

Time encoding in the Dravidian verb: an unusual system, revealing some shortcomings of the current typology
Category: oral

As new –and more accurate– descriptions are coming out, the encoding of time in the languages of the world appears much more complex and varied than previously thought (see for instance the problems raised by the temporal markers on nominals in *Language* 84). Even if we restrict our view to the verbal phrase of a single language, the encoding of time is of notorious diversity: in its forms (affix, particle, auxiliary, periphrasis, etc.) and values, (one form/several values; one value/several forms), and complexity, due to the interconnection of the three semantic domains of tense/aspect/modality [TAM]. These factors probably explain why the cross-linguistic “typologically oriented research on tense and aspect is relatively scarce” (Dahl 2000:3) and why typology has not gained in that domain the insights it has reached in other parts of the grammar. Most of the cross-linguistic studies are based on the values or ‘gram-types’ (present, past, future, im-/perfective, progressive, perfect, etc.) viewed in their diachronic development (Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca 1994), areal tendencies (Dahl 2000), or on the general characterization of the sub-domains of TAM (Tournadre 2004) and their relative prominence in various (families of) languages (Bhat 1999). All these studies brought out interesting typological generalizations. However, an important aspect of the TAM domain, is its systemic organization in most of the languages, is usually neglected in the cross-linguistic studies. Dahl noticed this weakness and attributed it to “the difficulty in finding a suitable framework in which different systems can be compared” (2000:3). Rare are the works, like those of Guillaume (1929) or Cohen (1989) which made an attempt in that direction.

The aim of this paper is to show, on a well documented family of languages, Dravidian, with an exceptionally long history (more than twenty centuries for Tamil) that some unusual characteristics of the encoding of time in the verb cannot be explained by a feature based typology, but requires a systemic approach to the verbal TAM domain. Three points will be emphasized: (i) that the unusual structure of the basic system reconstructed for Dravidian (Past/Non-Past/Negative) can be best explained within Guillaume’s approach ; (ii) that the strange zero morph coding negation in the South-Dravidian finite forms is the result of the systematization of the paradigms and an ‘historical accident’ (Harris 2008:76) ; (iii) that, in spite of the diversification or renewal of the forms, the diachronic developments observed in Tamil and other South-Dravidian languages show the stability of the ‘Past’/‘Non-Past’ tense system (Herring 1993). From a traditional typological point of view (i) is unusual, but links Dravidian to (other families of) languages where negation is coded in the morphological paradigms, in contrast, (ii) appears completely abnormal, due to the cross-linguistic widespread unmarkedness of the present tense and (iii) confirms that language-internal systems, far from being ‘epiphenomenal’ (Bybee & al. 1994), are partially shaped by the long-lasting effects of a characteristic diasystem (Weinreich 1954). These points, along with the ones mentioned initially, call for the development of more comprehensive typological frameworks...

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