Temporal and aspectual underspecification of the inflectional TAM system of Anindilyakwa, a language of northern Australia

Like many non-Pama-Nyungan languages of northern Australia, Anindilyakwa (a Gunwinyguan language of north-east Arnhem Land) is richly polysynthetic and morphologically complex. While the Anindilyakwa verb is a rich and complex unit that encodes core information concerning event structure, temporal and aspectual distinctions are often not marked explicitly via inflectional verbal morphology. This paper thus examines this T/A system, focussing on the temporal – and particularly aspectual – underspecification of inflectional TAM suffixes in this language.

The Anindilyakwa verb has a templatic structure, and involves complex interaction between prefixes and suffixes in the expression of TAM meanings. Mood is encoded in prenominal portmanteaux prefixes, and tense/aspect (as well as further modal distinctions) is expressed through one of four inflectional suffixes: two temporal markers (PST and NPST), one modal marker (POT), and the underspecified -Ø marker (the focus of this paper).

Mood is the most salient characteristic of the inflectional TAM verbal system (and the language could be described as mood prominent à la Bhatt (1999)). Conversely, in terms of temporal and aspectual expression, the verbal inflectional system is fairly weak. The PST and NPST markers are often temporally neutralised, and both of these markers are underspecified for viewpoint aspect.

The -Ø marker is both temporally and aspectually underspecified. The temporal anchoring of -Ø marked verbs are contextually determined by the Aktionsart class of the verb stem: stative verbs trigger a present interpretation, verbs describing atomic telic events (in the sense of e.g. Dowty 1986; i.e. non-gradual change-of-state telic verbs) a past interpretation, and verbs describing either alic dynamic events (i.e. activities and unbounded changes-of-states such as so-called ‘degree achievements’ (cf. Abusch 1986)) or non-atomic telic events (i.e. accomplishments (cf. Caudal 1999)) are capable of both past and present readings. This is displayed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>States</th>
<th>Dynamic non-atomic events (activities + accomplishments)</th>
<th>Atomic events (achievements)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>*</td>
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</table>

Table 1 -Ø marker: Aktionsart and temporal properties

In terms of aspect, the -Ø marker denotes an eventuality whose time span is confined within a more-or-less specified reference interval (Klein’s (1994) Topic Time (TT)) (i.e. perfective viewpoint aspect) when occurring with dynamic (i.e. non-stative) verbs. In contrast to this, stative verbs that take the -Ø marker express states that hold throughout the TT, and are not terminated within the TT (i.e. they take ongoing present readings).

In addition to these temporal and aspectual properties, the -Ø marker also interacts with the modal pronominal prefixes. The above description of the -Ø marker is observable only when in combination with REALIS series of mood prefixes; when in combination with modal (IRREALIS and IMPERATIVE,HORTATIVE series) prefixes, these aspectuo-temporal properties no longer hold.

Perfectives of statives expressing an ongoing present reading (rather than perfective aspectual reading) are not uncommon cross-linguistically, and have been described in languages including Badiaranke (Cover 2010), Island Carib (Bybee et al. 1994); Dényá (Abangma 1985); Wolof (Nussbaum et al. 1970); and Haitian Creole (Fitzpatrick 2006). This
paper thus extends the study of this cross-linguistic occurrence. I examine and provide an analysis of the -Ø marker in Anindilyakwa, taking into account the aspectuo-temporal properties displayed (such as the on-going present readings displayed by stative verbs (cf. Cover 2010)), and the interaction of this marker with different modal categories.

References


