

Competing Perspectives on Restructuring the Morphosyntax of Time

Tense in Sri Lankan Malay is explicitly marked, however the position of tense and the infinitival marker remains unexpectedly pre-verbal, although bound to the verb.

- (1) *Musba-maama itu panjang cerita=yang me-tulis=na a-liyat.*
Musba uncle DET long story=ACC INF-write=DAT PRS-try
'Uncle Musba is trying to write that long story.'

When another functional feature is present, we see amalgamated forms, such as the implicitly tense-marked negation markers, *tara* and *tuma*. Evidence that these are [+tense] and finite is the fact that only the phonologically dissimilar form, *jang*, can be used to negate a verb (2) whose context calls for a non-finite form.

- (2) *Musba-maama itu panjang cerita=yang ja(ng)-tulis=na, ruma-ka ati-duduk.*
Musba uncle DET long story=ACC NEG.INF-write=DAT house-in FUT-stay
'Uncle Musba will stay at home to not write (i.e. without writing) that long story.'

The obligatory pre-verbal distribution in question extends to a subordinator, *kapan* ("when"), which instead of becoming post-verbal/clause-final, appears as a prefix on the verb. This prefix is in complementary distribution with tense markers, but can be analyzed as [+tense]. Interrogative elements referring to time, including the homophonous *kapan* ("when...?"), are not bound to the left edge of the lexical verb (3), in contrast with the subordinating *kapan* (4), which occupies a slot reserved for (a) tense markers and (b) other [+tense] functional markers, with (a) and (b) in complementary distribution. Modal prefixes belong to (b), and cannot be bound to infinitival or participial verbs.

- (3) *Musba-mama iskul atu kapan si-kutumun?*
Musba uncle school DET when PST-see
'When did Uncle Musba see a school?'
- (4) *Musba-mama iskul atu kapan-(*si-)kutumun...*
Musba uncle school DET when-PST-see
'When Uncle Musba saw a school...'

From a syntactic perspective, the absence of agreement morphology has the most bearing on the anomalous distribution of tense and complementizers. Could the prefixation simply be phonological and in that sense syntactically-vestigial, given the pre-verbal distribution of free-standing temporal and modal markers in other Malay varieties? This possibility will be evaluated, in part with the help of comparative data from Sri Lankan Portuguese, a variety with tense and infinitival prefixes drawn from free-standing elements in the original (Portuguese) grammar that are semantically analogous with the elements selected from Malay by speakers of Sri Lankan Malay.