

What we do in the shadows of the pear tree: **Tense switching in Shughni Pear Stories**

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Abstract. This article presents the results of a study on the narrative functions of verb tenses in Shughni. Shughni is an Eastern Iranian language with a compact TAME system, which has tensed evidentials (with Preterite being the direct past and Perfect, the indirect past) and lacks grammaticalized aspect. The current study analyzes five narrations of the Pear Film plot by native Shughni speakers recorded in Kharagh in 2023. The Pear Film is a famous short film devised for linguistic experiments. For analysis, I used only independent clauses, as suggested by the Labovian framework of narrative analysis. Three consultants watched the film directly, while the other two only knew its plot as rendered by another speaker. They were then asked to retell the plot of the film in Shughni. This difference in the source information did not produce a definitive influence on the speakers' tense choice. Four consultants used the Present as the main narrative tense, while the fifth preferred the Preterite. It is unclear what motivates the choice of the narrative tense, and further study on this topic is necessary. All the five consultants switched to other tenses at least a few times. In Present-tense narratives, the Preterite and the Perfect are used to refer to past events. The Perfect is employed for events that were not witnessed by the narrator or the characters and therefore is often attested in backgrounding contexts denoting events outside of the main plot line. On the other hand, the Preterite is used for witnessed past events. In Preterite-tense narratives, the speaker often switches to the Present to denote imperfective events. The particle *yal* 'still, while' is often used in Present-tense clauses, functioning as an additional imperfective marker. Sequences of tensed verbs are often interrupted by clauses with the null copula. It is frequent even in Preterite-tense narratives where Russian translations use the past form of the verb of being. This fact indicates that the null copula is to some extent "tenseless" in narrative discourse.

Keywords: narrative, tense switching, Pear Film, Shughni, Pamir languages

Acknowledgments. I am grateful to all Shughni speakers who participated in the experiment, as well as to my colleagues Daria Chistiakova, Niyaz Kireyev, Polina Padalka, Daria Ryzhova and Boris Yakubson who recorded and/or glossed the narratives. This article is an output of a research project implemented as part

of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University).

For citation: Melenchenko M. G. What we do in the shadows of the pear tree: Tense switching in Shughni Pear Stories. *Indo-Iranian Languages*. 2026. 2(1). P. 74–99.

DOI: 10.30842/30346800.2026.2.1.5

Что мы делаем в тени грушевого дерева: переключение времен в шугнанских «Рассказах о грушах»

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена исследованию нарративных функций глагольных форм в шугнанском языке на материале пересказов «Фильма о грушах». Шугнанский — язык с компактной видовременной системой, в которой есть эвиденциальность, но отсутствует грамматикализованный аспект. Основной нарративной формой в пересказах большинства информантов оказалась форма презенса. Формы претерита и перфекта в нарративах используются для описания прошедших событий, сохраняя эвиденциальный контраст, а переключения с прошедших времен на форму презенса (иногда с дополнительным лексическим маркером) могут обозначать имперфективность клаузы.

Ключевые слова: нарратив, переключение времен, Фильм о грушах, шугнанский язык, памирские языки

Благодарности. Я благодарен всем носительницам и носителям шугнанского языка, которые поучаствовали в эксперименте, а также моим коллегам Дарье Чистяковой, Ниязу Кирееву, Полине Падалке, Дарье Рыжовой и Борису Якубсону, которые записали и/или отгlossировали полученные нарративы. Исследование осуществлено в рамках Программы фундаментальных исследований НИУ ВШЭ.

Для цитирования: Melenchenko M. G. What we do in the shadows of the pear tree: Tense switching in Shughni Pear Stories. *Indo-Iranian Languages*. 2026. 2(1). P. 74–99.

DOI: 10.30842/30346800.2026.2.1.5

1. Introduction

This article is a preliminary study of tense use in Shughni narratives. It is based on the data from five retellings of the Pear Film by native Shughni speakers. Research on the functions of tenses in narratives is based on the idea that narratives constitute a specific speech register. Whereas tense semantics is usually described in relation to speech time, in narratives event time relates to the current moment in the story instead of speech time [Paducheva 2010: 286]. Therefore, the use of tense forms in narratives may be different from those in conversations and, moreover, it is often conventionalized. As J. Obrtelová put it, tense choice is not “a purely random choice of the narrator, but rather seems to follow certain rules” [Obrtelová 2017: 39]. This is especially pertinent for languages with evidentials, which can be used as genre markers, allowing listeners to differentiate between several types of stories [Aikhenvald 2004: 310]. Switching between different forms may also serve to structure the narrative [Verhees 2019: 108–111; Urmanchieva 2021].

Shughni is an Eastern Iranian language spoken in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. It belongs to the areal grouping of Pamir languages. Although there are grammars of Shughni, the most important being [Karamshoev 1963; Parker 2023], semantics of tense forms and their use in narratives have not been studied extensively. The study [Melenchenko 2023] is devoted to the semantics of the Perfect tense but provides limited information on its use in narrative sequences.

Shughni seems to be a promising language for such research for two main reasons. Firstly, it has two past tenses, which encode direct and indirect evidentiality (the Preterite and the Perfect). As will be shown below, the interplay of evidentiality and narratives can be very non-trivial and is understudied cross-linguistically. Secondly, Shughni has no fully grammaticalized aspectual markers (both of the past tenses can be used for imperfective and perfective events). Since aspect plays a crucial role in narrative structuring in many languages [Fludernik 2012: 75], it is interesting how Shughni speakers manage the narrative discourse without it. The TAME system is rather compact, and therefore each of its tense forms may be expected to have a variety of functions, which would otherwise be distributed across several forms. The study of narratives can complement our understanding of the grammatical semantics of this system as well

as cultural conventions for different types of narratives in the Shughni community.

This article consists of five sections. Section 2 provides a short overview of the TAME system in Shughni. Section 3 describes the collected data and discusses the methodology of the study. Section 4 presents the results of the analysis of tense forms in the collected narratives. Section 5 concludes the article.

2. Tenses in Shughni

Contemporary Shughni has three tenses. The Present, or Present-Future (Russian *nastojščee*, *nastojšče-buduščee*) is the default tense for ongoing and future events. For most verbs, it can refer both to habitual and non-habitual events. Future time reference and habituality can be expressed by a clausal enclitic =*ta*, but its exact functions are unclear [Parker 2023: 339–344]. The Preterite (Russian *preterit*, *prošedšee*) is described in traditional grammars as an unmarked past tense [Karamshoev 1963: 154, 161–162; Edelman, Dodykhudoeva 2009: 806–807]. More recent research, however, has shown that the Preterite is a marked direct evidential form [Melenchenko 2023]. It is contrasted with the Perfect (Russian *perfekt*), whose main function in contemporary Kharagh Shughni¹ is the expression of indirect evidentiality [Ibid.: 124; Parker 2023: 348–350]. The Perfect form is also used in experiential and modal (e.g. counterfactual) contexts. At the same time, at least for some stative verbs (in particular, verbs of posture) the Perfect expresses ongoing states without regard to the evidential status [Melenchenko 2023: 124–132].

Shughni has other verb forms that need to be briefly mentioned. The Pluperfect form, which is derived from the Perfect with a suffix *-at/-it*, used to have deictic uses (“past-in-the-past”), but in contemporary language in Kharagh it is ungrammatical in such contexts. It has only retained modal uses, in which it is interchangeable with the Perfect [Melenchenko 2025]. There are no instances of the Pluperfect in the collected narratives. There are also two Infinitives, which are non-finite forms, and the Imperative, which, naturally, never appears in a narrative clause. There are several

¹ In this article, I use the alternate spelling of the town’s name, Kharagh, which corresponds to its pronunciation in Shughni (*Xaray*), instead of a more traditional spelling Khorugh, which corresponds to the Tajik version of the name (*Xoruy*).

participles, the most widely used of which is the Resultative participle, derived from the Perfect. Infinitives and participles are used in several periphrastic constructions, including inchoative, progressive, prospective and “passive” [Parker 2023: 352–356, 370–376].

The Present tense drastically differs from all other finite verb forms in its agreement system. A Present verb form consists of the verbal stem and a subject agreement suffix. In contrast, all other finite verb forms except the Imperative (Preterite, Perfect, Pluperfect) express agreement by means of clausal enclitics, which are usually positioned after the first nominal phrase [Chistiakova 2022]. Nominal predicates such as nouns, adjectives or participles employ the null copula or verb-like copular particles: the existential *yast* ‘there is’ and the universal negative *nist* ‘is not’. For agreement, nominal predicates also use clausal enclitics. More detailed descriptions of Shughni verb morphosyntax, including verbal stems, agreement and periphrastic constructions can be found in grammars [Karamshoev 1963; Parker 2023] or in the article [Melenchenko 2023: 122–124].

3. Data and methodology

Pear Film is a short film designed at the University of California in Berkeley in 1975. It was created for a project aimed at studying cultural and linguistic differences manifested in specific properties of the narratives [Chafe (ed.) 1980: xi–xv]. Speakers of different languages were asked to watch the film and then retell its plot to a different speaker who had not seen the film. None of the characters in the film speak to each other so the experiment is easily reproduced for different languages. The narratives of these speakers were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Several studies that used the results of the project were published in a highly influential collective monograph [Ibid.]. The film was subsequently used by many linguists working in different fields of linguistics, including studies on reference and anaphora [Du Bois 1987; Bickel 2003], use of gestures in spoken languages [Kibrik, Fedorova 2018], speech of people with aphasia [Khudyakova et al. 2016] and schizophrenia [van Schuppen et al. 2020], audio description for blind or visually impaired people [Orero 2008; Mazur, Kruger 2012], variation and language change [Fafulas 2021; Sonnenhauser et al. 2023] and many other topics. The reason why the Pear Film is so popular is that it allegedly provides a culturally universal stim-

ulus for elicitation of spontaneous oral texts, which can then be used differently depending on the goals of the researcher.

This study uses five narrations of the plot of the Pear Film by Shughni speakers recorded by Niyaz Kireyev, Daria Ryzhova, Boris Yakubson and me during our stay in Kharagh (Shughni *Xaray*), Tajikistan, in 2023. Three consultants (R99, N75, O04) were asked to watch the film and then retell its events to another speaker. The other two speakers (A99, M91) listened to their renarration but did not watch the film themselves (A99 listened to O04's narrative, and M91 listened to N75's narrative). Then they were asked to retell the story once again to other consultants. In each session, the listeners were encouraged to ask questions during and after the story, but that happened rarely.

The following table summarizes the metadata of the speakers and their narratives. The code used to refer to the consultant consists of the first letter of their name (e.g. M) and the last two digits of their year of birth (e.g. 99). As can be seen from the table, three of the consultants were born in 1999–2004 and were around 23 years old during the experiment, another speaker was born in 1991 and was around 32 years old, and one of the speakers was born around 1975 and was around 50 years old. Three of the consultants (N75, M91, O04) were born in Kharagh, two were born in the Porshinev (*Porxinev*) community, which is located about 15 km north of Kharagh. There is no systematic research on the Porshinev variety, but it is expected that the speech of its residents is slightly different from those born in Kharagh. Currently, however, all the consultants live in Kharagh. The narratives were of different lengths with 437 clauses total; the mean length is 87 clauses.

Table 1. Data on the collected narratives and the consultants that produced them

Speaker	Source	Gender	Place of birth	Clauses
N75	watched the film	F	Kharagh	123
M91	from N75's retelling	F	Kharagh	41
O04	watched the film	F	Kharagh	100
A99	from O04's retelling	M	Porshinev	90
R99	watched the film	F	Porshinev	83

Each session of narrative retelling was filmed and recorded with lapel microphones and then transcribed, translated into Russian and glossed by several participants of the Pamir research group in HSE with the help of Shughni speakers. For the aims of this study, I divided the texts into individual clauses and annotated each clause with several labels. The principles of the annotation follow the basics of the methodology of narrative analysis proposed by W. Labov and J. Waletzky [Labov, Waletzky 1967; Labov 2013] and their application in J. Obrtelová's extensive research on narratives in Wakhi, another Eastern Iranian language of the Pamir area [Obrtelová 2017: 34–38; 2019: 142–146].

Labov and Waletzky suggest that only matrix clauses are included in the “temporal sequence” of the narrative, since dependent clauses usually denote actions outside of the main sequence of events [Labov, Waletzky 1967: 21; Labov 2013: 15]. Following Obrtelová [2019: 145], I take subordinate clauses into consideration but assign different labels to matrix and subordinate clauses in order to distinguish them. Again, following Obrtelová, I distinguish clauses with direct speech and label them separately. Sentences addressed to the listener of the story were also labeled as direct speech, since they are not part of the narrative. All the other clauses were also annotated according to the type of the predicate. The following types were distinguished: PST (Preterite), PF (Perfect), PQP (Pluperfect), PRS (Present), IMP (Imperative), COP (copula), TA (Present or copula with the clitic =*ta*), PTCP (Resultative participle with the null copula) and UNF (for unfinished clauses). Infinitives and adnominal participles were not regarded as separate clauses. Periphrastic constructions were annotated according to the tense of their auxiliary verb (e.g. a prospective construction with the auxiliary in the Present was labeled PRS).

The process of annotation faced several issues. Firstly, for Shughni, the task of delimiting clauses is sometimes problematic. Since Shughni syntax is still under-studied, it is often unclear whether a certain phrase constitutes its own clause or where the border between the two clauses is. In many cases, it is also unclear which clauses should be treated as subordinate. Many narrative passages in Shughni seemingly have a quite “flat” syntactic structure: clausal coordination in a Shughni narrative is often paralleled by subordination in the Russian translation. However, there are also clear markers of subordination, which are used almost exclusively in dependent clauses: *aga* ‘if’, *ca* ‘when, if’, (*d*)*idi* ‘that, which’, *to* ‘when,

until' and others. In one case, even though no subordination markers are present, the verb in the Present tense clearly performs a dependent function (see similar examples in e.g. [Parker 2023: 385]) and is considered to constitute a subordinate clause.

Apart from the overall approach to narrative structure, Labov and Waletzky proposed a specific analytical framework, in which each of the clauses is assigned a certain type. Narrative clauses denote consequential events, and coordinate clauses denote events that are simultaneous with events from other clauses. These two types are claimed to constitute the foreground of the narrative and are contrasted with free clauses, which denote events that take place during the whole narrative, and restricted clauses, which denote events that take place only during some part of the narrative [Labov, Waletzky 1967: 22–28]. This framework was later further developed by many scholars, who distinguished other clause types, such as summative, informative, evaluative, etc. (see [Obtelová 2019: 144–145]). These labels were not used in annotation, but they will be brought up occasionally in the analysis of the results, as well as some other aspects of the Labovian framework.

To provide a clearer representation of the distribution of predicate types in the narrative, I have created catplot diagrams for each of the narratives using Python modules “seaborn” [Waskom 2021] and “Plotly” [Plotly 2015]. The module “seaborn” was employed to export the diagrams into static images, and “Plotly” to export the interactive versions of the diagrams, which allow the user to read each of the clauses, its glossing and translation. Dots on the plot represent individual clauses, they are placed on the *x*-axis one after another, as in the narrative. Different values of the *y*-axis represent different clause type labels (matrix clause, subordinate clause, direct speech), whereas different predicate types (PRS, PST, COP, etc.) are shown with different colors of the dots. Examples of these diagrams are shown in Section 4.1. The code and all the resulting diagrams can be found in a GitHub repository: <https://github.com/maxmerben/shughni-narratives>.

A few remarks regarding the presentation of the text material are necessary. The Shughni examples in this article are written in the Iranistic transcription used by the Pamir research group in HSE.² Since the exam-

²The description of the transcription can be found on this webpage: <https://pamiri.online/blog/ortho>.

ples in this article are quite large, I use simplified glossing for brevity. Many morphemic divisions are not shown, and many glosses are simplified and shortened. Namely, demonstratives, which are very frequent in Shughni speech, are glossed with English words that have similar meanings. The number [2] in square brackets denotes that this demonstrative is of the medial series (2nd series). Demonstratives of the distal (3rd) series, which are more frequent, are not marked with a number [Parker 2023: 200–220]. Clause boundaries are marked with square brackets. In clauses with the null copula, the main nominal predicate is underlined. To facilitate the reader's understanding of the Shughni text, I attempted to make the English translation as literal as possible, with the Present translated as English Present Simple or Present Progressive, the Preterite as Past Simple and the Perfect as Present Perfect.

4. Analysis

This section is devoted to the analysis of the collected Pear Stories. The whole dataset of clauses in the five narratives contains 375 independent clauses and 29 subordinate clauses, which correspond to the events in the narrative. Apart from that, 33 clauses were labeled as direct speech. Among the 375 matrix clauses, there are 241 clauses with the Present tense (including clauses with the enclitic =*ta*), 61 clauses with the Preterite, 47 clauses with the null copula, 15 with the Perfect, and another 11 were not finished by the speaker.

4.1. The choice of narrative tense

As shown above, the Present is by far the most frequent form in the narratives. The reason for that is that it functions as a narrative tense in 4 out of 5 narratives. The excerpt (1), taken from the midpoint of N75's retelling, exemplifies this function of the Present tense. In R99's retelling, however, the Preterite is a narrative tense: it is used in 42 out of 67 independent clauses, while the Present is used only in 8 clauses. Figures 1 and 2 show a visual representation of two narratives: the Present-tense narrative by N75 and the Preterite-tense narrative by R99.



Fig. 1. Predicate types across N75's narrative



Fig. 2. Predicate types across R99's narrative

- (1) *[Wād bād yi.čīz=aθ na-lūv-en]*,
 they then something=INT NEG-say-PRS.3PL
[yordam di-rd kin-en],
 help he[2].OBL-DAT do-PRS.3PL
[δūv-en di=qati]=xu,
 pick-PRS.3PL he[2].OBL=COM=AND1
[wam di sabad vo ribi-yen]
 she.OBL he[2].OBL basket again put-PRS.3PL
di vilisped=ti]=xu, [vid bād tīzd].
 he[2].OBL bike=SUP=AND1 (s)he[2] then go.PRS.3SG
[Naw dūs.ik joy tīzd]=atā,
 only little place go.PRS.3SG=AND3
[yu sar zulik bād wam žīr]
 he most small then she.OBL stone
as pūnd=ti zēzd]=xu,
 EL road=SUP take.PRS.3SG=AND1
[δīd wam šič],
 give.PRS.3SG she.OBL now
[vid pi wam-and ca juk-t].
 (s)he[2] UP she.OBL-LOC SUBD hit-PST
 ‘Then they [the boys] **don't say** anything, **help** him [the protagonist], **pick**
 [the pears] with him, **put** the basket back on top of the bike, and he **leaves**.
 He only **rides** a little bit, and then the smallest one [from the boys] **takes**
 the stone from the road, the one which he **hit** [previously]’ [N75: 164–172]

What motivates different choices of the narrative tense? There is little information about this problem in sources on Shughni. According

to [Karamshoev 1963: 161], the Shughni Perfect may be used for narration in folk tales. The same is briefly mentioned in [Parker 2023: 214]. Unfortunately, there is no data on the narrative Present. While it is impossible to give a proper answer to this question with such a small and homogeneous corpus, I will address several different ideas that might be useful for further studies.

Firstly, there is the notion of the historical present, which is often evoked in discussions on tense switching and tense choice. This term conflates two different phenomena: the use of the present tense as a narrative tense and its sporadic use in an otherwise past-tense narrative [Fludernik 1991: 368; Paducheva 2010: 288]. Both phenomena can be found in the recorded Pear Stories; the first (“narrative present”) is attested in four of them and the second (“emphatic present”) is found in R99’s predominantly Preterite-tense narrative (see Section 4.3). Studies on the historical present usually focus on unexpected switches to the “emphatic” present tense and back to the past tense. According to a cross-linguistic study on verb tenses in Pear Stories [Taylor, Mauro 2011], the present tense is the most widely used strategy for retelling the Pear Film in the majority of European languages in the sample (e.g. English, French, German, Greek, Polish and many others); the study, however, provides no explanation for this fact and does not go into details on the matter.

A further complication is the presence of evidentiality in Shughni. Since the Preterite is the direct evidential past and the Perfect is the indirect evidential past, one could assume that both are used as narrative tenses in witnessed and unwitnessed narratives correspondingly. However, that is not the case. Even though perfects are traditionally thought of as intrinsically non-narrative tenses, perfects with an indirect evidential meaning may be used as the narrative tense [Dahl 1985: 138, 151–152; Verhees 2019: 108–109]. Still, languages with evidentiality systems similar to Shughni often employ other strategies and avoid using the Perfect. For example, according to Obrtelová [2019: 53–63], in Wakhi, the Preterite is used as the default narrative form for witnessed stories, and the Present is used for unwitnessed stories (usually anecdotes, legends, and folk tales). In contrast, in Sarikoli, a language related to Shughni, as well as in Tajik, the Perfect can be freely used as a narrative tense for unwitnessed stories, namely, traditional folk tales [Palmer 2016: 97–99; Nilsson 2022: 191–192].

However, it is important to distinguish conventionalized narrative genres such as folk tales and simple retelling of unwitnessed events. Several studies of narratives in different languages with evidential systems show significant variation and speakers' freedom in framing unwitnessed events; see e.g. research on Macedonian (< Indo-European) [Mushin 2000: 935] and Andi (< East Caucasian) [Verhees 2019: 125–127]). Finally, it is unclear whether the initial source of information (Pearl Film) is considered to be a direct or indirect source. Languages with evidential distinctions may choose different strategies to express information acquired through phone calls, radio, TV, seen in a dream, etc. [Aikhenvald 2004: 343–354]. Interestingly, in the description of the Sarikoli Perfect, Palmer [2016: 99] explicitly states that it is used as a narrative tense when describing events in videos. The discussion of the role of evidentiality regarding tense choice in the collected narratives requires further studies on how events witnessed on a screen are perceived by Shughni speakers. It should also be noted that, while two of the narrators did not see the film themselves, it did not have a definitive impact on their tense choice; however, major differences may emerge in a study based on a larger sample. Thus, the choice of the narrative tense requires further research. Yet, the collected material allows us to make some inferences about tense switching.

4.2. Tense switching: Present to Preterite

Even though the majority of independent clauses in four out of five narratives use a Present verb form, in each of them there is at least one instance of a Preterite form used in a matrix clause outside of direct speech. There are eight such switches in total. Some of these switches have a “deictic” function: they are used to refer to previous events of the narrative that for some reason need to be brought up again. In (2), N75 used the Preterite to highlight a potential past event that could but did not happen. While this function of the Preterite may seem trivial, it is important to remember that Shughni has two past tenses. In examples such as (2), the speaker chooses the Preterite instead of the Perfect to highlight that the event was perceived directly by the speaker (see Section 4.4 for a discussion of the parallel use of the Perfect for unwitnessed events).

- (2) [Wam di-rd dākiǰt]=xu,
she.OBL he[2].OBL-DAT give.PRS.3SG=AND1

[*bād id ik.di.yec bād wev-ard*
then (s)he[2] before then they.OBL-DAT

na-dākčūd nok=atā,
NEG-give.PST pear=AND3

[*idi wi šlāpa yod*]=xu,
COMPL he.OBL hat carry.PST=AND1

[*bād yu ara dūnā nok zēzd*]...
then he three unit pear take.PRS.3SG

‘He [one of the boys] **gives** it [the hat] to him [the protagonist], and before [he] **didn’t give** them pears, but when he **brought** [him] his hat, he **takes** three pears...’ [N75: 95–98]

In (3), A99 apparently noticed that the listener was confused by something, so he stopped the narrative sequence to explain what he thought caused the confusion: that *yu* ‘he’ was just a stranger (the reference might be to the man with the donkey who passed near the pear picker), and he did not play an important role in the story. In his explanation, A99 used the Preterite to refer to past events. After the confusion has been cleared, the story goes on in the Present tense.

(3) ...[*yi čorik markab=qati naǰǰtst yam.va*],

INDEF man donkey=COM pass.PRS.3SG there

[*yu naǰǰtst*], [*yu sof xu.rd.aθ ānjā*
he pass.PRS.3SG he only simply there

naǰǰtst]=xu, [*tayor*]=at...

pass.PRS.3SG=AND1 finished=AND2

⟨...⟩

...Ūn, [*di zulikak, yu velik=qati*].

yes he[2].OBL small_child he bike=COM

[*Di polni ribi-yen, fukaθ*].

he[2].OBL full put-PRS.3PL all

[*Yu tūyd*], [*yu sof xu.rd.aθ*].

he go.PST.M he only simply

popūtčik vud]. [*Yu tūyd*]=atā,

stranger be.PST.M he go.PST.M=AND3

[*yid zulikak dam ribīzd*].

(s)he[2] small_child she[2].OBL put.PRS.3SG

‘...there **passes** a man with a donkey, he **passes**, he just **passes** there, and that’s it... ⟨...⟩ ...Yes, that child, he is with a bike. He **fills** the basket... (notices

the listener's confusion) He [the man with a donkey] **left**, he simply... [he] **was** a stranger³. He **left**, and [then] the child **puts**...' [A99: 23–26, 36–41]

An interesting instance of tense switching in (4) apparently happened due to priming by the listener, who interrupted O04's narration with two Preterite-tense clauses. In her reply, O04 copies the tense used in the question but then switches back to the Present continuing the story.

- (4) **Speaker:** [*Bād yu yal padam=āj*
then he still there=DIR
sifnt]=at, [*azam.aθ yi.ga...*
climb.PRS.3SG=AND2 from there another
Listener: [*Dev mūn-en=i fuk ar sabad*
those[2] apple-PL=3SG all DOWN basket
lākčūd]=xu, [*bād sifd=o*]?
let.PST=AND1 then climb.PST.M=Q
Speaker: [*Mūn nay*], [*nok*]. *Ūn*, [*wev=i*
apple no pear yes they.OBL=3SG
fukaθ lākčūd]=xu, [*bād sifd*].
all let.PST=AND1 then climb.PST.M
[*Aro yu yal sifnt...*
HEZ he still climb.PRS.3SG
S: 'He **climbs up**, and from there...'
L: 'He **left** the apples in the basket and then **left**?'
S: 'Not apples, pears. Yes, [he] **left** them all, and **climbed up**.
So, he **climbs up**...' [O04: 18–23]

A curious observation is that out of eight switches to the Preterite, four (including the one above) happen with the verb *sifidow* 'climb up' (5). Three of them describe the pear picker climbing back onto the tree at the beginning of the film (R99 also uses the Preterite form *sifid* here, although that is of course not a tense switch), and another instance (A99) describes the boy getting up after the bike crash. It is unclear how such a high frequency of the Preterite switches for this particular form can be explained.

³ It seems here that A99 was looking for a word that meant 'stranger' and decided to switch to Russian to use the word *popūtčik*, which, however, means 'travel companion'.

- (5) [Auyūn=en yam.and pur]=atā,
 two=3PL there full=AND3
 [yu=yi wam yi.ga yi.lāv aram čūd]=xu,
 he=3SG she.OBL other a_little there do.PST=AND1
 [bād sifd vo],
 then climb.PST.M again
 [vo sifd pi wam daraxt].
 again climb.PST.M UP she.OBL tree
 [Sifd pi wam daraxt]=xu,
 climb.PST.M UP she.OBL tree=AND1
 [qaroraθ — na gāp dūd],
 silently NEG word give.PRS.3SG
 [na yi.čīz] — [nok dūv-d].
 NEG something pear pick-PRS.3SG
 ‘Two [baskets are already] full, and he **put** a few [pears] in the other [basket], then **climbed up** again, again **climbed up** on the tree. **Climbed up** on the tree, and silently— **does not say** a word or anything— **picks** pears.’ [N75: 19–25]

4.3. Tense switching: Preterite to Present

Among the five retellings, there is one (R99) in which the Preterite functions as the narrative tense. Nevertheless, at some points in the story, R99 unexpectedly switches to the Present tense. Scholars usually theorize that switches to the historical present may express a “turn of events”: surprising, memorable events, the result of a character’s actions, introduction and description of new entities and characters [Fludernik 1991: 368–376; Thoma 2011], but other functions have been suggested for different languages and text genres as well (see [Johnstone 1987; Leith 1995; Louro, Ritz 2014]).

R99’s narrative contains five switches to the Present tense. Apparently, the Present form is used to explicitly mark an imperfective event. In excerpt (6), taken from the end of the narrative, this form is used to describe several simultaneous actions: the pear picker is sitting and thinking, while the boys are “showing off” (this line probably refers to one of the boys playing with his ping-pong toy) and eating pears. However, the reasons for the sudden interruption of the sequence of Present-tense clauses by the Preterite form *načīd* ‘passed’ are unclear. Apart from Present-tense verb forms,

this example also features the Present-tense negative copular particle *nist*, which reflects the temporal perspective of the pear picker (‘[now] one of the baskets is gone’).

- (6) ...[*yu=yi... δu sabad pur čū*]=*yatā*,
 he=3SG two basket full do.PST=AND3
 [*yi.ga sabad xoli vad*],
 other basket empty be.PST.F/PL
 [*yā=yi sabad nist*]. [*Yu yal nīθt*],
 she=3SG basket be.NEG he still sit.PRS.3SG
 [*čurt δīd*]=*at*,
 thought give.PRS.3SG=AND2
 [*dāδ bačgala noz-en*]=*at*,
 they[2] children show_off-PRS.3PL=AND2
 [*naŷjīd=en*], [*kayūn xen*]=*at*,
 pass.PST=3PL pear eat.PRS.3PL=AND2
 ī... [*yed.and bād tayor sut*].
 and there[2] then finished become.PST.M
 ‘(He knew that) he... **filled** two baskets, and another one **was** empty, [and now] that basket **is not** [there]. He **is** still **sitting, thinking**, and those children are **showing off**, they **passed by**, [they are] **eating** pears, and... that **was** the end.’ [R99: 67–75]

Other instances of the Present occur in a single clause; nevertheless, they also denote lasting events. In (7), where R99 introduces the girl, she says that the girl was riding the bike on the same road and then describes the same scene again, suddenly using the Present tense. Apparently, in doing so, she references the long shot of the two kids riding towards each other that appears in the Pear Film.

- (7) [*Aro, pis pūnd-aθ=atā, yi.ga yac-ak*
 HEZ GOAL road-ADV=AND3 other girl-DIM
azam yat aro, velosiped=qati aro],
 from_there come.PST HEZ bike=COM HEZ
 [*tar yakdigar=aŷ yal ti-yen=atā*].
 EQ each_other=DIR still go-PRS.3PL=AND3
 [*Yā yac-ak dis.ga xāŷ*],
 she girl-DIM so pretty
 [*wam yūnj-ak daroz-aθ wīč-in-aθ*].
 she.OBL hair-DIM long-ADV weave.PF-PTCP-ADV

[Aro *yu=yi koroči wam wīn-t*],
 HEZ he=3SG HEZ she.OBL see-PST
 [yu=yi wam wīn-t]=xu,
 he=3SG she.OBL see-PST=AND1
 [xu uχ=i binēs-t], [fām-t=at=o]?
 REFL mind=3SG lose-PST understand-PST=2SG=Q
 [Bād, mi.ti aray sabad yam.and]=atā...
 then there three basket there=AND3

‘So, on the road, another girl **went**, on a bike, they **are** still **riding** towards each other. And that girl [is] very pretty, her long hair braided. So, then he **saw** her, he **saw** her and **lost** his mind, you **understood**? So, [there are] three baskets there...’ [R99: 25–28]

Another instance of a Present-tense switch occurs when R99 describes what the protagonist sees after the bike crash (8). The tense switch seems to play a similar role here. This scene in the film is deliberately static, and the viewer does not see the boys coming. The protagonist raises his head from the ground and finds the boys already standing there and looking at him. Examples (7) and (8) fit the apt observation which E. V. Paducheva [2010: 289–290] has formulated for Russian: Present-tense switches can be used to introduce a static “background” for the following events. Similar functions of the Present tense are attested in the Vakh dialect of Northern Khanty [Urmanchieva 2021: 299–309].

- (8) [Yu *wi kayūn fukaθ taxirm sut*].
 he he.OBL pear all scattered become.PST.M
 [Bād *wi-nd aram yam.and aray=ga*
 then he.OBL-LOC there there three=ADD
wi doδ=ga bačgalā-yak-en
 he.OBL measure=ADD children-DIM-PL
ik.dis=ga]... [bačamard-aθ=en, *wirivz-in*]...
 such=ADD strong-ADV=3PL stand.PF.F/PL-PTCP
 [aro *tar wi čis-en*].
 HEZ EQ he.OBL look-PRS.3PL

‘All his pears **became** scattered. Then there are also three children of his age... [they’re] fit, [they’re] standing [there]... looking at him.’ [R99: 39–42]

The particle *yal*, translated in the dictionary [Karamshoev 1988] as ‘still, while’, which appears with the first instance of the Present-tense clause

in both of these examples, seems to play an important role in the explicit marking of imperfectivity. In (6), it is possible to imagine a literal interpretation of this word ('while the pear picker is sitting and thinking, the kids are passing by [and] eating pears'), but in the context of (7) neither 'still' nor 'while' seem to be fitting translations for it. Apart from (6) and (7), *yal* is used in another Present-tense context in R99's retelling. This property of *yal* was briefly noted in [Melenchenko 2023: 127, 129] but requires further research.

Overall, *yal* is used 19 times in the collected Pear Stories, at least once in each person's narrative. 14 instances occur in Present-tense clauses, 2 with the Perfect, 1 with the Preterite, 1 with the null copula, 1 in an unfinished clause. Analysis of the Present-tense contexts shows that, indeed, *yal* is regularly used to contextualize other perfective events in relation to lasting imperfective events. Examples (9) and (10) present clear cases of such use. Note that *yal* appears in clauses with coordinating enclitics =*at* and =*atā* in (6), (7), (9), and (10): these conjunctions, in contrast to another coordinator, =*xu*, are used for simultaneous events⁴.

- (9) [Po putī yu yal tīzd]=atā,
 on way he still go.PRS.3SG=AND3
 [yak.čand nok woġ-en]...
 few pear fall-PRS.3PL
 'On [protagonist's] way, while he **is riding**, several pears **fall**...'
 [O04: 36–37]
- (10) [Bād padam yal jām kiġt]=at,
 then there still collected do.PRS.3SG=AND2
 [yīw az wi woġt ar zimād]...
 one EL he.OBL fall.PRS.3SG DOWN ground
 'Then, while he [the pear picker] **is picking** [the pears], one of them **falls** on the ground...' [A99: 8–9]

4.4. Perfect

In the collected Pear Stories, Shughni speakers rarely used the Perfect tense. In sum, Perfect forms occur in 15 matrix clauses out of 375. Cross-

⁴ According to C. Parker [2023: 439–440], =*at* is used for simultaneous events, while =*atā* is used for contrasting events ('but'). Fieldwork conducted by Polina Padalka and me in 2024 shows that both conjunctions are used interchangeably in both types of contexts, and the semantic differences between them are vague. Anyway, both types of contexts actually presuppose simultaneity of events in most cases.

linguistically, perfects are often used in narratives for “backgrounding”, e.g. for events that happened before the main narrative [Bybee et al. 1994: 62]. Backgrounding usually occurs in the beginning of the narrative, where the narrator sets the scene for the forthcoming plot, and often within the narrative itself. Such uses are attested in many languages. Pamir languages are no exception: the “backgrounding” function of the perfect tense is attested in Sarikoli [Palmer 2016: 98] and Wakhi [Obretlová 2017: 65–66].

Use of the Shughni Perfect in narratives has been briefly described in [Melenchenko 2023: 132–134]. Occurrences attested in the Pear Stories generally seem to support the same conclusions, which I will shortly reintroduce here with corresponding examples. For example, M91’s retelling begins with at least 6 matrix clauses⁵, in which she outlines the setting of the future plot, describing what, in her view, happened before the beginning of the actual story, which uses the Present (11).

- (11) [Ruzo *vud* *idi*], [yi *čorik=i* *siftōj*
 one_day be.PST.M COMPL INDEF man=3SG climb.PF.M
pi daraxt=xu, pi xu boγ=and]=*xu*,
 UP tree=AND1 UP REFL garden=LOC=AND1
[xušrūy boγ wi-nd vudj, γulā boγ]=*xu*,
 beautiful garden he.OBL-LOC be.PF.M big garden=AND1
[yu siftōj pi daraxt=xu], [*xoyix=i čūj*,
 he climb.PF.M UP tree=AND1 wish=3SG do.PF
 <...> [*Bād=i zočč*,
 then=3SG take.PF
[padam siftōj]=*xu*, [*bād=i čūčč*
 there climb.PF.M=AND1 then=3SG look.PF
idi], [*čiz yam.and vaz=ga vīsč-in*
 COMPL thing there goat=ADD tie.PF-PTCP
 <...> [*Bād azam=ti xāfct*...
 then from_there=SUP get_down.PRS.3SG

‘There **was** a day, one man **has climbed up** on the tree, in his garden, and there **has been** a beautiful garden of his, a large garden, and he **has climbed up** on the tree, he **has wanted** (from the pear tree... you know, for himself.) Then he **has taken**, **has climbed up** there and **has seen** that there is also

⁵ It is unclear whether the second clause should be considered subordinate (since there is a complementizer *idi*) or matrix (since the first clause represents a formulaic narrative introduction).

a goat **tied** (to another tree, near the tree that he has climbed on, nearby.)
Then he **gets down** from there...' [M91: 1–12]

Excerpt (12) is an example of backgrounding in the middle of the narrative. The film begins with the pear picker already standing on the ladder, and the speaker did not see him climbing up. So, to refer to the event of climbing up, N75 switches to the Perfect, since it is an event that happened before the beginning of the narrative.

- (12) [Čorik pi diraxt aro nok **đŭv-d**]. ⟨...⟩
man UP tree HEZ pear pick-PRS.3SG
[yu wi ar xu fārtuk darŭn **đŭv-d**].
he he.OBL DOWN REFL apron inside pick-PRS.3SG
Atā [pi diraxt yu xubaθ **na-sifđŭj**].
AND3 UP tree he REFL NEG-climb.PF.M
[yu **sifđŭj** padam čiz=qati]...
he climb.PF.M there thing=COM
[narvŭnd=qati padam **sifđŭj**].
ladder=COM there climb.PF.M
'A man picks **pears** from the tree. (He picks pears, yeah... the pears he picks, since there is nothing else [to put them in,]) he **picks** them into his apron. And he **hasn't climbed up** on the tree himself, he **has climbed** with this thing... **has climbed** with the ladder' [N75: 11–14]

The importance of the evidential meaning of the Perfect is shown in example (13). This context cannot be explained simply by backgrounding: the stealing of the pears happened in the film and was actually witnessed by the speaker. However, the speaker uses the Perfect because he adopts the perspective of the pear picker, who has not seen his basket being stolen and finds it missing only after getting down from the tree. These examples show the interplay of the narrative function of backgrounding and the indirect evidential meaning of the Perfect. All three examples can be explained by indirect evidentiality: from the viewer's perspective in case of (11) and (12) and from a character's perspective in case of (13).

- (13) ...[čost], [yam.and i.ga xoli]=yatā,
look.PRS.3SG there other empty=AND3
[yā yi.ga **nist**]. [Wam=en zoč-č]...
she other be.NEG she.OBL=3PL take-PF

‘...[the pear picker] **looks**, one [basket] there [is] empty, and another **is not** [there]. [They] **have taken it...**’ [A99: 58–61]

Several additional remarks are necessary to conclude the section devoted to the Perfect. There is one instance of the stative use of the Perfect tense with the verb *nīstow* ‘sit’ (see [Melenchenko 2023: 127–129] on stative Perfects). There is also one use of the Perfect which I cannot explain with the current knowledge about tense semantics in Shughni (14), since the event was witnessed. Some studies suggest that indirect evidentials can perform an opposite function of foregrounding, highlighting important events [Aikhenvald 2004: 316–318; Verhees 2019: 128], but it is unclear whether this context is a case of foregrounding. A more plausible explanation would suggest that *ribūyǰ* here is an instance of a stative Perfect, but unfortunately, I do not know if it belongs to the class of stative verbs in Shughni.

- (14) [yā=ga dis yulā=yaθ]=at...
 she=ADD such big=ADV=AND2
 [yu=yi ribūyǰ]=ga xu čīz=ti wam...
 he=3SG put.PF=ADD REFL thing=SUP she.OBL
 ‘She [the basket is] so big... And he **has put** it on his thing... (on his bike).’
 [R99: 19–20]

4.5. Null copula

An interesting property of Shughni narratives is the prominence of the null copula. The Present tense of the verb *vidow* ‘be’ is used only in irrealis contexts and is therefore rare in texts (there are zero instances in the collected Pear Stories). In realis contexts, the functions of the verb of being are fulfilled by the null copula and the second-position agreement clitics⁶. In the collected texts, the null copula appears in 47 clauses, which makes up about 13% of all the clauses. The null copula is used, in Labovian terms, in restricted and free clauses, i.e. in clauses that comment on states that hold true at least for some section of the narrative.

It is especially curious that the null copula is frequent in R99’s narrative, whose narrative tense is the Preterite. In R99’s retelling, it usually corresponds to the verb ‘be’ in the past tense in the Russian translation,

⁶ An alternative view is that the agreement clitics *are* copulas, see e.g. [Parker 2023: 265–272].

and literal translation of such excerpts with the Russian null copula often sounds strange. The Shughni clauses with the null copula seem to be able to interrupt narrative sequences with any tense. This can be seen in examples (3), (5) and (11) with Present-tense narratives, but note especially example (7), where R99 uses the null copula in the middle of her Preterite-tense narration. (15) shows another excerpt of this kind, where both the null copula and the negative copula *nist* appear.⁷

- (15) [Čūd=i gīr], atā [yu virod-ik
do.PST=3SG fixed AND3 he brother-DIM
pi xu daraxt], [yu yam-aθ nist].
UP REFL tree he SORROW-ADV be.NEG
[Aro yu zulikak yat]=xu...
HEZ he small_child come.PST=AND1
‘[The boy on the bike] **stopped**, and the guy [the pear picker is] on his
tree, he **is not** bothered. So, the child **came** and...’ [R99: 14–17]

5. Conclusions

In this article, I have attempted to show that Pear Stories can be useful for studying how Shughni tenses function in narratives. In four out of five Pear Stories, Shughni speakers used the Present as the main narrative tense, another speaker used the Preterite. The choice of the narrative tense requires further research on a larger sample. However, all speakers used both the Present and the Preterite to some extent. In Present-tense narratives, the Preterite and the Perfect are used to refer to events that precede the current moment in the story. The Preterite is employed when the event was a part of the narrative or was witnessed by the narrator or the characters. On the other hand, the Perfect refers to past events that happened “outside” of the narrative. The indirect evidential meaning of the Perfect tense correlates with its backgrounding function.

In the Preterite-tense narrative, the speaker often switches to the Present to refer to an imperfective event. The particle *yal* ‘still, while’, which is often used in Present-tense clauses, highlights that other events are happening during this event. It was observed that even in the Preterite-tense narrative, the speaker often uses the null copula instead of the Preterite

⁷Nominal predicates with null copulas are underlined.

form of the verb of being, which indicates that the null copula is to some extent “tenseless” in narratives. Tense switching allows the speakers to navigate the discourse and make the events of the story easier to understand for the listener.

Abbreviations

[2] — demonstratives of the 2nd (medial) series; ADD — additive; ADV — adverbializer; AND1, AND2, AND3 — coordinating conjunctions; COM — comitative; COMPL — complementizer; COP — copula; DAT — dative; DIM — diminutive; DIR — directive (‘towards’); DOWN — essive with the spatial meaning ‘down there’; EL — elative; EQ — essive with the meaning ‘on the same level’; F — feminine; GOAL — goal; HEZ — hesitation markers; IMP — Imperative; INDEF — indefinite article; INT — intensifier; LOC — locative; M — masculine; NEG — negation; OBL — oblique case; PF — Perfect; PL — plural; PQP — Pluperfect; PRS — Present; PST — Preterite; PTCP — Resultative participle; Q — question enclitic; REFL — reflexive; SG — singular; SUBD — subordinating conjunction; SUP — superessive; TA — Present or copula with the clitic =*ta*; UNF — unfinished clause; UP — essive with the meaning ‘up there’.

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Получено/received 26.08.2024

Принято/accepted 07.12.2025