Multifunctionality of the Optative Mood in Inuktitut

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This presentation examines the issue of modeling category switching in syntactic structure. How do we model morphemes which appear as verbs in one context and functional heads in another? Specifically, I look at the optative mood ending -la in the Inuktitut language, which has been analyzed (Lavie et al., 2010) as the same underlying morpheme as the quotative verb -la. I provide an analysis based on Universal Spine Theory (Wiltschko, 2015), in which categories are derived via the association of roots with a loose hierarchical template corresponding roughly to speech event, viewpoint aspect, voice, and verbal levels.

The optative mood is often considered to be part of the imperative paradigm, and shows agreement for first and third person. Its meaning is usually considered to be expressing a suggestion, exhortation, or request, as in (1):

1. a. ani-**langa**   "Let me go out"/"May I go out?"
go.out-OPT.1SG
b. ani-**luk**   "Let's (du) go out"
go.out-OPT.1DU   Kangiryuariamut (Lowe, 1986, p. 134)

Lavie et al. (2010) analyze the semantic core in these meanings as "direct indirect speech": speech presented as from a 1st person source separate from the speaker. In their view, the morpheme's use in optative 1SG is because a speaker cannot give an order to themselves. It is considered to be the same morpheme seen in (2) to indicate speech:

2. haa-la-gajaq-rama   "I would sigh" (e.g. if I were tired)
"haa"-make.sound-would-CAUS.1s   Utkuhiksalingmiut (Briggs et al., 2015)

In terms of Universal Spine Theory, we can say that the common semantic core is the speech meaning, and its realization as a verb or a mood depends on whether it is inserted in the highest or lowest spot in the syntactic spine. However, this raises a few problems. One is that in some dialects, the optative mood is used for negative declarative sentences as in (3) and this explanation doesn't explain why it would be suited for this.

3. taku-nngi-**laanga**   "she/he/it doesn't see me"
See-NEG-OPT.3S/1S   Labrador (Johns, 1996)

Another is that this explains the similarity between the verb and 1SG morpheme, but not the similarity between 1SG and other 1- and 3-person endings, which all contain -l/-la/-li. Lavie et al.'s proposal should predict the uniqueness of the 1SG morpheme. I will discuss two other possibilities for a semantic core: that the optative is desiderative and that it is speech event linked and otherwise underspecified, the advantages and disadvantages of both, as well as any insights provided from ongoing fieldwork on these forms.

References

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