

Distance in tensed nominals: A typological perspective

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Recent research has challenged the previously well-established theoretical assumptions of nouns being time stable as opposed to verbs (see among others Givón 2001). The temporal reading of nominals was shown for languages like English (Enç 1986, Musan 1999) but cross-linguistic research also drew attention to several languages in which tense is morphologically encoded in nouns (Nordlinger & Saddler 2004).

In this talk I will focus on overt nominal tense expressed through deictics and examine the mapping of spatial distance and time reference. A preliminary study of seven unrelated languages shows that noun determiners encoding distance in space may be used for future reference and irrealis (e.g. Pilaga' and Toba?, Guaykuruan in Vidal and Klein (1998), Nêlêmwa, Oceanic in Bril (2002), Pomak, Slavic in Adamou (2011)), or that they may be associated with past reference (e.g. Irakw, Cushitic in Mous (1993), Wolof, Niger-Congo in Robert (2006), Zapotec, Otomanguean in Fenton (2010)). This small sample indicates that there is not a one-to-one relation between the distance in space and past or future reference. Panare (Cariban) confirms the non-relevance of the past/future distinction since, according to Gildea (1993), the distal demonstrative developed into a tense marker of both past and distant future reference (as opposed to the proximate demonstrative which got associated to present and immediate future). This analysis also allows to account for the variation found in the central Rhodopean (Slavic) varieties where the distal deictics are preferred for past reference (Kanevska-Nikolova 2006) rather than future as in the closely related Pomak varieties spoken in Greece (Adamou 2011).

The available data thus encourage us to consider that, in the tensed nominals, distal reference in space is associated with distal reference in time from the 'here and now' situation (Sit0), be it in the past or the future. This approach is backed up by the fact that when the language encodes a distinction between past and remote past (e.g. Wolof, Zapotec), or immediate future and distant future (e.g. Nêlêmwa, Panare), the distal spatial determiner is always the one associated to the most distant temporal reference.

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