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

---

1 Acknowledgments: I am grateful to Prof. Giovanni Stary and Prof. Tatiana Pang for their support and precious answers to my questions.

© Meloni G, 2011
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 paragons 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 ilan minggan cooha bel hehebi (Nian 1971, p. 78)
    I, also [name] (accusative) three thousand soldiers prepare
    'I also let [name] prepare three thousand soldiers';

11. bi [omissis] be dang sede ejhehebi (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 (图丽琛) 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] is well (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” (tarigha) “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 (图丽琛) 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 tucike, 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 hūtuktu-i tehe burung han alin, tusiyetu han-i nuktere babe šurdeme wargi amargi baru eyeme genefi **selenge** bira de **dosikabi**.

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 Selenge.

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 eastwards 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 Selenge, 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 Lü’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.
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 (Tulisen 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 unngihe bihe, te [omissis] bana-i nirugan be suwalinyame 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.

Literature

Gabelentz H. Élémens de la grammaire mandchoue. Altenbourg, 1832.

Summary

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.