

The grammaticalization of verbs in Timor, Alor and Pantar

An intriguing issue that is currently gaining interest is the nature of the relationship between grammaticalization, typology and contact. While it is clear that cross-linguistic similarities in grammaticalization patterns reflect universal patterns of human language structure and evolution (Narrog and Heine 2011), we also know that similarities may be genetically inherited, or areally diffused. However, to date much remains unclear about how similar grammaticalization patterns are affected by similar typological structures or by the contact area where languages are spoken. Here I study the role of typology and contact in grammaticalization of verbs in the Timor-Alor-Pantar (TAP) family of approx. 25 Papuan languages.

After outlining the typological features of the TAP family, I investigate the cognate forms of three proto-TAP verbs in 15 TAP languages: the locational verb ***mi** ‘be in, at’, the deictic verb ***mai** ‘come’, and the handling verb ***med** ‘take’. The synchronic reflexes of these verbs in the individual languages exhibit different stages of grammaticalization— from independent and serial verb, to postposition or verbal prefix. A careful comparison of the synchronic forms and the contexts in which they appear enables a reconstruction of deverbal grammaticalizations across the TAP family.

I then compare deverbal grammaticalization in TAP with processes of deverbal grammaticalization in three Austronesian languages currently spoken in the vicinity of TAP languages: Indonesian, the national language of Indonesia; Alorese, spoken on Pantar and Alor (Klamer 2011); and Tetun, the national language of East Timor (Hajek 2006). In many respects, the outcome of verb grammaticalization in these languages contrasts sharply with the outcomes in TAP languages, in parallel with the typological contrasts between Austronesian and TAP.

It thus appears that the outcomes of verb grammaticalization in these families are determined by their typological characteristics rather than universal tendencies in human language structure. Furthermore, language contact does not play any role. This is remarkable, as the Timor-Alor-Pantar region is a contact zone where speakers of Papuan and Austronesian speakers have been in contact for millennia (Pawley 2005; Spriggs 2011), while more recently the fact that the Austronesian national language Indonesian is spoken by almost everyone in the archipelago has influenced the TAP languages in numerous ways (e.g. in the development of numeral classifiers; Klamer 2014a; Klamer 2014b). In the final part of the paper I suggest an explanation why the grammaticalization of verbs in TAP has not been affected by contact.

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