

Article

A Study of Tenselessness in Rengma (Western)

Monali Longmailai

Centre for Endangered Languages, Tezpur University, Tezpur-784028 Assam, India; monalilong@gmail.com

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Abstract: Rengma is a Tibeto–Burman language from the Naga group (Angami–Pochuri) spoken in Northeast India. The paper is one of the first attempts in documenting the Western Rengma language, a variety of Rengma found in Karbi Anglong district, Assam. It makes attempts to study the tense, aspect and mood features present in Western Rengma in comparison to related neighbouring Tibeto-Burman (TB) languages such as Angami and Sema and thereby, seek to identify the aspect of tenselessness in this language. The study further examines the serial verb construction (SVC) as pivotal in determining time in relation to tense–aspect–mood (TAM). Throughout the paper, we observe the semantic-pragmatic features to probe the verbal features and later validate if time in Rengma is a genetic or an areal feature.

Keywords: Tense; aspect; mood; Rengma

1. Introduction

Rengma belongs to the Angami–Pochuri group of the Tibeto–Burman language family (Post and Burling 2017) spoken in the northeast India in the states of Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. The term “rengma”, which is an exonym, literally means “ring men” derived from the words “ring” and “men” as named by the British during the colonization period (this group of people used to wear large rings around their neck and ears), in general words. The approximate population of the Rengma people is 65,328, according to the (Census of India 2011). They can be grouped as Northern: *Ntenyi* (between Dimapur and Kohima in Nagaland), Central: (Western and Eastern) and Southern: *Ketenenyu*, *Azonyu*, and *Nzonyu* (bordering Nagaland and Manipur). Western (*Terüpvunyu*) covers Karbi Anglong district in Assam and Dimapur in Nagaland falls in the Eastern part (*Tseminyu*). The present study focuses on the Western Rengma dialect *Terüpvunyu*, /tərYΦu¹ u/, which is also an endonym and autonym since it is named by the people themselves to refer to the language and the group.

Figure 1 shows the areal distribution of the Rengma speaking region with the native names of the dialects, while Figure 2 shows the genetic classification of the language in a family tree.

The data for the research was conducted based on elicitations from informants speaking Western Rengma in Karbi Anglong district, Assam. Nearly 100 sentences were manually collected primarily from two groups of male informants aged 30 to 50 years, for the present purpose. (I would like to acknowledge my informants John S. Rengma and Phenpiga Rengma for their assistance and help in providing data of their language and analysis. Without them, this work would have been incomplete.) The language has never been documented, as Post and Burling (2017) also remarks of the absence of published work on Western Rengma except for accounts from phonological features in Marrison (1967), which identified *Ntenyi* as a Northern Rengma. There are literary contributions, nevertheless, by non-linguistic writers on Rengma like Mills (1937), which provides socio-historical background of the people and a brief mention of the language, as well as the community members such as Kath (2005) work on the socio-cultural aspects of the Rengmas such as religion, festivals, traditions, and migration, and Sebü (2005) on traditional folk songs of the Rengmas, and their marriage system (Sebü 2006). Also, there is no known work on the other dialects of Rengma. (I have come across news of research scholars,

local and from abroad who began work on Western Rengma although their work is unavailable for reference currently.)

Presently, they use the Roman script with diacritics for writing official documents (local) and social networking sites. Hence, the present study is one of the first attempts in documenting the Western Rengma dialect and the Rengma language besides describing the verbal morphosyntax in relation to time.

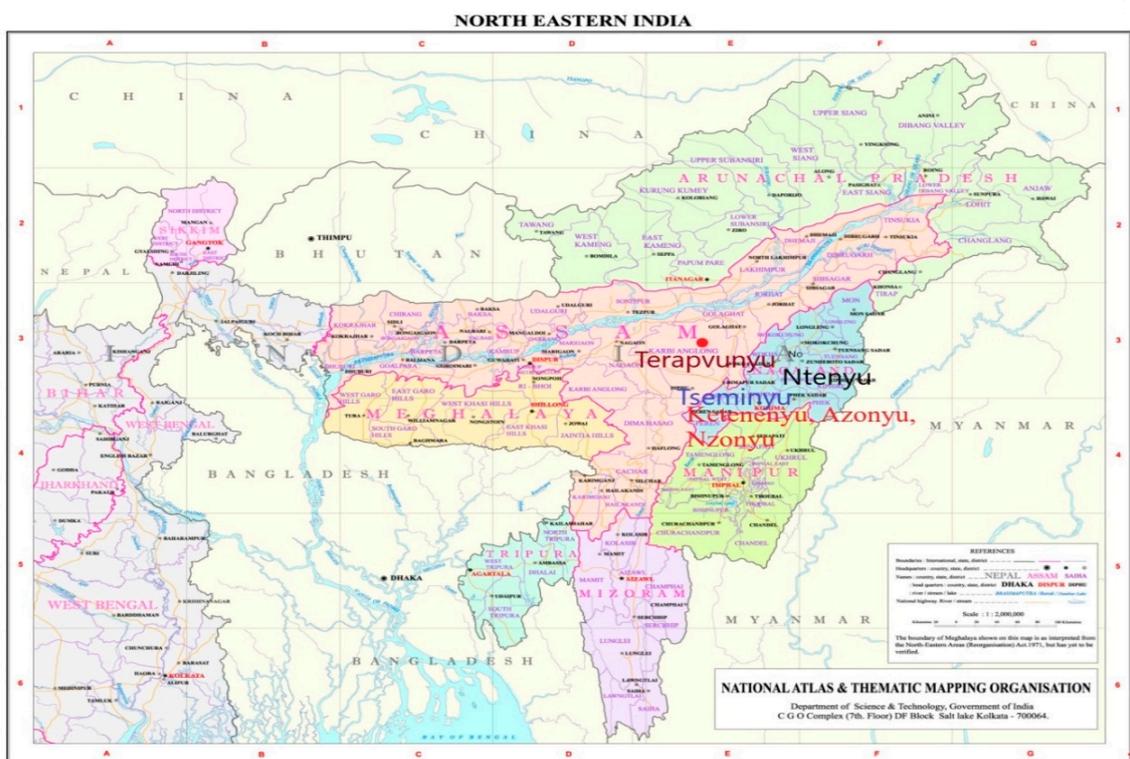


Figure 1. Rengma speaking areas in Northeast India (Map of Northeast India 2019).

According to the schema of Krauss (Krauss 2006), the status of the Rengma Naga language can be identified between stable (A: all speak, children and up) and unstable (A: some locals where children speak), which indicates that the language is in a vulnerable position of endangerment. The Rengma language is vulnerably endangered since it is spoken at home and restricted domains only. However, the speakers have a positive attitude towards their language and use it among themselves, both parents and children, in their everyday life (interpersonal communication with informants).

Typologically, Rengma is a tonal language with agglutinating features and SOV word order (Subject-Verb-Object). The data collected for the present analysis are presented in the Rengma orthography, (Roman script with diacritics) without the IPA symbols, since the preliminary work on phonology to identify the sounds and tones in Rengma is yet to be completed. Nasal phonemes and nasalisation of vowels are found to be highly productive in the language and it is overwhelmingly suffixing rather than prefixing. It has a rich noun and verb morphology with a high presence of reduplication, noun categorization devices, verbal deixis, and serial verbs, although it lacks agreement features, like many Naga languages (Sreedhar 1980; Giridhar 1980). Tense–aspect–mood (TAM) is a crucial feature in Rengma since there is no clear morphological representation of tense to indicate time. This language realizes the dimension of time in terms of various semantic and pragmatic factors. The paper, thus attempts to study the TAM features in the Rengma language (Western dialect), and identify the aspect of tenselessness in determining time. It also discusses the role of serial verb construction (SVC) in indicating the past, present, and the future. Additionally, it aims to look at the semantic and pragmatic contexts, which presumably function as vital features in determining time in Rengma.

Finally, it cross examines the TAM from the cognate Naga languages such as Angami and Sema to classify this aspect as to whether it is a genetic feature or an areal feature.

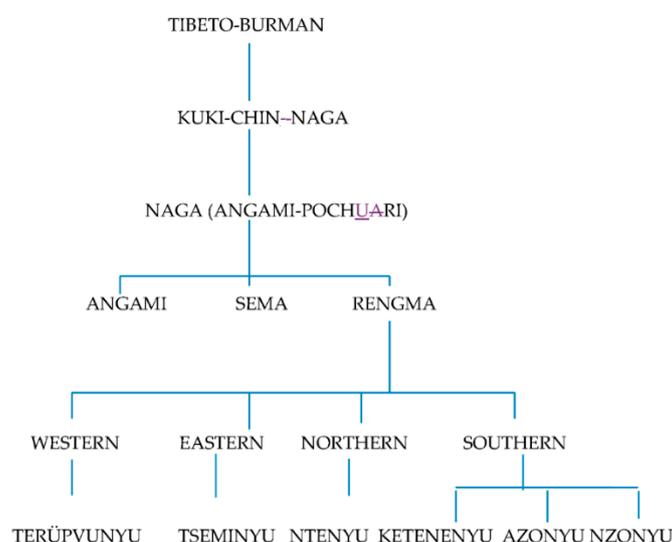


Figure 2. Genetic classification of the Rengma language modified from Ethnologue (Eberhard et al. 2019).

2. Tense–Aspect–Mood: An Overview

Payne (1997) defines tense as “the grammatical expression of the relation of the time of an event at some reference point in time, usually the moment the clause is uttered”. In the given sense, languages can have the possibilities of categorizing tense, as a three-way distinction (past, present and future) and two-way as in, past vs. non-past, future vs. non-future, and present vs. non-present. Several of the Tibeto-Burman languages tend to have future vs. non-future tense distinction such as, the Naga group: Mongsen Ao (Coupe 2007), Angami (Giridhar 1980), and Dimasa (Longmailai 2014) from the Bodo-Garo group.

Further, aspect describes “the internal temporal shape of events or states”, while mode describes “the speaker’s attitude toward a situation, including the speaker’s belief in its reality, or likelihood” (Payne 1997). Coupe (2007) has discussed the correlation of tense, aspect, and mood in the context of these TB languages. To elaborate, the morpheme that indicates the past entails the completion of an event and is realised by a speaker, while those morphemes that indicate probability of completion in the present and future time are, at the same time, yet to be realised in a given speech situation. This shows that the TB languages are richer in semantic aspects, rather than merely having future vs. non-future tense distinction.

This hypothesis leads to a prospect in examining the Rengma language (Western Rengma) from a TB scenario of time and observe if the temporal expressions in Rengma have similar typological features, or if they function differently. The subsequent sections, thus, identify the tense–aspect–mood feature in the language and conclude with comparison from TAM operation in the neighbouring Naga languages, Angami and Sema.

2.1. Tense

Table 1 shows the morphological markings of tense in Rengma as past, present and future:

Table 1. Tense marking in Rengma.

| Past | Present | Future |
|------|---------|--------|
| -ya | -yo | -te |
| -ma | | -ma |
| -∅ | -∅ | |

From the Table 1 and the first set of examples, Rengma appears to have three tenses as shown in bold in the sentences (1) to (3):

- a-le a-zu-ka zo-hü, ndü
 1SG-NOM 1SG.GEN-mother-DAT tell-DIST yesterday
 latsi-ka-nyu kehong-ka de-de thyü-hü-**ya**
 school-GEN programme (and all)-REDUP do-DIST-PST
 ‘I narrated my mother what happened yesterday in the school function (Lit: I tell completed my mother yesterday school’s programme and all)’.¹
- angah-yo agin-nde-**yo**
 baby-TOP hungry-be-PRES
 ‘The baby is hungry’.
- a-le nchanki latsikhwen shenrü-lo ligi pi-shi-**te**
 1SG-NOM later book bring-finish 3FSG give-finish-FUT
 ‘I will bring her a book later (Lit: I will finish bringing and giving the book to her later)’.

The problem arises with the second set when the morpheme *-ma* occurs in both the past (4) and the future time (5) making it appear to have a present vs. non-present tense feature, while in some cases, past (6) and present (7) are unmarked:

- a-le tu tɛ-lɔ-kɔ-**ma**
 1SG-NOM rice eat-(finish)-(finish)-PST
 ‘I ate rice’.
- ligɛ npu rɛ-kat^he-we a-le gei-**ma**
 3SG alone come-if-then 1SG-NOM go-FUT
 ‘If he comes alone, then I will go’.
- ponyugü-le John-nan nchenyi atho thyü-le zo-hü. (Unmarked: past)
 boy-NOM John-ACC morning work do-NF tell-DIST
 ‘The boy made/asked John (to) do the work today in the morning’.
- a-le tu tɛ (Unmarked: present)
 1SG-NOM rice eat

¹ Rengma nominative subjects optionally mark the case. It functions more like definiteness.

'I eat rice'.

Observing the examples (4) to (7), Rengma can be said to be neither a past vs. non-past, nor future vs. non-future language. To further examine these tense features, the affirmative sentences (8a), (9a), and (10a) in the three temporal events are compared with the negative (8b), (9b), and (10b) and interrogative counterparts (8c), (9c), and (10c) respectively:

- 8a. ahi-e ke-sha-bin-ma
1PL.RECIP complete-know-HAB/EXIST-PST
'We knew each other'.
- b. ahi-e ke-sha-mu-hü
1PL.RECIP-NOM complete-know-NEG-DIST
'We did not know each other'.
- c. nhi-e ke-sha-hü-la
2PL.RECIP-NOM complete-know-DIST-QST
'Did you know each other?'
- 9a. ahi-e ke-sha-bin-yo
1PL.RECIP-NOM complete-know-HAB/EXIST-PRES
'We know each other'.
- b. ahi-e ke-sha-mu
1PL.RECIP-NOM complete-know-NEG
'We don't know each other'.
- c. nhi-e ke-sha-bin-la
2PL.RECIP-NOM complete-know-HAB/EXIST-QST
'Do you know each other?'
- 10a. ahi-e ke-sha-bin-ma
1PL.RECIP -NOM complete-know-HAB/EXIST-FUT
'We will know each other'.
- b. ahi-e ke-sha-m-lo-ho
1PL.RECIP-NOM complete-know-NEG-finish-DIST
'We will not know each other'.
- c. nhi-e ke-sha-lo gwala
2PL.RECIP-NOM complete-know-finish QST
'Will you know each other?'

In the sets for the negative sentences (8b) and (9b), it can be seen that the past and the present time have the same construction as in *-mu*, while the future time (10b) has the allomorphic *-m* (which will also be seen as the same in the future negative sentence, 25, in Section 2.3). Again, while the future time carries the full form *gwala*, the past and the present time have the shortened form of the interrogative as *-la*. From these non-affirmative sentences, Rengma seems to have a future vs. non-future (past and

present behaving alike), unlike the present vs. non-present in the case of affirmative sentences. This leads to a postulation that the Rengma language has irregular tense markings for the three points in time depending on the speech type (affirmative vs. non-affirmative), not on the temporal act (past, present, and future).

2.2. Aspect

Rengma has two basic types of aspect: perfective and imperfective. Table 2 lists these aspectual features:

Table 2. Aspectual marking in Rengma.

| Perfective | Imperfective |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| -lo, -ko, be-sho, ko-sho | bin, -nyo (Habitual generic) |

The morphemes functioning for perfectivity like *-lo*, *-ko*, *be-sho*, and *ko-sho* are resultative serial verbs suffixed to the main verb, i.e., there is no particular morpheme or suffix in Rengma to indicate completion of an event in time. These resultatives are also components of explicator-compound verbs (ECV). According to [Abbi and Gopalakrishnan \(1992\)](#), in an ECV, V1 constitutes the head and the V2 indicates aspect, adverbial, and attitudinal meanings and is multifunctional, all these “semantic functions can be subsumed under one semantico-grammatical category i.e., ‘perfective’ in the South Asian context”. To add further, [Masica \(1976\)](#) discusses the areal distribution of ECV as a typological phenomenon across South Asian languages, and this linguistic area also includes Rengma. The following sentences, (11) to (14), illustrate the use of serial verbs for the function of the perfective aspect.

11. a-pü-le zang-yhu atho thyü-bin-nyo thyü-pen-lo
 1SG-father-NOM day-two work do-HAB-TOP do-(complete)-finish
 ‘My father finished work in two days (Lit: My father work do complete finish after two days)’.
12. nchenyugi agin-nde-ko
 baby hungry-be-finish
 ‘The baby has become hungry (Lit: The baby finished becoming hungry)’.
13. John lügi-le hahnyu gü-hü o gongryü tagen
 John sister-NOM market go-DIST and return meal
 thyü-lo-be-sho
 do-finish-total-complete
 ‘John’s sister went to the market and finished cooking returning (Lit: John’s sister go shop market and returning, cook finish total complete)’.
14. Joseph-le tagen thyü-shi o ye-gü jie-ting
 Joseph-NOM meal do-finish and inside-go sleep-NZR
 ko-sho
 finish-complete
 ‘Joseph finished cooking meal and completed sleeping going inside (Lit: Joseph cook finish food and sleeping finish complete going inside)’.

On the other hand, *-bin* is suffixed to indicate the non-completion of an event in the language. It is an existential copula as examples (15) and (16) illustrate, which can also occur alone as in (16) to indicate the habituality as well as the iterative aspect.

15. ncho hijyonyu ponyugü-le ngo-n phennyu lünyu n-me
 nowadays boy-NOM 2SG-GEN village girl human-one
 phi nyon-shü-bin-nyo
 look heart-like-EXIST-HAB.PRES

‘The boy likes/loves the girl from your village nowadays (Lit: The boy heart look like do the girl from your village nowadays)’.

16. ligü kanyu hü-bin
 3MSG home be-EXIST/HAB

‘He stays/has been staying at home’.

The morpheme *-nyo* functions for habituality in general, in the present time in Rengma and it can be a terminal verb suffix as in (17).

17. teminyü kethen jang-ka/gwenkho-ka she-ko-he-nyo
 people old age-LOC/time-LOC die-finish-DIST-HAB.PRES

‘People die of old age’.

Throughout the analysis, there has been no presence of the progressive aspect and past habituality. From the above discussion, Rengma seems to have aspect in terms of either completed or non-completed event with the help of these resultatives or serial verbs.

2.3. Mood

Mood can be expressed in Rengma in two ways: realis and irrealis. Table 3 provides an overview of some of the modal features as realised from the tense and aspect features besides modality:

Table 3. Realis and irrealis moods in Rengma.

| Realis | | Irrealis | |
|--------|--------------|------------|-----------------------------------|
| -ma | Past | -ma | Future |
| -ya | Past | -yo/-nyo | Present |
| -ø | Past/Present | -ø | Present |
| -lo | Perfective | -te | Future |
| -ko | '' '' | -ta | Imperative |
| be-sho | '' '' | -nyi | Desiderative |
| ko-sho | '' '' | -bin, -nyo | Habitual/Existential, Habitual |
| | | -yi | Prohibitive |
| | | -m | Negative |
| | | gwa | Potential |
| | | then | Necessity |
| | | kho' | Hortative |

As observed from the given table, mood is realised in actions from the past time, whether based on the temporal event (tense) or the completion (aspect), whereas the speech events to be realised in the future (other than imperfective aspect) carry modality with the help of post-verbal particles and verbal suffixes in Rengma to indicate obligation, wish, necessity, ability, and others. The sentences (18) to (25) highlight examples of the latter feature:

IMPERATIVE

18. gū-o n-beng che-lo-ta
 go-and 2SG.GEN-hand wash-finish-IMP
 ‘Go wash your hands’.

PROHIBITIVE/NEGATIVE IMPERATIVE

19. nthü tu ban-yi-ta
 today food cook-PROH-IMP
 ‘Don’t cook food today’.

POTENTIAL

20. a-le teyhenyu hi-gwenkho-ka tin-ka-bin kentokhen
 1SG-NOM usually PROX-time-LOC move-RLVZ-HAB bus
 lopa nhe lo-gwa
 give see finish-POT
 ‘I can show you the bus that leaves every day at this time’.

NECESSITY

21. nthyü a-le mii-e kaha-hi-lo-m then
 today 1SG-NOM medicine-ACC buy-NF (DIST)-finish-NEG need
 ‘I need to buy medicines today (Lit: Today, I buy need not yet bought medicines)’.

DESIDERATIVE

22. a-le kenyile ncho kaki go-nyl
 1SG-NOM wish now home go-DSD
 ‘I wish I could go home now’.

23. a-le ncho kaki go-nyl-bin-yo
 1SG-NOM now home go-DSD-EXIST/be-HAB
 ‘I want to go home now (Lit: I am having want (to) go home now)’.

HORTATIVE

24. **kho’** kensi-sha nsi-yma
 HORT foot-ball kick-FUT
 ‘Let’s go play football’.

NEGATIVE

25. a-le ligü sha-ti-m

1SG-NOM 3MSG know-FUT.DIST-NEG

'I won't know him'.

2.4. Observation

From the discussion given on the representation of TAM in Rengma, observations can be made here: Firstly, although the language covertly marks the non-future time (past and present)—which may be overlooked as having future vs. non-future tense distinction, owing to the similarity in the non-affirmative sentences—the presence of *-ma* in both the past and the future time, additionally, makes it unclear to distinguish tense as past vs. non-past and future vs. non-future as shown in (26) and (27); rather it behaves like present vs. non-present.

26. ahi ke-sha-bin-**ma**

1PL.RECIP complete-know-HAB/EXIST-PST

'We knew each other'.

27. ahi-le ke-sha-bin-**ma**

1PL.RECIP-NOM complete-know-HAB/EXIST-FUT

'We will know each other'.²

In addition, the language marks *-ya* for the past time as well as *-ma*, which provides the possibility to understand the semantic feature of *-ma* and *-ya* in terms of definiteness. That is, *-ma* seems to be marked for indefinite past and definite future while *-ya* is used for definite past (cf. e.g., (1)).

Secondly, what appears to be marked for the present tense, i.e., *-yo*, semantically functions for the habitual generic aspect (allomorph of *nyo*). The sentence (28) thus semantically interprets time to be that of habituality in the present context.

28. ahi ke-sha-bin-**yo**

1PL.RECIP complete-know-HAB/EXIST-HAB.PRES

'We know each other'.

Finally, in terms of definiteness, all the above mentioned tense-aspect features show indefiniteness, while the other counterpart of the future time (other than the indefinite *-ma*) *-te* (cf. e.g., (3)) and the perfective marking serial verbs (e.g., (29)) are cases of definiteness.

29. ahi-le ke-sha-lo-ko

1PL.RECIP -NOM complete-know-finish-finish

'We have known each other'.

Further, in case of the future time, *-ma* can be said to be distal (indefinite) as in (27) and *-te* proximal (definite) as in (3).

Following Table 4 summarises the tense-aspect distinction based on definiteness:

² The Rengma language has free variations for the nominative case as *-le* and *-e*.

Table 4. Definiteness in Rengma tense-aspect.

| Definite | Indefinite |
|--------------|------------------------|
| -ko PFV | -∅ Non-FUT |
| -lo PFV | -yo/-nyo PRES and HABG |
| be-sho PFV | -ma PST.DIST |
| ko-sho PFV | -ta PST.PROX |
| -ya PST | -bin HAB/EXIST |
| -ma FUT.PROX | |
| -te FUT.DIST | |

Table 4 shows that the examples of definiteness and indefiniteness do not complement the concept of realis vs. irrealis moods, since besides the perfective marking serial verbs, which are realis, column 1 (definite) also contains the future *-te* (irrealis), while column 2 (indefinite) contains past time (realis) along with the irrealis present time and habitual aspect, which will be discussed in the subsequent sections. Apart from this, serial verbs are seen to be highly prominent in determining perfectivity in the Rengma language. The following Section 3 highlights their role in determining time in Rengma.

3. Serial Verbs

Serial verbs, in simple words, are combinations of verb stems with no connective markings in a sentence. Tibeto-Burman languages are rich in serial verbs and Rengma is no exception. Serial verbs in this language are found to be of the following semantic types: explanatory, evaluative, resultative, especially the “finish” set of resultatives, as displayed for some common instances, in the Table 5:

Table 5. Serial verbs in Rengma.

| Explanatory | Evaluative | Resultative “Finish” |
|--------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| do TELL | LOOK heart LIKE | Complete FINISH |
| do TELL GIVE | LOOK heart LIKE NEG finish | Total FINISH |
| | LOOK heart LIKE NEG make finish | Sleep complete FINISH |
| | | Work do complete FINISH |
| | | Shoot kill FINISH |

The explanatory serial verbs are seen to use mostly “tell”, “give”, and “finish” forms in the language, while evaluative verbs are combinations of “look”, “heart”, and “like” with negation for its opposite counterpart. Resultative verbs are extremely common with “return”, “leave”, and “finish/complete” as the most productive of all these verb forms. The maximal sequence is V1, V2, V3, and V4 for all the serial verbs.

Verb serialization is a typological feature of greater mainland Southeast Asia, especially Austro-Asiatic and several Tibeto-Burman languages (North, East, and Southeast) and these languages lack the finiteness asymmetries (clause chaining, subordinate clause embedding) that are found in Indo-Aryan languages and in the TB languages from the South, West, and Southwest (Post 2011, p. 199). All the serial verbs are finite in Rengma (although it has mixed features geographically falling between these two belts), and they are, thus, seen to be pivotal in the completion of a temporal event rather than the tense forms that need a finite verb.

In the following examples, (30) to (36), the verbal sequence is illustrated and the event completion, which is always with the final verb here, is shown in bold:

EXPLANATORY

30. a-le nchenyi ligü-nan tho thyü-le **zo**-hü-ma.
 1SG-NOM morning 3SG-ACC work do-NF tell-DIST-PST
 ‘I made/asked him (to) do the work today in the morning’.

31. a-le nchenyi ligü-nan tho thyü-le **zo-lopi**-hü-ma.
 1SG-NOM morning 3SG-ACC work do-NF tell-give-DIST-FUT
 ‘I made/asked him give (to) do the work today in the morning’.

EVALUATIVE

32. ncho hijyonyu ponyugü-le ngo-n phennyu lünyu n-me
 nowadays boy-NOM 2SG-GEN village girl human-one
 V1 V2-V3
 phi nyon-**shü**-bin-nyo
 look heart-like-HAB-HAB.PRES
 ‘The boy LOOK HEART LIKE DO the girl from your village nowadays’.

V1

33. gwengwa ponyugü-le ngo-n phennyu lünyu nme phi
 past boy-NOM 2SG-GEN village girl one look
 V2-V3 V1-V2
 nyon-**shü**-hü, mu-we ncho-we nmu ko-**sho**
 heart-like-DIST, NEG-CNT now-CNT NEG make-finish
 ‘The boy MAKE LOOK HEART LIKE DO the girl FINISH from your village before,
 not now’.

RESULTATIVE

34. kepyoh-kele shikarigü-le tamün gwün shü-**ko**
 suddenly-REDUP hunter-NOM tiger shoot kill-finish
 ‘The hunter DIE CAUSE/KILL a tiger BEFORE suddenly’.

35. Joseph-le tagen thyü-**shi** o ye-gü jie-ting
 Joseph-le meal do-finish and inside-go sleep-NZR
 V3-V4
 ko-**sho**
 complete-finish

‘Joseph COOK FINISH food and SLEEP COMPLETE FINISH going inside’.

| | V1 | | V2-V3-V4 |
|---|----------------|---------|---|
| 36. a-pü-le | zang-yhu | atho | thyü-bin-nyo |
| | 1SG-father-NOM | day-two | work do-HAB/EXIST-HAB.PRES do-(complete)-(finish) |
| ‘My father work DO COMPLETE FINISH after two days’. | | | |

Throughout the given examples, the explanatory verbs take the indefinite *-ma* (past time) due to the indirect causation present in the sentences. The set of examples for evaluative verbs are in the state of habituality since emotions like “love”, “like”, “dislike” are recurring social expressions. It is evident that the resultative serial verbs, ending with *-lo*, *-ko*, and *-sho* (bound forms), indicate completion of a temporal event and thus determine the aspectual feature of perfectivity. It is interesting to note the optional use of the verb *lopi* ‘give’ in Rengma (example 31); its presence indicates indirect causation and acts like a “benefactive” (Abbi and Gopalakrishnan 1992, p. 690) in contrast to (30), which has a higher degree of causation with the mere use of the verb to ‘tell’.

4. Comparison of Rengma TAM with Cognate TB Languages

Throughout the analysis, the language appears to be weakly tensed and the *-ma* verbal suffix rules out Rengma as a modal language, since the suffix is both realis (past time) and irrealis (future time) leaving a linguist to speculate it as strongly aspectual, due to the high presence of resultative serial verbs for completion of an action. In this context, the TAM features of the cognate (Naga group) and neighbouring Tibeto–Burman languages, Angami and Sema, can be compared.

Giridhar (1980) describes Angami as having covertly marked (null) past and present tenses and overt *tyò* for future tense. Aspect is classified as perfective and imperfective, of which, the Angami language shows the presence of the habitual *-ya*, reduplicated iterative, immediacy *-ãzĩé* and durative/progressive *zĩé/-zǎ*. Mood (irrealis) is also marked for necessity, obligation, and permission, etc.

Sreedhar (1980), however, shows the semantic-pragmatic context of tense marking in Sema in the three tenses: past, present, and future. The past has been identified as marked for remoteness and immediacy which includes the feature of completive vs. incompletive and determinative vs. indeterminative, and illustrates a list of morphemes showing these features: *wè* (remote past), *kè* (specified), *wà* (with first and second persons and verb unspecified), *wé* (alternant of *wà*), and *e* (stative and potential). The present tense is unattested, with the exception of the verbal suffix *-ni*, only after the aspectual marker. In the case of the future tense, it is determined by the degree of certainty and doubt as in *nani* (certain), *ni* (less certain), and *wi* (probability). The Sema language functions for imperfectivity are evident from the progressive *a/cé* and habitual *ce/ace*, since the language tends to focus more on the immediacy and remoteness in its temporal speech act than the completion of a speech event. Further, Sema is unmarked for realis mood as indicative (unmarked for perfectivity as well) and marked for irrealis moods such as, imperative *lo/ò/le*, potential *lu nani*, probability *luwì*, and conditional *cala aye*, etc.

From the above discussion, it is clear that Angami has a future vs. non-future tense distinction (past and present are unmarked, while future is marked), and its aspectual system is again unmarked perfective vs. marked imperfective, and lacks realis features (unmarked past and present on the one hand, and future on the other). Sema, has similar aspectual and mood features with Angami, i.e., unmarked perfective vs. marked imperfective and unmarked realis vs. marked realis although tense is bounded by remote vs. immediate and determinative vs. indeterminative features with marked past (realis) and future (irrealis) and unmarked present time (irrealis). The Sema language is therefore, more aspectual than tense due to the semantic features playing a role in determining tense rather than a clear-cut morphological representation of time.

In comparison to Angami and Sema as described by Giridhar and Sreedhar, Rengma from the present study seems to carry TAM as labelled in Table 6:

Table 6. Tense–aspect–mood in Rengma.

| | | |
|--------|--|---|
| Tense | Past | Indefinite <i>-ma</i> (Distal) vs. unmarked (exceptional definite and proximal <i>-ya</i>) |
| | Present | Unmarked except <i>-yo</i> with stative verbs and habitual sentences |
| | Future | Definite <i>-ma</i> (Proximal) vs. Indefinite <i>-te</i> (Distal) |
| Aspect | Perfective | <i>-lo, -ko, ko-sho, be-sho</i> |
| | Imperfective | Progressive/Habitual <i>bin</i> , Habitual Generic <i>-yo/-nyo</i> |
| Mood | Marked Realis (Indicative) and Irrealis (Imperative, Prohibitive, Necessity, etc.) | |

Rengma, is similar to Angami as a future vs. non-future language in the case of non-affirmative sentence forms, while it is more similar to Sema, for the aspectual features rather than tense and modal due to the status of the post verbal suffix *-ma*. The suffix *-ma* occurs in both the past and future tenses representing a present vs. non-present tense system, thereby, ruling out the question of determining the language as having, past vs. non-past, future vs. non-future. Moreover, it has three distinct tenses: past *-ya*, present *-yo*, and future *-te*. Rengma, like Sema, has semantic features of definiteness (used as determinative vs. indeterminative in Sema) and proximal vs. distal for the non-present tense described in the latter as immediate vs. remote. *-ma* is marked for definiteness in the future time (proximal) and indefiniteness (distal) in the past. From the context of mood, *-ma* occurs as both realis (past) and irrealis (future). Thus, Rengma, at this point, is weakly tensed and modal, in which case, the aspectual features need to be examined further. To further add, Rengma is no exception in being a weakly tensed language as most of these TB languages also do not distinguish time during negation, in which case, it will have the same negated form for past and present time while the future stands apart (Coupe 2007), as is evident from the language. As has been previously discussed, Rengma is rich in resultative serial verbs, which are crucial to understand whether the action has been completed in a particular speech event. These serial verbs function for completion of the event while the habituality/non-finite *-bin/-nyo* including the future *-ma*, indicate non-completion of the speech event. Thus, Rengma is strongly aspectual and carries elements of perfective (completive) vs. imperfective (incompletive). Table 7 summarises the major findings with the help of *-ma*.

Table 7. Time in Rengma.

| | |
|---|--|
| Semantic feature: Definite and Indefinite | <i>-ma</i> |
| Pragmatic context: Proximal and Distal | <i>-ma</i> |
| Tense: Future and Non-Future | <i>-ma</i> |
| Mood: Realis and Irrealis | <i>-ma</i> |
| Aspect: Perfective (Completive) and Imperfective (Incompletive) | <i>-lo,-ko, -sho</i> (serial verbs) and <i>-ma</i> (indefinite past and definite future) |

5. Conclusions

From the present study, it can be concluded that Rengma, unlike the neighbouring and cognate languages Angami and Sema, appears to have future vs. non-Future tense distinctions for non-affirmatives only, being a weakly tensed language. It also tends to be present vs. non-present exclusively in affirmatives. However, *-ma* is homophonous in tense (distal past and proximal future) and mood (realis and irrealis) in Rengma, and discrepant in semantic features (definite and indefinite) and pragmatic contexts in determining time (distal past and proximal future). Thus, Rengma seems to

be more aspectual than tense since the relationship of serial verbs (resultative) ending with *-lo*, *-ko*, and *-sho* with perfectivity is distinctly present in the completion of a speech event whereas tense and modal features that include *-ma* have indistinct boundaries and are thus related to imperfectivity.

Among the Rengma languages as mentioned earlier, there is no previous work on Western Rengma (Terapvünyu) except Marrison's account (1967) of Northern dialect (Ntenyu). It needs to be noted that Western Rengma is vulnerably endangered and speakers, apart from the villages, are shifting towards the neighbouring languages, Assamese (colloquial), and Nagamese. Current documentation on Western Rengma by the author is still preliminary and research work is highly required on the lesser known Rengma dialects (Northern and Western Rengma are more similar than Southern Rengma as observed during recent comparison of numerals).

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Abbreviations

| | | | |
|-------|---------------|-------|----------------|
| 1 | First person | IRR | Irrealis |
| 2 | Second person | LOC | Locative |
| 3 | Third person | M | Masculine |
| ACC | Accusative | NEG | Negative |
| ASS | Assertive | NF | Non Finite |
| CNT | Contrast | NOM | Nominative |
| DAT | Dative | NZR | Nominalizer |
| DIST | Distal | POT | Potential |
| DSD | Desiderative | PRES | Present |
| EXIST | Existential | PROH | Prohibitive |
| F | Feminine | PST | Past |
| FUT | Future | RECIP | Reciprocal |
| GEN | Genitive | REDUP | Reduplication |
| HAB | Habitual | RLVZ | Relativizer |
| HORT | Hortative | SG | Singular |
| IMP | Imperative | TOP | Topicalisation |

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