

# A Novel Approach to Delineating Kazakh’s Five Present Tenses: Lexical Aspect

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## Abstract

The present tense in Kazakh may be expressed through the use of four auxiliary verbs (*jatır* ‘lie’, *jür* ‘go’, *tur* ‘stand’, and *otır* ‘sit’), as well as through a form which is morphologically equivalent to the present tense in other Central Asian Turkic languages, but is usually considered to refer to future tense in Kazakh. Previous works concerning these forms ignore any differences in use; vaguely ascribe them to aspectual variation, at best alluding to a perfective/imperfective breakdown; or attempt to attribute the literal meanings of the auxiliaries to the position in which the event is performed. However, I have found that the specific temporal and aspectual differences between these five present tenses in Kazakh, as well as various restrictions on their uses, may be viewed as being based on aspectual properties of the events they pattern with—specifically, a system consisting of the distinctions  $\pm$ telic and  $\pm$ stages. In addition, there are other aspectual properties, such as the duration of the event before the timeframe in question, which appear relevant as well.

## 1 Overview

The present tense in Kazakh may be expressed through the use of four verbs which pattern with a participial main verb: *jatır* ‘lie’ (1a), *jür* ‘go’ (1b), *tur* ‘stand’ (1c), and *otır* ‘sit’ (1d); in addition, the form which is morphologically equivalent to the present tense in other Central Asian Turkic languages retains some present tense usage in Kazakh (2a), though it is generally considered to refer to future tense (2b).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a. *Üy-ge kel-e jatır-mın*  
home-DAT come-presPART lie-1st.sg  
“I’m coming home.”

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise specified, all sentences are elicited in 2004 and 2005 from my primary informants (Anna Kudiyarova Mergenbaevna, Assel Nussupova, and Malika Nigmatulina—to whom I’m endlessly grateful), from communications with other native speakers of Kazakh, or from my own knowledge of the language. Of course, any errors in data or analysis are exclusively mine.

- b. *Üy-ge kel-ip jür-min*  
 home-DAT come-presPART go-1st.sg  
 “I come home [e.g., every day].”
- c. *Ol qazir bastıq-qa sen-ip tur*  
 he now boss-DAT believe-pastPART stand  
 “He believes his boss right now.”
- d. *Say iş-ip otır-mın*  
 tea drink-pastGER sit-1st.sg  
 “I am drinking tea.”
- (2) a. *Ol bastıq-qa sen-e-di*  
 he boss-DAT believe-presPART-3rd  
 “He believes his boss.”
- b. *Üy-ge kel-e-min*  
 home-DAT come-PRES-1st.sg  
 “I will come home.”

These five present tense forms—the verbal quartet and the simple present tense—may appear at first glance to be interchangeable, and while most accounts treat them either as interchangeable or as varying in vague aspectual properties, a thorough analysis shows that many of the differences can be attributed to specific properties of lexical aspect.

## 2 Cutting the Quartet

### 2.1 Previous Analyses

Several superficial differences between the forms have been pointed out in existing literature. While some sources offer no explanation for the differences (Somfai Kara (2002), Kubaeva (2003), etc.), others ascribe them vaguely to aspectual differences (Kirchner (1998), Bekturova & Bekturov (1996), Krippes (1996), and Demirci (2003)).

One example of this is the analysis (?) that there are lexicalised perfective and imperfective verbs pairs as in Slavic languages; in fact, this analysis appears to have arisen from the tradition of Russian grammarians. Some interesting pairs are *need examples from source*. This analysis assumes the lack of a productive system, which is undesirable, and which after some structured investigation appears not to be the case.

Another source (?) suggests that there is a ranking of the auxiliaries based on the relative length of aspect frame which they convey

Bekturova & Bekturov (1996) also suggests that the auxiliary indicates the position in which the event in question is performed (see figure 1 on page 6).

While the first three illustrations in figure 1(a) literally depict the position suggested by the auxiliary used (*jür* “going,” *tur* “standing,” and *otır* “sitting”), the last illustration, using *jatır*, does not depict an event being performed lying down. Furthermore, with the exception of the sentence provided along with the explanation for *jür* under



(a) Illustration of the four auxiliaries

The form of the Compound Present Tense has different shades of meaning. It depends on the usage of one of the verbs: **отыр, тұр, жүр, жатыр**.

- Отыр** denotes an action taking place at the moment of speaking (when the subject is sitting): *Әгіл кітап оқып отыр* „Adil is reading a book“. *Кәрім шай ішіп отыр*. „Karim is having tea“.
- Тұр** attaches the character of repetition to the action taking place at the given moment (or when the subject is standing): *Екі ағам сөйлесіп тұр*. „Two men are speaking“ (standing).
- Жатыр** attaches the constant character to the action and points to its duration: *Айгүл институтта оқып жатыр* „Aigul studies at the Institute (continues to study at the present moment). In this case it may be translated into English by the Present Indefinite. *Мен келе жатырмын* “I am going” (now).
- Жүр** also points to the constant character of the action or its repetition: *Айгүл институтта оқып жүр* „Aigul studies at the Institute“. In this case the two verbs are very close in their meaning. The difference is very slight. **Жүр** is more concrete.

(b) Explanation of illustrations

Figure 1: Excerpts from Bekturova & Bekturov (1996, 67-68)

item 4 in figure 1(b), all example events provided are activities—that is, events with stages but no endpoint.

That said, position in which the event is performed *is* relevant to a complete analysis of the verbs’ differences in use, and Bekturova & Bekturov, while vague in their wording, provide one of the best attempts to account for the differences between the verbs of Kazakh’s present tense verbal quartet that I have encountered, as it does begin to extract some of the main differences.

## 2.2 The Theoretical Framework

Rothstein (2004) discusses the classic Vendlerian (Vendler, 1957, 1967) verb classes: states, activities, achievements, and accomplishments (see also Dowty (1979)). A verb (or verb phrase) may be classified as one of these based on the properties of the event in question—namely, along the lines of telicity (whether or not it has an end-point), and stages (whether or not multiple stages exist as part of the event). Rothstein (2004, 12) applies the features [ $\pm$ telic] and [ $\pm$ stages] (which, as will be seen, are important in helping to delineate the verbal quartet) to lexical classes as follows: **states** are events which have no endpoint or stages, such as *know, believe, desire*, etc. (Rothstein, 2004, 6); **activities** are events with stages, but no general endpoint: *walk, swim, push a cart*, etc; **achievements** have no stages, and the endpoint makes up almost the entire event: *recognise, find, die*, etc; **accomplishments** involve an endpoint and stages, and include phrases such as *paint a picture, write a book, and deliver a sermon*. Table 1 shows a breakdown of the four categories of lexical aspect by feature.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>It should be noted that verb phrases can be coerced into a different event category given the right

	[±stages]	[±telic]
States	-	-
Activities	+	-
Achievements	-	+
Accomplishments	+	+

Table 1: A Distinctive Feature Analysis of Lexical Aspect

## 2.3 The Differences

Given the tools of lexical aspect and the breakdown thereof by feature, the uses of Kazakh’s simple present tense and quartet of auxiliaries used for the present tense may be delineated along the lines of lexical aspect of the verb phrases they select.

### 2.3.1 The Simple Present Tense

The simple present tense in Kazakh is used with non-telic events (states and activities) for generic statements (ex. 8), and with telic events (achievements and accomplishments) for future tense (ex. 9). It can also convey habitual aspect for any event type if given the right context (ex. 10).

- (3) *Ol bastıq-qa sen-e-di*  
 3rd.sg boss-DAT believe-presPART-3rd  
 “S/he believes his/her boss.”
- (4) *Men alma-nı je-y-min*  
 I apple-ACC eat-presPART-1st.sg  
 “I’m going to eat the apple.”
- (5) *Kün-de alma je-y-min*  
 day-LOC apple eat-presPART-1st.sg  
 “I eat an apple daily.”

### 2.3.2 *jatır* – ‘lie’

The verb *jatır* in Kazakh could be translated as something along the lines of “to be lying down.” This is the most generally used of the present tense quartet’s verbs, as it indicates progressive aspect. Its use is restricted to events with stages and coerces non-staged events into having stages.

The verb *jatır* is hence used with **activities** ([-telic,+stages], ex. 11) and **accomplishments** ([+telic,+stages], ex. 12) to indicate progressive aspect:

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aspectual information—for example, an achievement is coerced into an accomplishment by using progressive aspect in English: “I’m finding my glasses.”

- (6) *Men qazir jügir-ip jatır-mın*  
 I now run-pastPART lie-1st.sg  
 “I’m running right now.”
- (7) *Men qazir alma je-p jatır-mın*  
 I now apple eat-pastPART lie-1st.sg  
 “I’m eating an apple right now.”

*Jatır* is used with **states** ([-telic, -stages]) and **achievements** ([+telic, -stages]) only to coërcé [+stages], just as use of the progressive does in English.<sup>3</sup> **States** become **activities** (13) and **achievements** become **accomplishments** (14):

- (8) *Palaw oğan qazir una-p jatır*  
 plov (a rice dish) 3rd.sg.DAT now like-pastPART lie  
 “He likes plov right now,” “He is sitting at the table and enjoying having plov for lunch or dinner.”
- (9) *Ata-sı qazir öl-ip jatır*  
 grandfather-POS.3rd.sg now die-pastPART lie  
 “His grandfather is dying right now.”

### 2.3.3 *jür* – ‘go’

The verb *jür* in Kazakh means literally “to be going” or “to run” (of a machine) (Balakaev *et al.*, 1962, 277). It generally indicates either habitual aspect—which has varied implications depending on the aspectual properties inherent to the event—or a sort of perfect progressive.

When *jür* is used with **states** ([-telic, -stages]), it adds to the present tense the aspectual properties of the state having already begun but still being true—a persistent aspect akin to perfect progressive:

- (10) a. *Oğan una-p jür-mın*  
 3rd.sg.DAT like-pastPART go-1st.sg  
 “S/he likes me.” (i.e., “S/he has liked me for a certain amount of time.”)
- b. *Oğan bas-ı awr-ıp jür*  
 3rd.sg.DAT head-POSS.3rd hurt-pastPART go  
 “His/her head has been hurting.”

When *jür* is used with **achievements** ([+telic, -stages]), it adds the aspectual meaning to the achievement of regular recurrence:

- (11) *Jib-ip jür*  
 melt-pastPART go  
 “It melts.” (e.g., “every day”)

The verb *jür* is used with **activities** ([-telic, +stages]) to show a perfect progressive sort of persistence:

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<sup>3</sup>I have very sparse data on the use of *jatır* with states and achievements.

- (12) *Men kün-de biyle-p jür-min*  
 I day-LOC dance-pastPART go-1st.sg  
 “I dance every day.” (i.e., “I’ve been going dancing. [I’ve started lessons and go every day.]”)
- (13) *Bir saġat jügir-ip jür*  
 one hour run-pastPART go  
 “S/he’s (been) running for an hour.”

When used with **accomplishments** ([+telic,+stages]), *jür* adds the aspectual information of on-going participation (though not necessarily at the present time) in various stages of an accomplishment:

- (14) *Kitap jaz-ıp jür-min*  
 book write-pastPART go-1st.sg  
 “I’m writing a book.” (i.e., “I started writing a book; I’ve been writing and doing research for it, and will finish at some undetermined point in the future.”)

### 2.3.4 *tur* – ‘stand’

The verb *tur* in Kazakh means literally “to be standing.”

The auxiliary verb *tur* may be used with **states** ([-telic,-stages]), to show that the event is occurring *now* (compare 20b against 20a, which uses the simple present tense) or during some period of time (21):

- (15) a. *Ol bastıq-qa sen-e-di*  
 he boss-DAT believe-presPART-3rd  
 “He believes his boss.”
- b. *Ol qazır bastıq-qa sen-ip tur*  
 he now boss-DAT believe-pastPART stand  
 “He believes his boss right now.”
- (16) a. *Oġan una-p tur-min*  
 3rd.sg.DAT like-pastPART stand-1st.sg  
 “S/he likes me [e.g., during some period of time, such as ‘right now’].”
- b. *Oġan bas-ı awr-ıp tur*  
 3rd.sg.DAT head-POSS.3rd hurt-pastPART stand  
 “His/her head hurts [e.g., right now].”

*Tur* may be used with **achievements** ([+telic,-stages]) to show that the end-point that constitutes the achievement is occurring *now*, and practically coerces stages in so doing (compare 22a and 22b):

- (17) a. *Biz taw töbe-si-ne kün-de jet-e-miz*  
 we mountain peak-POS.3rd-DAT day-LOC reach-presPART-1st.pl  
 “We reach the summit of the mountain every day.”
- b. *Biz taw töbe-si-ne qazır jet-ip tur-mız*  
 we mountain peak-POS.3rd-DAT now reach-pastPART stand-1st.pl  
 “We are reaching the summit of the mountain right now.”

**Tur** is occasionally<sup>4</sup> used with **activities** ([-telic,+stages]), to show that the activity is being performed in a standing position; except possibly for a adding a more focussed immediacy to the connotation, its use is in all other ways similar to that of **jatır**:

- (18) a. *Ol süwret sal-ıp jatır*  
 s/he picture/drawing put-pastPART lie  
 “S/he’s drawing.”  
 b. *Ol süwret sal-ıp tur*  
 s/he picture/drawing put-pastPART stand  
 “S/he’s drawing standing.”

**Tur** is used with **accomplishments** ([+telic,+stages]), to convey a progressive meaning like **jatır**, with the added connotation of either a standing position or of a sort of immediacy:

- (19) *Men qazır alma jep tur-ın*  
 I now apple eat-pastPART stand-1st.sg  
 “I’m eating an apple (standing / right) now.”  
 (20) ?*Men qazır xat-tı jaz-ıp tur-ın*  
 I now letter-ACC write-pastPART stand-1st.sg  
 “I’m writing the letter (standing / right) now.”

### 2.3.5 *otır* – ‘sit’

The verb **otır** in Kazakh means literally “to be sitting.” Its use as an auxiliary generally conveys progressive aspect, but with the connotation that the event has already started some time in the past and/or that the event is performed in a sitting position.

With **activities** ([+stages, -telic], 26) and **accomplishments** ([+stages,+telic], 27), **otır** indicates progressive aspect with the added information of sitting:<sup>5</sup>

- (21) *Süwret sal-ıp otır*  
 picture put-pastPART sit  
 “S/he’s (sitting and) drawing.”  
 (22) *Men qazır alma je-p otır-ın*  
 I now apple eat-pastPART sit-1st.sg  
 “I’m (sitting and) eating an apple now.”

With **states** ([-stages, -telic]) and **achievements** ([-stages,+telic]), **otır** is rare, but like **jatır**, can coërce a progressive reading (i.e., [+stages]), but with the added notion of the event being performed in a seated position (ex. 28a;<sup>6</sup> cf. 21a),

<sup>4</sup>I have few examples of **tur** with activities because most of the activities that I elicited involved verbs of motion, which cannot be carried out standing [in Kazakh]. *Süwret sal* (lit. “put a picture”) is a light verb meaning “draw;” it should not have an accomplishment reading of “draw a picture.”

<sup>5</sup>The verb **otır** is largely unattested in my data with activities, apparently due to the fact that most of the activities that I elicited involved movement (e.g., *dance, swim, run*), which are not naturally carried out sitting.

<sup>6</sup>The provided example is the only such example in my dataset.

or can add the aspectual nuance of the event having already begun (ex. 28b; cf. 15b, 21b).

- (23) a. *Oğan una-p otır-mın*  
 3rd.sg.DAT like-pastPART sit-1st.sg  
 “*S/he is liking me (right now, and I am sitting).*”
- b. *Oğan bas-ı awr-ıp otır*  
 3rd.sg.DAT head-POSS.3rd hurt-pastPART sit  
 “*His/her head hurts [e.g., right now, and has for some time].*”

## 2.4 Codifying the Differences

Table 2 summarises the differences in use between the five present tenses in Kazakh, as determined by this study.

	states <i>like, believe</i>	achievements <i>find, die, reach</i>	activities <i>dance, run, draw</i>	accomplishments <i>eat an apple</i>
$\pm$ stages	–	–	+	+
$\pm$ telic	–	+	–	+
simple present	habitual, generic	habitual, future	habitual, (generic)	habitual, future
<i>jatır</i> – ‘lie’	coërces progressive (+stages)		progressive	
<i>jür</i> – ‘go’	perfect progressive	habitual recurrence	perfect progressive	habitual participation
<i>tur</i> – ‘stand’	immediate, coërces standing progressive		immediate, standing progressive	
<i>otır</i> – ‘sit’	persistent, coërces sitting progressive		persistent, sitting progressive	

Table 2: Breakdown of Kazakh Present Tense

## 3 Closing Thoughts

### 3.1 Summary

This paper has examined several problems presented by the situation of the present tense in Kazakh. The evidence indicates that the four verbs used in the present tense should be considered auxiliaries—as opposed to light verbs—due to their defective paradigms, their semi-independent status in the language, and the fact that they pattern only with other verbs. It has also been shown that the differences in usage between the five forms constituting the present tense in Kazakh—the four auxiliaries and the simple present—may be delineated through lexical aspect; a summary of the results of this is shown in table 2. Furthermore, not only is lexical aspect crucial for considering

this problem, but it is evident that an analysis which divides the aspectual categories along the features [ $\pm$ stages] and [ $\pm$ telic] provides a convenient way to approach it.

### 3.2 What's Left

Further elicitations and evaluation could provide more comprehensive and specific generalisations about the aspectual nuances of each form and the uses of the auxiliary quartet in other tenses, as well as help to determine the productivity of the descriptive function of the **participle + helping verb** construction (such as the “sitting” and “standing” progressives) in Kazakh.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Thanks to Andrew Nevins for suggesting this possibility.

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