

This paper deals with two synthetic past tenses in the Hill Mari language, which have been previously called “1st past” and “2nd past” (Pengitov 1955, Alhoniemi 1993), or “witnessed” vs. “unwitnessed past” (among many others, Savatkova 2002). The latter term (Russian *očevidnos’ t’*) hints that the semantic opposition between the two tenses is somehow based on evidentiality, as many scholars have put it before (a good review can be found in Serebrennikov

The aim of this paper is to show that, at least for Hill Mari, the opposition between these two tenses has nothing to deal with evidentiality and to propose instead an analysis that would predict their distribution. Hereafter we refer to the “1st past” as **Aorist** and to the “2nd Past” as **Perfect**. Our data comes from our own fieldwork in the villages of Mikryakovo and Sosnovoye (Gornomariysky region, Russia) in 2016 and 2017 and includes both elicited sentences and evidence from spontaneous discourse we have collected and transcribed there.

The both tenses can be used in contexts of both direct (1) and indirect evidence of various kinds — for example, hearsay (2) or inferential (3):

- (1) *män’* *už-ân-am,* *što* *vas’a* *ke-n* ^(ok) *ke-š*
I see-PRF-1SG that V. go-PRF[3SG] go-AOR[3SG]
‘I saw that Vasya has left.’
- (2) *pop-a-t,* *što vas’a* *ke-n* ^(ok) *ke-š*
say-NPST-3PL that V. go-PRF[3SG] go-AOR[3SG]
‘They say that Vasya has left.’
- (3) *kišä-žä* *eče* *sveza=ok,* *tädä toko=vele ert-äš* ^(ok) *ert-en* *saj*
trace-POSS.3SG still fresh-EMPH this just=only pass-AOR[3SG]pass-PRF[3SG] perhaps
‘The footprints is fresh, he must have just passed.’

We claim that the Perfect is just a default past tense not having any aspectual or whichever restrictions; as for Aorist, its usage is restricted to but a few contexts. First of all, unlike Perfect, Aorist cannot have habitual or generic reference, being only used to denote episodic situations:

- (4) *mä pervi šim momoca-š pâr-en-nä / *pâr-äš-na*
we previously black sauna-ILL enter-PRF-1PL enter-AOR-1PL
‘We used to go to a smoke sauna in earlier days.’

Futhermore, in *plan de discourse*, that is, in non-narrative context, Aorist only denotes events that have just occurred, i. e. refers to immediate past. Thus, it cannot combine with adverbials which set a point in the distant past, e. g. “ten years ago”:

- (5) *papi lu i pervi kol-en / # kol-äš*
granny 10 year previously die-PRF[3SG] die-AOR[3SG]
‘{When did the granny die? — }The granny died ten years ago.’

However, in narrative contexts, this restriction is withdrawn. Beginning from the second clause of a narrative, Aorist can be used to refer to distant past, e.g. describing the deeds of the Tsar Peter I:

- (6) *a tädä otkazâvaj-alt-ân / otkazâvaj-alt-äš*
a this refuse-DETR-PRF[3SG] refuse-DETR-AOR[3SG]
‘{Once Sweden parleys came to the Tsar Peter and offered peace,} but he refused.’

Thus, there are two main cases in which Aorist is used: immediate past contexts and narrative progression. In our talk, we are going to propose a unified semantics for Aorist based on the interaction of the topic time and the *perspective time* (PT), a notion introduced by Kamp & Reyle (1993). In short, we claim that the Aorist has a restriction on the adjacency of the perspective time and topic time: if the perspective time coincides with the time of utterance, this restriction

results in the “immediate past” flavour, but if the PT is back (“the time of narrative”), the event just takes place *immediately after* another event, as it always happens in the narrative progression.

Aorist is said to represent situations somehow more “fresh” and “vivid”, acting much like *praesens historicum* forms in Mari and many other languages. Thus, it is in this sense that the traditional terms *očevidnos't'* and *neočevidnos't'* should be interpreted.

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