When only nominals are marked for tense: the case of Ticuna (isolate, Western Amazonia)

Ticuna is a language isolate spoken by about 50,000 ethnic Ticunas along the Western Amazon river, across the borders of Peru, Colombia and Brazil (see APPENDIX, MAP 1). This talk will be based on first-hand data from the Ticuna variety of San Martín de Amacayacu (Amazonas, Colombia; SMA), where I have been doing fieldwork for the past three years.

SMA Ticuna displays a clear case of *"independent nominal tense"*, *"in which the nominal itself is temporally situated independently of the proposition as a whole"* (Nordlinger & Sadler 2004:801). In certain syntactic positions, the language requires NPs to be preceded by a set of "CON(NECTORS)". Besides agreeing with the agreement class (C(LASSES)1-5) of the following NP, these connectors are the most frequent locus for specifying the NP as situated in the past (PST). In most contexts, situating an argument in the past triggers a past temporal reading of the whole clause, as in example (1):

(1) [('Ĩ.¹nẽ¹ ga⁴) 'nã.⁴³mã²⁴ã̃³ tɕa³dʑa¹ɾuɯ³ 'ũ.⁴³ ga⁴ 'ku.³ɾa⁴ka¹.]
/(ĩ¹Tẽ¹ ga⁴) Tã⁴³-Pã²⁴ tɕa³=dʑa¹=duɯ³=ũ⁴³ **ga⁴** ku³da⁴ka¹/
yesterday PAST 3.C1=COM 1SG=i¹.3OBJ=duɯ³=to.go **CON.C1/5.PST** community.leader
"(Yesterday) I met the community leader."

This is but an implicature effect at the clausal level of a NP-level feature, however: the temporal situation of NPs and the temporal reading of the clause they belong to are in themselves independent. In examples (2-4), the temporal interpretation of the whole clause is non-past, while one NP is marked as situated in the past by the connector that precedes it:
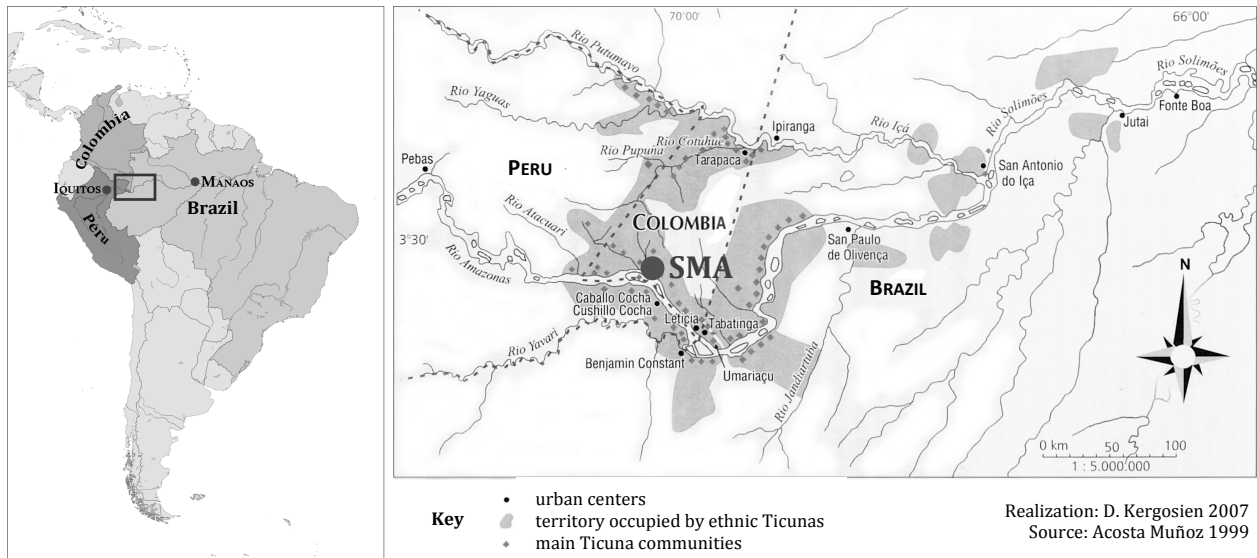
(2) ['Nã.²gu⁴ ĩ̃⁵tɕa³ɾuɯ³ Ɂĩ.³nuɯ̃³ ga⁴ 'tɕoɁ³¹ɾuɯ³ 'pa.³pa⁵.]
/Tã²-gu⁴ i⁵=tɕa³=duɯ³=ĩ̃³Tuɯ̃³ **ga⁴** tɕau¹-a¹duɯ³ pa³pa⁵/
3.C5-LOC1 PROG=1SG=duɯ³=to.think **CON.C1/5.PST** 1SG-GEN dad
"[What are you doing? –] I'm recalling my (deceased) father."

(3) ['KuɁ³¹uɯ̃³ ta⁴ tɕa³dʑa¹ 'wɛ. ga⁴ 'tɕo.¹pa⁴ta³ dʑa⁴ 'taɁ³¹uɯ̃⁵nẽ¹.]
/ku⁴³-Ɂuɯ̃³ ta⁴ tɕa³=dʑa¹=weᶜʳᵏ **ga²** tɕau¹-pa⁴ta³ dʑa² ta⁴³-Ɂuɯ̃⁵Tẽ¹/
2SG-ACC DES 1SG=i¹.3OBJ=to.show **CON.C3.PST** 1SG-building CON.C3 be.big-NMLZ.C3
"I'm going to go and show you my former big house. [It is Juan's now and is still big.]"

(4) ['Nṵ̃Ɂmã⁴ waɁ³i⁴ mã³ɾuɯ³ 'nuɯ̃.³¹guɯɁ¹uɯ̃¹ta¹ nã⁴ɾuɯ³ 'Ɂã̰ṵ̃ ga⁴ 'ɸʷe.¹nẽ³ẽ¹kuɯ³.]
/Tɕuɯ̃ᶜʳᵏPã⁴ waɁ³i⁴ Pã³duɯ³ Tuɯ̃³¹-guɯ¹-Ɂuɯ̃¹ta¹ Tã⁴=duɯ³=ãuᶜʳᵏ **ga⁴** ɸʷe¹Tẽ³e³-kuɯ³/
present.time CONTR PFV 3.C5=REFL=LOC2 3.C5=duɯ³=to.stay **CON.C1/5.PST** to.hunt-NMLZ.C5
"But now the (former) hunter stays at home [as there is no more game in the jungle]."

Depending on several factors, different features of the referent of the NP (its very existence – (2) –, its belonging to someone – (3) –, one of its properties – (4) –, etc.) may be situated in the past, yielding interesting meaning effects (death – (2) –, loss of ownership – (3) –, end of activity – (4) –, etc.). In example (1), it can be argued that it is only the *role* of the referent of the NP in the state of things referred to by the whole clause that is situated in the past, which *secondarily* requires a past time interpretation for the whole clause.

Interestingly, the grammatical category of tense is almost entirely restricted to the nominal domain in SMA Ticuna, being mainly a feature of the aforementioned connectors and of the anaphoric deictics. Only one non-nominal morpheme refers to tense, the clause-level particle *ga⁴* "PAST" (see (1)), probably the result of a recent grammaticalization of *ga⁴* "CON.C1/5.PST".

Exploring the uses of SMA Ticuna nominal past-tense marking will show that the language very likely displays a genuine case of nominal tense (as defined by Tonhauser 2008:337-338) in an otherwise nearly tenseless language.

APPENDIX

MAP 1 | *Location of the Ticuna people (adapted from Goulard 2009)*

CONVENTIONS USED IN THE EXAMPLES

The examples presented here were elicited (on the basis of spontaneous uses of nominal tense), contextualized and verified with two native speakers, Loida Ángel Ruiz and Javier Sánchez Gregorio, in October 2017.

Superscripts: Superscript characters (^{4}, ^{31}, ^{2}, etc.) are used to transcribe tones (in the phonetic transcription) and tonemes (in the phonological transcription) following Chao (1930)'s 1-5 tonal scale, in which 1 indicates the lowest pitch level and 5 the highest pitch level. Superscript ^{crk} transcribes a toneme whose distinctive phonetic feature is syllable-length creaky voice phonation.

Capital letters: capital letters in the phonological transcription stand for archiphonemes only specified for place of articulation but unspecified for sonority (/T/ stands for "velar consonant unspecified for sonority", /Tɕ/ for "palatal consonant unspecified for sonority", etc.).

Glossing conventions: 1 "first person", 2 "second person", 3 "third person", ACC "accusative relational noun", C "agreement class", COM "comitative relational noun", CON "connector", CONTR "contrastive topic", DES "desiderative modality", GEN "genitive relational noun", IRR "irrealis modality", LOC1 "locative relational noun 1", LOC2 "locative relational noun 2", NMLZ "nominalizer", OBJ "direct object", PAST "clause-level past particle", PFV "perfective aspect", PROG "progressive aspect", PST "past", REFL "reflexive", SG "singular". Dɯ^3 and i^1 are morphemes of the predicative head whose function is still poorly understood.

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