

## A Contrastive Study on Past Tense Forms in Trans-New Guinea Languages Spoken in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea

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## I Introduction

When we consider tense and aspect, the past tense and related tense systems are necessary grammatical features. This study examines past tense forms in Trans-New Guinea languages.<sup>1)</sup> Trans-New Guinea languages are grammatically different from each other, and this study identifies common tense features by contrasting four sample languages spoken in Madang Province, which is located on the northern coast of Papua New Guinea (Lynch 1998: 62–64, Nose 2016a, Nose 2016b, Nose 2017).

The languages examined in this study include Amele and Siroi, which are spoken in the coastal areas, and Usan and Tauya, which are spoken in the mountain areas (see Figure 1). The languages spoken in the coastal area are in close contact with other Trans-New Guinea as well as Austronesian languages spoken in the coastal area, and their grammars have affected one another (cf. Dempwolff n.d., Nose 2016b, Ross 2002). Consequently, Trans-New Guinea languages spoken in the coastal area have developed less complicated grammar structures in general. In contrast, the Trans-New Guinea languages spoken in the mountain areas have been isolated from other languages and have less contact with Austronesian languages. Therefore, Trans-New Guinea languages spoken in the mountain areas generally continue to retain complicated grammatical structures (Foley 2000).

**1)** Trans-New Guinea languages are sometimes referred to as Papuan, part of a language group of more than 500 languages (Foley 2000).

**2)** I have been conducting fieldwork in Madang Province, particularly in the Amele area. I have already visited the Siroi area, but I have not begun to conduct interviews there. The mountain areas, Tauya and Usan, are hard to reach, and I have been unable to develop points of contact there. Fortunately, we can identify several kinds of descriptive grammars in the Madang Province,

This study examines the past tense features of the four languages in terms of form-meaning relationships. It considers common past tense features in Trans-New Guinea languages by investigating their past tense morphology and semantics. These findings clarify concepts of time in Trans-New Guinea languages and their usage in regional culture and community (Sinha et al. 2011, Velupillai 2016, Nose 2016b).

Section 2 offers an overview of previous studies that investigated tense and language descriptions in Papua New Guinea and outlines the study objectives. Section 3 presents data on the past tense in the sample languages. Section 4 discusses the form/meaning of the past tense in the sample languages. Section 5 presents the conclusion.

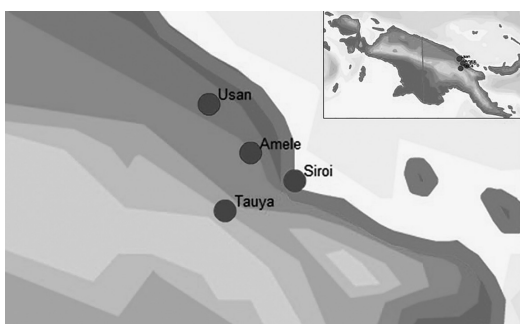


Figure 1: Sample languages spoken in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea<sup>2)</sup>

including the ones utilized in this study. More than 250 indigenous languages are used in the province, including Trans-New Guinea and Austronesian ones. Of these, approximately 50-70 languages have been recorded; the others are not recorded yet, and some of them are in the process of dying and being replaced by the lingua franca Tok Pisin.

## II Preliminary studies and study objectives

This section reviews previous studies on tense and several studies on the languages spoken in Papua New Guinea. In linguistic studies, several researchers have focused on the past tense in grammar; these include classical studies such as those by Comrie (1976, 1985). It also includes functional studies such as those by Bybee et al. (1994), Bybee and Dahl (1989), Hopper (1979), and Dahl (1985). Recently, more advanced studies on tense and aspect have been conducted by Bhat (1999), Dahl and Velupillai (2005), Velupillai (2016), Johanson (2000), and Smith (2005). Other significant recent studies on cognitive linguistics include those by Sinha et al. (2011) and Nose (2016a).<sup>3)</sup>

General studies on New Guinea languages have been conducted by Lynch (1998), Foley (2000), and Aikhenvald (2014). Approximately 1,000 languages are spoken in the Melanesia area, and more than half of them are classified as Papuan or Trans-New Guinea languages. Numerous previous studies have explored descriptive grammars; however, none have determined common grammatical traits to confidently identify Trans-New Guinea features (see also Nose 2016a, 2016b, 2017).

Velupillai (2016) summarized several previous studies and claimed that tense features have already been investigated in many languages. Furthermore, she mentioned that there are two

<sup>3)</sup> These previous studies have clarified theoretical and cross-linguistic points of tense and aspect, and apparently, studying such elements further is fruitless because there is no room left to analyze them. This study, nevertheless, still tries to consider the behaviors of the past tense by utilizing the languages' descriptive grammars and my field interviews. It, therefore, gives deeper descriptions of tense (and aspect partly) in the sample languages and tries to identify concrete features or historical mechanisms among them.

kinds of languages: one language uses tense, and another is tenseless. She further claimed that present and past tenses are more important than other tenses. Dahl and Velupillai (2005) conducted a typological study on tense and created a map of typological past tense features, as shown in Figure 2.

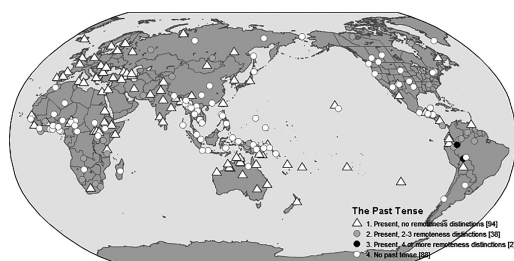


Figure 2: The past tense in world languages (Dahl and Velupillai 2005)

They investigated the past tenses in more than 200 languages and classified these into those that have past tense and those that do not. Furthermore, they checked the remoteness distinctions of languages (see several past tense forms in Amele (1)). They found that many languages have past tenses ( $94 + 38 + 2 = 134$ ); however, many languages still do not have past tense (white dots: 88). Tenseless languages are observed in Central Africa, South-East Asia, and North America. White triangle and dots (94) indicate “present tense and past without remote distinctions,” i.e., tenses with “one present and one past.” The majority of languages, including European languages (such as English), are included in this group; however, when we focus on the map of New Guinea Island, the distribution is different.

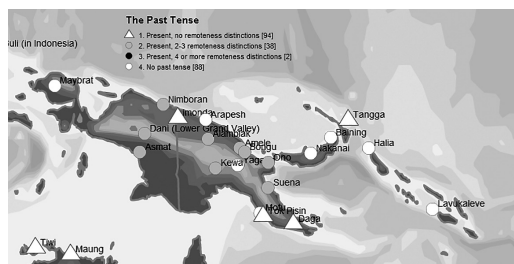


Figure 3: The past tense zoomed in for New Guinea Island (Dahl and Velupillai 2005)

In Figure 3, particularly in New Guinea Island, there are languages with 2–3 remoteness distinctions (grey circle dots) despite several exceptions (no tense or no remote distinction). For example, Amele has a complicated tense system, as shown in (1).

(1) Amele: (Roberts 1987: 224–225)

Present: Ija fi-gi-na.

I see - present/1sg

“I see.”

Past:

Today's past: Ija fi-g-a.

I see-today's past/1sg

“I saw (today).”

Yesterday's past: Ija fi-g-an.

I see - yesterday's past/1sg

“I saw (yesterday).”

Remote past: Ija fe-em.

I see - remote past/1sg

“I saw (before yesterday).”

This kind of remoteness distinction can be observed in other Trans-New Guinea languages as well. Nose (2016a) discussed the reason why

Amele has such remoteness distinctions and why Amele and these “rich tense” languages have more complicated grammatical morphology of verbs.<sup>4)</sup>

First, this study explores common past tense features of the four sample languages. Previously, Dahl (1983) tried to determine whether there is any remote distinction between the tenses. This study tries to answer this question by investigating the cases of Trans-New Guinea languages. Second, it explores the differences between coastal and mountain areas, contrasting the data to identify characteristics from a geographical perspective. Third, it explores how the past tense is involved in the grammar of a language.

### III Data on Trans-New Guinea languages

This section presents the data on the sample languages. This study particularly investigates verbal morphology of the past tense and the perfective implications of the past tense forms. It summarizes the data and explains the grammatical mechanism of tenses in Trans-New Guinea languages. Morphologically, their past forms are suffix, inflection, or other forms. Furthermore, this study examines the meanings of the various past forms and investigates the usages of the past tenses in several Trans-New Guinea languages. It partly utilizes interview data (from Amele) gathered by the researcher and partly relies on books of descriptive grammars (from Usan, Siroi, and Tauya). Because the locations of Usan, Siroi, and Tauya are dif-

ficult to access, the grammar books provide sufficient information for this study.<sup>5)</sup>

Amele is a Trans-New Guinea language spoken near the coastal area. There are three kinds of past tenses with remoteness distinctions, as shown in (1) and (2). These distinctions are among today, yesterday, and remote past tenses.

#### (2) Remoteness distinctions in Amele:

Present: Ija hu-**gi-na**. “I come.”

Past: Today’s past: Ija hu-**g-a**. “I came (today).”

Yesterday’s past: Ija hu-**g-an**. “I came (yesterday).”

Remote past: Ija ho-**om**. “I came (before yesterday).”

Amele has additional past usages, habitual past and negative past, as shown in (3). Their past behaviors are morphologically motivated, and their verbal morphologies are shown in Table 1.

#### (3) Two additional past usages in Amele:

Habitual past: Ija ho-**l-ig**.

I come-habitual past/1sg  
“I used to come.”

Negative past: Ija qee ho-**l-om**.

I not come-negative  
past/1sg  
“I did not come.”

While Amele has several kinds of past tense forms, it has a limited aspect system. Therefore, perfect/perfective meanings are realized using today’s past tense form (Roberts 1987: 227) or the adverbial word “wele (already),” as shown in (4).

<sup>4)</sup> Nose (2017) conducted a contrastive study on rich tense and tenseless languages. The study clarified the features of the languages within the rich tense system. Dahl and Velupillai (2005) clarified that many languages have remoteness distinctions of the past tense in New Guinea Island and articulated the reasons why they have such a complicated system.

<sup>5)</sup> Nose (2016a) already discussed the past tense features of several languages in Papua New Guinea, but their samples are varied in general, among Amele and Kobon (Trans-New Guinea), Bel (Austronesian), and Tok Pisin (creole). In contrast, this study focuses on Amele, Siroi, Tauya, and Usan, the Trans-New Guinea languages spoken in Madang Province. This study particularly seeks for deeper description of the past tenses and their processes of grammaticalization.

(4) Perfective in Amele: (Roberts 1987: 232)

Uqa **wele** nui-a.  
He already go - today's past/3sg  
"He has already gone."

Another coastal area language, Siroi, is outlined in Wells' (1979) descriptive grammar. Siroi has a complicated verbal morphology with past and immediate past suffixes, as shown in Table 2.

(5) Tense usages in Siroi (Wells 1979: 55, 57)

- a. Past: panke sulu-**na**.  
throw away finish-3sg/past  
"He wasted all (his money)."
- b. Immediate past:  
(kupe) te-tiwe tu-**kik**.  
leg take-stand give-him-1pl  
/immediate past  
"We fixed his (leg) completely."
- c. Perfective: Kutu-we deng **pur-na**  
pour-it cease-3SG/past  
"He finished pouring it out."

There are basic (endocentre and obligatory stem) and non-basic (dependent and independent suffix) inflections; tense suffixes are non-basic, but they agree with person and number (Wells 1979: 27, 30). Tense meanings are binary, past, and immediate past, as in (5a) and (5b). Perfective implication is shown in (5c) through completive and entire verb phrase fillers that mean "cease" or "finish."

Third is Usan, a mountain area language described by Reesink (1987). Usan also has a complicated verbal morphology, and it features two kinds of past tense suffixes: near past and far past, as shown in Table 3. Near past indicates something that occurred on the same day

as the time of utterance, while far past refers to something that occurred on the previous day. All tense suffixes are included in verbal inflections of person and number, and the sentence examples are shown in (6).<sup>6)</sup>

(6) Usan: Reesink (1987: 96, 101, 102)<sup>7)</sup>

- a. Neutral tense (= present tense):  
Ginam ite ir-**aum**  
place up go.ip-1sg/present  
"I am going up to that village."
- b. Near past:  
mani eng qoan ne-t  
yam the before you-for  
big-**umei**.  
put-1sg/near past  
"I've put the food for you long ago" (qoan: long ago).
- c. Far past:  
Itu-ut qoriub-ub di-**umei**,  
morning banana plant come up-1sg/near past  
ende qam-**arei**.  
thus say-3sg/far past  
"He said: this morning I planted a banana and came up."

Perfective implication in Usan is realized periphrastically through the verb *wogub* "cease" or "stop," as in (7).

(7) Perfective in Usan: (Reesink 1987: 83)

- iyau bur wan toat ba  
dog pig young follow take  
is-ari **wogub**  
descend-3sg cease  
"The dog followed the piglet and took it and went down ..."

<sup>6)</sup> Davies (1989) identified another mountain language, Kobon, which also has a distinction between near past and far past.

<sup>7)</sup> The far past suffix *-arei* in (6c) is an inflection of the verb class (4a and 4b), which is why the form *-arei* is not found in Table 3.

Fourth is Tauya, a mountain area language described by MacDonald (1990). Tauya has a relatively simple verbal morphology. MacDonald (1990: 13) referred to these as morphologies “desinenes.” It has only the aorist tense, as shown in Table 4. In the aorist tense, it is not the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> persons that are conflated but rather the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> persons in both singular and plural number. Moreover, Tauya has a future tense form.

(8) Tauya; (?a: indicative mood suffix), (MacDonald 1990: 13),

- a. Ni-e- ?a  
eat 1/2 indicative  
“I/You ate.”
- b. Ni-ene-?a  
eat 1/2 indicative  
“We/You ate.”

Aorist usage in (8) means imperfective past, a simple past form characteristic in Tauya and distinct from those in other Trans-New Guinea languages. Tauya has two means of expressing perfective: using the auxiliary *-fe-* (transitive) and *-ti-* (intensive).<sup>8)</sup>

(9) Perfective in Tauya (Wells 1990: 195):

- Ni-fe- (perfective) -ene-?a.  
“We/you ate.”

Table 5 provides a summary of the sample languages and findings of this study. Generally, verb suffix is a common feature in the sample languages, but only Tauya is simpler than other languages in its verbal morphology. Remoteness distinctions (near past and far past) are observed in Amele, Siroi, and Usan, but Tauya has only the aorist (imperfective past) tense.

<sup>8)</sup> Tauya might have had remoteness distinctions before, but its speakers ceased to use them, and it has adopted a simpler aorist tense. It is possible that this loss is due to a lack of contacts with Austronesian languages, which lack tense systems in general.

MacDonald (1990) indicated several auxiliaries incorporated in verbal morphology, such as stative, habitual, perfective, progressive and so on; however, they do not have remoteness distinctions. Trans-New Guinea languages are generally poor in the grammar of aspect; thus, aspectual meanings are realized lexically (using adverb “already”) or through verbs “cease” and “finish” (except in Tauya’s perfective).

Amele has the most complicated remoteness distinctions, but the author found that Amele speakers prefer to use today’s past for expressing present and past situations in everyday conversation. Moreover, the language has a distinction between near and far past. Remoteness distinction may be an important factor in Trans-New Guinea languages, but this distinction is not observed in Tauya. Instead, Tauya has another grammatical tense and other perfective forms.

## IV | Discussion

The data in Section 3 indicate that each of the sample languages has at least one past tense form, but Amele, Siroi, and Usan have remoteness distinctions based on near and far past. Amele has a diverse tense system, including habitual and negative past. Tauya is an exception as it has a single aorist tense and two kinds of perfective forms.

This section discusses two issues. First, it explores functional motivations for past tense usages. Second, it discusses the relation between tense and concept of time. (cf. Aikhenvald 2014, Sinha et al. 2011).

When we investigated the nature of the past tense forms in the sample Trans-New Guinea languages, we observed that their past tense be-



Table 1: Forms: verbal inflections of “*oboga* (walk)”<sup>9)</sup>

	Present	Today’ past	Yesterday’s past	Remote	Habitual	Negative past
1sg	ob-ig-a	ob-ig-a	ob-ig-an	ob-on	ob-igi-na-on	ob-o-rin
2sg	ob-og-a	ob-oy-a	ob-og-an	ob-on	ob-ogo-na-on	ob-o-ron
3sg	ob-ey-a	ob-ey-a	ob-ey-an	ob-on	ob-e-na-on	ob-o-r
1pl	ob-oq-a	ob-oq-a	ob-oq-an	ob-on	ob-oqo-na-on	ob-o-rom
2/3pl	ob-oig-a	ob-oig-a	ob-oig-an	ob-on	ob-ogi-na-on	ob-o-roim

Table 2: Tense suffixes in Siroi (Wells 1979: passim)

	Present suffix	Past suffix	Immediate past suffix
1s	-et	-en	-it
2/3s	-ate/ -it	-na	-at
1d	-ek	-keng	-ik/ -ki
2/3d	-ade/ -ik	-naik	-aik
1p	-eg	-geng	-ig/ -gig
2/3p	-ade/ -ig	-naig	-aig

Table 3: Tense suffixes in Usan (Reesink 1987: 94-96)<sup>10)</sup>

	Present tense	Near past suffix	Far past suffix
1s	-ou-m/ -au-m	-umei	-emei
2s	-an	-anei	-enei
3s	-a	-ai	-erei
1p	-oun/ -aun	-unei	-eminei
2p	-oumon/ -oamon	-umanei	-emanei
3p	-our/ -oar	-urei	-emirei

Table 4: Tauya personal desinences: Aorist tense (past action without indication of its completion or continuation)

1/2sg	e
1/2pl	ene
3sg	a
3pl	I

**9)** Amele has negative future tense form. Thus, it has positive and negative forms in both the past and future tenses. Finnish (Finno-Ugric) has negative verb forms with conjugations, which are similar to Amele forms. This study considers that Amele and Finnish have semantically significant commonalities among the positive and negative forms and verbal morphology.

**10)** There are several kinds of verb classes in Usan, and the inflections in Table 3 are used in the verb classes (1, 2, 3, and 4b) in the far past tense.

Table 5: Summary

	Morphology	Meanings <sup>11)</sup>	Perfective meaning	Other points
Amele (coastal)	Verb inflections, suffix	Today, Yesterday, Remote, habitual	Today, lexical "already"	Negative and habitual past
Siroi (coastal)	Past suffix in verbs (included in verb morphology)	Past and immediate past	Lexical verbs like "cease" and "finish"	
Usan (mountain)	Suffix in verbs (included in verb morphology)	Near past and far past	Lexical verb of "cease"	
Tauya (mountain)	Suffix in verbs (simpler)	Aorist (imperfective past)	Two Perfective auxiliaries	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> person forms are identical

haviors are diverse and that each language has at least one past tense marker. We found that Amele, Siroi, and Usan have remoteness distinctions, but Tauya does not have such a distinction. All the sample languages have some perfective marker or usage, but their options change depending on the lexical adverb "already" or on verbs "finish" and "cease." Tauya has two kinds of grammatical perfectives.

Therefore, this study claims that past tense is necessary in Trans-New Guinea languages and that their morphology is involved in the verbal inflections. Semantically, remoteness distinction is a characteristic of all the languages. The speakers of Amele, Siroi, and Usan have a motivation to employ such remoteness distinctions (for example, there is no such system in Tok Pisin), but they thought that the perfective is not so necessary. This is because they want to know when the action happened (today, yesterday, or before) and are not interested in the completeness of the action. Tauya has another system in which there is no remoteness distinction and the speakers are more interested in the com-

pleteness of the action. Thus, we consider Tauya to be an exception.<sup>12)</sup>

Next, this study discusses how past tense grammar is involved in Trans-New Guinea languages and how the people deal with time in their grammars (cf. Sinha et al. 2011). We consider why Amele, Kobon, Siroi, and Usan have several kinds of past tense forms. Trans-New Guinea languages encode several points in a given time sequence (Velupillai 2016) but have few distinctions among their aspectual meanings. In contrast, Tauya has a relatively poor usage of tense. This study follows the understanding that each of these features of Trans-New Guinea languages was included in the grammars of their languages at an earlier stage (cf. Foley 2000). Sinha et al. (2011) claimed that there is no concept of time such as "today" or "last Monday" in Amondawa, but it has a tense. Temporal concepts are composed of temporal adverbs such as "yesterday" or "last night," tense and aspect, and other means. As was already shown, there are many tenseless languages; therefore, tense marking and concept of tense are not necessary features of

**11)** Dahl (1983) discussed how three kinds of memory (surface, shallow, and deep) can be incorporated in the past tense grammar. The relations between the surface and deep memories are grammaticalized in the relation between the near and far past tenses.

**12)** As indicated by Nose (2016a), Tok Pisin has both past and perfective markers and is used as the lingua franca in everyday communication. Thus, speakers of every native language have knowledge of the past/perfective distinction through their knowledge of Tok Pisin.



natural languages (Nose 2017). Nevertheless, the sample languages have at least one past tense, which indicates that past tense is a necessary feature of their grammars.

Finally, this study claims that remoteness distinctions (near versus far) were an important factor for the speakers in New Guinea in earlier times; however, nowadays, these are not so important and have been lost in case of some languages. Instead, other means (lexical perfective, aorist tense, and temporal adverbs) are used to describe past events. The differences between coastal and mountain areas cannot be observed in their languages' past tense usages.<sup>13)</sup>

## V Conclusion

This study claims that the languages spoken in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea have remoteness distinctions, particularly between near and far past, with the exception of Tauya. It finds that the languages' tense grammaticalizations are involved in verbal morphology. Thus, they are radically different from English and other European languages because they need a clear difference between near and far past and have a poor system of marking the perfective. These languages feature complicated verbal morphologies for marking rich tenses and partly for aspect, characteristics that can be observed in languages spoken in South Africa and South America (Dahl & Velupillai 2005).

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**13)** A previous version of this study found that Waskia, a coastal area language, has completely changed its tense system, which is now similar to those of Austronesian languages. We will discuss this point in the future study.

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# **A Contrastive Study on Past Tense Forms in Trans-New Guinea Languages Spoken in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea**

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Past tense forms are necessary features of the grammars of the world languages. This study examines the past tense in Trans-New Guinea languages spoken in Madang Province, Papua New Guinea. Trans-New Guinea languages are grammatically and lexically different from each other; nevertheless, this study tries to find common tense features by comparing four sample languages: Amele and Siroi, which are spoken in the coastal area, and Usan and Tauya, which are spoken in the mountain area. This study examines past tense features in terms of form-meaning relationships. It finds that the languages spoken in the area have remoteness distinctions, particularly near and far past distinctions, except for Tauya. Additionally, the observed past tense forms partly imply aspect meanings (perfective).

This study finds that verb suffix is a common feature that indicates the past tense in the sample languages, but only Tauya has a simpler verbal morphology of its past tense. Remoteness distinctions (near past and far past) are observed in Amele, Siroi, and Usan, while Tauya has only the aorist (imperfective past) tense. Instead of remoteness distinctions, Tauya has several auxiliaries incorporated into its verbal morphology. These auxiliaries have meanings of stative, habitual, perfective, and progressive relation, and so on, but they do not have a remoteness distinction per se. Trans-

New Guinea languages are generally poor in the grammar of aspect, and their aspectual meanings are realized lexically (using the adverb “already”) or through the verbs “cease” or “finish” (except for in Tauya’s perfective).

Finally, this study claims that remoteness distinctions were important for the speakers of New Guinea in earlier times; however, nowadays, they are not as significant. Further, in some languages (including Tauya), they have been lost entirely. Other means (lexical perfective, aorist tense, and temporal adverbs) are now more commonly used to specify past events. The differences between coastal and mountain areas cannot be observed in the past tense usages, but Tauya’s past tense functions are an exception among Trans-New Guinea languages in general.

