are accordingly normally reported in past tenses; b) narratives contain both sequentially ordered events and non-sequential collateral material; c) the unmarked order of presentation in a narrative is one in which the order of narrative units (clauses) in a text parallels the order in which events are assumed to have occurred in the world modelled by that text; d) all narrations are informed by a particular mode of reporting information, which establishes the

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¹ Tzotzil is spoken in southern Mexico by approximately 250,000 people.

narrator's perspective on, relationship to, or involvement with the agents and events of the story. These are the general features shared by all narratives 'by definition'.

Fleischman's first tenet (supported by the three other tenets) conditions the special role of tense in narratives. In this respect, Tzotzil provides an interesting case. Being a tenseless language, like other languages of the Mayan family, it shows that aspect categories can play a similar role to tense categories. The fundamental difference between tense and aspect in interactive discourse proves to be unimportant in narrative discourse.

This paper considers the unusual usage of aspect in Tzotzil, conditioned by the narrative norm. Its unusualness consists in the fact that the incompletive aspect is used instead of the completive to describe completed events in the past, although the completive seems to display much more suitable semantics for describing these typically narrative events. The objective of this study is to analyze the reasons for such replacement of aspect categories, based on original texts. I embed Tzotzil data into the rich research tradition of European narratives and draw some parallels between Tzotzil and other languages of the Mayan language family.

1.1. Basic definitions

First of all, the term NARRATIVE should be defined. My starting point is the basic definition by Labov (1972:359), that the narrative is 'one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred'. Generally, I draw no distinction between different types of narrative: life-stories, personal experiences, everyday work instructions, folktales, etc. The latter type makes up an essential part of my data, however, due to my text selection. Aspect switching seems to be more common for folktales, although there are many factors besides the particular narrative genre. The majority of my examples are from the collection of Laughlin (1977),² who published original texts without any editing; other sources (Alarcón Estrada et al. 1997, Mondragón et al. 2002, Pérez López et al. 1994) provide very few data on aspect switching, which possibly has been caused by the editing process. I deal only with 'positive examples', acknowledging when the phenomenon under consideration does indeed take place in a particular text. I am unable to state confidently that the phenomenon is absent in any text. Therefore, no quantitative analysis is possible.

Hofling (1991:6), dealing with texts in Itzaj, another Mayan language, points out the following features of folktales that distinguish them from other kinds of narratives: 'Folktales typically begin with a standard formula, marking the genre as folktale and signaling a time reference in the distant past. They may have an elaborate thematic structure, with formally marked episodes and stanzas, and they typically end with a *précis*'. It is notable that he does not overtly mention aspect marking among these special features of folktales. I will not cover here the question about possible differences between folktales and other types of narratives, since I do not have sufficient data at the moment to justify any answer.³

1.2. Previous work

The historical present tense is the most well known linguistic phenomenon connected with narrative discourse. It is considered the marked member of temporal opposition (past vs.

² The narratives in this collection are from the Zinacantan dialect of Tzotzil (see Laughlin 1977:12–13 for more detailed sociolinguistic information).

³ England (2009:231), examining narratives in Mam (another Mayan language), points out that aspect switching is used in all kind of narratives, not just in folktales.

present): ‘I will assume tacit acceptance of the claim . . . that the unmarked tense of narrative language is the past’ (Fleischman 1991:79). In this context, the historical present may seem to be a mere stylistic mechanism that adds vividness to past events. This interpretation is found to be somewhat deficient, however. Fleischmann (1985:866) argues that ‘we would like to be able to identify more precisely the textual environments in which these presents occur – since they do not occur randomly – and to determine, if possible, why they occur where they do’. Why should a temporal opposition be required in a narrative, even though the events that constitute the narrative plot do not presuppose any temporal difference? Furthermore, what exactly is expressed by the marked members of this opposition? Different studies provide answers to these questions that are similar in some respects and very different in others.

Schiffrin (1981) suggests the idea of event SIGNIFICANCE. She claims that ‘the historical present is an internal evaluation device: it allows the narrator to present events as if they were occurring at that moment, so that the audience can hear for itself what happened, and can interpret for itself the significance of those events for the experience’ (ibid.:59). This conclusion is drawn based on data from English, but the analysis of Spanish oral narratives enables Silva-Corvalán (1983) to conclude the same. The concept of significance can be understood from a speaker’s position as ‘one of the grammatical resources which speakers use to represent their experiences in narrative’ (Schiffrin 1981:61). Apparently, it also can be understood without taking a speaker into account, but only from importance for plot development.

Fleischman (1985:852) proposes the notion of GROUNDING: the insertion of the present tense into past narration to differentiate background information from the foreground. This leads to a more precise definition of narrative: ‘it should be apparent that a narrative is not simply a linear sequence of events, ordered chronologically, but a configuration of events that has ‘texture’ or ‘focus’, an institution in which all events are not created equal’ (ibid.:854). Fludernik (1991:369) argues, however, that ‘the notion of foregrounding does not help to explain why something is foregrounded in the first place, and why other narrative clauses are backgrounded as a consequence’. She proposes ‘to consider the switch into the present tense as a signal for a narrative ‘turn’ of events’, that ‘pragmatically signals a speaker’s subjective involvement in the story’ (ibid.:374).

Fleischman (1985, 1991) takes a further important step, proceeding from tense to aspect in narrative discourse. She defines the unmarked tense of narrative more accurately as ‘perfective ‘event’ past’ (Fleischman 1991:79). Based on data from European languages, all studies in the area of narrative grammar are forced to deal more with tense than with aspect. In this respect, studies on languages with other tense-aspect systems are of great interest.

Carrying out a comparative research of indigenous literatures, O’Neill (2008) points out a possible functional explanation of ‘unexpected’ choice of tense or aspect categories in a traditional oral narrative. ‘While the mythic past is remote and distant in one sense, it is also curiously close and immediate in still another respect, because it laid the foundations for the present world and continues to animate every twitch and turn in the world around us’ (O’Neill 2008:179). In this respect, a tendency to frame pivotal scenes in myth and folklore within the imperfective aspect may express a strong continuity between the mythic past and today’s present, making an event ‘timeless valid’, as is often the case with mythic or even historical narratives.

The grammatical features of narratives in Mayan languages have not been yet adequately studied. There is no grammatical category of tense in Mayan languages, so the research methods and principles that have been elaborated for European languages are not directly applicable. However, some descriptive grammars provide some data about uncommon aspect choice in

narratives. The important works by England (2003, 2009) on the Mam language reveal an interesting phenomenon of inverse aspect marking. A narrative context in Mam is itself regarded as marked, and the unmarked element becomes the marked one (below I will discuss the narrative marking in Mam in comparison to Tzotzil in more detail). The paper by Maxwell (1987) on some grammatical features of Chuj narratives should also be noted. Interestingly, the presence of narrative-conditioned switches in aspect marking is also noticed in hieroglyphic Mayan, the language of ancient inscriptions (Houston 1997).

2. Tzotzil data

This section presents the Tzotzil data concerning the aspect system in general and aspect switching in narrative. The subsection 2.1 describes the morphology of Tzotzil aspects, and the next subsection the semantics. I argue that the meanings of the completive and incompletive are not strictly aspectual but also include some temporal and modal semantic components. The subsection 2.3 presents the phenomenon of aspect switching, which will be analyzed in more detail in section 3.

2.1. Tzotzil aspect system

The grammatical aspect system of Tzotzil is characterized by the binary opposition between completive and incompletive. Really, there are two other aspect categories in Tzotzil: perfect and prospective. However, these are expressed by participles, not by finite verb forms, so the scope of their uses is syntactically restricted. Every finite verb form in Tzotzil must be marked only by completive or incompletive.

The terms COMPLETIVE and INCOMPLETIVE are commonly used in the linguistic tradition of descriptive works on Mayan languages, although typologists would prefer the terms PERFECTIVE and IMPERFECTIVE, respectively. England (2009:213) mentions that ‘the terms completive and incompletive are roughly equivalent to perfective and imperfective’. In this paper, I prefer to maintain the established Mayan tradition and label these categories completive and incompletive.

The aspect system of Tzotzil is relatively poor in comparison with some other Mayan languages, where aspect systems are extended by adding other aspectual categories (progressive, for instance) as well as by involving other semantic domains such as tense, temporal distance and mood. The resulting aspect-mood-tense systems include – besides completive and incompletive – categories of potential (Mam, Chuj), optative (some K’ichean languages), obligative (Yukatekan languages), and others. In spite of reduction, the Tzotzil aspect system is characterized by significant allomorphic variation. Both completive and incompletive can be expressed by different morphemes. These morphemes have the same meaning, and the choice is generally guided by morphological and stylistic reasons.

The completive can be expressed by the prepositional particle *la(j)*, by the prefixes *l-* or *i-*, and also by the absence of any aspectual marker. The particle *la(j)* seems to be more common for northeastern Tzotzil dialects in areas near Tzeltal, where the completive for transitive verbs⁴ is marked by the preverbal particle *la*⁵ (Polian 2013:153). The prefixes *l-* or *i-* are distributed according to the personal absolutive marker: the former is used together with prefixes of the first and second person while the latter is used with zero affix of the third person (Haviland 1981:113). This prefix can be omitted without any semantic change; then the finite verb form in the completive aspect is represented by a bare verb stem.

⁴ The completive for intransitive verbs has no overt morphological marker.

⁵ This particle descends from the verb *laj* ‘to finish’.

The incomplete markers are the prefix *x-*, the prefix *ch-*, and the combination of the particle *ta* with the prefix *x-*. The latter combination of markers is apparently the old diachronic alternative to the prefix *ch-* (Haviland 1981:109).⁶ In the modern language, all these three markers seem to be synonymic. According to native speakers, the usage of the particle *ta* is a distinctive feature of the literary style.

2.2. *Semantics of completive/incompletive*

This subsection briefly considers the semantics of the completive and incomplete beyond narrative contexts. Generally speaking, the completive aspect denotes an action that is terminated with respect to some point of reference. By default, the point of reference concurs with the moment of speech, so the completive normally refers to the past tense 1.⁷

- (1) **i-k'ot** **li** **pukuj=e**
 COM-come DEF devil=ENCL⁸
 'The devil came.'

This feature makes the completive 'tense-dependent'. It cannot be used to denote an action in the future, even if completed. Naturally, an action that is terminated but belongs to the future is marked by the incomplete aspect in Tzotzil in example 2.

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

This incompatibility of the Tzotzil completive with future actions seems to be highly important. It clears up the complex semantic nature of the completive and incomplete: these categories denote 'tense-dependent aspect'. This is another reason why I prefer not to label them as perfective and imperfective, which are purely aspect categories and do not imply any temporal meaning; cf. the definition by Comrie (1976:16): 'perfectivity indicates the view of a situation as a single whole, without distinction of the various separate phases that make up that situation; while the imperfective pays essential attention to the internal structure of the situation'.

The point of reference can be sometimes removed to the past. Firstly, it occurs in subordinate clauses of condition, where the point of reference is removed automatically from the moment of speech to the moment of the action described in the main clause in 3.

- (3) **mi** **I-a-at'isaj=e** **ch-i-tsak-at-otik**
 if COM-2ABS-sneeze=ENCL INC-1ABS-catch-PASS-PL.INCL
 'If you sneeze we would be caught.'

⁶ Both incomplete prefixes are normally left out immediately before ergative prefixes of the first and third person.

⁷ All examples in subsection 2.2 were obtained by elicitation during my fieldwork on Tzotzil. We can therefore be sure that these examples were not affected by narrative context.

⁸ The following abbreviations are used in glossing: ABS = absolutive, AGN = agentive, APPL = applicative, COM = completive, DEF = definite article, DIR = directional, EMPH = emphasis, ENCL = enclitic, ERG = ergative, EXIST = existential predicate, FOC = focus, IMP = imperative, INC = incomplete, INCL = inclusive, IRR = irrealis, LOC = locative, NEG = negation, NMLZ = nominalization, PASS = passive, PAST = past tense adverb, PL = plural, POSS = possessive, PREP = preposition, QUOT = quotative, RN = relational noun, SG = singular.

Another means to remove the point of reference is lexical: the sequence of particles *to* ‘yet/still’ and *ox* ‘then (not now)’. These particles mean the point of temporal reference coincides with the moment of the action in the past, authorizing the incompleted to denote an action that was in progress in the past but is terminated at the moment of speech in 4.

- (4) volje **ch**-i-ak’otaj-otik to ox s-junul k’ak’al
 yesterday **INC-1ABS-dance-PL.INCL** still PAST 3POSS-whole day
 ‘Yesterday we were dancing all day long.’

Without these particles, it is necessary to use the completive aspect: cf. 4 and 5.

- (5) volje **I**-i-ak’otaj-otik s-junul k’ak’al
 yesterday **COM-1ABS-dance-PL.INCL** 3POSS-whole day
 ‘Yesterday we were dancing all day long.’

Therefore, what the completive and incompleted in Tzotzil really denote is not an ABSOLUTE TENSE, rather a RELATIVE TENSE,⁹ where the ‘reference point for location of a situation is some point in time given by the context, not necessarily the present moment’ (Comrie 1985:56). In the case of the incompleted, the relative future tense can also be considered from the standpoint of irreal modality: since the action belongs to the future, it is irreal, because it does not exist yet in the real world.

2.3. Unexpected choice of aspect

As shown in the previous subsection, the completive aspect perfectly fits the function of unmarked narrative category, since it denotes a completed action in the past. However, unexpected aspect marking sometimes occurs in the narrative. For example, in 6 there are two clauses from a narrated story that have a clear completive meaning, but both finite verb forms occur in the incompleted aspect.

- (6) **ta** la s-butan lok’el x-chak ta ventana ti ants=e
INC QUOT 3ERG-put DIR(out) 3POSS-ass PREP window DEF woman=ENCL
 ta x-xokon s-vay-eb
 PREP 3POSS-side 3POSS-sleep-LOC

‘The wife stuck her ass out the window, next to her bed.’

- ta** la s-lek’ tal ti baka
INC QUOT 3ERG-lick DIR(here) DEF cow
 ‘The cow licked it.’ (Laughlin 1977:59)

Within a narrative text, the incompleted normally occurs concurrently with the completive, which is much more frequent. There is no narrative in my corpus that would consist of incompleted clauses only. The general pattern is that the main text is in the completive, with

⁹ It should be emphasized that the Mayan completive and incompleted are not tense categories; this paper stresses only that aspect meaning is not the sole meaning denoted by these categories.

some rare incomplete inclusions. For example, in 7 there is a fragment from the same story told in (6), separated through direct speech. All clauses in 7 are marked by the completive.

- (7) **i-s-tam** la lok'el jun s-machita jlikel
COM-3ERG-grasp QUOT DIR(out) one 3POSS-machete quickly
i-s-p'as-be s-nuk' ti baka=e
COM-3ERG-cut-APPL 3POSS-neck DEF cow=ENCL
 'He picked up his machete, went out and quickly cut off the cow's head.'

i-cham ti povre baka
COM-die DEF poor cow
 'The poor cow died.' (Laughlin 1977:59)

The narrative text can of course have no fragments marked by the incomplete at all. However, if some are present, these normally alternate with completive marked fragments. Therefore, what one should analyze is not the usage of the incomplete aspect in Tzotzil narratives, but rather aspect switching from the completive to the incomplete and back. A similar idea in respect to tense switching (from past tenses to the historical present and back) in English narratives was proposed by Wolfson (1979). A universal rule about occurrence of incomplete markers instead of completive ones in narrative contexts can hardly be drawn; however, there are some more or less clear tendencies that will be discussed in the next section.

3. Analysis

Analysis of aspect marking in original Tzotzil stories reveals a tendency for clauses with the same aspect marking to be placed together. The subsection 3.1 deals with this feature, which I call CLUSTERIZATION, following the terminology of Schiffrin (1981). The subsection 3.2 shows that narrative fragments highlighted by aspect switching correspond to some extent with some episodes of the story. It is interesting to ask why some episodes and not others tend to be highlighted by a speaker. There are two main strategies (backgrounding and foregrounding) that seem to be operating at the same time, despite being in opposition.

3.1. Clusterization

Clauses marked by the incomplete aspect tend to be placed next to one another rather than to be scattered all over the text. A fragment of incomplete marking consisting of three consecutive clauses bordered by the completive marked fragments is presented in 8.

- (8) **bweno,** o la jun vinik **i-cham** la y-ajnil
 well EXISTQUOT one man **COM-die** QUOT 3POSS-wife
 'There was a man whose wife died.'
- bats'i** **ch-ok'** la ta jmek ti vinik=e
 really INC-cry QUOT PREP much DEF man=ENCL
 'The man cried and cried.'

ch-k'ot la ta mukenal
 INC-come QUOT PREP graveyard
 'He went to the graveyard.'

ch-k'ot la ok'-uk
 INC-come QUOT cry-IRR
 'He went to weep.'

i-tal la jun vinik
 COM-arrive QUOT one man
 'A man appeared.' (Laughlin 1977:28)

Direct speech can also act as the cluster's border. In 9, there are three clauses with incompletive marking between two direct speech fragments.

(9) **bat-an** che'e xi la
 leave-IMP then 3ERG.COM.say QUOT
 "Go on, then" – he said.'

ta x-kaji ta ka' ti Pegro=e
 INC INC-mount PREP horse DEF Peter=ENCL
 'Peter mounted the horse.'

ta s-paj-be akuxa ti ka'=e
 INC 3ERG-fix-APPL needle DEF horse=ENCL
 'He pricked the horse with a needle.'

ta x-va'i ti ka'=e
 INC INC-get_up DEF horse=ENCL
 'The horse reared.'

a mu x-i-s-nop l-a-ka'=e
 oh NEG INC-1ABS-3ERG-understand DEF-2POSS-horse=ENCL
 "Oh, your horse isn't used to me." (Laughlin 1977:88)

Schiffrin (1981:51) states that 'there is a tendency for verbs in the same tense to cluster together', and the Tzotzil data corroborates this idea. Tzotzil shows the same tendency concerning verbal aspect instead of tense.

3.2. Episode highlighting

In 8, the incompletive aspect marks a sequence of clauses that describes a short episode at the beginning of the story. This episode is rather insignificant in relation to the full story, serving as an indication of the initial state of affairs in the 'story world'. In 9, such an episode occurs in the main body of the story, but it is also rather insignificant, describing a 'transitional moment' from one key scene to another. The contrary strategy of using incompletive marking is presented in 10.

(10) mu to ox la s-na' mi ja' s-malal
 NEG still PAST QUOT 3ERG-know if EMPH 3POSS-husband
 'She hadn't known that it was her husband.'

ta la s-maj ech'el
 INC QUOT 3ERG-beat DIR(outside)
 'She beat him off.'

ta la s-k'as-be y-akan ta te'
 INC QUOT 3ERG-break-APPL 3POSS-leg PREP stick
 'She broke his legs with a stick.'

ta la x-jatav ta jol na
 INC QUOT INC-escape PREP head house
 'He fled to the roof.'

y-o'on-uk la och-uk ta y-ut na pero
 3POSS-heart-IRR QUOT enter-IRR PREP 3POSS-RN(inside) house but

mu xa k'u x-cha'le
 NEG already what INC-do

'He wanted to go inside, but there was nothing he could do now.'

te i-cham
 there COM-die
 'There he died.' (Laughlin 1977:51)

Here, the incompletive aspect marks the denouement of the story. The upshot (the last sentence), on the contrary, is marked by the completive. The scene where the wife resorts to violence against her husband is thus clearly separated from the episode of his death. Example 10 leads us to a hypothesis about interdependence between aspect switching and structural components of the story, such as orientation, evaluation, resolution, coda, etc. (see Labov & Waletzky 1967; Labov 1972). However, there is no regular pattern: a highlighted episode often corresponds only to a part of a structural component but can also correspond, conversely, to several structural components together. The sentence 11 presents perhaps the sole reliable example from my corpus of Tzotzil narratives of the aspectually highlighted fragment corresponding to a structural component.

(11) ja' la jech ta s-kolta-ik ti j-ch'ul tot-ik=e
 EMPH QUOT so INC 3ERG-help-PL DEF 1POSS-holy father-PL.INCL=ENCL
 'So they helped Our Holy Father (i.e., the Sun).' (Pérez López et al. 1994:126)

This incompletive marked clause functions as a coda, indicating the end of the narrative and signaling the exit from the narrative discourse.

The switch of aspect marking is therefore generally used to indicate a whole episode in the narrative plot, but not necessarily the whole structural component of the story. The switch from the completive to incompletive marks the initial boundary, since the switch back from the

incomplete to the completive marks the end boundary. In other words, aspect switching in Tzotzil, like tense switching in European languages, ‘makes a scene’ (Schiffrin 1981:51); it highlights one particular episode against a background made up of other episodes. We should then ask what peculiarity of an episode is really coded by the substitution of the incomplete aspect for the completive one, if not the difference between structural components.

The notions of grounding and an episode’s significance (see section 1.2) can be used to elaborate a satisfactory answer. In essence, these two concepts imply the same. The contrast between background and foreground information reflects the difference between episodes in terms of their importance for the narrative plot. It is apparent that a less significant episode tends to be placed on a background, while a more significant one comes to the foreground. This does not resolve the problem of semantic explanation of different aspect marking, however. As we have seen in 8, the incomplete aspect occurs in the typical background context – the description of the preliminary state of affairs where the story unfolds. A similar example is presented in 12.

(12) o la jun vinik x-chi’uk jun ants ach’ j-nupun-el
 EXISTQUOT one man 3POSS-RN(with) one woman new AGN-marry-NMLZ
 ‘There was a man and a woman, newlyweds.’

a ti vinik=e ta x-lok’ ech’el ta x-bat ta
 FOC DEF man=ENCL INC INC-go_out DIR(outside) INC INC-leave INC

x-xanav
 INC-walk

‘The husband goes out; he leaves; he travels.’

a ti ants=e jun y-o’on ta x-kom yilel ta
 FOC DEF woman=ENCL one 3POSS-heartINC INC-remain seemingly PREP

ora pero oy yan y-ajmul
 time but EXIST another 3POSS-lover

‘The wife stays at home happily (lit. ‘she has one heart / her heart is one’), it seems, but she has a lover.’ (Laughlin 1977:67–68)

The beginning of the story 12 is even translated into English using the historical present tense. This fragment is not of much importance for the narrative plot, since it specifies only the context in which the plot will be developed. The rest of the story is narrated in the completive aspect, and this makes a clear distinction between the background and the main plot.

However, in 10, as we have already seen, the opposite is true. The incomplete marks the episode that belongs to the foreground information without any doubt, since it describes the denouement of the story. At the moment, I cannot suggest any satisfactory criterion for defining the ‘relative weight’ of an episode that could be used for estimating its potential suitability to be aspectually emphasized. It also seems unclear when a speaker may want to mark background and insignificant episodes and when foreground important ones. This decision seems to be down to the speaker’s choice. There is no doubt, however, that these two opposite strategies of aspect switching are present at the same time.

3.3. Further considerations

It seems important to mention that the opposition between marked and unmarked narrative fragments, as well as the opposition between completive and incompletive aspects, is necessarily binary. There are no other aspectual categories in Tzotzil, and there are no means to express ‘half-marked’ or ‘partly-marked’ fragments of narration. This seems very natural for Tzotzil, with its binary aspect system (see section 2.1), but is true also in European languages that have a ramified tense-aspect system, and consequently dispose of many possible ways to mark such intermediate cases. I will return to this problem in section 4.

There are some rare cases in Tzotzil when aspect switches very often. In 13, four clauses are presented; two of these are marked by the completive and another two by the incompletive, and the aspect categories alternate.

(13) **i-ech'** **la** **tal** **ta** **Soktom**
 COM-pass QUOT DIR(here) PREP Chiapa
 ‘They left from Chiapa.’

y-u'un **x-tal** **y-ak'-ik** **k'ok'**
 3POSS-RN(cause) INC-arrive 3ERG-give-PL fire
 ‘They came to wage war (lit. ‘...to give a fire’).’

i-mak-e **la** **ta** **be** **y-u'un** **epal pulatu** **la** **ta**
 COM-close-PASS QUOT PREP road 3POSS-RN(cause) many bowl QUOT INC
x-ak'otaj
 INC-dance

‘They were stopped on the way, because there were many bowls dancing.’

ch-laj **vok'-uk** **ta** **y-ak'ol** **Soktom**
 INC-end break-IRR PREP 3POSS-RN(above) Chiapa
 ‘They all broke above Chiapa.’ (Laughlin 1977:78)

At first sight, this example contradicts the postulate about clusterization of marked and unmarked alternatives. However, in all examples given above, the verb forms in the same aspect are grouped together and do not alternate. I can suggest two possible explanations for such alternation in this specific context. Firstly, each clause in 13 may be seen as a small episode in itself. Naturally, we are dealing with a row of homogeneous (mainly, motion) events: pass, come, stop, break. Each of these events in isolation presents a completely ‘self-sufficient’ episode in this sequence. The second hypothesis is based on the homogeneity of those events. Aspect switching can be used here in order to differentiate one event from another and not lose the audience’s attention. In other words, in this particular fragment, aspect switching may seem to be more a rhetorical device.

Finally, it should be also noted that there are of course narratives that are more episodic in nature and ones that are less so. Fleischman (1985:865–66) claims that the mediaeval Old French narratives that she studied ‘tend to be episodic: structurally, each episode constitutes a minimal story in itself’. This also seems to hold true for the Tzotzil folktales that form the essential part of my data. It remains unclear whether the frequentness and/or semantics of aspect switching can depend on the degree of ‘episodicity’ of the narrative.

4. Cross-language variation

In the previous section, I presented the data from Tzotzil and came to the conclusion that there are two strategies of using aspect switching at the same time. One presupposes the coding of background information by the incompletive aspect, while the other presupposes the same for foreground information. The distribution of these strategies remains unclear. In this section, I will consider analogous systems of tense/aspect switching in narratives from European and Mayan languages that can throw more light on the Tzotzil system.

4.1. *Historical present tense*

The system of narrative aspect marking in Tzotzil is very similar to the well-studied systems of tense marking in European languages. The narrative mode itself conditions the past tense in languages that grammatically mark temporal distinctions, and in the same way, it normally conditions the perfective aspect in tenseless languages that grammatically mark only aspectual distinctions. In this respect, the aspectual system of Tzotzil is even more ‘convenient’ for such narrative use. As shown in section 2.1, the completive aspect in Tzotzil combines the aspectual meaning of the perfective and the temporal meaning of the past tense, resulting in what Fleischman (1991:79) calls a ‘perfective ‘event’ past’. These categories, the past tense and the completive aspect, are ‘natural’ for narrative, so they become unmarked members, set off against their grammatical ‘opponents’: the present tense and the incompletive aspect, respectively. Naturally, the usage of the incompletive aspect in Tzotzil is very similar to the usage of the historical present tense (see Wolfson 1978, 1979; Schiffrin 1981; Silva-Corvalan 1983). As shown in section 3, the same principles of grounding, vividness, event significance, and narrative turn can be applied to describe the semantics of aspect switching in Tzotzil as well as the semantics of tense switching in European narratives.

Although the semantics of tense and aspect switching in narratives seem to be similar to a certain extent, this is slightly surprising. The primary semantics of tense and aspect categories, which are significantly different in ordinary conversational discourse, seem unimportant in a narrative context. What is of more importance is that these are the main grammatical categories of the predicates that build a basic grammatical opposition. Since all narrative events necessarily have predetermined aspect and temporal properties (see section 1), the presence of those oppositions permit the use of tense or aspect switching as a special narrative device. The Tzotzil data corroborates Wolfson’s idea that the historical present in itself has no significance; ‘rather, it is the switching between conversational historical present and the past tenses which is the relevant feature’ (Wolfson 1979:168). Similarly, the Tzotzil incompletive and its meaning beyond the narrative context also have no significance; what is significant is the possibility of switching.

On the other hand, this similarity between Tzotzil (and Mayan in general) aspect and European tense can serve as an argument to consider the categories of completive and incompletive as jointly aspectual and temporal (and, possibly, also modal), rather than strictly aspectual (see section 2.2). The Mayan languages are therefore not as tenseless as commonly accepted.

4.2. *Other Mayan languages*

In Mayan languages, aspect marking in the narrative context has been thoroughly studied only in the language Mam by England (2003, 2009). This language belongs to the Mamean sub-

branch and is fairly remote from Tzotzil.¹⁰ The distribution of aspect categories in Mam narratives is not similar to that in Tzotzil. In Mam, the completive aspect is used as a marked narrative category; the incompletive aspect, on the contrary, is an unmarked category: ‘in general most clauses in narratives that are marked for aspect use the incompletive marker’ (England 2009:216). England underlines that it is not ‘a stylistic device used for vividness’ (ibid.). So, the situation is quite the opposite to that in Tzotzil. This strategy in Mam can be explained by observing that the narrative mode in Mam is itself marked. Thus, ‘in a context that is itself marked, the normal markedness values of an opposition may be reversed’ (Fleischman 1991:77). The aspect switching in Mam therefore amounts to switching from the incompletive to the completive and back again, unlike in Tzotzil, where the switching is from the completive to the incompletive and back again. It is noteworthy, however, that in two different languages of the Mayan family (although not closely connected) two opposite strategies of narrative aspect marking are present.

According to Houston (1997), the pattern of aspect usage in Classic Maya¹¹ narratives was the same as in modern Mam. Houston claims the incompletive aspect was ‘apparently an unmarked ‘default’ in Classic texts’ (1997:299). He explains this feature through the idea of vividness: ‘Maya texts employ shifts in aspect and deixis to grip the listener, heighten drama, and authenticate narrative through the bridging of present with past story worlds’ (ibid.:301). The very limited data on hieroglyphic narratives make it hard to draw any conclusion about the possible reasons for such an aspect choice.

Maxwell (1987), writing about completive/incompletive aspect switching in Chuj (a Mayan language of the Q’anjob’alan branch), detects a probable dependence between aspect switching and episode boundaries. But she does not suggest any strict rule to describe satisfactorily when aspect switching is used and when it is not:

‘Episodes of the narrative need not maintain a single tense/aspect, nor even remain within a single set. However, each episode is set off by a switch between the two sets. Episode ending switches usually run from an incompletive to a completive clause. The episode boundary, then, is marked by the switch to completive. The subsequent episode may continue in completive or return to incompletive, or mix the two. Since tense/aspect switches also occur episode internally, shifts are not sufficient cues to episode endings’ (Maxwell 1987:490).

Other languages of the Mayan family have not been sufficiently investigated in relation to aspect switching provoked by narrative context. However, there is some interesting evidence from descriptive grammars. It seems that some languages have the same distribution of aspect categories as Mam, and other languages the same distribution as Tzotzil. For example, in the grammar of Tzutujil (Dayley 1985:80–81) and in that of Jacalteco (Craig 1977:60), aspect uses in narrative are mentioned: the incompletive seems to be a common means to replace the completive, in most cases describing the ‘narrative present’. In Sakapultek (Mó Isém 2006:720), the point events of the narrative plot are marked by the completive aspect, but there are still some other events marked by the incompletive. Mó Isém (2006) proposes the hypothesis that this is background information (‘información de fondo’) that is marked by the incompletive. Can Pixabaj (2006:650–51) evidences the opposite case in Uspantek, where the narrative plot is

¹⁰ For the classification of the Mayan languages see (Campbell & Kaufman 1985).

¹¹ Classic Maya is the written language of Mayan hieroglyphic inscriptions. It belongs to the Cholan sub-branch of the Cholan-Tzeltalan branch.

marked by the incomplete aspect, with some rare inclusions of the complete. The high preference for complete marking against the incomplete in Sakapultek is quite similar to the case of Tzotzil described in this paper. On the contrary, the opposite distribution of the complete and incomplete markers in Uspantek narratives seems to be similar to the case of Mam. Interestingly, both Sakapultek and Uspantek are K'ichean languages and genetically distant from both Tzotzil and Mam. However, there is not enough information to draw any conclusion; at the moment it is only possible to declare that the phenomenon of aspect switching in the narrative context is present in all languages mentioned above.

Fludernik (1991:367) claims that 'there is a common, general pattern of episodic narrative, at least for Indo-European languages', and that 'the historical present tense occurs at precisely specified points within this pattern in all these languages'. As shown in this subsection, the Mayan languages also show this pattern to an extent, except that the role of the European historical present tense can be played by the complete aspect in some Mayan languages and by the incomplete aspect in others. Despite having a very similar pattern of episodic narrative, the Mayan languages distinguish themselves in the distribution of morphological markers to code these two elements of the pattern. Two contrary strategies are used; depending on the concrete language, both the complete and the incomplete can act as unmarked and as marked members of the opposition.

5. Conclusion

The semantics of aspect switching in Tzotzil are rather like the semantics of tense switching in European languages. There are many ways to analyze the reasons why a particular narrative episode needs to be marked by tense/aspect switching. Many researchers have tried to find some common patterns, describing them in terms of vividness, evaluation, grounding, plot (as opposed to off-plot), etc. All these notions can also be applied to Tzotzil, but no one idea seems to be absolutely satisfactory.

The comparison between Tzotzil and other Mayan languages makes it clear that the distribution of aspect categories is reversed in some languages (at least, in Mam): the role of the unmarked narrative aspect (the complete in Tzotzil) can be played by the incomplete aspect, and the role of the marked one (the incomplete in Tzotzil) by the complete aspect. Nevertheless, this does not affect the semantics of aspect switching, which seem to remain very similar.

In Tzotzil, the use of the incomplete aspect instead of the complete in narratives may be considered the third way to move the point of temporal reference, in addition to subordinated conditional clauses and special adverbs (see section 2.2). In this case, the relocation of the point of reference to the past tense (which equates to the narrative present) has no specific grammatical marker. It is conditioned pragmatically by the narrative mode itself: by the situation of storytelling.

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