

Excerpt (from the Preface):

One of the interesting features of the Mongolian language is the existence of *four* different past tense forms of the verb. To translate ‘came’, for example, one can choose (in the written language based on Khalkha Mongolian) between *ирэв irev*, *ирлээ irlee*, *иржээ irjee*, and *ирсэн irsen*. Textbooks and reference grammars have contained various accounts of the differences between these endings, generally vague, sometimes mutually contradictory, and ultimately inadequately informative concerning this significant topic. The question, naturally, is why Mongolian has four different past tense endings, and how their meanings and/or uses differ from one another.

This question may be illustrated by a couple of passages from *Erdene bulsan aral*, the Mongolian translation of R. L. Stevenson’s novel *Treasure Island*. In the novel, when both time and his former shipmates finally catch up with the old pirate “Billy Bones,” the mysterious lodger at the Admiral Benbow Inn, one of the pirates enters the inn to call on Bones, only to come running out almost at once to inform his fellows that *Bill үхчихjee*—“Bill’s dead!” It turns out that old Bill has left a treasure map and soon the hero of the tale, Jim Hawkins, finds himself a member of the crew of a vessel sent to seek out that treasure. When the crew lands on the treasure island of the title, Jim encounters Ben Gunn, marooned there years before by the cruel Captain Flint. Panicked at the sight of Jim’s ship, Gunn asks him, “That’s not Flint’s ship, is it?” At which Jim assures him that it isn’t, and, furthermore, that *Flint үхчихsen*—“Flint is dead.”

But why is it that the pirate declares that Billy Bones *үхчихjee*, when Jim tells Gunn that Captain Flint *үхчихsen*? Is the choice of different tenses simply fortuitous, or merely a matter of style, or does it reflect some real difference in meaning and/or use?

Until the last two decades the grammatical literature was at best unhelpful, and at worst misleading, where the past tense endings of Mongolian are concerned. Binnick (1979) was an early attempt at posing, and pointing towards a solution for, the problem. More than a decade later, Binnick (1990) termed the differentiation of the tenses “pragmatic,” thereby claiming that the difference between the past tenses was *not*, as previously thought, semantic, and did not have to do primarily with their literal, context-free meanings in terms of tense and aspect, but rather with how they are used in context. In the early 90s, when editorial pressure forced me to provide simple labels for the endings *-jee* and *-lee* in a contribution on Mongolian, I chose, on what seems now to have been insufficient evidence (albeit following the approach of my 1990 article), to term them *inferential* and *evidential* respectively.

These terms were already familiar from the grammars of languages like Turkish. The Turkish past tense ending *-dı* is evidential and indicates that the speaker actually witnessed the happening they are reporting, while *-miş* is inferential and merely indicates that the speaker has reason to infer or suppose that it did.

While by the beginning of the present century the idea that Mongolian might have a past tense system based at least in part on an opposition of evidentiality and inferentiality was

no longer novel, the proposal was based largely, if not entirely, on native-speaker intuition, and moreover was so vague and general as to provide little, if any, guidance to the non-native-speaker wishing to properly use and interpret the various past tense endings. Nor did it clarify the roles of the so-called “neutral” endings *-v* and *-sen*—how they differed from the “non-neutral” endings *-lee* and *-jee*, as well as from one another— though there are useful, albeit limited, suggestions in a number of works.

The intention in the present work is to construct an argument for, and to flesh out the details covered by, the labels of “evidential” and “inferential,” and as well to provide an account of the “neutral” past tenses. If this goal has been fulfilled it is due principally to the assistance of a native speaker, Sodnomdorj Gongor, and to a lesser extent to the advent of the World Wide Web, which has provided easy access to samples of a wide range of genres in contemporary Mongolian.

Many of the questions raised by the Mongolian past tenses are far from fully resolved, but hopefully the present work has, at the very least, provided a more reliable and useful guide to usage than has hitherto existed, and laid the foundation for further investigation into a number of aspects of this fascinating language.