

Andras Balint

CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN THE TIME
CONCEPTS OF NEW GUINEAN SPEAKERS

A Linguistic View

Introduction

The previous speaker, Mr. John R. Prince, has devoted considerable time and effort to analysing the learning difficulties of indigenous speakers and has written several articles on the subject.

It would be presumptuous of me to oppose Mr. Prince's arguments on the theoretical level since I am a newcomer to the scene, and a mere beginner in Melanesian linguistics. Nor do I feel that I have to contradict him on the subject of learning problems. Having taught native speakers of New Guinean languages a course in Approaches to Grammatical Analysis, I myself have found unexpected 'noise' in the communication channel between sender and receiver. I attribute this, however, to the enormous difference between their cultural background and mine, rather than to any inherent deficiency in the time-indicating system in their respective languages.

The Universal Nature of Time-Indication in Sentences

In an earlier article on the same subject the previous speaker referred to a discussion he had had in June 1966 with field workers of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in the course of which he was told that "... in the Kiriwina-Woodlark-Normanby group of languages there is no indication in the verb of past, present or future. The verb aspects relate to reality or unreality".¹

While not disputing the validity of these statements, I must point out that I have demonstrated in an article published in the English Teaching Forum that time may be indicated in sentences by

1. J.R. Prince, "Conclusions from Discussions with S.I.L. on Time Concepts"
n.d., mimeographed, p.1.

other means than verbs and time expressions.² I furthermore hold to the view that "time-indication in sentences is a syntactic-semantic universal ... in other words, if formal signs indicate that the syntactic condition - 'sentenceness' - is present, the semantic condition - time-indication - must co-occur".³

I therefore suggest that we should look for such signs in the languages of New Guinean speakers who seem to have problems with the English linguistic expression of time concepts. If we can adequately describe the time-indicating system used by the users of these languages, we will be able to relate their system to our space-time matrix and substantially reduce the admittedly severe cultural shock experienced by individuals coming from an orally based cultural tradition with its inevitable limitations of spatial and temporal span to the text-based, highly complex space-time frame of Western culture.

The Romantic Fallacy of Present-Oriented 'Natives'

As I wanted to collect more data to substantiate my hypothesis on the universality of time-indication in sentences, I have embarked on the study of a Melanesian language, the language spoken by the Mekeo people.

Approximately five thousand Mekeo speakers live in less than twenty villages on the coastal plain in Papua, about sixty miles to the west of Port Moresby. According to Father Hubert van der Weerde, a member of the Sacred Heart Mission on Yule Island, who had lived in Veipa for twenty years, there are five dialects in Mekeo. My Mekeo informants came from the village of Veipa (Veifa'a) whose inhabitants are speakers of the Pioufa dialect, the dialect learnt by the S.H.M. fathers who had established a station in that village.

2. Andras Balint, "Time Indication and Sentences in Hungarian and English", English Teaching Forum, Vol.D, No.2, March-April 1966.
3. Andras Balint, "Time Indication in English: An Unrestricted Syntactic-Semantic Universal", English Teaching Forum, Vol.D, No.5, Sept.-Oct. 1966, p.7.

In learning the Mekeo language, I have found that without serious study of the linguistic expression of past, present and future in these cultures one may easily fall into the romantic fallacy of regarding indigenes as happy-go-lucky, present-oriented 'natives' who have no concept of future.

One of my Mekeo informants told me that he had to put an end to his bigamous marital life because of a painful back. "How come?", I asked him. "Well, my two wives slept on either side of me, according to Mekeo custom. Whenever I tried to turn towards one, the other would pull me back or kick up a row that would wake up the whole village. All I could do was to stay on my back night after night. I could not for the life of me explain to them that, say, on Saturday I will turn to wife No.1 and the next day, Sunday, it will be the other wife's turn".

You can imagine how I brightened up. I have just discovered a language without future time indication! It did not take me long, however, to find out that my Mekeo friend's predicament was due to a condition of these women, which in Hungarian is expressed in the proverb: long hair, short brains.¹

The Mekeo Time System

Far from being present-oriented, the Mekeos have neatly divided their days into pau 'today', favoko 'tomorrow', engani 'the day after tomorrow', engae engani 'the day after the day after tomorrow', fai 'yesterday', fa'e 'the day before yesterday', and enga pa eine 'the day before the day before yesterday'.

When the missionaries came and the Mekeos learned about the delights of the European weekend sans work, they rapidly adjusted their culture to the new conditions by first adding a'ule 'Saturday'

1. Hosszú haj, rövid ész.

(from a'ule 'bell') to their days because the bells in the mission chapel were sounded on Saturday afternoons. Aule was followed by iwi 'Sunday' (from iwi 'church' from iwi 'singing').

While the English names for the five weekdays of the week were absorbed into the Mekeo lexicon following appropriate phonetic changes (e.g. pa'laide for 'Friday'), the new seven-day week became iwi after the Mekeo name given to Sunday because it marked the beginning of a new week.

Mekeos now call the current week pau iwinai 'today week', last week is munia iwinai 'behind week', next week has become angoa iwinai 'before week', the week after next is angoa iwina angoaisai 'before week before us', and the week before last munia iwina muniaisai 'behind week behind us'.

Evidently, just as in English 'before' and 'after' is used for both space and time, the Mekeos have also extended spatial terms to indicate time. Whatever is before them is to be encountered at a future (later) time, whatever is behind them has already been met with. They walk away from the past towards the future. They seem to me more logical in that than the English are when they talk of the day they left behind yesterday as 'the day before yesterday' not 'the day behind yesterday'. A Mekeo speaker would have no trouble understanding us, were we to say "Socrates lived 500 years behind Christ".

But languages, as linguists well know, follow their own logic, not the Aristotelian or symbolic logic of philosophers.

Is There Past Time Indication in the Mekeo Verb System?

The English sentence "My father died three months before I got married" is translated into Mekeo as follows:

Lau	amau	e'mae	ngava	oiso	kelao	kai	lau	la	amage
I	father	died	moon	three	they went	when	I	her	married

The sentence 'my father is dying' is written, through no fault of the Mekeos, the same way as 'my father died' because the

Sacred Heart Mission fathers did not record the shift in stress in the orthography they had devised for Mekeo. The Mekeo sentence 'my father is dying' goes lau amau 'emae. The same sentence with past time indication changes to lau amau e'mae.

Mekeo Months and Seasons

Changes in the moon are used to divide the year into lunar months:

ngawa mamanga	new moon
ngawa eapaipue	half moon (the moon is standing in the middle)
ngawa enge emengalaisa	three quarters moon (the moon's edge has been cut off)
ngawa ake epongu	full moon (the moon's mouth is full)
ngawa engea	(the moon is lost)

The Mekeos also have their seasons just as we have spring, summer, and so forth. But their seasons are differently divided as there is no spring, etc. in Mekeo country. Their name for the year is inipo which also means 'cane grass' because the cane grass is only high and in blossom once a year. When the kapok tree is bare, the very dry season is on, called augeenge. Opa is the season of occasional showers when the kapok (ungo) is in blossom and there is plenty of fish in the river.

Foame is the time when the kapok pods break up and the seeds start flying around in the wind, and aupu is the rainy season with heavy floods when the kapok tree has green leaves and the flowers have fallen off.

Past, Present and Future Time Indication in Mekeo

Let me now turn to time indication in the Mekeo language.

Events viewed as occurring at the moment of coding

Isa 'eue.

He is getting up.

Isa 'eappae.

He is standing.

Isa Mokuai 'eangu.

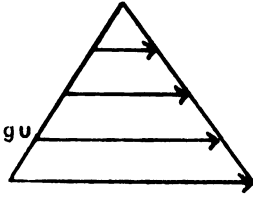
He is staying in Port Moresby.

Isa Mokuai 'eanguangu.

He lives in Port Moresby.

Isa pamelele aunga.

He is a teacher.



Overlapping

George leitio aina elongolongo kai isa akawa imoi epafeui.
 George radio sound is listening while he wife children make +
 'George is listening to the radio while his wife puts the children to sleep
 bed'.

Events viewed as occurring earlier than the moment of coding

Isa e'ue.

He got up.

Isa paafi engai e'appa.

He was standing at the door.

Isa Mokuai e'angu.

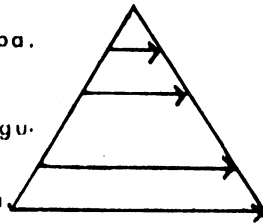
He stopped in Port Moresby.

Isa Mokuai o'anguangu.
 (aoniamo)

He lived in Port Moresby (all his life) (aoniamo all the time)

Isa e pamalele aunga.

He was a teacher.



Overlapping

Isa enga faoma e ani'ia kai isa ngaunga pongua e'mai.
 he his food . ate when he son hut came
 'He was having dinner when his son came home'.

Events viewed as occurring later than the moment of coding

Isa ane 'ue.

He will get up.

Isa Moku 'ane lao.

He will go to Port Moresby.

Isa pamalele aunga ane mie.

He will be a teacher.



Overlapping

Isa enga foama ane aniania kai isa ngaunga pongua 'emai.
He his food will be eating when he son hut comes.
'He will be having dinner when his son comes home'.

Earlier and later time relationship

Lau amau e'mae gnava oiso kelao kai lau 'lamange.

I father died moon three(pl) went by when I married.

'My father died three months before I got married'.

Lau Moku lala lao kai inengeai Frank aunimai appiaongai.

I Moresby was going when on the way Frank both of us met.

'I was on my way to Moresby when I met Frank'.

Non-identified and identified time later than the moment of coding

Isa pamalele aunge ane mie.

He make school mantrelational will be.
suffix

'He will be a teacher'.

Favoko isa enga pangua ane lao.

Tomorrow he his village will go.

'He will go to his village tomorrow'.

Isa enga foama ane aniaia kai isa ngaunga pangue 'e mai.

He his food will be eating it when he son home comes.

'He will be eating dinner when his son comes home'.

Subconscious Ethnocentricity?

Although my data are as yet insufficient to draw up a comprehensive time-indicating system for Mekeo, they do demonstrate that a Mekeo speaker would have no difficulty expressing the various time indications and time relationships we find in the English language.

Mr. Prince will forgive me if I seem to detect a certain amount of linguistic and cultural ethnocentricity in his remarks. Both of us are inheritors as well as prisoners of Western civilisation and are understandably proud of its many achievements. Yet, often in the past and even today, this pride has led us to impose our standards on other cultures - sometimes with disastrous results.

Mr. Prince first calls the phrase I will have done 'awkward', but - after demonstrating on his physical model what a 'complex' situation it is the linguistic representation of - he terms it a 'far from easy verb construction'. That, I believe, is where his subconscious ethnocentricity shows. He is in effect saying: "We, native speakers of English have some awkward phrases in our language. Tough luck for you who are trying to master this difficult language. But, you see, we have developed such a delicate instrument that it can record such a highly complex situation accurately. I know, the construction is 'far from easy', and I am sympathetic to your efforts trying to reconstruct this verb construction in your language with its primitive verb system. If you observe my 'physical model', however, I can make it 'more meaningful' to you".

Instead of using Mr. Prince's physical model, I have led my Mekeo informant to a situation where he had to express this pre-future time relationship. This is what he came up with:

Angoa iwina aisama Charles enga elisam one pafua.
before week by Charles his exams will finish.
'By next week Charles will have finished his exams.'

It so happens that Hungarian, my native language, uses the same construction:

Jövő hét végére	Charles	{be fogja fejezni} {befejezi	} vizsgáit
Next week end + by	Charles	(will finish) (finishes) exams + his!

-
1. In Hungarian, we must indicate which part of the week it is going to be: beginning, middle or end. The verb form for the future - a separate Future Tense using the auxiliary fog 'will' is rarely used nowadays. It is being replaced by the Present Tense whenever a future point or period of time is indicated.