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Tense and Aspect in Basque

The Basque tense and aspect system is complicated by the co-existence of two conjugation types which allow for different oppositions. One is the conjugation of analytically (periphrastically) construed verbs, the default case; the other involves a small number of synthetically construed verbs, which can optionally be construed periphrastically as well.

The first of the two conjugation types, the analytical construction, consists of a main verb in a non-finite form (here the verbal noun in the inessive case) and a tense-aspect auxiliary (here the present tense of the transitive auxiliary *ukan*):[1]

(1) Egi-te-n   dut.
     do-NOM-IN   PRS.3S<1S
     'I do it.'

The second type is represented by synthetically construed verbs, which are directly conjugated, i.e. person and tense markers are attached to the verbal root:

(2) Ba-[2]   d-a-ki-t.[3]
     ENC-   3S-PRS-know-1S.ERG
            ABS
            PRS
     'I know it.'

The following verbs can be construed synthetically:

izan (intransitive tense-aspect auxiliary, 'to be')
ukan (transitive tense-aspect auxiliary, 'to have')
egon 'to stay, to be'
eduki 'to hold, to have'
jakin 'to know'
ekarri 'to bring'
eraman 'to take (to)'
joan 'to go (directed)'
ibili 'to go (undirected), to wander'
etorri 'to come'
etzan 'to lie' (position)
eritzi 'to think'
irudi 'to seem' (third person only)
(*jaugin* 'to come', in the imperative only)
(very rare: *ikusi* 'to see', *erabili* 'to conduct, use')

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[1] *ukan*, the participle form of the verb (usually the citation form), is used in the North Eastern dialects only. Basque grammarians therefore reconstructed a more regular participle form **edun*, which is used in some grammars to refer to that auxiliary.

[2] The enunciative *ba-* is obligatory, if a conjugated verb stands at the beginning of the sentence. It fills the empty focus position which comes canonically before the conjugated verb.

[3] *d-u-t* can be analyzed in the same way, *-u-* being the transitive root. Especially in the auxiliaries, we have to deal with a great deal of fusion, all the more as the forms become more complex. I shall therefore refrain from a detailed interlinear analysis. The actant structure will be visualized as in (1), where the ergative is indicated by the open side of the pointed bracket (<).

In comparison with early records (16th century) the number of synthetically construed verbs has significantly decreased.[4]

1. Tense-aspect oppositions with analytical verbs

The analytical construction is the only productive pattern, i.e. the analytical verb represents the normal case.

1.1. Using present-tense auxiliaries

1.1.1. Present

By combining the auxiliary in the present tense with the nominalized main verb (verbal noun) in the inessive, we get the normal present tense, as can be seen in example (1). Example (3) shows the case of an intransitive verb:

> (3)   Mintza-tze-n   naiz.
>   speak-NOM-IN   PRS.1S
>   'I speak.'

1.1.2. Present perfect

The combination of the present-tense auxiliary with the participle is used to mark perfect tense. It means that the event expressed by the main verb has taken place recently:[5]

> (4)   Egin   dut.
>   do:PCP   PRS.3S<1S
>   'I have done it.'

> (5)   Mintza-tu   naiz.
>   speak-PCP   PRS.1S
>   'I have spoken.'

It may be labelled "near past" and is incompatible with adverbials, referring to long periods of time or remote past time:

> (6)   *Aspaldi-an   egin   dut.
>   long_ago-IN   do:PCP   PRS.3S<1S
>   'I have done it long ago.'

> (7)   *Aspaldi-an   mintza-tu   naiz.
>   long_ago-IN   speak-PCP   PRS.1S
>   'I have spoken long ago.'

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[4]   Lafon (1943) lists about 60 in texts of the 16th and 17th century.
[5]   i.e. what may be called a "recent perfect" (cf. Breu 1988).

1.1.3. Resultative

Such adverbials are possible, if the participle is used like an adjective with the individualizer -*a* (usually called 'article'),[6] which makes it accessible for number agreement with the head NP:[7]

(8)   Etxe-a(-k)   sal-du-a(-k)   d(it)u   aspaldi-an.
      house-IDV(-P) sell-PCP-IDV(-P) PRS(P)   long_ago-IN
      'S/he sold the house(s) long ago.'

The resultative is used when the speaker wants to underline that an action or event in the past resulted in a state still prevailing at the time of speech.

1.1.4. Future

Future is expressed by adding the delimitative case ending -*ko*[8] to the participle. After consonants, some dialects prefer the (possessive) genitive -*en* instead (I gloss them as future markers when attached to participles):

(9)   Egin-go/-en   dut.
      do:PCP-FUT   PRS.3S<1S
      'I shall do it.'

(10) Mintza-tu-ko   naiz.
      speak-PCP-FUT PRS.1S
      'I shall speak.'

1.2. Using past-tense auxiliaries

In its turn the past-tense auxiliary can be combined with the same range of non-finite forms as the present tense. This results in the following tense-aspect meanings:

1.2.1. Imperfective past

When combined with the verbal noun in the inessive (the combination denoting simple present above), the past auxiliary is used to express imperfective past tense:

(11) Egi-te-n   nuen.
      do-NOM-IN   PRT.1S>3S
      'I did it / was doing it.'

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[6]   That the 'article' is actually an individualizer is shown by Iturrioz (1982, 1985); unfortunately, Basque grammarians and school teachers continue to speak of "mugagabea" ('indetermined') and "mugatua" ('determined'), in spite of knowing better.

[7]   There are concurrent ways of formation: In North-Eastern dialects, the partitive -*rik* is attached to the participle, in the South-Western dialects a special formative -*(e)ta* is added, which may be etymologically related to *eta* 'and'. Haase (1991a) studies the resultative in greater detail. Haase (1991b) gives a short account of the development in contact with Gascon and French, where the resultative combined with an intransitive auxiliary came to be a passive and the resultative combined with a transitive auxiliary developed into a perfect or past tense.

[8]   Some grammarians (cf. e.g. Lafitte 1979) call the delimitative "locative genitive".

(12)   Mintza-tze-n   nintzen.
        speak-NOM-IN   PRT.1S
        'I spoke / was speaking.'

1.2.2. Perfective past

When combined with the participle (the combination denoting perfect above), it is used to express perfective past tense:

(13)   Egin   nuen.
        do:PCP   PRT.1S>3S
        'I did it.'

(14)   Mintza-tu   nintzen.
        speak-PCP   PRT.1S
        'I spoke.'

Thus, the formal opposition between verbal noun and participle distinguishes imperfective and perfective aspect in the past, whereas in the present tense it is used for distinguishing simple present and perfect. This is summarized in the following table:

	present auxiliary	past auxiliary
inessive verbal noun	simple present (aspectually neutral)	imperfective past
participle	present perfect	perfective past

Table 1

The perfective/imperfective distinction is the same as in the Romance languages.

1.2.3. Pluperfect

The resultative combined with the present auxiliary functions as pluperfect when used with the past auxiliary.[9] The individualizer -*a* agrees in number with the head noun.

(14)   Egin-a   nuen.
        do:PCP-IDV   PRT.1S>3S
        'I had done it.'

(15)   Mintza-tu-a   nintzen.
        speak-PCP-IDV PRT.1S
        'I had spoken.'

Of course, the pluperfect can be interpreted as a resultative in the past, as the event in question is always seen to be relevant to another (more recent) event in the past.

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9   It may be reinforced by adding the participle *izan(a)* (or *ukan(a)* in transitive clauses, where this form exists). This seems to be a 'calque' from the neighboring Romance languages. The participles *izan* and *ukan* may also be added to the simple past tense, in order to signalize non-resultative anterior.

1.2.4. Future of the past

The auxiliary can be combined with the non-finite future form (i.e. participle + delimitative or genitive) to form a secondary future tense which is used in subordinate clauses when the main clause is in the past (*consecutio temporum*):[10]

(16) Pentsa-tu   zuen   mintza-tu-ko   nintze-la.
      think-PCP   PRT   speak-PCP-FUT   PRT-SR
                   3S>3S   1S
      'He thought that I would speak.'

1.3. Summary

The following table summarizes the tense-aspect oppositions with analytical verbs, i.e. verbs having no synthetical forms:

	present auxiliary	past auxiliary
inessive verbal noun	simple present (aspectually neutral)	imperfective past
participle	present perfect	perfective past
participle + -ko (-en)	future	future of the past
participle + -a(k), (+ -rik / -ta)	resultative	pluperfect

Table 2

Note that the opposition between simple present and present perfect (a temporal opposition) is parallelled by the opposition of imperfective and perfective aspect in the past.

2. Tense-aspect oppositions with synthetical verbs

We can conjugate synthetical verbs (enumerated above) directly by attaching person and tense markers to the verbal root. They may also be analytically construed. That means that we have an additional formal and functional opposition between such verbs construed synthetically and the same verbs construed analytically. As we shall see, some tenses and aspects cannot be expressed synthetically.

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[10] Sometimes normal future may be found in sentences like the following, if the event in the subordinate clause is still going to happen.

2.1. Synthetical construction

2.1.1. Present

The synthetical verb has a present-tense form which (just like the present tense of analytical verbs) is neutral with respect to the aspect opposition:

(17)   Ba-nago.
        ENC-stay:PRS.1S
        'I stay.'

In the present tense a synthetical verb is normally construed synthetically. This is the unmarked or default case.

2.1.2. Past

Analogously, a past tense can be formed which (contrary to the analytical form) is aspectually neutral, i.e. it can always be used, when we would otherwise have to decide between perfective and imperfective forms in the analytical construction:

(18)   Ba-nengoen.
        ENC-stay:PRT.1S
        'I stayed.'

Especially those dialects that have been under long and heavy Romance influence (e.g. the Eastern dialects of Lower Navarra) prefer the analytical construction in the past, whereas in the present tense, synthetically construed verbs may be found to some extent (even in potential and conditional forms).[11] The reason for this may be that in Romance the perfective-imperfective aspect distinction is obligatory in the past tense. In general, synthetical forms tend to disappear first in the past tense and last in the imperative. Note also that the verbs still showing synthetical conjugation are movement verbs or verbs with stative semantics, i.e. verbs that do not express actions or - more generally speaking - a change of situation. They are verbs where the perfective-imperfective aspect distinction only makes sense if special meanings are involved (e.g. 'to know' -> 'to come to know').

2.2. Analytical construction

Formally, the analytical construction of synthetical verbs is the same as for analytical verbs. As analytical forms and synthetical forms stand in opposition to each other, their semantic value (or 'function') is different.

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[11] The situation is slightly different in the Southern dialects (and consequently in Standard Basque), where synthetical forms are preferred in the past tense, as long as no aspectual recategorization of the mostly stative verbs is intended (e.g. 'to know' -> 'to come to know', cf. below).

2.2.1. Using present-tense auxiliaries

2.2.1.1. Present progressive

If a synthetical verb would normally be used synthetically, the use of the analytical construction in the present tense (present auxiliary + verbal noun) will express a specific aspectual meaning, in most cases progressive:

(19) Ego(i)-te-n   naiz.   *(instead of:* ba-nago 'I stay.')
      stay-NOM-IN   PRS.1S
      'I am staying.'

In an appropriate context it may also denote habituality.[12]

2.2.1.2. Present perfect

The present auxiliary combined with the participle is again used as a perfect:

(20) Egon   naiz.
      stay:PCP   PRS.1S
      'I have come.'

The perfect can only be formed analytically.

2.2.1.3. Resultative

The same holds for the resultative:

(21) Joan-a   da.
      go:PCP-IDV   PRS.3S
      'S/he is gone.'

Compare this sentence with the following in the present perfect:

(22) Joan   da.
      go:PCP   PRS.3S
      'S/he has (is) gone.'

This sentence can have a resultative meaning, but normally refers to an event in the near past (meaning e.g. 'S/he has gone (there) today.'), whereas *joana da* means something like: 'S/he is in the state of being gone.'

2.2.1.4. Future

In the modern language, the future can only be formed periphrastically by attaching the delimitative (or genitive) to the participle, as has been illustrated above:

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[12] There are less grammaticized ways of expressing progressive and habitual aspectuality, using the operator verbs *ari* ('to be occupied with') and *ohi* ('to be used to').

(23)   Joan-go/   (joan-en)   naiz.
        go:PCP-FUT   go:PCP-FUT   PRS.1S
        'I shall go.'

2.2.2. Using past-tense auxiliaries

When synthetically used, the synthetical verb is aspectually neutral in the past tense, as it is in the present. It does not interfere with the aspectual opposition between perfective and imperfective past, expressed by the inessive verbal noun and the participle respectively, both combined with a past tense auxiliary.

2.2.2.1. Imperfective past

Instead of the aspectually neutral form *(ba-)nindoan* ('I went.'), the following form is usually preferred, when the event is viewed as on-going at some point of reference or as iterative, i.e. imperfective:

(24)   Joa(i)-te-n   nintzen
        go-NOM-IN   PRT.1S
        'I went (was going).'

2.2.2.2. Perfective past

If the event is viewed as completed and punctual, i.e. perfective, the following analytical construction (the same as with analytical verbs) is preferred over the simple past:

(25)   Joan   nintzen.
        go:PCP   PRT.1S
        'I went/I left.'

2.2.2.3. Pluperfect

The pluperfect is always analytical:

(26)   Joan-a   nintzen.
        go:PCP-IDV   PRT.1S
        'I went / I left.'

2.2.2.4. Future of the past

Similarly, the future of the past is never anything but analytical:

(27)   Pentsa-tu   zuen   joan-go   nintze-la.
        think-PCP   PRT   go:PCP-FUT   PRT-SR
                     3S>3S   1S
        'He thought that I would come.'

2.3. Summary

The following table summarizes the tense-aspect oppositions of synthetical verbs. The differences with analytical verbs are highlighted:

	present	past
synthetical construction	*simple present (aspectually neutral)*	*simple past*
analytical construction:		
inessive verbal noun	*present progressive (habitual)*	imperfective past
participle	present perfect	perfective past
participle + *-ko* (*-en*)	future	future of the past
participle + *-a(k)*, (+ *-rik* / *-ta*)	resultative	pluperfect

Table 3 (for synthetical verbs only)

3. A word on mood

Although this article is primarily about tense and aspect in Basque, I shall deal briefly with mood as well in order to give a more complete picture of the whole.

3.1. Subjunctive

Except for the third person, the subjunctive is formally identical with the imperative. Basically, it is used in subordinate clauses that depend on a main clause with a verb of wishing or order. The event for which it is used is presented as non-real, but desired. Only the tense-aspect auxiliaries (*izan* and *ukan*) have special subjunctive forms. They are suppletive: for *izan*, the root -*di*- is used (grammarians speak of a subjunctive verb **edin*, which, of course, has no participle), for *ukan* the root -*za*- (grammarians speak of a subjunctive verb **ezan*):

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(28)  Nahi  dut      (bera/hura)   joan   dadi-n.
      want  PRS      s/he/that one  go     PRS.SBJ-SR
            3S<1S                          3S
      'I want him/her to go.' or lit.: 'that s/he goes.'
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Here *dadi-n* (subjunctive + subordinator) is used instead of *de-n* (*da* + *-n*, indicative + subordinator).

The following example shows the transitive *deza-n* (subjunctive + subordinator) instead of *du-en* (indicative + subordinator):

(29) Nahi   dut   (bera/hura)   egin   deza-n.
      want   PRS   s/he/that one   do   PRS.SBJ-SR
          3S<1S   3S<3S
      'I want him/her to do it.' *or lit.:* 'that s/he does it.'

The subjunctive is not used with the participle but with the non-finite verbal stem, which is homophonous with the participle if it ends with *-n*. If the verb has an *-i-* or *-tu*-participle (only the latter being productive), the difference becomes evident:

(30) (i) Ikus-*te*-n   du.
            see-NOM-IN   PRS.3S<3S
            'S/he sees (it).'

      (ii) Ikus-*i*   du.
            see-PCP   PRS.3S<3S
            'S/he has seen (it).'

      (iii) Ikus   deza-n.
            see   PRS.SBJ-SR
                 3S<3S
            '(I wish) that s/he sees (it).'[13]

This means that there is no aspectual opposition possible with the subjunctive.

If the main verb is in the past tense, the subjunctive in the subordinate clause is used in the past as well:

(31) Nahi   nuen   ikus   zeza-n.
      want   PRT   see   PRT.SBJ-SR
          1S>3S   3S>3S
      'I wished s/he would see / saw it.',
      'I wanted him/her to see (it).'*or* 'I wanted that s/he saw (it).'

3.2. Potential and conditional

If an event is viewed as only possibly occurring, the potential is used, i.e. the potential marker *-ke-* is inserted into the verb (synthetical or analytical):[14]

(32) (i) Ba-duzu.
          ENC-PRS.3S<2S
          'You have it.'

      (ii) Ba-du*ke*zu.
          ENC-POT.3S<2S
          'You may possibly have it.'

Inserted into past tense forms, *-ke-* marks the conditional, which is mainly used in the apodosis of unreal conditional clauses and thus corresponds to the conditional of Romance languages, or

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[13] The main clause may be left out elliptically.
[14] It should be noted in passing that the potential and conditional *-ke* is very often found with the verb in the subjunctive, a phenomenon that I call "subjunctive attraction".

of English; note that, in addition, in modern Basque the non-finite part of the analytical construction is marked for future:[15]

   (33)   Zu-re   plaza-n   (baldin) ba-nintz,[16]   (if-clause, protasis)
            2-GEN   place-IN (if)   ENC-SUP.1S

            egin-go   nuke.[17]   (then-clause, apodosis) ꞁ
            do:PCP-FUT COND.1S>3S
            'If I were in your place, I should do it.'

It is commonly thought (and philologically substantiable) that *-ke-* was originally a future marker. Due to the modal component of the future, it could develop into a mood marker, when a new analytical future emerged.

    The semantics of the delimitative makes us think that the analytical future was originally restricted to near future (event 'on the edge of' (delimitative!) occurrence).

4. Conclusion

We have seen that synthetical verbs show a set of tense-aspect oppositions that differ from the tense-aspect oppostions of analytical verbs. The former oppose an aspectually neutral, simple present to a progressive (habitual) one and have an aspectually neutral past tense that does not exist for analytical verbs.

    All synthetical verbs are old ones. The number of such verbs has been decreasing over the last centuries up to the point that in some dialects they have almost disappeared altogether. It is plausible to assume that before the first written sources, Basque had more synthetical verbs. It is even probable that the analytical construction is an innovation that came about in a (pre-) Romance language-contact situation, most probably originating from spoken Latin. The reason for such an assumption is the structural similarity with the *habeo-factum* perfect which is typical of vulgar (or spoken) Latin. The Latin construction, which is used instead of the simple past for resultative events, consists of the verb 'to have' (*habeo* 'I have', at that time pronounced something like /ajo/) and the participle (e.g. *factum* 'done', *habeo factum* 'I have done'). Due to language contact this construction has spread into adjacent Germanic and Slavic languages, being otherwise uncommon among the languages of the world which, so far, have not taken it over from European languages. The productive participle ending *-tu* corroborates the assumption that the Basque perfect construction comes from Latin.

    The evolution of the analytical present is comparable to what happens in quite a number of languages:[18] in order to denote progressive aspect, the verbal noun is used in a locative case (here the inessive) together with a verb meaning 'to be', i.e. 'to be in/at an action'. The specialty of Basque is that both 'to be' and 'to have' are used with the inessive verbal noun, according

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[15] In the dialects of the North-East and in older texts, the subjunctive is combined with *-ke-*, which is used with the verbal stem, if the construction is analytical. This is not the place to treat conditional clauses at length; for that matter, see Oyharçabal (1987).

[16] The suppositive (SUP) is a variant of the past without the ending *-(e)n*, used in if-clauses.

[17] A past conditional ('should have done') is formed by suffixing a (secondary) past tense marker (*-en*) on *-ke* (*egingo nukeen*).

[18] cf. Bybee/Dahl (1989).

to the actant structure of the verb.[19] This 'anomaly' with respect to other languages with a structurally similar progressive can be explained by the fact that the distinction of the two auxiliaries is necessary to mark the actant structure.

The progressive meaning gets lost with the decline of a regular opposition between analytical and synthetical forms.

The analytical construction revolutionized the tense-aspect system as a whole. New tense-aspect oppositions evolved (near past vs. remote past, perfective vs. imperfective etc.); a new analytical future was introduced (perhaps, originally, a near future), which came to stand in opposition to a potential future developing into a merely modal category (potential, conditional). Moreover, the auxiliary suppletion (*izan* vs. **edin* (intransitive, 'to be') and *ukan* vs. **ezan* (transitive, 'to have'), perhaps different verbs once) allowed for a regular distinction of indicative and subjunctive mood.

The following table gives a synoptic view of the tense-aspect system and its evolution. The small (and probably still decreasing) number of synthetical verbs are treated as relics from Classical Basque and therefore neglected under "Modern Basque":[20]

Stage 0	Stage 1	Stage 2
*Proto-Basque	Classical Basque	Modern Basque (neglecting S-verbs)
present (S)	present (S)	present
	progressive (A)	
	perfect (A)	perfect
	resultative (A)	(resultative)
past (S)	past (S)	
	past perfective (A)	past perfective
	past imperfective (A)	past imperfective
	pluperfect (A)	pluperfect
future (S,-*ke*-)	potential fut. (S,A)	(potential)
	near future (A)	future
fut. of the past (S,-*ke*-)	conditional (S,A)	conditional
	fut. of the past (A)	future of the past
	subjunctive (A)	subjunctive
	past subjunct. (A)	past subjunctive
	subjunct.-potent. (A)	
	subjunct.-condit. (A)	

Table 4: (S: synthetical construction, A: analytical construction)

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[19] 'to be' with intransitive verbs, i.e. verbs requiring an absolutive only, or absolutive and dative; 'to have' with transitive verbs, i.e. verbs requiring the ergative as well.

[20] They are indeed more abundant in the written standard than in most spoken varieties.

The present situation of Basque is somewhat in between stage 1 and 2, as it still shows some synthetically construed verbs, though less in the past tense. As already said, the reason for this may be the obligatory past perfective/imperfective distinction in the Romance contact languages. On the whole, the stage 2 system comes very near to the Romance system.

We can conclude that the change of the Basque tense-aspect system is contact-induced. The most significant step that made all the other steps follow was the introduction of the analytical construction, probably on the model of spoken Latin.

If we compare this evolution with what had happened in other spheres of Basque grammar, we find that the tense-aspect system is particularly innovative, Basque morphosyntax being otherwise very conservative.[21] A reason for this may be that tense-aspect oppositions have very concrete semantic meaning. This 'semantic load' makes bilingual speakers feel the necessity to transpose structures from one language into the other, all the more so as they found 'meaningful' material (e.g. a verb 'to have') which could be translated without much difficulty and thus be used as a basis of structural transpositions ('calques').

Abbreviations

ABS	absolutive	P	plural
COND	conditional	PCP	participle
ENC	enunciative	POT	potential
ERG	ergative	PRS	present
FUT	future	PRT	preterite
GEN	genitive	S	singular
IDV	individualizer	SBJ	subjunctive
IN	inessive	SR	subordinator
NOM	nominalizer	SUP	suppositive

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[21] Haase (1992) gives an account of contact-induced change throughout the grammar of Basque, and proposes explanatory concepts, such as 'semantic load' and 'translatability'.

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