

Giorgio Meloni

Some Remarks on the Manchu Verb Form *-habi*

The aim of this article is to clarify the meaning and uses of the *-habi* form of Manchu verbs. This form indicates a completed action when the actual meaning of the verb is that of a completed action; if the verb used indicates an ongoing action or a state, its use compares to that of present tense in most European languages. *-habi* and *-ha bihe* forms compared reveal a tense opposition¹.

Key words: Manchu language, Manchu verb, Manchu grammar, Tungusic, Altaic.

The Case

Scholars of the Manchu language and culture know well, as Gertraude Roth Li says, that there is no *definitive study of Manchu verbs* (Roth Li 2000, p. 358). The existing Manchu grammars in various languages have so different approaches to and explanations of the same problems as to be sometimes confusing if not altogether contradictory. In fact, while trying to make sense of the use of the *-habi* form, some uses of it made me wonder how they would conciliate with what the grammar manuals say. In the various grammars it is listed as *present tense* (Aisin Gioro 1983, p. 204), as *remote past* (Ji 1986, p. 139), as *imperfective* (Roth Li, p. 358), just to cite a few of the most recent. I will spare the reader the list of the ways it has been treated starting from Verbiest (1623–1688), and get to the subject.

Test case: *-ha, -ra* forms

These two forms are opposed by Sinor 1949 with *-ha* meaning the completion of an action (*aspect accompli*, *ibid.*, p. 150), and *-ra* the non-completion of an action (*aspect inaccompli*, *ibid.*, p. 150). This is easily proved:

1. *tacire niyalma*
study (imperfective) person
'student';
2. *taciha hafan*
study (perfective) officer
'learned scholar'.

Here *tacire* and *taciha* act very much like present and past participles of the verb *tacimbi* (*to study*) respectively, and in fact may have the corresponding form in translation like in this case (in fact, if we look at the etymology of the term *student* we will find that it is the present participle of the latin verb *studere*, *to study*). In other cases the translation might

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need to use other terms, but still confirming their imperfective/perfective (here in the strict sense of incomplete/complete) meaning, these are Sinor's examples:

3. yabure niyalma
travel (imperfective) person
'traveller';
4. foloho bithe
print (perfective) letter
'printed book'.

I wanted only to highlight these aspectual properties to prompt the reader to keep them in mind for a better understanding of what follows. I will now start the discussion of the main topic.

The *-habi* form

Although this form is labelled quite differently, most scholars agree in saying that the conveyed meaning is that of an action completed in the past (in the words of Roth Li 2000, p. 359: *the action is completed in the past but influences the present*).

It seems to me that this definition does not fit very well the following examples taken from Tulišen's *Diary*:

5. babade aldaka sere moo banjihabi (p. 22)
everywhere (locative) gold-peach call (imperfective) tree grow
'everywhere grow gold-peach trees';
6. jugūn-i unduri alin alarame banjihabi (p. 99)
road (genitive) along mountain low grow
'along the road there are low mountains';
7. dergi amargi baru eyehebi (p. 34)
east north towards flow
'[the river] flows in north-east direction';

To me it does not seem correct to consider the flowing of a river as a completed action.

I agree that making paragon between very different languages to analyze the morphology of a given language might in some cases complicate things ever further, but I will nonetheless take the risk and eventually demonstrate that it can help to better understand this *-habi* form, and especially helpful is the way we translate this form into European morphologically bulimic languages.

In the first half of the 19th century, Gabelentz, while warning the reader that the grammatical terms of the European tradition he used to describe Manchu could only very partially correspond to the actual meaning in Manchu, explained the *-habi* form as being similar to French (and I would add English, Italian and so on) *passé composé*, having the *-ha* form acting as a past participle and *-bi* as the present tense of *bimbi* (*to be*), an auxiliary verb (Gabelentz 1832, p. 91). Then the author says this form has to be translated sometimes as a *passé composé* and sometimes as *present*, but does not tell us if there is a rule to this different way of translating it. In fact I think there is, and it is very important for a proper classification of this form; I will enunciate it now and show some examples afterwards.

The *-habi* form has to be translated as *passé composé* (well, not necessarily, but it is some sort of past with perfective meaning) when the action described by the verb is one that is meant to be concluded, like a single action, but not necessarily a single action, and there is no reference to other posterior actions related to it; it translates as present if the

action described by the verb is continued, similar to a state. Examples 5, 6, and 7 belong to this second case. A similar use follows:

8. bi ubade tehebi
I here (locative) live
'I live here'.
Let's now see how they compare to these:
9. bi bithe be arahabi
I letter (accusative) write
'I have written a letter'.
10. bi, geli [name] be ilanminggan cooha belhebuhebi (Nian 1971, p. 78)
I, also [name] (accusative) three thousand soldiers prepare
'I also let [name] prepare three thousand soldiers';
11. bi [*omissis*] be dangsede ejehebi (Nian 1971, p. 84)
I [*omissis*] (accusative) records record
'I reported [*omissis*] in the records'.

It is clear from these examples, that these actions can only be understood as completed in the past, something was done in the past (I wrote a letter) and the result of the action (the letter) is right in front of my eyes. But examples (5–8) can only be understood as a present state, and the action that caused it is not really taken into consideration.

While analysing these forms, I was tempted to see a division in transitive (for completed action) and intransitive (state) in this use, but was soon contradicted by these examples (all in Tulišen (圖麗琛) 1983) where *tarimbi* (cultivate) is clearly a transitive verb:

12. jugūn-i dalbade gemu usin tarihabi (p. 31)
road (genitive) side (locative) all field cultivate
'along the road [they] cultivate fields'.
13. [list of furniture] bi, [list of animals] be ujihebi, [list of cereals] be tarimbi. [list of vegetables] bi, cahin-i muke be jembi, (p. 28)
[list of furniture] is [list of animals] (accusative) raise [list of cereals] (accusative) grow
[list of vegetables] iswell (genitive) water eat
'there are [list of furniture] they raise [list of animals] they grow [list of cereals] there are [list of vegetables] they drink water from the well'.

This is probably the most interesting example. As we can see, *-habi* and *-mbi* forms are used with the same meaning of a persistent state. What is very interesting is, in cases like (12), there is no explicit subject, whereas in cases like (13) the subject is explicit (a few lines before) and as we can see both *-mbi* and *-habi* forms have an explicit accusative (*be*). This makes (12) sound more like "there are" (bi) "cultivated" (tariha) "fields" (usin), or a kind of impersonal form, but discussing this would already be off topic. What is important is that *-mbi* and *-habi* forms are here used with the same meaning.

Let us now see how *-ha* and *-habi* forms are related.

-ha vs -habi forms

Scholars all agree that *-habi* forms can only be used as predicate, at the end of a phrase, whereas *-ha* forms can be used both nominally and as predicates. The problem arises when they are used in apparently exactly the same way, and it is difficult to ascertain why one or the other has been used. Let's see an example (Tulišen (圖麗琛) 1983, p. 21–22; geographical names are in boldface or small caps for reasons explained right below):

14. **tula** birai sekiyen, **gentei han** alin-i wargi ergi ci eyeme tucifi, wargi baru eyeme, **hanggai han** alin ci eyeme tucike **orgon** bira de **dosika**, GENTEI HAN alin-i dergi ergi ci eyeme tucike bira be HERULUN sembi, dergi baru eyeme genefi HULUN omo de **DOSIKA**, HULUN omo ci eyeme tucike bira be ERGUNE sembi, dergi amargi baru eyeme genefi SAHALIYAN ULA de **DOSIKABI**, **orgon** bira jebdzundamba hütuktu-i tehe burung han alin, tusiyetu han-i nuktere babe šurdeme wargi amargi baru eyeme genefi **selengge** bira de **dosikabi**.

Tula river (genitive) source, Gentei Han mountain (genitive) West side from flow (-*me* form) exit (-*fi* form), West towards flow (-*me* form), Hanggai Han mountain from flow (-*me* form) exit (-*ha* form) Orgon river (locative) enter (-*ha* form), Gentei Han mountain (genitive) East side from flow (-*me*) exit (-*ha* form) river (accusative) Herulun call (-*mbi* form), East towards flow (-*me* form) go (-*fi* form) Hulun lake (locative) enter (-*ha* form), Hulun lake from flow (-*me* form) exit (-*ha* form) river (accusative) Ergune call (-*mbi* form), East North towards flow (-*me* form) go (-*fi* form) Sahaliyan River (locative) enter (-*habi* form), Orgon river Jebdzundamba Hütuktu (genitive) live (-*he* form) Burung Han mountain, Burung Han mountain, Tusiyetu Khan (genitive) pasture (-*re* form) place (accusative) around West North towards flow (-*me* form) go (-*fi* form) Selengge river (locative) enter (-*habi* form)

The source of the River Tula flows out of the West side of Gentei Han Mountain, flows westwards and enters the River Orgon which originates from Hanggai Han Mountain; the River flowing out of the East side of Gentei Han mountain is named Herulun, flows eastwards and enters Lake Hulun, the River flowing out of lake Hulun is named Ergune, flows towards North-East and enters the River Amur; the River Orgon goes around Burung Han Mountain where lives Hutuktu Jebdzundamba and around the places where Khan Tusiyetu pastures, flows towards North-West and enters the River Selengge.

The general rule in the Manchu language, by which suffixes are added only to the last word of the phrase if more than one word requires it, is said to apply to the *-bi* in *-habi* too (Gabelentz 1832, p. 93). The above example seems to contradict this, but in fact here *-bi* closes semantically related blocks of text (marked by boldface and smallcaps). The text describes two rivers originating from the same mountain. The River Tula originates from the west side of Gentei Han Mountain and flows into the River Orgon which originates from the nearby Hanggai Mountain; this part is closed by *dosika* because the description only stops momentarily to continue the description of the rivers that generate from the same Gentei Han Mountain; so from the east side of Gentei Han Mountain generates the River Herulun flowing towards east and into Lake Hulun; here *dosika* is used again because the description continues from Lake Hulun, from which generates the River Ergune, which flows eastwards and into the River Amur; here *dosikabi* is used because this block of description is finished, and the first block restarts from the River Orgon which, after going through this and that place, flows into the River Selengge, and here is the final *dosikabi* which closes this block of text.

The way the final *-bi* is related to the previous *-ha* forms is not at all self-evident, and this has led Zhao Zhiqiang to deny any semantic function to *-bi* found in *-habi* forms. He cites (between many other texts) the Manchu translation of the poem *Lu'e* (often misspelled as *Liao'e*) from the *Book of Odes* (section *Xiao Ya*) as a proof of the fact that the presence or the absence of *-bi* does not make any difference (Zhao 2002, p. 11). As cited by Zhao Zhiqiang (only the first eight verses) it does seem that *-bi* is kind of useless, but if analysed with the whole poem, I think that the use of *-bi* has the same rule as above, that is it closes semantically homogeneous blocks of text.

Chinese	English	Manchu
蓼蓼者莪 匪莪伊蒿 哀哀父母 生我劬勞	Long and large grows the e; It is not the e but the hao. Alas! alas! my parents, With what toil ye gave me birth!	ler ler serengge empi sembi <u>he</u> dule empi waka suiha <u>oho</u> koro koro ama eniye mimbe ujifi suilame jobo <u>ho</u>
蓼蓼者莪 匪莪伊蔚 哀哀父母 生我勞瘁	Long and large grows the e; It is not the e but the wei. Alas! alas! my parents, With what toil and suffering ye gave me birth!	ler ler serengge empi sembi <u>hebi</u> dule empi waka hamgiya <u>ohobi</u> koro koro ama eniye mimbe ujifi suilahai nimekule <u>hebi</u>
瓶之罄矣 維罍之恥 鮮民之生 不如死之久矣	When the pitcher is exhausted, It is the shame of the jar. Than to live an orphan, It would be better to have been long dead.	tampin untuhun oci damu malu-i girucun kai simeli irgen-i banjirengge aifini bucere de isirakū kai
無父何怙 無母何恃 出則銜恤 入則靡至	Fatherless, who is there to rely on? Motherless, who is there to depend on? When I go abroad, I carry my grief with me; When I come home, I have no one to go to.	ama akū oci erturengge akū eme akū oci akdarangge akū kai tucici jobocun be tebumbi dosici ba baharakū gese kai
父兮生我 母兮鞠我 拊我畜我 長我育我	O my father, who begat me! O my mother, who nourished me! Ye indulged me, ye fed me, Ye held me up, ye supported me,	ama oci mimbe banjibu <u>habi</u> eme oci mimbe ujij <u>hebi</u> mimbe biluša <u>ha</u> imbe erše <u>hebi</u> mimbe mutubu <u>ha</u> mimbe hūwašabu- <u>habi</u>
顧我復我 出入腹我 欲報之德 昊天罔極	Ye looked after me, ye never left me, Out and in ye bore me in your arms. If I would return your kindness, It is like great Heaven, illimitable,	mimbe tuwašata <u>ha</u> imbe bargiya <u>habi</u> tucici dosici mimbe tebeliy <u>hebi</u> kesi be karulaki seci dergi abkai hese mohon akū <u>ohobi</u>
南山烈烈 飄風發發 民莫不穀 我獨何害	Cold and bleak is the Southern hill; The rushing wind is very fierce. People all are happy; Why am I alone thus miserable?	julergi alin colgoro <u>ko</u> colgoro <u>kobi</u> dara edun šeo šeo sembi niyalma sain akūngge akū ainu mini teile jobošombi
南山律律 飄風弗弗 民莫不穀 我獨不卒	The Southern hill is very steep; The rushing wind is blustering. People all are happy; I alone have been unable to finish [my duty].	julergi alin sehehuri sehehuri ni dara edun hoo hoo sembini niyalma sain akūngge akū ainu mini teile dube akū ni

The English translation is taken from *The Chinese Classics*, 1871, p. 351–52, with some minor formatting changes; the poem is divided into six *zhang* (*stanzas*). An analysis of its formal aspect shows clearly how the *-ha* and *-habi* forms work. The first *zhang* has *-ha* form because every single verse corresponds semantically to the ones in the second *zhang*. These first two function as a sort of introduction to the main part of the poem. In the fourth *zhang* single verbs have *-habi* form, where there are two, the first has *-ha* form. The first verse of the fifth *zhang* shows us the same mechanism of the first two *zhang*, but within a

single verse instead of expanding into two verses. Therefore it seems to me clear that the previous *-ha* forms are in fact meant to be *-habi* forms.

Tense opposition: *-habi* vs *-ha bihe* forms

In opposing *-habi* and *-ha bihe* forms, their tense-indication function becomes quite clear. Examples (8) and (9) may be written with the *-ha bihe* form:

15. *bi ubade tehe bihe*
 I here (locative) live did
 ‘I had lived here’, ‘I used to live here’;
16. *bi bithe be araha bihe*
 I letter (accusative) written had
 ‘I had written a letter’.

The *-ha bihe* form is used to describe either a state that existed in the past or an action that happened before another, therefore this form is often preceded by phrasings like *tere fonde* (“at that time”) and similar. It will be clearer with a couple of examples:

17. *daci wei harangga bihe*, *ne ejen bisire akū* (Nian 1971, p. 69)
 formerly who (genitive) belong did, now master there isthere is not
 ‘formerly, whom did they belong to, do they have a master now?’
18. *neneme suweni gurun-i mi k’o lai menigurun de genehe de, murin tarin-i arbuša ha bihe* (Tulišen (圖麗琛) 1983, p. 11)
 formerly your country (genitive) Nikolaj my country (locative) go (perfective) (temporal), not properly behave
 ‘formerly, when your country’s Nikolaj went to my country, he did not behave properly’;
19. ...*bithe unggihe bihe*, *te [omissis] bana-i nirugan be suwaliyame benjihebi*, (Nian 1971, p. 73–74)
 letter sent was, now [omissis] place (genitive) map (accusative) together send
 ‘[was said in the] letter that was sent, now I have sent the [omissis] together with a map of the place’.

And very often, as in examples (17, 19), the text goes on telling what was in the past, and then starts telling about the present situation with *te*, *ne* (now) etc.

In theory, the form *-ha bihe* should follow the same rule of dropping *bihe* in case there were more than one consecutively, but I could not find any example presenting such a case, so I can regretfully only speculate on this.

Conclusions

The *-habi* form indicates either an action concluded in the past (I have written the letter, the letter is here ready; I have sent the letter, the letter is on its way to you), or a present state which does not necessarily refer to a traceable action in the past (the river flowing). It is paralleled by the *-ha bihe* form which indicates either a state in the past that afterwards changed, or an action performed in the past, often in relation to another action performed after it.

If a sentence should require many *-habi* forms, only the last of a semantically homogeneous block of text will have the “full” *-habi* form, the preceding will drop the *-bi*; the same *might* apply to the *-ha bihe* form, but there is no evidence to that effect so far.

The purpose of this article was to make clear the uses of the *-habi* form, which I hope to have achieved. The Manchu language deserves a renewed joint effort for an overall rationalization of its grammatical system. Until then, I find less misleading using, like I did in this article, very “cold” terms like “*-habi* form”, “*-ra* form” and so on instead of tense labels found in European languages.

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Summary

Джорджо Мелони

Некоторые размышления о маньчжурской глагольной форме на *-habi*

Цель этой статьи — выяснить значение и употребление маньчжурского глагола на *-habi*. Эта форма глагола обозначает совершенное действие; если же употребляемый глагол обозначает поступательное действие или состояние, то эта форма глагола употребляется как настоящее время большинства европейских языков. Формы на *-habi* и *-ha bihe* противопоставлены по времени.