

‘Today’ and ‘yesterday’ in tense systems
(either oral or poster)

In this paper, which is part of a larger study of remoteness distinctions in tense-aspect systems, I want to survey hodiernal (‘today’) and hesternal (‘yesterday’) categories with past time reference, in order to test on a larger sample than has been done before the “hodiernality thesis” (HodTh), i.e. the claim that any tense-aspect system that refers to objective time measures includes a distinction between ‘today’ and ‘yesterday’ (Dahl (1984)), and also to see if the geographical and genealogical distribution of categories gives any hint about the historical processes forming remoteness systems.

While the larger project will use different kinds of data, this particular part is based on information from grammars, with the reservations that have to be made about those.

To look at a representative sample of the world’s languages is not the optimal methodology here, since this would yield too few cases of the relevant phenomena. Rather, I tried to find information about as many relevant systems as possible, focusing on those that make reference to objective time-measures such as days and years, and within those, the ones which where those time-measures are reasonably exact (such as ‘the same day’). So far, I have found such systems in about 260 languages. The overwhelming majority of these are found in three geographical areas -- sub-Saharan Africa, New Guinea and western South America, in the two first of which predominantly (but not exclusively) in two large language families -- Niger-Congo and Trans-New Guinea. In about 90 per cent of the languages, there is information in grammars that sufficiently unequivocally points to the existence of a grammatical distinction between hodiernal and hesternal time reference. In the rest, however, the grammars indicate that the same category is used for those and that the cut-off point is rather between yesterday and the preceding day. These systems, then, are apparent counterexamples to the HodTh. Interestingly, they are more or less evenly spread over the three geographical areas, with a possible tendency to be more common on their peripheries. The conclusion is that the HodTh has to be seen as reflecting a statistical tendency rather than an absolute universal.

The existence of a counterexample to the HodTh, viz. the Huar dialect of Amele, a Trans-New Guinea language, was pointed out in Anderson & Roberts (1991). While Huar has a hodiernal-hesternal category, the main dialect of Amele distinguishes hodiernal and hesternal past. A&R discuss which system is the original one but come to no clear conclusion. Data from Niger-Congo languages suggest that both types of categories can ultimately derive from the same source, viz. perfects. A closer study of pairs of related languages could possibly shed light on the direction of change but is complicated because of the multitude of markers used to signal remoteness distinctions.

References

- Anderson, T. D. and Roberts, J. R. 1991. An Exception to the Hodiernal: Non-hodiernal Distinction. *Studies in Language*, 15.295-299.
Dahl, Östen. 1984. Temporal Distance: Remoteness Distinctions in Tense-Aspect Systems. *Linguistics*, 21.102-122.