Nominal tense marking in Movima

Nominal or clausal scope?[*]

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1. Introduction

In most languages, tense marking takes place on the verb or in the verb phrase. This is because tense marking usually serves to locate a situation in time, and situations are typically expressed by verbs. However, there are languages in which tense marking is not associated with the verb, but rather with the noun.

Movima, an unclassified language spoken in lowland Bolivia, is such a language. The opposition between past, the time span up to the morning of the day of speaking, and nonpast, the time from the morning of the day of speaking into the future, is not encoded on the verb, but by the article, which is an obligatory element of the noun phrase:

(1) a. ***aj** wu'tu* 'the/a pot (nonpast)'   b. ***oj** wu'tu* 'the/a pot (past)'

In a language that marks tense on the noun phrase, the question arises what exactly is temporally located. In contrast to verbs, nouns typically denote more time-stable concepts and have a referential function. Does this type of tense marking, then, have its scope only over the NP, like the English nominal prefix *ex-* in 'ex-husband'? Or does it have a clausal scope, comparable to verbal tense marking in other languages?

This question is discussed by Nordlinger & Sadler (2003), who label the first type "independent" and the second type "propositional" nominal tense marking. They find that languages with nominal tense marking can be divided into two typological groups. The first group consists of languages in which nominal tense marking serves to locate just the nominal concept in time (e.g. Guaraní). In the languages of the second group (e.g. the Arawakan language Chamicuro), nominal tense marking has its scope over the clause as a whole.

Movima, however, is a language in which the same marker represents both types of nominal tense marking. On the one hand, the choice of the article mainly depends on temporal properties of the nominal referent. On the other hand, a past-tense NP usually implies that the predicate has to be understood as expressing a past situation as well. Hence, the distinction between propositional and independent nominal tense marking is blurred in Movima. The aim of this paper is to find out up to which degree tense marking has a strictly nominal scope and under which conditions it is applied for clausal tense marking.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives an overview of the forms and functions of the Movima article. In Section 3, I describe the circumstances under which nominal tense marking has a scope over the NP only. In Section 4, I discuss the cases in which nominal tense marking is used to mark clausal past tense. It will be shown that, although the scope of Movima past-tense marking is primarily over the NP, it is usually interpreted as clausal tense marking. Finally, Section 5 presents an idea on what may be the underlying reasons for the intricacies of Movima nominal tense marking.[1]

2.   The article: Forms and functions

The Movima article specifies the noun for semantic gender and number and indicates temporal and spatial properties of the referent.[2] The different forms are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Movima article[3]

	m	f	n	pl
unmarked	*uj*	*i'nej*	*aj*	*ij*
absentive	*kuj*	*kinoj*	*koj*	*kij*
past	*uj*	*isnoj*	*oj*	*ij, (isoj)*

The categories unmarked, absentive, and past indicate the spatial or temporal location of the referent with respect to the speaker and the speech situation. The unmarked article is used with nouns whose referents are located in the surroundings of the speaker at the time of speaking and with nouns denoting "absolute" concepts (cf. 3.1). The absentive article basically indicates that the nominal referent either exists somewhere outside the surroundings of the speaker or that it is within the speaker's surroundings, but inaccessible (e.g. when its exact location is not known).[4] With temporal and action nouns, it is employed to mark "immediate past", a subcategory of nonpast, which covers the time span from the morning up to the moment of speaking (cf. 3.2).

The function of the past-tense article will be specified in the remainder of this paper. Apart from this article, past tense can be specified by tense particles: *la'* 'before' and *kwil* or *kwilka* 'long ago'. However, the past-tense form of the article is usually sufficient for the encoding of past tense. In past-tense narratives, it is the only regular indicator of tense, comparable to past-tense verb forms in languages like English.

The masculine and plural past-tense articles are identical with the respective unmarked ones (the past-tense form of the plural article, *isoj*, is only used in remote-past contexts). I consider them different, homophonous morphemes, because their interpretation depends on the actual speech situation: when a masculine or plural NP contains the unmarked article and the referent is not present in the surroundings of the speaker, this usually implies past-tense reference.

3. Nominal past-tense marking with scope over the NP only

In this section, I describe the cases in which the choice of the article is determined by properties of the referent, irrespective of the context. I will present the possibility of nominal past-tense marking in past-tense and in nonpast contexts.

3.1 Nouns denoting "absolute" concepts

One type of nouns always receives the unmarked article, independently of the referent's location relative to the speaker and of the temporal context. Nouns of this type denote "absolute" concepts, i.e. concepts which do not change location and which are conceived of as highly time-stable. Typical representatives of this type are nouns referring to specific places (as in (2)), institutions (3), and generic concepts (4). All examples contain overt past-tense reference, which shows that the marking of these nouns is not affected by contextual tense.

(2) *kwilka   jo'yaj ij   dirinka n-aj   Aperema:to*
     long.ago arrive ART.PL gringa O-ART.N (place name)
     'Long ago, the *gringas* arrived at the Apere Mato (river fork).'

(3) *isoj   ve'e:-piń   di' jelra=aj   ele:siya*[5]
     ART.PL.P fire-CL.long, thin REL light=ART.N church
     'the candles that illuminated the church'

(4) *n-oł   dichi⟨ye:~⟩ye toł ma'nespa:na aj   tadoyni*
     O-ART.N.P.1SG child⟨PRD~⟩ INT like   ART.N sweet
     'When I was a child, oh dear how much I liked sweets.'

The fact that these nouns are not sensitive to the temporal context is an indication that the choice of the article depends on properties of the nominal referent: high time stability of the referent impedes the use of the past-tense article.

3.2 Temporal and action nouns

As opposed to nouns denoting absolute concepts, there are nouns which are always marked according to the temporal context, i.e. they receive the past-tense article in past-tense contexts. These are the temporal and action nouns, as represented by (5) and (6), respectively. Since these nouns denote concepts which are not time-stable, they are automatically marked for past tense when they refer to a time or event before the day of speaking:

(5) *jo'yaj=us*   *n-oj*   *la'*   *walaylo*
arrive=3M.A O-ART.N.P before afternoon
'He arrived yesterday afternoon.'

(6) *n-oj*   *ayloba-wa*=*y'ìi*   *nosdé*   *n-aj*   *kole:giyo*
O-ART.N.P gather-NMZ=1EXCL over.there O-ART.N school
'when we gathered over there at the school'

With temporal and action nouns, another tense category can be encoded by the article: "immediate past", which is a subcategory of nonpast. It is marked by combining a temporal or action noun with the absentive article, which, of course, cannot serve as a marker of spatial location here. The time span covered is that from the morning up to the actual moment of speaking:[6]

(7) *che no-koj*   *ima:yoj* *jayna pó'mo=us*   *jayna*[7]
and O-ART.N.A morning then   get.up=3M.A already
'And he got up (today) in the morning.'

In short, nouns denoting concepts which are not time-stable, such as times and events, are also marked according to the "existence" of their referents, i.e. they receive marking as soon as the time or event is over.

3.3 Nouns denoting present entities or humans

I will now turn to the intermediate types of nouns: those denoting concrete entities. As can be expected from the marking of the noun types described above, the condition for past-tense marking of NPs referring to concrete entities is basically that the referent has ceased to exist at the moment of speaking. This is shown by the following minimal pair, in which clausal past tense is indicated by the particle *la'* 'before', and the article is chosen according to the actual existence of the referent:

(8) a.   *la'*   *iñ*   *jo'yaj n-aj*   *asna*
before 1SG.S arrive O-ART.N my.home
'Some time ago I arrived at home (where I am now).'

  b.   *la'*   *iñ*   *jo'yaj n-oj*   *asna*
before 1SG.S arrive O-ART.N.P my.home
'Some time ago I arrived at home (which doesn't exist anymore).'

However, there are more factors which influence the applicability of the past-tense article with concrete nouns, apart from the actual existence of the referent. These are the referent's presence or absence with respect to the speaker's surroundings, and its animacy (i.e., the distinction between human and non-human).

When the referent is present in the speaker's surroundings, it is encoded by an unmarked NP, independently of the contextual tense. (Accordingly, nouns referring to the speaker's body parts never receive past-tense marking — but see (22) below for an exception.)

> (9) *n-oj*   *to⟨chi~⟩chik-a='nej   majni*
>   O-ART.N.P little⟨PRD~⟩-LV=ART.F my.child
>   'when my (present) daughter was little'

When the referent is absent from the speaker's surroundings, the choice of either the absentive or the past-tense article is primarily determined by the animacy of the referent: whereas non-human referents are automatically marked for past tense in past-tense contexts, irrespective of their actual existence (cf. 4.1), nouns referring to humans are marked according to the actual physical existence of the referent.

A living human referent who is absent from the speaker's surroundings is encoded by an absentive NP (cf. (10)). Also when the person has died recently, as is the case in (11), he/she is referred to in this way. When he/she has been dead for a long time, a human is referred to by a past-tense NP, as in (12a); absentive marking is ungrammatical in that case, as shown by (12b).

> (10) *oj*   *ya:lowe-wa=kinoj   kweya=us   ney=j   alkol*
>   ART.N.P drink-NMZ=ART.F.A woman=3M.A DEF=ART alcohol
>   '[He didn't like] that his wife drank that alcohol.'

> (11) *kinoj   ney ay'ku   di' jayna   kayni*
>   ART.F.A DEF my.aunt REL already be.dead
>   'That (absent) aunt of mine who died [yesterday].'

> (12) a.   *la'*   *n-oj*   *soṅ-tino:na' kayni   isnoj   ay'ku*
>   before O-ART.N other-IN:year be.dead ART.F.P my.aunt
>   'Last year my aunt died.'
>   b. *... kinoj   ay'ku*
>   ART.F.A my.aunt

Thus, in the case of concrete referents which are present in the speaker's surroundings and with human referents, the possibility of past-tense marking depends on the physical existence of the referent at the time of speaking. Like the marking of absolute concepts and that of highly non-time-stable concepts discussed above, this shows that nominal tense marking in Movima basically has a nominal scope. The case of nouns referring to absent non-human entities, which are marked according to the temporal context, will be discussed in 4.1 below.

3.4 Past-tense marking in a nonpast context

In order to provide the final evidence that Movima nominal tense marking is basically of the independent type, I will now turn to the past-tense marking of NPs in nonpast contexts. As in past-tense contexts, this is determined by the actual existence of the referent.

In example (13), the present-tense context is provided by the personal pronoun *a'ko*. The past-tense NP refers to an entity that has completely ceased to exist (i.e., it is not the case that the dress is torn apart and therefore not recognizable):

(13) *a'ko*   *rey*   *łała⟨kwa~⟩-kwá=oj*   *do'we*
      PRO.N.PRS again seam⟨POSS~⟩-ABS=ART.N.P my.dress
      'This is the seam of my (former) dress.'

The following example shows that also in a future context, which can be indicated e.g. by the verbal inchoative aspect particle *loy*, it is possible to mark a NP for past tense if its referent has ceased to exist. This construction is common when the clausal head is an informative verb.

(14) *ajalo:maj loy* *oj*   *no:no di'* *pa:ko*
      tell:TR   INC ART.N.P pet   REL dog
      'I'll tell you about my (former, deceased) pet dog.'

However, it is important to point out that the past-tense article has this restricted nominal scope only when the clause contains another element which overtly indicates nonpast tense, as is the case in (13) and (14). When there is no such element, a clause with a past-tense NP is automatically interpreted as referring to a situation in the past. Consider the following example, which nearly forms a minimal pair with (14) above. In contrast to (14), there is no indicator of future tense, so that the entire clause is understood as past.

(15) *dokoy,* <u>*kena:pa*</u> *n-oj*   *joy-wa* *n-aj*   *Tirinra*
      good   inform O-ART.N.P go-NMZ O-ART.N (place name)
      'Okay, I told you how I went (lit. of my (past) going) to Trinidad.'

This shows that, while Movima nominal past-tense marking is basically of the independent type, in its actual use its scope is often over the entire proposition. In the cases in which clausal and nominal tense diverge, this has to be explicitly marked, as in (13) and (14) above.

In any case, the situations in which a noun phrase can be marked for past-tense in a nonpast context are relatively rare. This is because entities which have simply lost their function or identity, of the type that can be referred to in English by the prefix *ex-*, are not automatically referred to by a past-tense NP in Movima. This could already be seen above with respect to the encoding of recently-died humans (cf. (11)). The loss of function or identity is expressed

differently, e.g. by a past-tense particle, as in (16), or by the lexical aspect of the verb, as in (17).

(16) *iso'*   *ij*   *wulna* n-**aj**   **kwil**   **asna**
      DEM.exist.P ART.PL plant O-ART.N long.ago my.home
      'I had plants at my former home (i.e., the place where I used to live).'

(17) *bayachó=us*   **aj**   **wa:so**
      break:TR=3M.A ART.N glass
      'He (absent) has broken the (present) glass.'

While this shows that the applicability of nominal past-tense marking independently of clausal tense is restricted in Movima, the examples presented so far have shown that in principle, Movima nominal tense marking is indeed of the independent type. However, the following section shows that it is frequently employed for the marking of clausal tense.

4.   Nominal past-tense marking encoding clausal tense

Under certain circumstances, the existence of the referent at the time of speaking is disregarded and the past-tense article is used to mark clausal past tense. This occurs on a regular basis with nouns referring to absent non-human entities (cf. 4.1). Furthermore, even in the case of referents present at the speech situation and human referents, the article is occasionally employed for the marking of clausal tense (cf. 4.2).

4.1 Reference to absent non-human entities in past-tense contexts

When in a past-tense context reference is made to an absent, non-human entity, this is done by a past-tense NP, no matter whether the referent is still in existence or not. For example, the car referred to by the past-tense NP in (18) still existed at the actual time of speaking:

(18) *jayna lista   n-oj*   *joyaj-wa=**oj***   **awto** *jayna*
      already ready(F) O-ART.N.P arrive-NMZ=ART.N.P car   already
      '[She] was ready when the car arrived.'

It can be assumed that nouns referring to non-human entities can be marked irrespective of the existence of the referent because the existence of a non-human entity which played a role in a past event is less relevant than that of a person or an absolute concept. With an absent non-human referent, therefore, the article can be used to indicate clausal tense.

    The following example shows that the possibility of past-tense marking is not related to the grammatical relation encoded by the NP. Transitive subjects can be marked for past tense, too:

(19) *nanará=**oj**   **son↓-poy**   *di' pa:ko oj   charki*
      let.loose=ART.N.P other-BR:animal REL dog ART.N.P dried.meat
      'The other dog let go of the dry meat.'

4.2 Nouns denoting present entities or humans

The past-tense article can be used for clausal tense marking even with the effect
that the restrictions imposed by the presence or animacy of the referent are
overridden. For some speakers and under certain circumstances, it can be more
important to mark clausal tense than to consider the existence of the referent,
even when it is human, as in (20), or when it is present at the speech situation,
as in (21) and (22).

(20) *n-asko   elaná=**uj**   **pa'**   isnoj   ma'*
      O-PRO.N.A leave=ART.M my.father ART.F.P my.mother
      'At that (time) my father left my mother.' [both absent, but alive]

(21) *jiwa:wa=y'ɬi n-**oj**   **asna**=y'ɬi   jayna*
      come=1EXCL O-ART.N.P home=1EXCL already
      'We came home already [where we are now].'

(22) *jayna n-oj   imayni jayna tivijni **oj**   chodo:wi*
      already O-ART.N.P night already hurt ART.N.P my.stomach
      'Then in the night, my stomach hurt.'

This shows that there is a certain liberty in the use of the past-tense article.
Speakers can employ the past-tense article as a marker of clausal tense, irrespec-
tive of the existence or non-existence of the nominal referent. As a result, the
marking of clausal tense is a major function of the past-tense article.

5. Towards an explanation

We have seen that the possibility of marking nouns for past tense depends to a
large extent on the actual existence of the referent at the time of speaking, which
shows that the scope of Movima nominal tense marking is principally over the
noun phrase. However, the criterion for past-tense marking is less clear-cut
than might, at first, be thought: the kind of concept denoted by the noun, its
animacy, and its presence or absence with respect to the speech situation do also
play a role. These factors can be arranged on a gradual scale according to their
influence on the possibility of nominal tense marking, as in Figure 1.

Thus, the possibility of past-tense marking of a noun cannot be predicted
exclusively on the basis of the existence or non-existence of the referent.
Depending on certain other properties of the referent, such as absence and
inanimacy, the past-tense article can just be employed as a device for marking
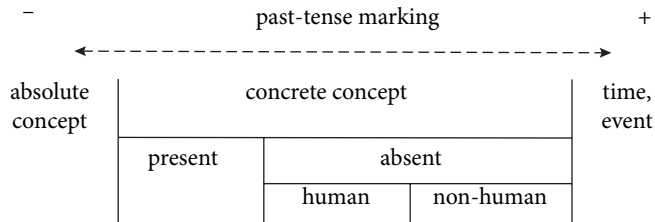
Figure 1. Possible past-tense marking according to the type of referent

clausal past tense. Apart from that, discourse-pragmatic devices can play a crucial role: speakers can use the past-tense article in order to mark propositional past tense, whereby the criteria presented in Figure 1 can be overridden.

From this it is evident that Movima nominal tense marking must be determined by more factors than just by properties of the referent. The following is an attempt to propose a model which captures these factors.

It has become apparent at various points in the above description that the spatial and temporal categories encoded by the Movima article are closely connected: only absent referents can be encoded by a past-tense NP; with temporal and action nouns, the absentive article marks a tense category; and nouns denoting "absolute" concepts are not only unmarked with respect to tense, but also with respect to space.

Under the assumption that the Movima article does not really separate space and time, I want to postulate that it marks nouns according to the (physical and temporal) "presence" and "accessibility" of their referents, be they concrete or abstract, in the perception of the speaker. With the example of the neuter article, which displays most distinctions since it is combined with concrete as well as abstract nouns, this is schematized in Table 2.

Table 2. The article as a marker of perceived presence and accessibility

oj	*koj*		*aj*
−present −accessible	−present +accessible	+present −accessible	+present +accessible

The features [+present] and [+accessible], which can only be expressed by the unmarked article, apply to the speaker's physical surroundings, on the spatial level, and to the time span from the moment of speaking into the future, on the temporal level. Hence, it can be said that Movima categorizes future events as accessible. (The encoding of absolute concepts is not characterized by this scheme because these concepts are not subject to deictic criteria.)

The absentive article indicates that something is perceived as either present or accessible, but not both. On the spatial level, it can be applied to entities

which are within the surroundings of the speaker, but not accessible (e.g. invisible), or, as was illustrated above, which are outside the surroundings of the speaker, but in existence and therefore perceived as accessible.[8] On the temporal level, the absentive article marks the time span on the same day, but before the moment of speaking, as is reflected by its function with temporal and action nouns (cf. 3.2). Apparently, events that have occurred within this time span are perceived as accessible, even though they do not continue at the time of speaking.

The category encoded by the past-tense article, finally, indicates that the referent is not present and, furthermore, that it is perceived as neither spatially nor temporally accessible. This is the reason why it can appear in past-tense contexts, irrespective of the referent's existence: many entities that played a role in the past are not perceived as accessible at the moment of speaking, even though they may still be in existence. By contrast, an entity that has simply lost its function can still be physically present at the moment of speaking, in which case it is not encoded by a past-tense NP (cf. 3.4). The accessibility feature, furthermore, helps to understand why in Movima, past tense only covers the time span up to the previous evening: what has occurred the day before usually does not affect us as much as what has occurred on the same day, and can therefore be perceived as inaccessible.

While this is only a tentative analysis of the system, it provides a clue why independent and propositional tense are difficult to tease apart in Movima. The article is applied not only according to a measurable property of the nominal referent, but also according to the larger context of reference. Thus, we are not dealing with grammatical tense marking here, but with a temporal interpretation of a complex pragmatic category.

Notes

1. My analysis is based on texts I recorded in Santa Ana del Yacuma, Bolivia. All examples are from these texts and from my field notes. In their representation I basically follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules.

2. Definiteness is not a category of the article. It is expressed by the demonstratives, which form a different paradigm.

3. The letter *j* represents the sound [h], which is in allophonic variation with [s].

4. The term "surroundings" means that the referent is perceived as being somewhere close by, e.g. in the same house or compound as the speaker.

5. Under certain circumstances, e.g. when a transitive subject is encoded by a NP in postverbal position, the article is encliticized to the predicate. This is only a phonological effect of the constituent order and does not mean that the article belongs morphologically to the verb.

6. Due to space limitations, the arguments for the exact delimitations of the temporal categories cannot be given within this paper.

7. There does not seem to be any direct relationship between the aspectual adverb *jayna* 'already' and nominal tense marking.

8. The feature pairs indicate that the absentive article is also a marker of evidentiality. Empirical evidence supports this.

Abbreviations

1EXCL = first person plural exclusive; 1SG = first person singular; A = absential; ABS = absolute state; ART = article; BR = bound root; CL = classifier; DEF = definiteness marker; DUR = durative; F = feminine; IMP = imperative; IN = incorporated noun; INC = inchoative; INT = intensifier; INTR = intransitive; LOC = locational; LV = linking vowel; M = masculine; N = neuter; NMZ = action nominalizer; NSTD = non-standing; O = oblique; P = past; PL = plural; POSS = possessive; PRD = predicative; PRO = personal pronoun; PRS = presentive; REAS = reason; REL = relativizer; S = intransitive subject; TR = transitive

Reference

Nordlinger, R. and Sadler, L. (2003) 'Nominal tense in cross-linguistic perspective'. Ms. University of Melbourne/University of Essex.