

X. gSer tog Blo bzang tshul khrim s rgya mtsho on Tibetan Verb Tenses

To what degree do the Tibetan grammarians' classifications of the three tenses—or more literally, the three times (*dus gsum*)—into past ('*das pa*), present (*da lta ba*), and future (*ma 'ongs pa*) really describe actions and states in the past, present, or future? Are they tenses, showing how a state, event, or action is situated in time relative to the speech act—before, simultaneous, or subsequent¹— or is “tense” just being used more or less infelicitously?

The question is not new. Shōju Inaba 1955 had already argued that future forms, as one finds them in the major Tibetan dictionaries or in traditional grammarians' lists of verbs, have little or nothing to do with the future.² Indeed, it seems true that the so-called “future” is the most problematic of the Tibetan grammarians' classifications and is often an odd misnomer for something quite different. Comparisons with Sanskrit give a working idea of the anomalies: (1) In Tibetan translations of Sanskrit future tenses, the future simplex forms that we find in dictionaries are rarely used; instead, the Sanskrit future is typically translated by what the grammarians would term a present (*da lta ba*), or by a periphrastic form using this present form plus *par 'gyur*. (2) The grammarians' future (e.g., *gzung*) is frequently used to express a Sanskrit present passive, or this “future” and its related forms in *par bya* (e.g., *gzung bar bya*) are used to translate Sanskrit terms ending in the suffixes of obligation (*kr̥tya*) *-ya*, *-tavya* and *-anīya*. Pāṇini

¹ Cf. Bussmann 1996, 478, *s.v.* tense: “fundamental grammatical (morphological) category of the verb which expresses the temporal relation between a speech act ... and the state of affairs or event described in the utterance, i.e., which places the event spoken of in relation to the temporal perspective of the speaker.”

² See AACT p. 82, n. 73 and p. 90.

speaks of a number of uses of *krtya*, such as in cases of permission (*sarga*), opportunity (*prāptakāla*), fittingness (*arha*), etc.³

It may well be impossible for us to find *the* precise reason why Tibetan grammarians, from Thon mi Sambhoṭa (seventh century?) to Si tu Paṅ chen (1699-1774), chose to use the term “future” here, but it is nevertheless noteworthy that at least one grammarian was himself aware that the traditional Tibetan classification of the three times (*dus gsum*) did not correlate very well with the actual temporal values expressed by Tibetan verbs. That grammarian was the fifth gSer tog incarnation, Blo bzang tshul khriṃs rgya mtsho (1845-1915) of sKu ‘bum monastery in present-day Qinghai. gSer tog’s tactic was to distinguish between two ways of classifying the three times (*dus gsum gyi ‘jog tshul*), one being in terms of the triad, “actions, agents, and objects” (*bya byed las gsum gyi dus gsum*), and the other being the “general way to classify the three times” (*spyir dus gsum gyi ‘jog tshul*), i.e., in terms of the actual temporal value of the verb in a particular context. The former classification is clearly based on some key ideas from Si tu Paṅ chen (although the mere term *bya byed las gsum gyi dus gsum* may itself be new), but the latter type of analysis was, as far as we know, first developed in gSer tog’s major work, the *Sum cu pa dang rtags kyi ‘jug pa’i mchan ‘grel* (MHTL 5412).⁴ In his chapter on *bdag* and *gzhan*, we find explicit references to Si tu and to A lag sha Ngag dbang bstan dar (1759-1840), and it is obvious that gSer tog was heavily indebted to these two authors for many of his ideas. Nonetheless, this twofold approach to problems of tense is not to be found in their works, nor does it seem to be found in the *Sum rtags* works of other famous eighteenth and nineteenth century grammarians, such as ICang skya Rol

³ Cf. Renou 1975 §160b: “La valeur d’obligation s’affaiblit très souvent, surtout dans les formes en *ya-*, en éventuel : chose permise (*sarge*), opportune (*prāptakāle*), capacité (*śakti*), convenance (*arhe*); ép[ique] et ailleurs, en simple futur imprécis, *bhavya* ... et *bhāvya-*, ... *vaineya* ‘qui va se convertir’... See Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 3.3.163; 3.3.169-171; pp. 132-133 ed. Böhtlingk 1977.

⁴ His other grammatical work is entitled *Bya byed las gsum dus gsum dang bcas pa’i dper brjod che long bsdus pa* (MHTL 5413). This text consists of numerous examples of verb forms but is also prefixed by a number of verses that summarize gSer tog’s position on *bdag*, *gzhan*, and *bya byed las gsum*. The text is included as an appendix to the edition of the *mchan ‘grel*—i.e., *gSer tog sum rtags*—that has been printed in China.

pa'i rdo rje (1717-1786), dNgul chu Dharmabhadra (1772-1851), dByangs can Grub pa'i rdo rje (1809-1887) or A kya Yongs 'dzin dByangs can dga' ba'i blo gros (1740-1827). We provisionally hypothesize, therefore, that it is gSer tog's own invention.

A working idea of gSer tog's twofold distinction can easily be given by means of a parallel with English and French, where, as in numerous other languages, context can determine that the action occurs at a different time than what the grammatical tense of the verb would otherwise express. For example, in the sentences *I am going there tomorrow*, *J'y vais demain*, standard present forms are being used to express an action that will occur in the future relative to the time of the speech act. As we shall see, gSer tog exploits this general type of distinction to make, *inter alia*, some potentially significant remarks about the puzzling case of future simplex and future in *par bya*, and thus it merits investigation in some detail. Unfortunately, gSer tog himself never gave a rigorous and exhaustive description of the two schemata, contenting himself with a number of remarks and examples here and there in his chapter on *bdag* and *gzhan*. [Note added in 2020: this work is translated below in chapter XII]. We shall look at some of these remarks and try to piece together his various ideas.

By way of a typical case, take a verb such as “to seek,” *tshol ba*, with a dictionary future form *bstal ba*. For grammarians the simplex *btsal*, or *btsal lo*, and its related forms in *par bya* / *bar bya* and *bya* (i.e., *btsal bar bya*, *btsal bya*) are future (*ma 'ongs pa*) and are said to express (as we have argued earlier in AACT) patient-prominence. To use the grammarians' term, they express future act-qua-thing-done (*bya ba'i las ma 'ongs pa*). This type of action is categorized under the rubric *gzhan* (“other”) and is invariably explained in the context of the triad, actions, agents, and objects (*bya byed las gsum*), as being related to the object/patient (*las*) of the action. The present simplex *tshol ba* or the continuative form *tshol bzhin pa* are taken as agent-prominent, or “present act-qua-doing” (*byed pa'i las da lta ba*), are classified under *bdag* (“self”), and are related to the agent (*byed pa po*). As for the past *btsald⁵* or *btsald zin pa* there is some controversy as to how it should be taken, but gSer tog and others (such as A kya Yongs 'dzin) clearly relate it to the object/patient. The result is that we have a schema where the three tenses are correlated with members of

⁵ We follow gSer tog in conserving the old supplementary --d suffix (*da drag*).

the triad, *bya ba*, *byed pa* (*po*), and *las*: gSer tog can thus speak of *this* schema as being “the three times in terms of the triad, actions, agents, and objects” (*bya byed las gsum gyi dus gsum*; see chapter XII, §13 *et seq.*).

A simpler way to express this point is to say that *bya byed las gsum gyi dus gsum* are essentially “tenses” as we find them in any Tibetan-Tibetan or Tibetan-English dictionary—these are also the past, present, future stems found in traditional grammar’s lists of the “three times” of verbs. Let us thus from here on speak of the “dictionary present” like *tshol ba*, a “dictionary future” like *btsal ba*, and a “dictionary past,” like *btsald*. In many occurrences these three “dictionary forms” will also have their same corresponding temporal values and will express actions that are before (past), simultaneous with (present), or in the future relative to the speech act. But gSer tog brings up the point that quite often this dictionary-style classification does not reflect the actual temporal value of verbs. This can be in the following cases: (1) contexts where present dictionary forms have to be understood as actually expressing an action in the future; (2) verbs that make no distinction between their “dictionary presents” and “futures” and hence have to rely on auxiliaries (*tshig grogs*) to make periphrastic forms expressing such distinctions; (3) the special case of future act-qua-thing-done (*bya ba’i las ma ‘ongs pa*), viz., *btsal bar bya*, etc., which, in itself, just expresses the modal sense of “... is to be done” or “... ought to be done,” and not the strictly temporal future.

This is, of course, a rather condensed account of gSer tog’s ideas: for supporting evidence we now have to look at some of the various arguments occurring in pp. 137-156 of his *mchan ‘grel*, where he expresses these ideas in the grammatical jargon of *bdag* and *gzhan*. Here, then, are the relevant passages.

1. Context. gSer tog introduces his distinction between the two perspectives on tense on p. 140 of his *mchan ‘grel* (see chapter XII, §13 below):

‘on kyang bya byed las kyi dus gsum dang / spyir dus gsum gyi ‘jog tshul la khyad par cung zad re yod de / dper na / gdul bya’i sems can / zhes pa lta bu la mtshon na / las sgra de yi ‘jug yul rnam pa gsum du yod de / gdul bya zhes pa las sgra dngos ma ‘ongs pa dang / sems can ni las / ‘dul ba ni byed pa da lta ba / btuld pa ni byas zin ‘das pa / gdul bar bya zhes pa ni bya ba’i las ma ‘ongs pa zhes bya zhing / sems can de gdul ba’i bya bas slar ‘dul dgos pa ni / dus kyi dus ma ‘ongs

pa dang / 'dul bzhin pa ni / dus kyi dus da lta ba dang / btuld zin pa ni / dus kyi dus 'das pa'i don yin par go dgos so //. “However, there is some difference between the way to classify the three times in terms of [the triad] actions, agents, and objects (*bya byed las kyi dus gsum*) and the way to classify the three times generally (*spyir dus gsum gyi 'jog tshul*). Take, for example, something like [the phrase] *gdul bya'i sems can* (‘the sentient being to be disciplined’). One should understand the following points (*don*). There are three spheres of application for the word *las* (‘patient/object’): *gdul bya* (‘that which is to be disciplined’), i.e., the actual, future word for the object (*las sgra dngos ma 'ongs pa*), or *sems can* (‘sentient being’) are termed the object (*las*); ‘*dul ba* (‘... disciplines/...is disciplining’) is termed present doing (*byed pa da lta ba*); *btuld pa* (‘... has been disciplined’) is termed the past that has been done (*byas zin 'das pa*); *gdul bar bya* (‘... is to be disciplined’) is termed the future act-qua-thing-done (*bya ba'i las ma 'ongs pa*). And when we again have to discipline (*slar 'dul dgos pa*) the sentient being by means of a disciplinary action (*gdul ba'i bya ba*), this [use of ‘*dul*’] is temporally future (*dus kyi dus ma 'ongs pa*); ‘*dul bzhin pa* (‘...is now disciplining’) is temporally present (*dus kyi dus da lta ba*); *btuld zin pa* (‘... has been disciplined’) is temporally past (*dus kyi dus 'das pa*).”

Explanatory remarks. The schema of three uses of the word *las* (*las sgra*) that gSer tog invokes here is found in other grammatical treatises⁶ and is as follows: (1) the patient/object, i.e., *gdul bya* and *sems can*; (2) the act-qua-doing, i.e., present forms such as ‘*dul ba*; (3) the act-qua-thing-done, i.e., the future *gdul bar bya* and the past *btuld pa*. All these forms (with the exception of *sems can*) are cases of *bya byed las gsum gyi dus gsum* “the three times in terms of the triad, actions, agents, and objects.” To this gSer

⁶ Cf. A kya Yongs ‘dzin, *rNam dbye brgyad dang bya byed las sogs kyi khyad par mdo tsam brjod pa dka'i gnas gsal ba'i me long* (Collected Works, 2, New Delhi, 1971, p. 452): *spyir na las kyi sgra de yi // 'jug yul gsum du shes bya ste // gcad bya zhes pa las sgra dngos // gcod par byed sogs byed pa'i las // gcad par bya dang bcad par byas // rim pa bzhin du bya ba'i las // ma 'ongs pa dang 'das pa'o //*. “In general, it should be understood that there are three spheres of application for the word *las*. When one says, *gcad bya* (‘what is to be cut’), this is an actual word for *las*; *gcod par byed* (‘...cuts’), etc. is *byed pa'i las* (‘act-qua-doing’); *gcad par bya* (‘... is to be cut’) and *bcad par byas* (‘... has been cut’) are, respectively, future and past *bya ba'i las* (‘act-qua-thing-done’).”

tog opposes a general schema in terms of *dus kyi dus ma 'ongs pa, dus kyi dus da lta ba* and *dus kyi dus 'das pa*—literally, “future/present/past time in terms of time,” an unpalatable translation which, following the sense, I have abandoned in favour of “the temporally future/present/past.” In sum, this passage is arguing that there are cases where the context shows that the present dictionary form, or “present in terms of actions, agents, and objects,” is used to indicate an event that *will* occur, one that is, temporally speaking, in the future. This seems to be the point of his example: the verb in *slar 'dul dgos pa* (“will again have to discipline”) is indeed a present dictionary form, but indicates an action in the future due to the word *slar* (“again”). The other two examples, viz., *'dul bzhin pa, btuld zin pa*, are cases where the dictionary forms and the actual strict temporal values seem to coincide.⁷

2. Auxiliaries. On p. 148 of his *mchan 'grel* (chapter XII, §35 below), we find the following elaboration upon some remarks of Si tu concerning certain *g-* and *d-* prefixed forms that are not included under self and other:

ma ning dang 'chad 'gyur mo dang shin tu mo rnams kyi skabs su shes par bya rgyu zhig yod de / gcad bya / gcod byed / dpag bya / dpog byed ces pa lta bu ga da gnyis yig gzugs mi 'dra bas bdag gzhan gnyis car la 'jug pa na / bya byed kyi tshig dang tshig grogs ma sbyar yang / des bya las ma 'ongs pa dang byed pa da lta ba yin par go nus mod kyang / gsub bya / gsub byed / dkri bya / dkri byed ces pa lta bu ga da gnyis yig gzugs gcig gis bdag gzhan gnyis ka la 'jug pa 'i tshe / byed tshig gis ma gsal ba rnams la / gsub kyin / dkri yin lta bu tshig grogs kyin gin gyin yin bzhi bo las gang rung sbyar bas byed pa da lta ba ston tshul gcig dang / ga da gnyis yig gzugs gcig gis bdag gzhan gnyis ka la 'jug pa na / dmigs kyis dus la 'jug pa 'i tshe / gsub kyin / dkri yin lta bu dus kyi dus da lta ba dang / gsub par 'gyur / dkri bar 'gyur lta bu tshig grogs sbyar bas dus kyi dus ma 'ongs pa gsal bar ston pa 'i tshul gcig ste tshul gnyis yod pa 'i gnad kyis / rtsa gzhung 'dir bdag gzhan dang dus gsum so sor gsungs dgos byung ba yin no //. “In connection with the neutral [prefixes *g-*, *d-*] as well as the feminine [*a-*] and extremely feminine [prefix *m-*] that will be explained [below], there is a [point] that should

⁷ We find other somewhat ironical remarks on the influence of context, particularly in cases, like *smin pa* (“to be ripe”), that have only one dictionary form. See chapter XII, §29.

be understood. Take [expressions] such as *gcad bya* (‘what is to be cut’), *gcod byed* (‘what effectuates the cutting,’ ‘the means of cutting’), *dpag bya* (‘what is to be understood’) [and] *dpog byed* (‘what effectuates the understanding,’ ‘means of understanding’), where [the prefixes] *g-* [and] *d-* are applied for both self and other via different written forms [i.e., *gcod*, *gcad*, *dpog*, *dpag*, etc.]. Then, even when the expressions *bya* [and] *byed* and auxiliaries (*tshig grogs*) are not used, these [simplex forms, i.e., *gcad*, *gcod*, etc.] enable one to understand that it is future act-qua-thing-done (*bya las ma ‘ongs pa*) and present doing (*byed pa da lta ba*) [at stake]. By contrast, take [expressions] such as *gtsub bya* (‘what is to be rubbed’), *gtsub byed* (‘what effectuates the rubbing,’ ‘means of rubbing’), *dkri bya* (‘what is to be tied up’) [and] *dkri byed* (‘what effectuates the tying,’ ‘the means of tying’), where *g-* [and] *d-* are applied for both self and other via one and the same written form [i.e., *gtsub* and *dkri*, respectively]. In those cases, when [the simplex forms *gtsub* and *dkri*] are not clarified by means of an expression *byed*, then by using one of the four auxiliaries *kyin*, *gin*, *gyin*, [or] *yin* in *gtsub kyin*, *dkri yin*, and the like, [we can convey] present doing (*byed pa da lta ba*). Such is one way to show [how *g-* and *d-* are used]. And when *g-* [and] *d-* are applied for both self and other via one and the same written form [as in the case of *gtsub* and *dkri*], then if they are applied specifically (*dmigs kyis*) for the times (*dus*), *gtsub kyin*, *dkri yin*, and so forth are the temporally present (*dus kyi dus da lta ba*), while by using auxiliaries [in verbal forms] such as *gtsub par ‘gyur* (‘... will rub’) [and] *dkri bar ‘gyur* (‘... will tie up’), one clearly [conveys] the temporally future (*dus kyi dus ma ‘ongs pa*). Such is another way to show [how *g-* and *d-* are used]. Given the two ways, then self, other, and the three times needed to be spoken about separately here in the root text [i.e., in śloka twelve of the *rTags kyi ‘jug pa*].”

Explanatory remarks. The contrast is between verbs, such as *gcod pa/gcad pa* (“cut”), that distinguish between present and future dictionary forms—i.e., *bdag* and *gzhan*—and those, such as *gtsub pa* (“rub”), that do not.⁸ In the latter case, it can be in function of the presence of *par byed*

⁸ The verb *gtsub pa* has the same form for present and future, although it does have a separate past form. The same holds for *dkri ba*.

(e.g., *gtsub par byed*) or *par bya* (e.g., *gtsub par bya*) that we can classify a verb like *gtsub pa* in terms of “doing” or “thing-done,” i.e., self and other, respectively—the “*gtsub*” retains one and the same written form (*yig gzugs gcig*). However, suppose that *byed* and *bya* are not used with *gtsub* and *dkri* and that there are only auxiliaries (*tshig grogs*) used to differentiate tenses so that self and other do not apply. Thus, depending on the auxiliary used, i.e., *kyin* or ‘*gyur*’, a verb like *gtsub* can show, respectively, *dus kyi dus da lta ba*, the temporal present, or a temporal future (*dus kyi dus ma ‘ongs pa*). gSer tog, again echoing Si tu, invokes the uses of auxiliaries in his exegesis on Thon mi Sambhoṭa’s śloka: on the one hand, *gcod pa/gcad pa*, *gtsub par byed*, *gtsub par bya* are covered by self and other in Thon mi’s line “the neutral is for both [self and other] and for the present” (*ma ning gnyis ka da ltar ched*);⁹ on the other hand, when Thon mi says “for the present” the temporal specification (i.e., *gtsub kyin*, or *gtsub ‘gyur*) capture what remains outside self and other. Note that gSer tog, like many others, sees Thon mi’s “for the present” as capturing the *main* (*gtso*) use but not the only one. “Future” is included too.

3. The special case of future act-qua-thing-done. gSer tog’s remarks on this subject come in the context of a criticism of A lag sha Ngag dbang bstan dar. gSer tog writes on p. 145 of his *mchan ‘grel* (chapter XII, §30 below):

bsTan dar pa’i ‘grel bar / ras de sang nyin bkru bar bya / yi ge de da dung bklag par bya’o zhes pa lta bu ma ‘ongs pa la ‘jug pa yod par gsungs pa ni bam bshad yin nam snyam ste / dper brjod dngos bstan ltar na sang nyin dang da dung zhes pa’i tshig gis dus kyi dus ma ‘ongs pa bstan gyi / bkru bar bya dang bklag par bya zhes pa bya las ma ‘ongs pa nyid las ma ‘das pa’o //. “In [A lag sha Ngag dbang] bstan dar’s commentary, when it is stated that there are applications [of *b-*] for the future such as ‘That cloth is to be washed tomorrow’ (*ras de sang nyin bkru bar bya*) and ‘That letter is still to be read’ (*yi ge de da dung bklag par bya’o*), I wonder whether this might be a corrupt explanation (*bam bshad*) [of the prefix *b-* being used for the temporally future]. In keeping with what [bsTan dar’s] example statements actually said (*dngos bstan*), the words *sang nyin* (‘tomorrow’) and *da dung* (‘still’)

⁹ “The neutral [prefixes *g-* and *d-*] are for both [self and other and] the present.”

show the temporally future (*dus kyi dus ma 'ongs pa*), but *bkru bar bya* ('...is to be washed') and *bklag par bya* ('... is to be read') are no more than just the future act-qua-thing-done (*bya las ma 'ongs pa*)."

Explanatory remarks. Ngag dbang bstan dar, on p. 186 of his *Sum rtags* commentary, *sKal ldan yid kyi pad ma 'byed pa'i snang ba'i mdzod*, had argued:

gzhung 'dir dngos su ma bstan kyang ma 'ongs pa la 'jug pa ni / dper na / ras de sang nyin bkru par bya'o / yi ge de da dung bklag par bya'o sogs so /. "Although not literally taught in this text [i.e., the *rTags kyi 'jug pa*] there are the following cases where [b-] is applied for the future: 'That cloth is to be washed tomorrow,' 'That letter is still to be read,' and so forth."

gSer tog, then, seems to be maintaining that here, in Ngag dbang bstan dar's examples, actual future temporal value is not expressed by the dictionary future forms and the ending in *par bya*, but rather by the context, i.e., the words "tomorrow" and "still." His remarks imply that the "future" in *par bya* is much less of a real future than a type of modal form, a position that would, of course, tally well with our earlier observations about Tibetan translations using dictionary futures + *par bya* for the Sanskrit suffixes of obligation (*krtya*). To go gSer tog one step further, the future act-qua-thing-done would, as in the Sanskrit *krtya*, show an essentially passive, or "patient-prominent,"¹⁰ action that is/was to be done, the form in *par bya* being in itself virtually temporally neutral. And although gSer tog does not explicitly say so, he would presumably have to agree that the future simplex forms, *bklag go*, etc. would also receive their real temporal value from elsewhere—context, or perhaps even auxiliaries like *bzhin*.¹¹ In any case, the passages given above—especially the debate with Ngag dbang bstan dar—do suggest that gSer tog came up with a significantly

¹⁰ See AACT p. 80 *et seq.*

¹¹ Here it is relevant to note that A kya Yongs 'dzin, in his *rTags kyi 'jug pa'i dka' gnas*, gives some examples of a periphrastic present passive, i.e., a "present act-qua-thing-done" (*bya las da lta ba*), formed from the dictionary future plus the present continuative auxiliary *bzhin*. Thus, e.g., *gcad bzhin pa* ("... is being cut"). See AACT p. 48, §15. It is not clear to me, however, whether these forms are regularly attestable Tibetan.

different and more nuanced account of the Tibetan verb tenses. No doubt, he made some real progress upon the traditional account of *dus gsum* by distinguishing between dictionary-style verb tenses and the various contexts and periphrastic constructions in which these verb forms can be used to express actual temporal values.

To return now to the problem posed at the outset, what we see in gSer tog should reinforce and complement a perspective like that of Inaba, for whom stems, as found in dictionaries, are in effect misleadingly named. While the so-called present and future stems are, for Inaba, active and passive imperfectives, respectively, the past is perfective but ambivalent with regard to voice. In short, a binary opposition between imperfective and perfective—*grosso modo* a difference of aspect between temporally unbounded or atterminative actions and bounded or terminative actions—is coupled with a distinction of voice.¹² I think that it would make eminent sense to add the traditional contribution, too. True, there is no analogue in *Sum rtags* literature to the imperfective-perfective aspectual distinction, but it is relatively natural to take the *Sum rtags* division between act-qua-doing (*byed las*) and the act-qua-thing-done (*bya las*), or self and other, as reinforcing the distinction of voice put forth by Inaba: the present stem shows self; the future stem shows other; the past is often said to be ambivalent, showing neither. Finally, the relationship between the so-called dictionary-style tenses (which are not tenses *stricto sensu*) and actual temporal values of verbs is brought out in the distinction by gSer tog between *bya byed las gsum gyi dus gsum*—i.e., the dictionary past, present, and future stems—and *spyir dus gsum*—i.e., the actual temporal value of verbs in a sentence, possibly due to context and auxiliaries. Combining those three, viz., aspect, voice, and temporal value, would be a major step towards an account of verbs in Classical Tibetan.

¹² See Derek Herforth's summary of Inaba's views in AACT p. 82, n. 73. On imperfective-perfective, see Comrie 1976 and Bussmann 1996, 219-220, *s.v.* imperfective vs perfective. To take a rough and ready example in English, contrast the imperfective "The house burned/was burning for some time" with the perfective "The house burned down in an hour."