

EXPRESSING PAST ACTIONS AND STATES IN BENGALI*

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The aim of this paper is to show which tenses are used to describe past actions and states in Bengali. Our conclusions are based on the analysis of text by four Bengali authors and on descriptions introduced in some Bengali grammars.

Key words: past actions and states, tense, preterite, past imperfect, pluperfect, past habitual, perfect

Each event (action or state) is performed in space and time. It is the moment of utterance, which serves as a basis for locating an event in time. When an event precedes the moment of utterance, it is classified as past; when it takes place in the moment of utterance, it is considered present; when it follows the moment of utterance, it is classified as future. In language, a grammatical time/tense is used to locate an event in relation to the moment of utterance, that is, to some other time. Therefore, an event which took place before the moment of utterance is usually described by the past tense, an event which takes place in the moment of utterance is described by the present tense and the event which will take place after the moment of utterance is, as a rule, described by the future tense. However, the usage of tenses need not always correspond to time: 'The relation of time to tense is far from being one-one.'¹

For instance, in Bengali, as in many other languages, the past can be expressed by the present tense – the historical present:

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¹SMITH, N. V. *Grammaticality, Time and Tense*, p. 39.

- (1) *syār oyālṭār ryāle 1595 khriṣṭābde ekṭi abhiyāne yān. se abhiyāner par 1596- e tini ābār larens kemis nāme ekjanke elḍorāḍor sandhāne pāṭhān. tārpar śeṣbār 1617 sālē mrityur ekbachar āge tini nījei ābār sei sandhāne giyechilen.* (PM47) ‘In 1595 A.C. Sir Walter Raleigh “conducts” an expedition. After this expedition he again “sends” a man named Lawrence Kemis to search for El Dorado in 1598. Then in 1617, one year before his death, he himself “had gone” again to search for the last time.’

A future event, especially one which is just on the point of taking place, but also one which is not to be performed in the immediate future, can be described by the present imperfect:

- (2) *āmi ekṣuni āschi.* (SG37) ‘“I am coming” at once.’
 (3) *ekṭu pare yācchi.* (SG3) ‘“I am going” a little later.’
 (4) *āgāmi sambār āmi raṇajayke biye karchi.* (SG5) ‘Next Monday “I am marrying” Ranajay.’

It follows that the choice of a tense is not determined only by an objective reality, that is, by locating an event or state in time in relation to the moment of utterance, but also by other factors. The speaker can apply his or her subjective decision how to describe an event. However, he or she always decides in accordance with the rules of a given language.

The choice of tense is also governed by the grammatical rules of the language, for instance, by the sequence of tenses in English (he said he would go there tomorrow), or by the obligatory use of the past habitual in the conditional sentence in Bengali:

- (5) *ei ghare ekhan anya kon meye thākle, tākeo tumi cumu khete cāite?* (SG9) ‘If some other girl had stayed in this room, would you have also wanted to kiss her?’

Thus the situation in Bengali confirms Smith's conclusion that ‘each morpho-syntactic tense has a “default” meaning.... but this default meaning can in every case be overruled by either co-text or context: by linguistic or pragmatic factors.’²

²SMITH, N. V. *Grammaticality, Time and Tense*, p. 39.

The location of an event as anterior to the moment of utterance, simultaneous with the moment of utterance or posterior to the moment of utterance can be emphasised or described more precisely by time adverbials from the lexical meanings of which the past (yesterday, before, last year), the present (today, now, this year)³ or the future (tomorrow, then, next year) follow.

However, the present tense need not refer just to the moment of utterance, that is, to one point on the time axis; rather a wide period can be considered as the present. When classifying an event as present, the stress is laid on the fact that the event takes place in the present irrespective of how long it is being performed and when it started to be performed. For instance, the sentence *Gītā gata tin bachar dhare kalkātāy āche*. Gita 'is' in Calcutta during the past three years is considered as present and therefore, it is expressed by the present tense in spite of the fact that the event began three years ago, that is, in the past – at that time Gita began to live in Calcutta. This situation, however, lasts to the present. The same tense is used for describing this situation, for example, in Slovak: *Gítá žije v Kalkate tri roky*, but in English it is expressed by the present perfect: Gita has lived in Kalkata during the past three years.⁴

The continuous action begun in the past and extending into the present described by the present imperfect tense also belongs to the present:

(6) *āmi kayekdin dhare ekṭā kathā bhābchi*. 'I am thinking' about a matter for several days.

(7) *āpni kabe theke abhinay karchen?* Since when 'are you acting'? (Smith 103)

Similarly, the action in the sentence *pratidin āmi iskule yāi*, 'I go' to school every day is considered as present because it takes place also in the present, although the adverbial *pratidin* 'every day' indicates that it took place in the past as well.

Therefore, any action which includes the moment of utterance is considered present irrespective of how far into the past its beginning reaches. That is why the present perfect also belongs among present tenses:

(8) *anekṣaṇ basiye rekhechen, syār?* (PM22) 'Have you been sitting' for a long time, sir?

³ The adverbs the lexical meaning of which signals the present have a very wide usage. They can connect with the present, the past as well as the future tense: *ekhan āsche* – he is coming now, *ekhan eseche* he has come now, *ekhan āsbe* he will come now.

⁴ Sometimes the necessity to translate examples into another language with different grammatical rules can make the explanation a little unclear.

(9) *ye mereche se hayto ekhano bāser dotalātei rayeche*. (SG39) The one who has hit /me/ perhaps still stays ('has stayed') on the second floor of the bus.

Any past action took place before the moment of utterance and does not include this moment (*āmi okhāne gelām* – I went there), whereas a future action will take place after the moment of utterance and will not include this moment (*āmi okhāne yāba* – I will go there).

However, it seems that from the historical point of view it was not the location of an event in relation to the moment of utterance that was primary; instead, it was the speaker's subjective viewing of an event as perfective or imperfective that was of primary significance. A number of authors have demonstrated that a tense system has been established only secondarily, after establishing aspectual distinctions.

In Indian languages, for instance, Lienhard⁵ observes that 'the rebuilding of NIA verbal systems, after the almost complete destruction of the old system of tenses in the course of the MIA period, proceeded first (that is, in the early NIA period) by establishing aspectual distinctions, to which the refinements of tense (and mood) were only later added.'⁶

The relationship between perfectiveness and imperfectiveness in NIA languages and tenses which are connected with this category has been well shown by Masica who claims:

The first aspectual feature to be marked, theoretically and also historically in IA, is Perfectivity opposed initially merely to (unmarked) Non-Perfectivity, represented by the plain stem, which could be used not only for 'non-completed' (imperfective) action but (with or without further Tense-indication) for action not yet begun (future or hypothetical). Even without Tense-specification, Perfective and Non-Perfective are naturally linked to past and non-past time implication respectively.⁷

Masica summarizes the general development of aspectual oppositions in New Indo-Aryan languages in following figure.⁸

⁵ LIENHARD, according to MASICA, C.P. *The Indo-Aryan languages*, p. 262.

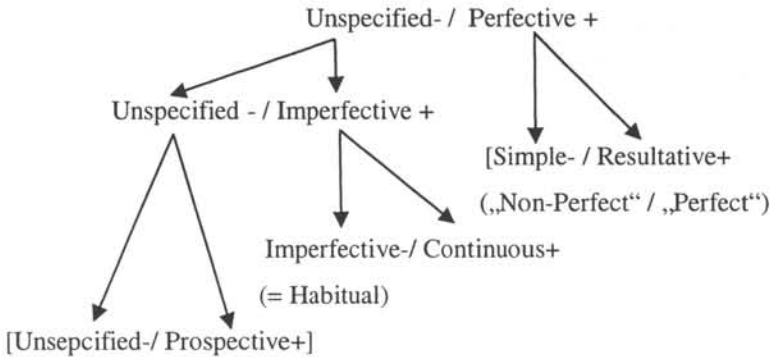
⁶ Similar situation can be found in some other languages. For instance, according to ILJISH, B. A. *History of the English Language*, p. 28, the Germanic languages originally did not have tenses; there were only aspects, from which the tenses of strong verbs with ablaut mutation developed.

⁷ MASICA, C. P. *The Indo-Aryan languages*, p. 272.

⁸ MASICA, C. P. *The Indo-Aryan languages*, p. 277.

+ = 'marked' member of opposition

- = 'unmarked' member of opposition



(Adapted from Masica 1990, 277)

Although Masica considers the development of aspectual oppositions, the particular finite verbal forms traditionally considered as tenses can be introduced to his figure. The perfective marks completed actions, logically past ones, while the unspecified includes incompleted actions, that is, present and future ones. The unspecified imperfective has split into the present imperfective (habitual) *kari* and the present continuous *karitechī/karchī*.⁹ The perfective is divided into 'non-perfect' *karitām/kartām* and 'perfect' *kariyāchī/karechī*, *kariyāchilām/karechilām*. Masica points out that: 'Indication of the Continuous in the past was then typically achieved through symmetrical use of a Past Tense-marking auxiliary, contrasting with the Tense-unspecified {-t-} forms that still stood for [past] Habitual/Contrafactive.'¹⁰

In this way eight tenses have been gradually established in Bengali: simple present, present imperfect, present perfect, preterite, past imperfect, pluperfect, past habitual and future. Some authors introduce ten tenses (Page¹¹ includes future imperfect: *karite thākiba/ karte thākba* and future perfect *kariyā thākiba/ kare thākba*), or even twelve tenses. (The frequentative imperfect *karite thākitām/ karte thāktām* and frequentative perfect *kariyā thākitām/ kare thāktām* are sometimes added.)

⁹ The verbal form (or suffix) preceding the sign / is in the *sādhū bhāṣā*, the literary form of Bengali, and the verbal form (or suffix) following after it is in the *calit bhāṣā*, the colloquial form of Bengali.

¹⁰ MASICA, C. P. *The Indo-Aryan languages*, p. 273.

¹¹ PAGE, S. *Introduction to Colloquial Bengali*, p. 152.

According to Bykova, 'The abundance of tense forms in Bengali is connected with the fact that all the grammatical categories find expression outside the verbal stem.'¹² Besides the root morpheme, which bears the lexical meaning of the verb, the finite verbal form consists of an aspect-marking grammatical morpheme followed by a tense-marking grammatical morpheme + personal endings. As a matter of fact, designations of finite verbal forms often include information about the aspect as well as the tense (for instance, present perfect, past imperfect). It seems that here, contrary to the historical point of view, the location of an event on the time axis in relation to the moment of utterance is basic, which is then specified according to the subjective viewing of the speaker (as perfect, continuous or habitual).¹³

As stated earlier, the aim of this paper is to show which tenses are used to describe events (actions or states) which took place in the past, that is, before the moment of utterance in Bengali.

As we have seen, tenses locate the time in relation to the moment of utterance. Although there is only one past time there are four finite verbal forms traditionally called past tenses in Bengali: preterite (*karilām/karlām*), pluperfect (*kariyāchilām/karechilām*), past imperfect (*karitechilām/karchilām*), and past habitual (*karitām/kartām*). These tenses do not only locate an action or state to the past but also express different perspectives of the speaker 'about the relevant way to describe the event'.^{14 15}

The fact that these tenses belong to the same category as regards to locating events on the time axis, that is, that all of them describe an action or state which took place in the past, is formally indicated by the marker of the past tense – suffix *-il-* /*-l-* and particular personal endings which are the same in all past tenses. In regards to the past habitual, its appurtenance to past tenses is

¹² BYKOVA, E. M. *The Bengali Language*, p. 85.

¹³ Some authors consider habituality as the third aspect; others consider it as a mode of verbal action.

¹⁴ SALABERRY, R. Tense Aspect in Verbal Morphology, In *Hispania*, p. 559.

¹⁵ Various authors can differ somewhat as to the names of these tenses; for instance Bykova (op. cit.) calls them preterite, pluperfect, past imperfect, frequentative; Svetovidova (op. cit.) uses the names past general, past non-resultative, past continuous, past habitual; Zbavitel (op. cit.) names them simple past, past perfect, past continuous, and past frequentative; Smith (op. cit.) calls them simple past, past perfect, past continuous, and conditional-past habitual; Radice (op. cit.) uses the designations simple past, past continuous, past perfect, and habitual past; Page (op. cit.) uses the names past simple, past imperfect, past perfect, and past frequentative; and Aleksejeva (op. cit.) designates them as the past narrative, past perfect, past continuous, and the past habitual tense.

indicated by personal endings which are identical with personal endings of the rest of past tenses (with the exception of the 2nd person familiar) while the marker *-it-/t-* signals that the finite verbal form expresses a habitual or frequentative action or state in the past.

As far as the way of forming of past tenses is concerned they can be divided into two groups.

The first group consists of preterite and past habitual in which the marker of the past tense (*-il-/l-* in preterite, *-it-/t-* in past habitual) is connected to the verbal root and then it is followed by personal endings: *kar-il-ām/kar-l-ām*, *kar-it-ām/kar-t-ām*.¹⁶

The second group includes the past imperfect which results from the fusion of the conjunctive ending in *-ite/0* with the past of the verb *āch-* 'to be': *karite-chil-ām/kar-chil-ām*, and pluperfect that results from the fusion of the conjunctive ending in *-i(y)ā/e* with the past of the verb *āch-* 'to be', *kariyā-chil-ām/kare-chil-ām*.¹⁷

Bykova¹⁸ and Radice¹⁹ also include the present perfect among the past tenses. They apparently take into consideration its main role to describe an action or state that took place in the past although its result often belongs to the present. However, the present perfect formally belongs among present tenses as it is formed with the help of the present form of the auxiliary verb *āch-* 'to be' and has personal endings which are identical with personal endings of other present tenses. Sometimes it includes the moment of utterance.²⁰

¹⁶ Here BYKOVA, E. M., op. cit., p. 85 speaks about suffixal tenses, while ZOGRAF, G. A., op. cit., p. 210 calls them secondary forms in contradistinction to primary forms in which the personal endings are connected directly to the root, for example, in the simple present *kar-i*.

¹⁷ BYKOVA, E. M., op. cit., p. 86 speaks about the compound tense in the case of pluperfect. She points out the fact that the past imperfect form has lost its compound character. The auxiliary verb *āch-* has undergone phonetic changes and has required the meaning of a suffix: *-chil-* in the past imperfect. This suffix took upon itself the function of indicating the imperfectness of an action, its continuity. In note 74 on page 170 she adds that imperfect forms 'may be treated as intermediate between suffixal and compound forms, as a combination of the verbal stem and an auxiliary verb. According to all the students of Bengali, these forms are not historically connected with the *-ite-* form.'

¹⁸ BYKOVA, E.M., op. cit., p. 85.

¹⁹ RADICE, W. *Teach Yourself Bengali*, p. 123.

²⁰ But, for instance, GUPTA, p. 94, in contradistinction to other authors of Bengali grammars, introduces just two past tenses: past indefinite (*āmi giyāchilām*) and past continuous (*āmi yāitechilām*). He claims, that there is no use of past perfect in Bengali. He does not introduce the preterite, neither in exercises, and the English preterite

The existence of four past tenses in Bengali indicates that a speaker can also express something else in addition to locating the actions and states on the time axis.

By the analysis of texts by four Bengali writers (Premendra Mitra, Mānik Bandjopādhyāy, Śīrṣendu Mukhopādhyāy, and Sunīl Gaṅgopādhyāy)²¹ consisting of 15, 000 words each we tried to find out the frequency of specific past tenses use in Bengali, and this also in comparison with the frequency of the other tenses used in the text. We also tried to find out how these tenses are used. Moreover, in order to get a more complex picture, we made the analysis of all verbal forms, finite as well as non-finite, in the book by Premendra Mitra Ghanādāke bhoṭ din.²²

Premendra Mitra:

The total number of words is 21,511

Tenses:

Present	simple	571	10.4%
	perfect	305	5.6%
	imperfect	188	3.4%
Past	preterite	723	13.2%
	perfect	89	1.6%
	imperfect	27	0.5%
	habitual	58	1.0% ²³
Future		361	6.6%

Participles:

perfect	1 812	33.4%
imperfect	512	9.4%
conditional	193	3.3%

All tenses: 42.3%

All participles 46.1%

The total number of 21,511 words includes 5,472 verbal forms (both finite and non-finite), that is 25.4% of all words. All tenses present 42.3% and participles 46.1% of the total of verbal forms. The rest, that is, 11.6% are verbal nouns, verbal adjectives, and infinitives.

translates as pluperfect called past indefinite: I went out for a walk yesterday: *kāl āmi berāte giyāchilām*.

²¹ See References.

²² Naturally, we realise that our findings are not completely representative.

²³ 'Non-Perfective marker {-t/} is used to indicate also the so-called Past Conditional or Contrafactive. In Bengali, the Contrafactive and what has typically become a Past Habitual are identical in form.' (MASICA, C. P. *The Indo-Aryan Languages*, p. 273).

The high percentage of the frequency of participles gives evidence of their wide usage. In addition to other roles, they can be used in the place of finite verbal forms which contributes to a lower occurrence of tenses in the four examples of text.

The perfect participle ending in *-iyā/-e* implies the chronological sequencing of events or their prior completion as the perfect tenses similarly do: *dekh-e-chi, dekh-e-chilum* 'I have seen/had seen'²⁴; or it implies the proceeding an action:

- (10) *meyeṭi geṭ periye bhetare dhuke dhūr pāye sīrīr dike gela* (SG61) 'The girl passed through the gate, entered inside and slowly went towards the staircase.'
- (11) *meyeṭi geṭer sāmne dāñriye itastata karchila* (SG1) 'The girl stopped in front of the gate and was hesitating.'

An event described by a perfect participle can be located in the present, the past or the future depending on the tense of the grammatically linked verbal form:

- (12) *jānalār dhāre base se ekhan bāire grām ār kṣet dekhche*. (ŚM64) 'Sitting at the window he is now looking outside on the villages and fields.'
- (13) *se āmār kāche ese balla*. 'He came to me and said.'
- (14) *se ese balbe*. 'He will come and say.'

The imperfect participle is most frequently used for expressing an action or state which was taking place simultaneously with an action described by a finite verbal form:

- (15) *bhābte bhābte camatkār ekṭā matlab māthāy ese gela*. (PM11) 'While thinking, an amazing plan came to my head.'

However, it can also be used for describing an action which took place before an action expressed by the finite verbal form:

- (16) *sekhāne bel tipte darjā khulla ekjan cākar śrenīr lok* (SG2) 'When she pressed the bell there, a servant opened the door.'

²⁴ MASICA, C. P. op. cit., p. 270.

The Frequency of the Occurrence of Tenses

Premendra Mitra (*Ghanādāke bhoṭ din*)

15, 000 words

1, 577 tenses = 10.5%

Mānik Bandyopāhyāy (*Śreṣṭha galpa*)

15, 000 words

1, 834 tenses = 12.2%

Śīrṣendu Mukhopādhyāy (*Galpasaṅgraha*)

15, 000 words

1, 568 tenses = 10.3%

Sunīl Gangopādhyāy (*Galpasaṅgraha*)

15, 000 words

2, 249 tenses = 15%

The next table records the occurrence of individual tenses (in percentages) in relation to the total percentage of tenses in the four examples of text.

	PM	ŚM	MB	SG
Present simple	353/ 22.4%	635/ 40.5%	583/31.7%	692/30.8%
imperfect	110/7%	130/8.3%	114/6.2%	204/9.1%
perfect	202/12.8%	140/8.9%	161/8.7%	223/9.9%
Past				
preterite	461/29.2%	366/23.3%	605/33%	704/31.3%
imperfect	12/1%	30/1.9%	27/1.5%	37/1.6%
perfect	56/3.6%	60/3.8%	75/4.8%	59/2.6%
habitual	32/2%	51/3.3%	70/3.8%	71/3.2%
Future	351/22.3%	136 /8.7%	199/10.9%	259/11.5% ²⁵

The Use of the Past Tenses

In addition to the frequency of the past tenses' occurrence, our aim is to show which past tenses are used for describing particular past actions or states. On the basis of the analysis of the examples of text and, for the most part, in accordance with the authors of Bengali grammars and textbooks,²⁶ the following conclusions can be drawn. The speaker can apply various perspectives to past actions or states: (1) he or she can simply narrate about a past action or state; (2)

²⁵ The table provides only rough information about the use of finite verbal forms in Bengali in general as the use of particular tenses depends on the type of text (it may differ, for instance, in dialogues or in narratives), on author's style, his or her subjective attitude to an action (for instance, he or she can describe a past action by simple present or by present imperfect) and so on. In spite of this, the figure provides at least an approximate picture about the frequency of the particular tenses used.

²⁶ See References.

he or she can take into consideration various modes of action (for instance, the suddenness, habituality, remoteness, simultaneity or the chronological sequence of actions); and (3) he or she can view an action as perfective or imperfective – and accordingly to describe it by using different finite verbal forms.

1. Simple description of past events

Several tenses may be used to express the narrative past.

1.1 If the speaker simply refers about a past event or series of events, he most frequently uses the preterite:

(17) *keyā ār kathā balār samay pela nā. baiṭā diyei subrat ābār cale gela rāstār anyadike. ekṭā ṛrām ese tāke āṛāl kare dila.* (SG44) ‘Keya “did not get” any time to say anything. Having given the book /to her/ Subrat ‘went’ to the other side of the road. A tram having come “hid” him.’

(18) *meyeṭi prathame ḍāndiker darjāy kaliṅ bel ṭipla, darjā khulla ekṭi... yubak.* (SG2) ‘At first the girl “pressed” the bell at the door on the right side, a young man “opened” the door.’

1.2 When referring about a past action also the past habitual can be used (most frequently in cases where the verb *jānā* to know is used):

(19) *āgāmī sombāri ye biye karbe, tā jāntām nā.* (SG5) ‘I did not know (“I did not used to know”) that you would marry as early as next Monday.’

(20) *nām, dhām sab kichui se ye ekhāne ese badleche tā jāntām.* (PM28) ‘I knew (“I used to know”) that she has changed name, residence, everything after coming here’.

(21) *didi ṭhiki jānto, baiṭār madhye ciṭhi āche.* (SG45) ‘The sister knew (“used to know”) for certain that there is a letter in the book’.

(22) *kāsmīrī śāloyālārā ekṭu bāṅglā bujhto.* (SG39) ‘The sellers of Kashmirishawls understood (“used to understand”) a little Bengali.’²⁷

1.3 A past action of which the present significance is not great may be described by pluperfect:²⁸

²⁷ The interpretation of this sentence depends on the context. It could also mean that they usually understood Bengali.

²⁸ PAGE, W. S. *An Introduction to Colloquial Bengali*, p. 150.

(23) *sekhāne giye ki dekhechile?* “What had you seen” when you got there?”

1.4 Sometimes the present perfect is used to describe a past action.

1.4.1 This is especially the case when an action is expressed by a verb of sensual perception (*dekhā* to see, *śonā* to hear, *ter pāoyā* to notice):

(24) *rebāke sigāreṭ khete abhay dekheche...* (ŚM52) ‘Abhay saw (“has seen”) Reba to smoke a cigarette....’

(25) *ālibābār galpa to śunecha?* (PM37) ‘“Have you heard” the story about Alibaba?’

(26) *chāder ghare āsār parei āmi ter peyechi, edike anek narkol gāch āche ekhano.* (SG20) ‘As soon as I came to the attic I noticed (“I have noticed”) that there are still many coconut trees at this side.’

1.4.2 An event which took place in the indefinite past and the emphasis is on the fact that it happened before the time of speaking, not on the result of the action, may also be described by present perfect:

(27) *orā kalkātā geche* ‘They went (“have gone”) to Calcutta.’

(28) *āmi oke ekṭā cumu kheyechi.* (SG16) ‘I kissed (“have kissed”) her once.’

1.4.3 The present perfect may also be used to describe a past action or state when the past is expressed by time adverbials:

(29) *mā beriyechen ekṭu āge.* (SG39) ‘Mother went (“has gone”) out a little earlier’.

(30) *tār opar phliṭ diyechi ādhhgaṇṭā āge* means (PM92) ‘I applied (“have applied”) the spray half an hour ago.’

2. Expressing different circumstances of a past event

2.1 An event has just taken place

The speaker expresses the fact that an event has just taken place in the past usually with the help of the preterite. However, it is not only the tense but also the adverbials, most frequently *ei mātra*, which indicate this circumstance of action:

(31) *raghu, mā beriye gechen? Hyā, ei mātra gelen.* (SG5) ‘Raghu, mother has gone out? Yes, she only just “went”.’

2.2 Suddenness of an action

2.2.1 The preterite, too, can be used to express a past action that was performed suddenly or abruptly. As the suddenness or abruptness is not an inherent feature of the preterite, this circumstance of action is indicated by the adverbial *haṭhāt*:

(32) *haṭhāt Gaura balle.* (PM12) ‘Suddenly Gaura said.’

(33) *haṭhāt mane parla.* (SG34) ‘Suddenly I recollected.’

2.2.2 The suddenness of an action is often expressed with the preterite of the vector in the compound verb²⁹ the role of which is to express the suddenness of action (*oṭhā, phalā, basā*):

(34) *oṭhār kathā šeṣ hatei ho ho kare hese uthlām.* (PM30) ‘As soon as Ojha’s story was over, I burst out laughing (I suddenly laughed).’

Although the vectors *oṭhā, phalā* and *basā* themselves indicate suddenness (or subitaneity³⁰), the adverbial *haṭhāt* may be used alongside with them:

(35) *ei kathār par subarnā kena ye haṭhāt rege uthla tār kon yukti nie.* (SG7) ‘Subarna had no reason why she suddenly got angry after these words’.

(36) *tāi āmār kathā śune se ekṭu hese phella haṭhāt.* (SG33) ‘Thus after hearing my words, he suddenly laughed a little.’

2.3 Habituality of an action

2.3.1 A repeatedly, habitually performed past action is usually described by the past habitual:

(37) *kichudīn āge se bāṛite frak parto.* (SG41) ‘Some days ago she “used to wear” a dress at home.’

2.3.2 The past habitual is also used when the frequency is specified by an adverbial:

(38) *sigāreṭ dharāte daśbār āgun cāita.* (ŚM36) ‘He wanted (“used to want”) a light ten times to light the cigarette.’

²⁹ A compound verb is a combination of a perfect participle and a finite (or non-finite) verbal form expressing a single action. The basic (lexical) meaning of this combination is carried by the participle, while the second verbal form (vector, compound marker) imparts an additional semantic nuance to it (*hese oThā*: *hese* “having laughed” + *oThā* “to rise” = *to burst out laughing, to laugh suddenly*).

³⁰ CHATTERJI, R. *Aspect and Meaning in Slavic and Indic*, p. 87.

2.3.3 However, a repeated past action can also be described by the present perfect. The repeatedness of the action is indicated by a time adverbial here:

- (39) *e pathe yete-āste bājārer chādṭā anekbār cokhe pareche* (PM48)
'Coming and going down this street I have noticed many times the market's roof.'

2.4 Describing the near or remote past

2.4.1 If the speaker describes events occurring in the very recent past – say within the same day, as Radice claims,³¹ the preterite is used:

- (40) *tāi āpnāke āj niye elām.* (SG38) 'Thus "I brought" you today.'

2.4.2 Preterite is also used to describe an event which took place in the remote definite past:

- (41) *jab cārNak kalkātā śaharer pattan karlen 1690 khrīṣṭābde.* 'Job Charnock "founded" Calcutta in 1690 A.D.'

2.4.3 For describing events that happened in a more or less remote past, the pluperfect is preferred:

- (42) *tārpar šeṣbār 1617 sālē mrityur ek bachar āge tini niṣei ābār sei sandhāne giyechilen.* (PM47) 'Then for the last time in 1617, one year before his death, he himself "had gone" for the search again.'
(43) *kāl jyochanāy tāder dujaneri baṛa ras uskechila.* (ŚM53) 'Yesterday Jyochanay "had sparked" great interest in two of them.'
(44) *āmi śunechilām, tomāder śiggiri biye habe.* (SG11) "'I had heard" you will promptly marry.'

2.4.4 Present perfect, too, can be used for describing a not very remote past:³²

- (45) *kichudīn āge tāder ucched kare diyeche raghurām.* (SG 50) 'Some days ago Raghuram "have abolished" them.'

2.5 Sequence of past events

2.5.1 To describe an event which took place simultaneously with another past event the past imperfect is used:

³¹ RADICE, W. *Teach yourself Bengali*, p. 156.

³² However, the use of the present perfect can also indicate the result in such cases.

- (46) *yakhan āmi rāstā diye yācchilām, takhan briṣṭi śuru hala.* ‘When “I was going” down the street, it began to rain.’
- (47) *āmi khācchilām, eman samay se ghare dhukla.* ‘“I was eating,” at that time he entered the room.’ (Alek. II/118)

2.5.2 To describe a past event that took place before another event in the past, pluperfect is used:

- (48) *karabī tumi pāliye gele kena? Bhay peyechile?* (SG36) ‘Karabi, why did you run away? “Had you been frightened?”’
- (49) *Dujan dekhā karte esechen phone śunechilām.* (PM35) ‘Two people have come for a visit, “I had listened” on the phone.’
- (50) *Tomār ekhāne āsbār āge āmi tapaner bāri giyechilām ekṭā kathā jijñes karbār janya.* (SG19) ‘Before your coming here “I had gone” to Tapan’s house to ask him about something.’

2.6 Resultativeness

An action that took place in the past with its results or effects reaching to the present is usually described by the present perfect:

- (51) *tār pharsā hāt duṭi... lāl haye geche* (SG13) ‘Her two fair hands...“have become red”.’

3. Making past events more vivid

3.1 If a speaker wants to make a story more vivid, he may use the historical present:³³

- (52) *tārpar śeṣbār 1617 sālē mrityur ek bachar āge tini nījei ābār sei sandhāne giyechilen. ei abhiyān thekei syār oyāltārē caram durbhagya śuru. jvare pare tāke trinidadē āṭke thākte hay....* (PM47) ‘Then the last time in 1617, on the year before his death, he himself had gone on the search. From this expedition begins the extreme bad luck of sir Walter. Being stricken with fever he has to stay in Trinidad.’

3.2 If the speaker wants to describe past action vividly, he will often prefer the present imperfect to the past imperfect:³⁴

³³ Linguists sometimes suggest that the historical present serves more to separate events within stories than to bring stories to life.

³⁴ RADICE, W. *Teach yourself Bengali*, p. 181.

- (53) *sei din ekṭu rāt kare bāri phirchi, ṭhik darjār kāche ekṭā honcaṭ khelām* (SG26) means ‘that day “I am returning” home a little later at night, I stumbled right at the door.’

4. Expressing aspect of a past action

A speaker can look upon the action or state either as a whole - in other words, he may assume an integrative attitude toward it (perfective action) - or he can look upon the action as a series of parts, as continuous; in the latter case, he assumes a fractionative attitude³⁵ (imperfective action). In the former case a speaker is ‘viewing an action as a whole from the outside’,³⁶ in the latter he is as if in the stream of the process – he can see neither its beginning, nor its end, therefore he cannot express it as a closed, whole event.³⁷

4.1 Perfective action

The past perfective action can be expressed by several means in Bengali. There is a special grammatical means for expressing perfectivity of the verbal action there, the suffix *-iyā/-e-*.³⁸ This morpheme is a part of the present perfect as well as the pluperfect. Both tenses can express perfective events in the past. However, as the table on the page 10 shows, the frequency of their occurrence is different.

4.1.1 If a perfective event took place in the remote past, the pluperfect is used to describe it:

- (54) *gata saptāhe goṭā pāncek hāti dhuke parechila pāser gānyer dhānkṣete.* (SG57) ‘Last week about five elephants “had entered” the rice fields of the neighbouring village.’

4.1.2 Pluperfect too can be used when an event took place in an unspecified past:

- (55) *darjā bandha karechile?* (SG18) ‘Had you closed the door?’
 (56) *ekṭā ekā śiriṣ gāch siki māl lambā chāyā phelechila.* (SG9) ‘One solitary rain-tree “had casted” a quarter of mile long shadow.’

³⁵ KENISTON, H. Verbal Aspect in Spanish, p. 164.

³⁶ COMRIE, B. *Aspect*, p. 16.

³⁷ ISAČENKO, A. *Grammatičeskij stroy russkogo yazyka v sopostavlenii s slovackim*, p. 133.

³⁸ However, as we have seen, it does not mean that each perfect verbal form inevitably expresses perfectivity.

4.1.3 If a perfective event took place in an unspecified, but not very remote past it may be described by the present perfect:

(57) *pārār sabāi to mete uṭheche.* (ŚM12) ‘All in the locality “have got mad”.’

(58) *ghanādā ... ekṭā sigareṭ šeṣ kare ār ekṭā dhariyechen śīśirer egiye deoyā ṭin theke.* (ŚM16) ‘Ghanada ... after finishing one cigarette “has taken” another one from Sisir’s box.’

4.1.4 However, a perfective past event is frequently described by the preterite. Although the preterite does not contain the grammatical morpheme of perfectivity *-iyā/-e-*, it often expresses not only past completed action, but also perfective action that would be described by the perfective verb in Slavic languages:

(59) *bāccāṭā marla.* (SG22) ‘The child “died”.’

(60) *...bikhur dehe pūrber svāstha phiriyā āsila.* (MB7) ‘Previous health “returned” to Bikhu’s body.’

(61) *ei ceyāre basun... baslām.* (SG35) ‘Sit [down] on this chair... “I sat [down]”.’

(62) *śīśir yena ākāś theke parla.* (PM14) ‘Shishir as if “fell down” from the sky.’

Some authors, for instance E. M. Bykova,³⁹ speak about the momentary perfectivity in such cases. The momentary perfectivity may also follow from the lexical aspect of the verb.

4.2 Imperfective action

4.2.1 If the speaker looks upon an action as continuous, he uses past imperfect for its description:

(63) *āmi takhan kalej theke phirchilām.* (SG42) ‘“I was returning” from the college at that time.’

(64) *dāoyāy base lungi pare hem biri khācchila.* (ŚM41) ‘Sitting on the verandah dressed in lungi Hem “was smoking” a biri.’

4.2.2 However, in comparison with English for instance, the past imperfect is used less frequently in Bengali and the imperfectivity of a past action can be

³⁹ BYKOVA. E. M. *The Bengali Language*, p. 87.

expressed by preterite especially if 'continuousness' or 'unfinishness' follow from the semantics of the verb, for instance, *tākāna* (to look at), *cāoyā* (to look at), *dekhāna* (to demonstrate), and some other examples. The meaning often depends on context: *se tākāla* means 'he was looking' or 'he looked at'. But also the construction *se ekbār tākāla* (SG14) is possible which means 'he looked once'.

5. Expressing a hypothetical past action or state

When describing the hypothetical past (hypothetical condition), past habitual is obligatorily used:

- (65) *ei ghare ekhan anya kon meye thākle, tākeo tumi cumu khete cāite?*
(SG9) 'If there had been some other girl in this room now, you would have wanted to kiss her too?'

It follows from the above analysis that there are various ways of describing various past actions and states in Bengali and relationships between them. Considering the existence of several past tenses and especially their different morphological structures it could be presumed that there are specific tenses established for expressing specific actions and states, especially as regards to perfectivity, imperfectivity and habituality as Bengali past finite verbal forms contain grammatical morphemes marking perfectivity (*-iyā/-e-*), imperfectivity (*-ite/-o-*), and habituality (*-it/-t-*). However, as can be seen, only the use of past imperfect is in accord with the expectations ensuing from its grammatical form – it expresses an imperfective, continuous, and a not completed action. As regards to the past habitual, although it usually describes habituality, in particular cases (with particular verbs) it can be used for describing a simple past action. (We leave aside its use in conditional sentences here.) As for pluperfect, it can express perfective as well as not perfective actions depending on the context. The same is true of preterite. We agree with Svetovidova that these tenses are neutral as to the aspect.⁴⁰

Moreover, in Bengali, there is a close connection between tense, aspect, and mood.⁴¹ For instance, it is often difficult to differentiate between perfectivity (aspect) and resultativity (mood) in the present perfect localising an action into the past (tense); and even if we speak about its usage for expressing simple past, there could be a hint of resultativity there: *orā kalkātā geche*. ('They went to Calcutta' can suggest a result: they are there.) The pluperfect is formally the perfect tense (with perfective marker *-iyā/-e-*), although it often expresses

⁴⁰ SVETOVIDOVA, I. A. *Vremya, vid i sposob deystviya in bengali*, p. 218.

⁴¹ See also SVETOVIDOVA, I.A. op. cit. or R. CHATTERJI, op. cit., p. 72.

actions in which the stress is not laid on the perfectivity but rather on the fact that they took place in the remoter past (mood and tense). Thus pluperfect can stay in opposition to preterite expressing recent events as well as to present perfect expressing the past with the stress placed on the result of an action. Thus the usage of tenses for expressing past actions and states has many nuances. Perhaps this fact led Radice to say, that 'the use of the various past tenses in Bengali is rather mysterious',⁴² or Smith to claim that 'tenses describing past actions are, to a certain extent, interchangeable'.⁴³

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⁴² RADICE, W. *Teach Yourself Bengali*, p. 123.

⁴³ SMITH, W. L. *Bengali Reference Grammar*, p. 99.

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