

# Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe

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- *From:* "Douglas G. Kilday" <fufluns@xxxxxxxxxxx>
  - *Date:* Tue, 15 Nov 2005 19:49:39 -0000
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"Neeraj Mathur" <neemathur@xxxxxxxxxxx> wrote ...

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> "Douglas G. Kilday" <fufluns@xxxxxxxxxxx> wrote ...

>>

>> I'm not sure how realistic "mass migration and mobility" is for medieval  
>> civilians.

>

> I was thinking in particular of the movements of Germanic peoples from the  
> 5th century on; when do things settle down, as it were?

Well, you've got me there. I can't put an end on "mass migration", but I  
would still question the applicability of "mass mobility" during  
non-affluent times.

>>> I can see the second stage as being consistent with a general movement  
>>> towards higher analysis in the languages in question: the preterite is  
>>> abandoned because of its 'synthetic' morphology.

>>

>> Aaugh, how Jespersenish! Much more plausible is devaluation of the  
>> "normal"

>> unmarked form (the simple preterite) followed by atrophy of its usage  
and

>> eventual abandonment for the "emphatic" marked form (the compound past).

>> But eventually new devices for emphasis must be introduced, and  
eventually

>> the "compound" is phonetically reduced to a "synthetic" inseparable  
form.

>> And the wheel rolls on. The notion of "progress" is no more appropriate

>> to

>> language than it is to Sisyphus.

>

> I'm not sure this is different from what I was thinking, despite the  
> inadequacies of my ability to phrase myself. I do not conceive of  
'progress'

> in language change. Rather, I have noticed that IE languages generally

> speaking move towards analysis, with more rigid word orders, analytic

> constructions and the loss of inflections. This can be seen from the

Celtic

## Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe

- > to the Indo–Iranian branches. Only Slavic and Baltic seem to preserve a rich
- > set of inflections; Tocharian was adding cases to the system before it died
- > too (and Greek and Sanskrit likely filled out verbal paradigms). I'm aware
- > that analytic languages may tend to become agglutinative; I've seen some
- > ingenious descriptions of French in these terms.

Umbrian also developed a secondary case–system by grammaticalizing postpositions, and even conservative Oscan had a neo–locative of this form. Much of what happens with case–marking seems to depend on the mechanics of stress and the placement of adpositions. Nevertheless I think the driving force behind the replacement of case–marking mechanisms is the substitution of marked "emphatic" forms for unmarked "normal" ones. This fits well with my view of laziness as the principal engine of linguistic change. The lazy person uses superfluous emphasis to draw attention to his utterances, since it requires less effort than clever phrasing, or for that matter actually doing something notable. Over time, emphatic expressions gradually crowd out normal ones.

I don't know the details about Tocharian, but the P–Italic languages had word–initial stress and allowed postposed adpositions, conditions favorable for developing new case–inflections. Classical Latin had "penultimate law" stress and only unproductive relics of postpositions (<mecum>, <tantisper>, etc.), and we know what became of its case–system. In French, expressions like "je ne le connais pas" which are agglutinative (or even polysynthetic?) result from word–final stress in the old semantic "words".

- > So the question becomes, why is the preterite unmarked in relation to the
- > compound past? I would suggest that the mechanics of the process, their
- > instigation, and their result are compatible with the general move towards
- > analysis that IE is undergoing. (It's also a bit problematic to talk about
- > their being phonetically recombined into a new synthetic, inseparable
- form;
- > this does not seem to be happening in these languages, where adverbs etc.
- > force separation.)

In Germanic and Romance at least, the simple preterite was established long before the compound past (or compound "perfect") came into frequent use, so the former was the normal unmarked way of denoting the past. Again, I don't see an underlying "move towards analysis"; it is a move towards replacement of the normal by the emphatic, leading eventually to devaluation of the emphatic into the normal, and the necessity of devising a new emphatic.

Whether the compound form becomes inseparable depends on the mechanics of stress and the conventions of auxiliary placement. We should note that the modern Western Romance verb is quite as inflectionally complex, quite as "synthetic", as the Latin verb. The WR future and conditional arose from Vulgar Latin periphrastic expressions involving postposed forms of <habere>, which were grammaticalized (probably quite early in the WR dialects, if not already in VL) to produce new verbal paradigms not found in classical Latin.

## Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe

- >>> Does this sound reasonable? If so, what do we make of American English:
- >>> is
- >>> its development completely unrelated? (The aspect system of English is,
- >>> of
- >>> course, significantly different from anything on the continent; when does
- >>> this develop?)
- >>
- >> When English-speakers started adopting periphrastic expressions used by
- >> native Insular Celtic-speakers in their ESL, leading to the progressive
- >> aspect?
- >
- > Sounds sensible; then again, the periphrastic forms in Celtic (Welsh is the
- > one I know best) do not exist in an aspectual contrast with inflected forms;
- > they have replaced them (in the present at least). Were they once in an
- > aspectual distinction?

I don't know, but I don't think it matters to the theory. What matters is that English-speakers (in the theory) picked up expressions like "I am on going to London" from Celtic ESL-speakers, and this new form of conveying the immediate present ("I am a-going" > "I'm going") was eventually interpreted as marking an aspectual distinction in English.

- > Does anybody know the process, or the appropriate literature, on the
- > development of periphrastic presents in Indo-Aryan? Hindi for example has
- > two presents, both periphrastic, with an aspectual distinction; I wonder
- how
- > this arose.

That's something I know absolutely nothing about, unfortunately.

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- *Follow-Ups:*

- ◆ *Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe*  
◇ *From: Nath Rao*

- *References:*

- ◆ *Past Tenses in Western Europe*  
◇ *From: Neeraj Mathur*
- ◆ *Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe*  
◇ *From: Dik T. Winter*
- ◆ *Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe*  
◇ *From: Neeraj Mathur*

Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe

◆ ***Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe***

◇ *From:* Neeraj Mathur

- Prev by Date: ***Re: Linguistic Agonies***
- Next by Date: ***Re: Linguistic Agonies***
- Previous by thread: ***Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe***
- Next by thread: ***Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe***
- Index(es):
  - ◆ ***Date***
  - ◆ ***Thread***