

Irrealis across the Kiranti languages

In examining the notion of irrealis across a sample of Kiranti languages of Eastern Nepal (Thulung, Khaling, Koyi, Limbu, Dumi), the following patterns come to light:

1) The irrealis is found with counterfactual conditionals, as seen in the following Thulung example:

go mukli mi-bi-ŋ-wa-m mala ama-mam-ka dykha be-m-**ba**
1SG Mukli NEG-come-1SG-IRR-NMLZ COND 1SG.POSS-mother-ERG difficulty do-3PL-IRR
If I had not come to Mukli, my mother would have struggled.

2) The irrealis is found in the negative past forms of verbs. This is the case in Thulung and Khaling, where the irrealis marker is found throughout negative past paradigms. The following examples show the substitution of the irrealis marker (-wa, -w respectively) for the past marker (-to, -t respectively):

mi-su-u-wa	su-uto	(Thulung)
NEG-tell-1SG/3SG-IRR	tell-1SG/3SG.PST	
I did not tell it.	I told it.	

mu-t ^h əŋ-wa	t ^h əŋ-ta	(Khaling)
NEG-see-IRR.1SG	see-1SG.PST	
I did not see it	I saw it.	

Possible associations with negation are also found in Limbu, where the negative prefix *mən-* is homophonous with the irrealis suffix (glossed "conditional" in van Driem 1985 but actually an irrealis). Furthermore, Limbu has a portemanteau agreement marker for 1s or 1s/3 negative past forms (<-paŋ>); there are several possible analyses for the p element within the portemanteau (-aŋ is 1s), one of which is that it is cognate with the Thulung-Khaling irrealis markers.

3) Mutual exclusivity of irrealis and past marker: in some languages, past and irrealis markers are mutually exclusive (Thulung, Khaling); they either occupy the same slot within the verbal template, or different slots that cannot be filled at the same time. This mutual exclusivity is not universal (in Limbu for example, the irrealis can cooccur with the past marker -ε) but suggests that past and irrealis are sometimes set up in opposition to each other. Steele proposes a semantic primitive to link the two concepts--a connection which is found in a number of language families--namely the dissociative, "past time is dissociated from present time. Irrealis is dissociated from reality." (1975 : 217)

4) Absence of irrealis marking in languages which have undergone a flip-flop in past marking: in both Dumi and Koyi, the past marker was reanalyzed as a non-past marker. Evidence of this is in the transitive agreement markers in Koyi, where the reflex of the Kiranti past marker *-ta is seen in the *non-past* markers:

1SG>3SG -dɔ -uŋa

2SG>3SG -dana -una

3SG>3SG -da -u

There seems to be a correlation between the absence of the irrealis marker and the unmarkedness of the past in these languages.

Based on the above, I would like to explore in greater detail the distribution of functions of the irrealis marker across Kiranti languages. Is Bybee correct in stating, speaking cross-linguistically, that irrealis is "simply too general to be useful, except as a pointer to a very broad domain" (1998: 269), or is there, in the Kiranti languages, evidence of sufficient shared features, centering around negation and past, to justify the the notion of an irrealis marker?

References

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