



Narrative tense in Khalkha Mongolian¹

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1 Overview

- In narrative contexts, the interpretation of tenses can differ from their canonical uses.
- **The English “historical present” (henceforth HP):**
 - Present tense morphology possesses a non-indexical use in narratives (1b).
 - Describes eventualities as holding at a **time of assessment** rather than **the utterance time (UT)** (Schlenker, 2004; Zucchi, 2005; Anand & Toosarvandani, 2017; 2018; 2020).
- (1) a. Right now, I **am** presenting this handout. (Canonical present)
b. The thief **sneaks** into the vault. He **is** nervous. He carefully **grabs** a handful of gems. (HP)
- Semantic accounts of narrative tenses vary in the formal mechanisms that underlie assessment time shifting:
 - A temporal operator (Zucchi, 2005)
 - A bicontextual semantics (Schlenker, 2004; Anand & Toosarvandani, 2017; 2018)
 - A modal operator (Anand & Toosarvandani, 2020)
- I present novel data on the **tense suffix -v** in Khalkha Mongolian (Eastern branch, Mongolic), which I identify as a **narrative tense marker**.
 - The felicity of -v in declarative sentences is **restricted to narrative contexts**.²
 - Data presented in this talk are the result of ongoing fieldwork, using standard tasks for eliciting semantic data (e.g., Matthewson, 2004).

- **Analysis:** -v is a **present tense** that comes with an **additional presupposition** that the time of assessment must not overlap with the time of the utterance.
 - This renders -v infelicitous in canonical present and play-by-play present contexts.
 - Thus, -v is only licensed when the assessment time is shifted away from the UT, which I capture via a modalized narrative operator (Anand & Toosarvandani, 2020).

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²Outside of declarative sentences, -v also has a limited distribution in questions, where it is described as being used for “interrogations” (e.g., Binnick, 2012). I set aside the case of -v in questions for future investigation.

- Though narrative tense markers are also attested in other languages (see Nurse, 2008, on Bantu languages), this is the first work to my knowledge that provides a formal account of their semantics.

Roadmap:

§1 Overview

§2 The temporal properties of -v

§3 -v in embedded contexts

§4 Formal analysis

§5 Conclusion

2 The temporal properties of -v

- **Previous grammatical descriptions of Khalkha Mongolian:** In declarative sentences, -v is used in **narrative contexts** (e.g., Street, 1963; Binnick, 2012).

– In line with past descriptions, I argue the temporal contribution of -v parallels the English HP.

- **(i).** -v is licensed in ‘**narrative mode,**’ illustrated in (2).
 - Describes the temporal orientation of eventualities relative to the **time of a story.**

(2) Namaig бага бай-*kh-ad* eej-iin yar-dag бай-*san* үлгер-ees cham-d yar-j
 1SG.ACC little AUX-INF-DAT mother-GEN tell-HAB AUX-PST.PRTCP story-ABL 2SG.OBL-DAT tell-CVB
 ög-ye.
 give-HORT

“Let me tell you a story that my mother told me when I was little.”

Ert urd-iin tsag-t tav-an khüü-tei neg-en khatan бай-dag бай-*jee*.
 long.ago before-GEN time-DAT five-hidden.*n* son-with one-hidden.*n* queen AUX-HAB AUX-INDIR.PST
 “Once upon a time, there was a queen that had five sons.”

Khatan khüükhed болгон-d-oo neg neg sum ög-**öv**.
 queen child each-DAT-REFL.POSS one.by.one arrow give-v
 “The queen **gives** each of her children an arrow.”

Daraa n’ khatan khüükh-düüd-ee sum-nuud-aa khugal gej khel-**ev**.
 later 3SG.POSS queen SON-PL-REFL.POSS arrow-PL-REFL.POSS break COMP say-v
 “Later, the queen **tells** her sons to break their arrows. ...”

- -v is likewise felicitous with **narratives set in the future**, like (3), indicating that its temporal reference is not restricted to times preceding the UT.

(3) *Context: You’re reading a science fiction novel that is set in the far future. The novel says:*

Namuun sansr-iin khölög-t or-**ov**. Genet ter robot khar-**av**.
 Namuun space-GEN craft-LOC enter-v suddenly 3.SG robot see-v
 “Namuun enters the spacecraft. Suddenly, she sees a robot.”

- Unlike a canonical present tense, *-v* is **not indexical to the UT** (4a), nor can it be used as a canonical past tense (4b).
- (4) a. *Context: You're describing what Erdenechimeg is doing right now.*
 Erdenechimeg khos beelii nekh-ej {bai-**n** / #bai-**v**}.
 Erdenechimeg pair glove knit-CVB {AUX-PRS / AUX-**v**}
 “Erdenechimeg is knitting a pair of gloves.”
- b. *Context: You're describing what Erdenechimeg was doing earlier.*
 Erdenechimeg khos beelii nekh-ej {bai-**saŋ** / #bai-**v**}.
 Erdenechimeg pair glove knit-CVB {AUX-PST / AUX-**v**}
 “Erdenechimeg was knitting a pair of gloves.”
- Further, *-v* is also **incompatible with play-by-play contexts** like (5), unlike the English present (Anand & Toosarvandani, 2017).
 - In play-by-play contexts, either **the direct proximate evidential -IAA** (see Binnick, 2012; Munkhbat, 2024) or present tense marker *-n* is preferred.
- (5) *Context: A sports announcer is providing real-time commentary on Bat-Erdene's basketball game:*
 Bat-Erdene zaal-nii dunduur güi-j {bai-**n** / #bai-**v**}. Tüünii bag-iin gishüün tüün
 Bat-Erdene hall-GEN through run-CVB {AUX-PRS / AUX-**v**} 3.SG.POSS team-GEN member 3.SG
 rüü bömbög-öö {damj-uul-**laa** / #damj-uul-**av**}.
 toward ball-REFL.POSS {PASS-CAUS-DIR.EV / PASS-CAUS-**v**}
 “Bat-Erdene runs through the sports hall. His teammate passes the ball to him.”
- **(ii)**. Like the English HP (Anand & Toosarvandani, 2018), *-v* **bans temporal backshifting**.
 - Only possible reading of (6a): Sarangerel's falling < Tuya's pushing.
- (6) a. Sarangerel un-**av**. Tuya tüün-iig tülkh-**ev**.
 Sarangerel fall-**v** Tuya 3.SG-ACC push-**v**
 “Sarangerel falls. Tuya pushes her.” (**Backshifted #**)
- b. Sarangerel un-**saŋ**. Tuya tüün-iig tülkh-**seŋ**.
 Sarangerel fall-PST Tuya 3.SG-ACC push-PST
 “Sarangerel fell. Tuya pushed her.” (**Backshifted ✓**)
- c. Sarangerel un-**av**. Tuya tüün-iig tülkh-**seŋ**.
 Sarangerel fall-**v** Tuya 3.SG-ACC push-PST
 “Sarangerel falls. Tuya pushed her.” (**Backshifted ✓**)
- d. Sarangerel un-**jee**. Tuya tüün-iig tülkh-**jee**.
 Sarangerel fall-INDIR.PST Tuya 3.SG-ACC push-INDIR.PST
 “Sarangerel fell, (I heard/suppose). Tuya pushed her, (I heard/suppose).” (**Backshifted ✓**)

- For a backshifted reading to arise (i.e., Tuya’s pushing < Sarangerel’s falling), it is necessary to use the **past tense -sAŋ** (6b, 6c) or **indirect past -jee** (6d).³

- **(iii)**. The lack of backshifting with *-v* is **not** because it is incompatible with discourse relations like Explanation (Lascarides & Asher, 1993).

- **Statives**, which permit temporal overlap between the two eventualities, **render -v felicitous in Explanation relations** (7).

- (7) Sarangerel un-**av**. Ter sogtuu bai-**v**.
Sarangerel fall-*v* 3.SG drunk AUX-*v*
“Sarangerel falls. She is drunk.”

- Both the English HP (Anand & Toosarvandani, 2017) and *-v* can “**anchor**” **past tenses** that appear in later sentences within a narrative.
 - For the past perfect in (8), the final subinterval of the ‘perfect time span’ (Iatridou et al., 2001) precedes the time of the room-being-bright eventuality.
 - In other words, Enkhbayar’s candle lighting < The room being bright.

- (8) Öröö gereltei bai-**v**. Enkhbayar laa asaa-**saŋ bai-saŋ**.
room bright AUX-*v* Enkhbayar candle light-PST AUX-PST
“The room is bright. Enkhbayar had lit a candle.”

- Takeaway from stative in (7) and past perfect in (8):
 - The semantics of *-v*, like the English HP, **does not strictly encode forward temporal progression** of the narrative.
- Based on these properties, I conclude that ***-v* is a narrative tense marker**, akin to the English HP. That being said...

- **(iv)**. Unlike the English present tense, *-v* **cannot temporally overlap with the UT, even within a narrative context**.

- In (9), the narrator of the story cannot use *-v* to describe the standing eventuality, which holds at the UT.
- Instead, the present tense *-n* is necessary in cases where the eventuality occurs at the UT.

³Evidence for a characterization of *-jee* as an indirect past evidential is given in the Appendix.

- (9) *Context: A maiden visits the king, hoping to become a knight. To convince him, she decides to tell him an inspirational tale.*

Bi tand neg tuukh yar-ij ög-ye.
 1.SG 2.DAT one story tell-CVB give-HORT
 “Let me tell you a story.”

Olon jil-iin ömnö, neg-en okhin adal yavdal-tai ayalal-d yav-akh-iig
 many year-GEN before one-HIDDEN.N girl adventure-with journey-DAT go-FUT.PRTCPC-ACC
 mörööd-dög bai-jee.
 dream.of-HAB AUX-INDIR.PST
 “Many years ago, there was a girl who dreamed of going on a journey.”

Neg ödör, tereer als gazar-t ayal-kh-aar shiid-**ev**.
 one day 3.SG far place-DAT travel-FUT.PRTCPC-INSTR decide-v
 “One day, she **decides** to travel to a far-off place.”

Khüch chadl-aa batal-kh-iin tuld tereer tenger-dakh’ luu-tai
 strength ability-REFL.POSS justify-FUT.PRTCPC-GEN in.order.to 3.SG sky-on dragon-with
 tulaldaan yalan diil-**ev**.
 battle overcome-v
 “During her adventure, she **defeats** a dragon to prove her strength.”

Kharin odoo, ter okhin tanii ömnö zogs-øj {bai-n / #bai-**v**}.
 but now DEM girl 2.SG.GEN before stand-CVB {AUX-PRS / AUX-v}
 “But now, that girl **stands** before you.”

Ter okhin bol bi bilee.
 DEM girl TOP 1.SG is
 “That girl is me.”

3 -v in embedded contexts

- Despite -v and the English HP sharing similar semantic properties, -v diverges from the English HP in **embedded contexts**.
- The English HP has been argued to be embeddable under attitude verbs (Anand & Toosarvandani, 2020), as in (10).

- (10) *Context: You are watching a documentary about the life of Edvard Munch, an expressionist painter. Following his mother’s death, Munch **spends** much of his childhood in Oslo drawing. He **is** frequently sick, often bedridden with illness. Despite his young age, Munch noticed that [he **is** more isolated than other children].*

- In contrast, -v **can only embed as a quotative** (11).

- (11) *Context: Oyuun just recited a story that her mother used to tell her. You're now reporting one of the sentences that Oyuun said during the storytelling.*

Oyuun “Gal-t uul delber-**ev**” gej khel-seŋ.
 Oyuun fire-DAT mountain erupt-v COMP say-PST
 “Oyuun said, ‘The volcano erupts.’”

- **-v cannot appear in non-quotative complements** (12), unlike the present tense *-n* or past tense *-sAŋ*.

- It **remains unembeddable even in a narrative context**, where the attitude verb is also inflected with *-v* (12b).

- (12) a. Khulan khaniaga-saŋ. Ter övchtei {bai-**n** / bai-**saŋ** / *bai-**v**} gej khel-seŋ.
 Khulan cough-PST 3.SG sick {AUX-PRS / AUX-PST / AUX-**v**} COMP say-PST
 “Khulan coughed. She said she is/was sick.”

- b. Khulan khaniaga-v. Ter övchtei {bai-**n** / bai-**saŋ** / *bai-**v**} gej khel-ev.
 Khulan cough-v 3.SG sick {AUX-PRS / AUX-PST / AUX-**v**} COMP say-**v**
 “Khulan coughs. She says she is/was sick.”

- A note on **present-under-past in Khalkha Mongolian**: when the present tense *-n* is embedded under the past, like in (12a, 13), it results in a **“double-access” reading** (Abusch, 1997).

- Thus, the difference in embedding between *-v* and the English HP cannot be traced to a more general difference in present-under-past readings across the two languages.

- (13) a. *Context: At 2pm, Erdenechimeg said, “Margad will be asleep from 6pm-10pm.” It is now 7pm.*
 Erdenechimeg Margad-iig unt-aj bai-**n** gej khel-seŋ
 Erdenechimeg Margad-ACC sleep-CVB AUX-PRS COMP say-PST
 ‘Erdenechimeg said Margad is sleeping.’

- b. *Context: At 2pm, Erdenechimeg said, “Margad is asleep right now.” It is now 7pm.*
 #Erdenechimeg Margad-iig unt-aj bai-**n** gej khel-seŋ
 Erdenechimeg Margad-ACC sleep-CVB AUX-PRS COMP say-PST
 ‘Erdenechimeg said Margad is sleeping.’

Consultant comment: “Erdenechimeg only told us Margad was sleeping at 2pm. We don’t know if she is still sleeping now.”

- How can we know whether cases of quotation punctuation like (11) are **genuine instances of quotation**?

- **Answer:** Via binding contrasts like (14).

- It is not possible to bind into quotations (Partee, 1973).

- Because of this, in (14a), the third person pronoun *ted* within the quotative complement cannot be bound by the subject.

- With a non-quotative complement, however, *ted* can be bound by the subject (14b).

- (14) a. [Bükh okhid-uud]_i “Enkhjin {bid-end_i / #ted-end_i} tusal-saŋ” gej khel-seŋ.
 all girl-PL Enkhjin {1.PL-DAT / 3.PL-DAT} help-PST COMP say-PST
 ‘All the girls_i said, “Enkhjin helped us_i/#them_i.”’
- b. [Bükh okhid-uud]_i Enkhjin ted-end_i tusal-saŋ gej khel-seŋ.
 all girl-PL Enkhjin 3.PL-DAT help-PST COMP say-PST
 ‘All the girls_i said Enkhjin helped them_i.’

Interim summary:

- -*v* is restricted to narrative contexts when it appears in declarative sentences.
- -*v* and the English HP have parallel temporal properties: both are non-indexical to the UT, both disallow backshifting, and both can anchor subsequent past tenses.
- Unlike the English HP, however, -*v* cannot overlap with the UT and can only be embedded as a quotative.

4 Formal analysis

- To derive the distribution of -*v*, I will assume a **bicontextual semantics**:
 - Interpretation is relative to a context of utterance (*u*) and a context of assessment (*a*) (Schlenker, 2004; Sharvit, 2004; 2008; Anand & Toosarvandani, 2017; 2018; 2020).
- Differences between (non-)canonical uses of the present tense stem from the temporal relationship between the **utterance time** and **assessment time** (e.g., Anand & Toosarvandani, 2017; 2018):

- (15) a. **Canonical present:**

$$\text{TIME}(a) = \text{TIME}(u)$$

- b. **Play-by-play present:**

$$\text{TIME}(a) \supseteq \text{TIME}(u)$$

- c. **Historical present:**

$$\text{TIME}(a) < \text{TIME}(u)$$

- I analyze -*v* as a tense marker that is only licensed in the context of a **modal operator NAR**, which shifts the assessment time away from the UT (Anand & Toosarvandani, 2020).
 - This captures the restriction of -*v* to narrative contexts in declarative sentences.⁴
- The modalized semantics given in (16) is the narrative operator of Lewis (1978) and Anand & Toosarvandani (2020):
 - NAR quantifies over worlds compatible with the relevant narrative $g(n)$.
 - $g(n)$ is evaluated with respect to the local world w_j and time t_i .
 - A time t' is identified as the temporal vantage point on the narrative.

⁴I note that this analysis is not incompatible with approaches that instead use a temporal operator (Zucchi, 2003), or that freely shift the assessment time at the root level (Schlenker, 2004; Anand & Toosarvandani, 2017; 2018).

- $\text{TIME}(a)$ is set to t' .

$$(16) \quad \llbracket \text{NAR}_n^{t_i, w_j} \lambda w \phi \rrbracket^{u, a, g} = \forall w' \text{ s.t. } w' \text{ is compatible with } g(n) \text{ in } w_j \text{ at } t_i \text{ and } t' \text{ is the temporal vantage point on } g(n) \text{ in } w_j \text{ at } t_i, \llbracket \lambda w \phi \rrbracket^{u, a[\text{TIME} \rightarrow t'], g}(w') = 1$$

- I trace the semantic properties that $-v$ shares with the English HP (e.g., restriction against backshifting) to its temporal semantics in (17a).
- Like a canonical present tense (17b), $-v$ **introduces a reference time that is contained within $\text{TIME}(a)$** .
 - $-v$ diverges from a canonical present tense in its presupposition that **$\text{TIME}(a)$ does not overlap with the $\text{TIME}(u)$** .
 - This presupposition renders $-v$ infelicitous in canonical present and play-by-play present contexts (see 15).
 - **Thus, $-v$ is only licensed in the presence of NAR .**

$$(17) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{a. } \llbracket -v \rrbracket^{u, a, g} = \lambda p: \text{TIME}(a) \cap \text{TIME}(u) = \emptyset. \exists t' [t' \subseteq \text{TIME}(a) \ \& \ p(t')] \\ \text{b. } \llbracket -n \rrbracket^{u, a, g} = \llbracket \text{PRS} \rrbracket^{u, a, g} = \lambda p. \exists t' [t' \subseteq \text{TIME}(a) \ \& \ p(t')] \end{array}$$

- The containment relation between the RT and $\text{TIME}(a)$ in (17a) results in a lack of backshifting when it interacts with the perfective aspect (see Anand & Toosarvandani, 2018 on the English HP).

$$(18) \quad \llbracket \text{PRFV} \rrbracket^g = \lambda P. \lambda t. \exists e [\tau(e) \subseteq t \ \& \ P(e)]$$

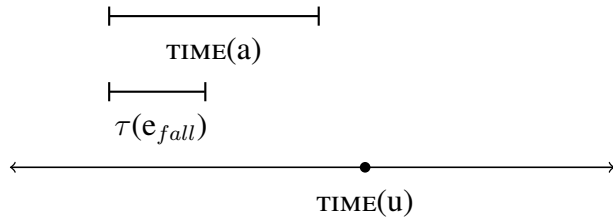
- **Illustrating how backshifting is ruled out, taking (19, repeated from 6a) as an example:**

- Sarangerel-falling-event = e_{fall}
- Tuya-pushing-event = e_{push}

$$(19) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{a. } [\text{Sarangerel un-}\mathbf{av}.]_{S1} [\text{Tuya t\u00fcen-iig t\u00fcikh-}\mathbf{ev}.]_{S2} \\ \text{Sarangerel fall-}v \quad \text{Tuya 3.SG-ACC push-}v \\ \text{'Sarangerel falls. Tuya pushes her.' (Backshifted \#)} \\ \text{b. } [\text{Sarangerel un-}\mathbf{av}.]_{S1} [\text{Tuya t\u00fcen-iig t\u00fcikh-}\mathbf{se\u0307n}.]_{S2} \\ \text{Sarangerel fall-}v \quad \text{Tuya 3.SG-ACC push-PST} \\ \text{'Sarangerel falls. Tuya pushed her.' (Backshifted \checkmark)} \end{array}$$

- The perfective aspect in (18): the duration of the eventuality $\tau(e)$ is contained in an RT.
 - Because PRFV is covert in Khalkha Mongolian (e.g., Knick, 2025), both verbs are aspectually perfective in (19).
- Backshifting occurs via anaphora to $\text{TIME}(a)$ when $\text{TIME}(a)$ is left-aligned to the preceding event e_{fall} (Anand & Toosarvandani, 2018), shown in (20).
 - Note that $\tau(e_{fall}) \subseteq \text{TIME}(a)$.

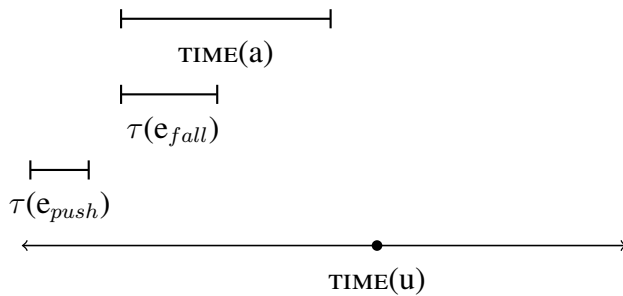
(20) S1 of (19a, 19b):



- For the simple past in (19b), backshifting is available because the past-shifted $RT < TIME(a)$, and the duration of the relevant event $\tau(e_{push}) \subseteq$ the RT.

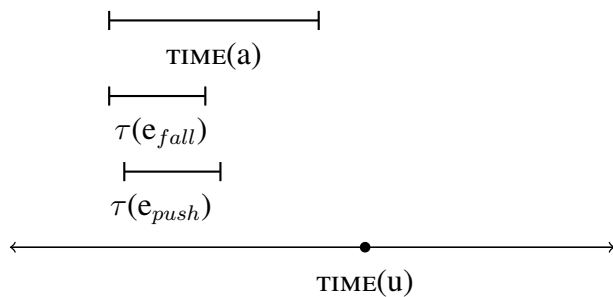
- In other words, $\tau(e_{push}) < TIME(a)$.
- Because $\tau(e_{fall}) \subseteq TIME(a)$, $\tau(e_{push}) < \tau(e_{fall})$.

(21) S2 of (19b), where backshifted ✓:



- However, when PRFV is combined with $-v$ in (19a), the $RT \subseteq TIME(a)$, and $\tau(e_{push}) \subseteq$ the RT.
 - This results in a configuration where $\tau(e_{push}) \subseteq TIME(a)$.
 - Crucially, the right boundary of $TIME(a)$ is equivalent to the right boundary of $\tau(e_1)$.
 - Therefore, since both $\tau(e_{fall})$ and $\tau(e_{push})$ must be contained within $TIME(a)$, no precedence relation is established.

(22) S2 of (19a), where backshifted #:



- To derive its inability to embed, I propose that in contrast with English (cf. Anand & Toosarvandani, 2020), the structural position that $-v$ occupies is too high to be embedded in Khalkha Mongolian.
 - Tense morphemes that encode an evidential meaning have been argued to occupy a projection in the left-periphery, above TP (e.g., Cinque, 1999; Speas, 2004; Korotkova, 2021).
 - Likewise, I suggest that tense morphemes that encode a narrative meaning are syntactically higher than canonical tenses.

5 Conclusion

- By identifying the Khalkha Mongolian suffix *-v* as a dedicated narrative tense marker, the current work contributes to our cross-linguistic understanding of **temporal meaning in narratives**.
- The provided analysis of *-v* captures parallels between the temporal properties of *-v* and the English HP, formalizing the source of their restricted use in narrative contexts.
- This is the first formal analysis, to my knowledge, of a dedicated narrative tense, despite being attested elsewhere cross-linguistically (see Nurse, 2008, on Bantu languages).

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7 Appendix

- Past descriptions label *-jee* as a past tense that encodes indirect evidence (e.g., Song, 1997) or inferential evidence (e.g., Binnick, 2012).
- Here, I show that *-jee* is an **indirect evidential** that requires **past temporal orientation**.
- **Past orientation:** *-jee* can only be used when the relevant eventuality holds before the UT (23a), not at the UT (23b).

(23) a. *Context: Yesterday, you stayed inside all day. You didn't look outside, but you heard the sound of rain pouring on your roof.*

Boroo or-j bai-**jee**
rain enter-CVB AUX-*jee*
'It rained, I suppose.'

b. *Context: Today, you're staying inside all day. You don't look outside, but you currently hear the sound of rain pouring on your roof.*

#Boroo or-j bai-**jee**
rain enter-CVB AUX-*jee*
Intended: 'It is raining, I suppose.'

- **Hearsay:** In addition to inferential evidence, *-jee* is felicitous with reportative evidence.
- This indicates that rather than being strictly inferential, *-jee* behaves like an **indirect evidential**.

(24) *Context: You heard a rumor that your acquaintance, Tengis, quit his job last year. You say to your friend:*

Tengis ajl-aas-aa gar-**jee**.
Tengis job-ABL-REFL.POSS leave-*jee*
'Tengis left his job, I heard.'

- **Abductive inferences:** *-jee* is felicitous in cases of abductive inference.
- Thus, the evidential requirements of *-jee* are not anti-abductive like English WOLL (e.g., Winans, 2016).

(25) *Context: You look over at the house plant owned by your roommate, Margad. You notice that its leaves are wilting. You say to your other friend:*

Margad urgaml-aa usla-kh-aa mart-**jee**.
Margad plant-REFL.POSS water-INF-REFL.POSS forget-*jee*
'Margad forgot to water her plants, I suppose.'

- **Pure reasoning:** *-jee* is felicitous when the speaker's evidence is from pure reasoning.
- This shows that *-jee* is not restricted to contexts where inferences are drawn from perceptual evidence of results (cf. Matthewson, 2012).

(26) *Context: You know that an archery tournament happened last week, and your friend, Nomin, was competing. Nomin is a skilled archer and has won many competitions in the past. However, you did not watch this tournament, nor did you speak to Nomin recently. Thus, you have no idea how this particular tournament went. When someone asks you about it, you say:*

Nomin temtseen-d türүүл-**jee**.

Nomin tournament-DAT win-*jee*

'Nomin won the tournament, I reckon.'

- Based on (23–26), I conclude that *-jee* is a past-oriented indirect evidential, as suggested by Song (1997).