

TENSE CATEGORIES AND THE POLYSEMOUS *-a* IN RAJI

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This paper compares the tense system in three Raji varieties and explains the semantics of the polysemous suffix -a in Purbiya Raji. The Raji variety spoken in Kumaun India differs significantly from the rest of the varieties in marking the tenses. It is argued that this suffix has multiple related meanings, such as past tense, perfective meaning in adverbial clauses, conditional and simultaneous meaning. It can be said that the polysemous suffix -a was related to two broad categories, viz. past and perfective, and conditional including simultaneous meaning. Out of these two, the semantics of the perfective meaning gradually extends to refer to the past time.

Keywords: tense, polysemy, perfect, conditional

1. The Raji language

Raji is an endangered TB language (ISO rji, glotolog: Raji 1240) spoken in Nepal, and also in India (Rastogi, 2012). It is primarily spoken in Surkhet, Bardiya, Kailali and Kanchanpur districts of western Nepal. The studies point out that there are three distinct dialects of Raji, viz. Naukule, Purbiya, and Barabandale (Epele et al., 2012) without referring precisely to the Raji variety spoken in Kumaun (India). The language is described as ‘threatened’ (van Driem, 2007). In Grierson and Konow’s classification (1909), Raji belongs to Jungali group within Western Subgroup of Complex Pronominalized languages within Himalayan section of TB languages. Noonan (2008) also noted that Raji belongs to the Central group of TB language family. He groups Raji with Kham group of languages and Kaiké spoken in the far-western Nepal. The classification of Raji as presented in Bradley (1997) is given in Figure 1.

Some preliminary evidence about the linguistic link between Raji and Raute is discussed in (Dhakal, 2021b). There are some studies associated with the Raji verbal morphology in India (Krishan, 2001; Rastogi, 2012). In addition, the information about the Barabandale is found in Khatri (2008),

and Bandhu et al. (2011). There are of course similarities across the varieties of Raji spoken in Nepal, but the detailed grammatical descriptions of all varieties of Raji are yet to come.

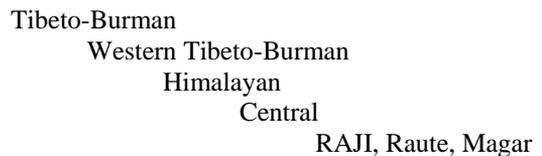


Figure 1: Genetic classification of Raji (Bradley 1997)

The speakers of Purbiya Raji live in a number of villages in Bardiya district including Sanoshree village. Some of the resources of the Purbiya Raji languages are available, such as the documentation of the oral genres (Dhakal, 2018), glossary (Dhakal, 2019), various uses of the suffix *-a* in the Purbiya Raji (Dhakal, 2020), and a descriptive grammar (Dhakal, 2021a).

The verbal morphology of the varieties of Raji has not been described in the comparative perspective in the studies mentioned above. The distinction of the Raji tense categories, and the analysis of the semantics of the tense marker *-a* in Raji is still lacking. This paper has explained the semantics of the tense marker *-a* substantiated by the corpus data comparing the tense categories of Raji in broad perspective.

The study is structured as follows: Section two outlines the description of the tenses in Raji varieties. The uses of polysemous suffix *-a* in Purbiya Raji is presented in section three. Similarly, some issues related to the distinction in the remoteness in the past tense is discussed in section four. The evidence from ‘The Frog Story’ is presented and analyzed in section 5 and 6 to analyse the semantics of the suffix *-a* in Purbiya

Raji. Finally, the conclusion of the article is given in section seven.

2. Raji tenses across Raji varieties

There are preliminary discussion in the tenses in Raji, viz. Krishan (2001) and Rastogi (2012) in Kumaun Raji, Khatri (2008) in Barabandale Raji Dhakal (2021a) in Purbiya Raji. Let's look at the references about the tense systems in the Raji varieties spoken in Kumaun (cf. Krishan (2001); and Rastogi (2012)).

Rastogi (2012) notes that there are three tense categories in Kumaun Raji. The present tense markers in the Kumaun Raji are /hĩ/ and /re, le/. Consider the following examples (all examples from Krishan, 2001, pp. 467-468). The present tense is marked with /hĩ/ (The original transcription and glossing maintained).

- (1) *na ise hĩ*
'I sleep'.
(2) *nani nhimi ise hĩ*
'We two sleep.'
(3) *nani ise hĩ*
'We (plural exclusive) sleep.'

The past tense is unmarked with singular subjects, but the plural subjects takes the suffix /he/

- (4) *nənu jaku ja-i he*
'You ate food'.
(5) *əhəi jaku ja-i he*
'They ate food'.

The future tense is marked with /ri/.

- (6) *na jaku ja ri*
'I will eat rice.'
(7) *nən jaku ja-ri*
'You (sg) will eat rice.'
(8) *ai jaku ja-ri*
'He will eat rice.'

The observations made by Rastogi is slightly different regarding the tense, aspect and mood in Kumaun Raji. Rastogi (2012, p. 56) mentions:

The verbal categories of this language are organized differently and they lack any category of tense in the strict sense. Raji verbs

can be divided into two groups- realis and irrealis. The realis particle /re/ and /ϕ/ are used in the sentences that have present or past time reference. It is important to note that Raji realis particle /re/ does not say anything about the time period occupied by the event, its initiation or termination, but simply implies that the event does happen.

The tense system in Rastogi (2012), and Krishan (2001) differ from the varieties spoken in Nepal in general and in the Purbiya Raji in particular. Although the tense marker *-h* occurs in the future tense in Purbiya Raji, the tense marking system in other tense systems are different compared to Kumaun Raji. However, the examples Krishan (2001) provides do not precisely resemble with the Purbiya Raji.

Consider examples to illustrate the tense system in Barabandale Raji (All examples are from Khatri, 2008).

- (9) *ŋa bɫaŋ dzaɦɫĩ*
ŋa bɫaŋ dza-ɦɫĩ
1SG rice eat-FUT
'I will eat rice.'

As explained by Khatri (2008), example (10), shows the same day non-past tense.

- (10) *ŋa bɫaŋ dzaki*
ŋa bɫaŋ dza-k-i
1SG rice eat-SD-NPST.1
'I eat rice.'

Example (11) shows the other day past tense.

- (11) *ŋa bɫaŋ dzakã*
ŋa bɫaŋ dza-k-ã
1SG rice eat-SD-PST.1
'I ate rice.'

Consider examples to illustrate the tense system in Purbiya Raji. Examples are from Dhakal (2021a).

- (12) *hon oŋka*
hon oŋ-ka
3SG come-PST.SG
'He came.'
(13) *hon keʈa dəi kui niŋsi*
hon keʈa dəi kui niŋ-si
that boy and dog sleep-PST.PL
'That boy and dog slept.'

- (14) *səttəlsij radza sija*
səttəlsij radza si-a
 Sattalsingh king die-2PST
 'Sattalsingh king died.' [SQ.323]
- (15) *nəwei dʰədza tsəikəŋ*
nəwei dʰədza tsəi-kə-ŋ
 new thread (scarf) need-NPST-3SG
 'New thread is needed.' [AW.6]

The research on Naukule Raji is in its early stage. The past is marked with *-kə* (16-17).

- (16) *ui nam nambə wajkə*
ui nam nam-bə waj-kə
 3SG house house-LOC reach-PST
 'He reached every house.'
- (17) *ŋa nambə swaki*
ŋa nam-bə swa-ki
 1SG house-LOC go-PRES
 'I go home.'

The examples presented in previous sections reveal a few things. Firstly, both the past and non-past tenses are marked by the suffix *-k* in all of the Raji varieties spoken in Nepal (viz. examples (10-11) for Barabandale Raji, and examples (16-17) for Naukule Raji marked with *-k* and example (12, 15) from Purbiya Raji), but is missing in the Kumaun Raji. The future tense *-h* is present in all of these varieties, but its state is not known in Naukule Raji. The presence of the tense marker *-a* is reported in Barabandale and in Purbiya Raji, but is not reported in Kumaun Raji.

3. Semantics of suffix *-a*

There are two past tenses in Purbiya Raji, viz. past tense marked with *-ka*, and *-a*. As mentioned above, the past tense *-a* is used to refer to the past activities. In addition, the suffix *-a* is also used for a number of other constructions.

3.1 Past tense

To begin with, *-a*, also realized as *-ja*, and *-ha*, is used to refer to the past events in non-finite clauses. It is glossed as the alternative (second) past tense '2PST' (18).

- (18) *səttəlsij radza sija*
səttəlsij radza si-a
 Sattalsingh kind die-2PST
 'Sattalsingh king died.' [SQ.323]

A number of examples are found in Raji in all narratives where the suffix *-a* is used to refer to the past tense.

3.2 Time adverbial clause

The suffix *-a* carries the perfective, conditional and simultaneity meanings in time adverbial clauses. The simultaneous converb is marked with the suffix *-a*, *-ha* in (19). The adverb follows the verb marked with this suffix.

- (19) *ŋa swaha nariu ɖeu rwaa*
ŋa swa-ha nariu ɖeu rwa-a
 1SG go-PERF while rain fall-2PST
 'It rained when I went.'

The actions overlap in the same time frame in the simultaneous clauses. The main action occurs within the time frame of the non-finite clause marked with *-ha* in (19).

The adverbials are used along with the perfective marker *-a* in the time adverbial clause. The meaning of 'perfective' in this case is related to anterior action as mentioned in Bybee et al. (1994, p. 61). In example (20), the action indicated by the verb *bər* 'grow' takes place earlier to *nəi* 'live, settle'.

- (20) *gamə bərja dzʰəi tʰənkə tʰənkə nəisi*
gamə bər-ja dzʰəi tʰən-kə
 village grow-PERF later place-GEN
tʰən-kə nəi-si
 place-GEN sit-PST.PL

'After the villages grew (expanded), they lived in different places.' [BIO.M.41-42]

The time adverb *dzʰəi* 'later' is used in (21). In this case, the clause marked with *-ja* signals that it takes place earlier to the action given in the main clause. The meaning is 'compared to sleeping, eating takes place first' in (21).

- (21) *bəʃa dzaʔa dzʰəi ŋa niŋkə*
bəʃa dzaʔ-a dzʰəi ŋa niŋ-kə
 rice eat-PERF later 1SG sleep-PST.1SG
 'After eating rice, I slept.'

The adverb *dhəu* 'before' is used in (22). In this case, the verb is marked with *-ja*.

- (22) *ɲa pʰərkeja ɖe oa*
ɲa pʰər-k-e-ja ɖe o-a
 1SG return-NTVZ-PERF rain come-2PST
 'It rained after I had returned.'

The adverb *nariulə* 'immediately' is used in (23). It shows that the action of the main clause begins immediately after the completion of the clause marked with *-a*.

- (23) *ɖeu roha nariulə bʰjaŋkʰa nokʰkasi*
ɖeu ro-a nariulə bʰjaŋkʰa
 rain fall-PERF immediately frog
nokʰkasi
 cry-PST-PL
 'The frogs immediately cried after the rain fell.'

- (24) *ɲa naja nariulə hon namha oŋka*
ɲa nəi-a nariulə hon
 1SG sleep-PERF immediately 3SG
nam-ha oŋ-ka
 house-LOC come-2PST
 'He came home immediately after I slept.'

As discussed in examples (20-24), the verbs marked with *-a*, *-ha*, *-ja* show the perfective, and simultaneous meaning. Both of these are related to the time in relation to the main clause.

3.3 Conditional clauses

The conditional clause is marked with the suffix *-a* in Purbiya Raji (25-26).

- (25) *bəju sija era karhəi*
bəju si-ja era kar-h-əi
 father die-COND boy weep-FUT-3SG
 'If father dies, the boy will weep.'
- (26) *naŋ oŋkəi ɲa boŋa kəhəi*
naŋ oŋ-kəi ɲa boŋa kə-h-əi
 2SG come-COND 1SG forest go-FUT-1SG
 'If you come, I will go to forest.'

The hypothetical conditional clause is formed with *dzʰəi* 'if'.

- (27) *bəgʰa mojaŋ wa dzʰəi ɲa brokʰəini*
bəgʰa mo-jaŋ o-a dzʰəi
 tiger see-NMLZ become-COND if
ɲa brokʰ-əini
 1SG run-COND.SG
 'I would run if I saw the tiger.'

With the examples presented in the preceding sections, it seems that the past tense marker *-a* has relations with the non-finite forms, such as perfective marker *-a* as in (20-21) and the perfective marker in adverbial clause. There is a one more reason for this as well. For example, all the tense markers, such as future, present, and past tense *-ka* agrees with the subject whereas the suffix *-a* does not. The tense suffix *-a* seems to have been developed out of these suffixes.

4. Remoteness in tense

The question now is how we can explain the semantics of the verbal suffix *-a* in the Pubriya Raji. Is it more convincing to explain this as 'the distal past tense' as explained by Khatri (2008, p. 31) in the context of the Barabandale Raji.

In order to explain the semantics of the verbal suffix *-a*, let's see how the distal (or distant) past tense is explained in typological context. Typologically, the tense categories in the past tense is based on the remoteness of time. For example, Comrie (1985, pp. 95-96) mentions the distinction between tenses:

The most remote past tense is described as referring 'to actions done any time earlier', though with the proviso that 'sometimes an event of only a few weeks ago will be expressed with the distant past suffix'...; the least remote of the three past tenses is used for earlier on today...; the middle form is used for time from yesterday back to a week ago...; while the third, most remote term is used typically for actions not earlier than some months previously.

Comrie (1985, p. 98) provides examples in which tense distinction is made in other languages. Such distinctions are: very recent past within the last couple of days; within the last few days; weeks or months ago; distant past etc.

We find similar description of 'remoteness of tense' is discussed in Dahl (1985, pp. 120-122). Dahl (1985, p. 113) argues that in a narrative context, and the first sentence often provides 'temporal anchoring for the rest of the discourse'.

Dahl (1985, p. 113) also argues that there are a number of languages in which past tense is

indicated by some verbal affixes, such as perfective (PFCT), perfect (PFV), and experiential (EXPER). Dahl (1985, p. 113) adds, “If there is one or more distinctions of remoteness in a TMA system, and reference can be made to objective time measures, one of the distinctions will be between 'more than one day away' and 'not more than one day away'.” Since there are two past tense markers in the Purbiya Raji, the question is whether the two past tense markers show the relation of remoteness, or any other relations.

5. Evidence from ‘The Frog Story’

We showed that the polysemous suffix -a is used for multiple meanings in the Purbiya Raji. We also showed that when the remoteness of tense is explained, they refer to the time categories. So, a discussion is made in this section about how the suffix -a is used in ‘A Frog Story’, a short narrative. The text is mainly narrated in the past tense and the sentences in it have been chunked into a total of 53 clauses and phrases. The verb forms that occur in this semi-natural text are given in table (1)¹.

Table 1: Finite verb forms in ‘Frog Story’

	Verbal inflectional categories	No. of occurrence
1	Past tense with -ka	2
2	Copular clauses	3
3	Past tense with -a	15
4	Past tense without -k (only -si marked clause)	13
5	Negative clauses without -ka	2
6	Non-finite clauses (and phrases)	19

Since this narrative was chunked into small parts of clauses as included in Dhakal (2018), and phrases in the original transcription, the same is maintained for the counting of the chunks. As we see in table (1), there are some clauses with the copula, and with non-finite verb forms. When we take this short narrative to account for the occurrence of the past tense markers in Raji, there are a couple of practical things to take into considerations. Firstly, the past tense markers are not obligatorily present in Raji. The past tense is

also deleted in some contexts, but the discourse situation informs us about the time reference of the narrative. In example (31), there is the absence of the past tense marker -ka, but the discourse context informs us that the sentence refers to the past time. In example (28), the past tense marker is deleted in a negative clause.

- (28) *hon b^hen^hka ni^hma*
hon b^hen^hka ni^h-ma
 that frog sleep-PST.NEG
 'The frog did not sleep.' [FS.4]

Similarly, the verb *darsoma* ‘find-PST.NEG’ in the clause at a place in the text. The inflection of copula contains neither the past tense marker -ka, nor -a.

- (29) *səŋg^hə səŋg^hə hiini*
səŋghə səŋghə hiini
 friend friend COP.PST
 'They were friends.' [FS.1]

The copular clauses occur only in three places in this short narrative. The other two places where the copular clauses occur in the clause-final position are *hō* ‘COP.NPST.SG’ (FS.2), *hej* ‘COP.NPST’ (FS.20, FS.22) and *hō* ‘COP.NPST.SG’ (FS.42).

There are of course the clauses marked with -ka in this text as in example (30).

- (30) *boŋakə ts^heu həi tɔŋkasi*
boŋa-kə ts^heu həi tɔŋ-ka-si
 forest-GEN edge towards reach-PST-PL
 '(They) reached to the edge of the forest.'
 [FS.14]

This is the only place where the past tense marker -ka occurs in this narrative.

6. Semantics of -a in Purbiya Raji

We presented a number of issues related to the uses of the verbal suffix -a in the preceding sections. When we look at this text, there fifteen places where the clauses are marked by the suffix -a. This is greater in frequency than the past tense marked with the suffix -ka. There are a number of sentences in which the past tense is realized without the tense

¹This is a short story narrated by Mr. Bhim Bahadur Raji of Raji Tole, Sanosri, Bardiya. The stimuli ‘Frog, where are you?’ by Mayer (1969).

marker. They occur in a total of thirteen times. If we lumped these two categories (viz. past tense marked with *-ka*, and the past tense realized without *-ka*, this is almost the same as the finite clauses marked with *-a*).

Let's now discuss the use of these tenses with the examples from the text entitled 'Frog Story'. Despite the fact that the events occur in the sequential order, the speaker switches between these tense markers. The text begins with the copula sentences (the first two sentences). The speaker makes use of the past tense without *-ka* (31).

- (31) *hon keṭa dḁi kui niḡ-si*
hon keṭa dḁi kui niḡ-si
 that boy and dog sleep-PST.PL
 'That boy and dog slept.' [FS.3]

Seven clauses are marked with the suffix *-si* alone. Despite the fact that the tense marker *-ka* is deleted in the past tense, the discourse context conveys us the meanings of the past tense. The speaker switches to the use of the marker *-a* in the clauses that follow. The speaker makes use of the suffix *-a* in the next clause.

- (32) *n^həu hon dḁḡ hḁiṭna mus ṭoḡa*
n^həu hon dḁḡ hḁiṭna
 and.then that hole from
mus ṭoḡ-a
 mouse come.out-2PST
 'And then the mouse came out of the hole.'
 [FS.25]

The speaker makes use of the suffix *-kaso* in the next clause which reads like unmarked in the information.

- (33) *kuiḁna k^hekkaso*
kui-kḁna k^hek-kaso
 dog-DAT drive.away-PST.3PL.3SG
 '(They) drove away the dog.' [FS.32]

The cases of how the speaker switches between the past tense marked with *-ka*, and *-a* is less clear. Let's consider the examples (34-35).

- (34) *hon kuiḁna tsumṭna rapa*
hon kui-kḁna tsum-ṭna rap-a
 that dog-DAT hold-SEQ cross-2PST
 'Having held the tree, (the boy) crossed the river.' [FS.44]

- (35) *bistarei ḁa ts^heuha ṭoḡkasi*
bistarei ḁa ts^heu-ha ṭoḡ-ka-si
 slowly hat edge-LOC come.out-PST-PL
 'Slowly, (they) reached the edge of the forest.'
 [FS.45]

It is to be noted that the suffixes *-ṭ*, and *-ṭna* both are used as sequential marker in Raji. As explained in earlier sections, all the events that occur in this short narrative show that the events are in sequential order. Additionally, the speaker switches back and forth between the past tense marker *-ka*, and the next past tense marker *-a* in this text. It is difficult to claim that these two tense markers in Raji can hardly be interpreted as past and distant past.

Bybee et al. (1994, p. 85) remarks, "Another indication of the similarity between past and perfective is the considerable historical and comparative evidence showing that simple past and perfective develop from the same lexical sources and through a stage of signaling anteriority". Bybee et al. (1994, p. 81) describes the development from "anterior along their diachronic path is the change from anterior to past or perfective". This is also convincing in the case of Raji in which the perfective meaning is extended to the past tense. Similarly, Heine and Kuteva (2002, p. 4) note, "Prepositions often develop into conjunctions, temporal conjunctions tend to give rise to causal or concessive conjunctions, demonstrative determiners develop into definite articles or relative clause markers, verbal perfect inflections may become past tense markers."

The issue that the past tense *-a* is related to the perfective meaning is explained in the previous sections. A question that is still unanswered is why the speaker switches between the past tense marked with *-ka*, and the past tense *-a*. Further investigation is needed for this. A discourse approach (cf. Longacre, 1993) to the description of this issue may further explain the phenomenon.

7. Conclusion

Leaving aside the Naukule Raji, the comparison of the tense markers in three Raji varieties show that the Kumaun Raji differs from the other varieties in marking the tense categories. All of these varieties have the past tense marked with *-ka*. The suffix *-a*

is analyzed in only Barabandale and Naukule Raji. In the tense categories, the suffix *-a* is interpreted as a distal tense marker (in other day tense) in Khatri (2008). The examples from corpus show that this suffix has multiple functions in Purbiya Raji, such as marking the time adverbial clauses, converb clauses, and conditional clauses. Since the clauses marked with *-ka*, and *-a* appear in between in narrating a texts in which the events are in sequential order, it shows that the suffix *-a* is used alongside with the tense marked with *-ka*. The text evidence shows that the non-finite verb form also appears in the finite verbal paradigm. The past tense marker *-a* does not inflect for person, number whereas *-ka* inflects for number, and honorificity. It seems that the tense marker *-a* develops parallel with the past tense marker *-ka*.

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