

Progressive Aspect in Sri Lankan Malay and the Syntactic Status of *ambe(l)*  
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Sri Lankan Malay (SLM) marks tense and aspect as discrete contrasts (1).

- (1) *Inĉian pe tumman nasi-yang si-makan-abbis.*  
 3S.POL POSS friend rice-ACC TNS-eat-ASP  
 "His friend finished eating the rice."
- (2) *Nasi-yang abbis-makan, inĉian pe tumman Klumbu-na si-balek.*  
 rice-ACC ASP-eat 3S.POL POSS friend Colombo-DAT TNS-return  
 "Having finished eating the rice, his friend returned to Colombo."

The distribution of tense and aspect markers can be correlated with the finiteness of the associated lexical verb. When the verb is a participial adjunct (2), the aspect marker appears as a prefix, whereas in the tense-marked verb, aspect is post-verbal (1). Complex SLM verbal constructions which are not marked as progressive, such as the perfect construction, have been shown to be biclausal, as they consist of a morphologically finite auxiliary and a separable non-finite participle.

I will discuss an aspect marker, *ambe(l)*, whose distribution does **not** reflect the SLM finiteness contrast. *Ambe(l)* invariably **follows** the lexical verb in progressive constructions, whereas we would expect it to **precede** tenseless lexical verbs. *Ambe(l)* frequently co-occurs with an auxiliary verb (*duudung* or *aĉa*), and *ambe(l)* and *aĉa* were treated simply as co-occurring auxiliaries in Smith & Paauw (2007). I claim that *ambe(l)* is neither an auxiliary nor an affix, but a complementizer, hence its invariant distribution. Smith & Paauw take the etymological counterpart of *ambe(l)*, functionally analogous with *sedang* in standard Malay, to be Malay *ambil*, meaning 'take'. An alternative etymological antecedent is the right-branching aspectual complementizer *sambil* ('while'), which was still heard vestigially in Sri Lanka in the first half of the twentieth century. *Ambe(l)* appears in SLM progressive constructions, which are particularly frequent in Kirinda Malay (spoken in Kirinda, southeastern Sri Lanka). In (3), progressive *ambe(l)* occurs in an inchoative construction, in which the lexical change of state verb *jaaĉi* ('to become') is non-finite.

- (3) *Inĉian pe tumman henĉat jaaĉi ambe a-datang*  
 3S.POL POSS friend tired **become** PROG PRES-come  
 "His friend is beginning to get tired."

The aspect marker (here *ambe*) follows the lexical verb, whereas we only expect an aspectual affix to follow a lexical verb in the event that that verb is tense-marked and finite, as in (1). The tense-marked auxiliary in (4), which is present in careful speech, can be deleted in rapid casual speech, leaving a non-finite participial clause with post-verbal *ambe*.

- (4) *Rikas ini ari-paĉa ka baru ruma attu e-rikat ambe (a-duudung).*  
 Rikas DET day-PLU in new house INDEF ASP-build PROG (PRES-AUX)  
 "Rikas has been building a new house these days."

The lexical verb can also occur with a tense prefix in the progressive construction in (4). The fact that *ambe(l)* follows tense-marked verbs as well as non-finite participles (i.e. in adverbial adjunct clauses), suggests that *ambe(l)* is only an apparent approximation of MT *keŋĉu-* (an aspectual auxiliary verb), and possibly of Sinhala *-gəna* (an aspectual affix). At this point in time, *ambe(l)* can still be analyzed as an aspectual complementizer, likely derived from Malay *sambil*, which no longer occurs as a right-branching complementizer. Approximations of this kind are predictable in grammatical restructuring due to convergence on a new model, where the appearance of a calque is a positive outcome.