Realis/irrealis as basic grammatical distinction in some Southern Arawakan languages

Some linguists reject *irrealis* to be a typologically relevant category. Bybee (1998: 269) e.g. argued that "the term 'irrealis' is simply too general to be useful". This owes to the fact that irrealis as a label is referred to a wide range of different categories, such as potential, optative, counterfactual, future, subjunctive, interrogative, and negative (cf. Frawley 1992). It seems difficult to compare all these functions that apparently operate on different levels of the grammar (cf. Bybee 1998: 265). The irrealis mode may interact with verbal categories, like tense and aspect, with nominal categories, like referentiality and definiteness, or with syntactic and pragmatic operations, like subordination and backgrounding. Secondly, irrealis is in many languages a secondary notion, expressed through an aspectual or temporal category or other constructions. Therefore, experts on the typology of grammaticalized concepts do not consider irrealis to be a universal category (Bybee et al. 1994, Bybee 1998: 264). In contrast, Elliott (2000) argues for a basic grammatical category of reality status. Even though this may not be a universal category, it cannot be ignored, considering its presence in a considerable number of languages of the world. She assumes that "[p]rototypically realis is used in clauses where there is perceived certainty of the factual reality of an event's taking place, while irrealis is used to identify that an event is perceived to exist only in an imagined or non-real world" (Elliott 2000: 67).

For a number of Southern Arawakan languages, distributed over Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil, the basic distinction between realis and irrealis seems obligatory. This presentation gives an overview of the category of reality status in these languages, which sums up the forms and the application of the markers. Languages of focus are Trinitario, Ignaciano, Baure, Joaquiniano, Paunaka, Terêna, and Nanti. Some of the presented data have only been collected or published recently, so that a comparative study could not have been produced any earlier.

In Paunaka, Trinitario, Terêna, Joaquiniano, and historical Baure, irrealis is marked obligatorily by a floating affix *a-/-a*, which is attached according to verb classes (active vs. stative basically). Realis, on the other hand, is the unmarked category.

(1)	*ne-niku*	–	*ne-nik-**a***	PAUNAKA
	1SG-eat.REAL		1SG-eat-IRR	
	'I ate'		'I am going to eat'	

(2)	*ti-kutibo*	–	*kuina t-**a**-kutibo*	PAUNAKA
	3intr-be.ill.REAL		NEG 3intr-IRR-be.ill	
	'(S)he is ill.'		'(S)he is not ill.'	

Irrealis in the compared languages comprises many non-realized meanings, like non-past, intention, conditional, imperative, and it is attached by default in negative constructions. In some of the languages the irrealis marking gets temporarily neutralized (Terêna), or it represents a defective paradigm due to phonological assimilation in postverbal position (Ignaciano), while other languages lost the irrealis system completely (contemporary Baure).

(3)	*ma-yana*!	–	*p-**á**-matina*	IGNACIANO
	3SGm.m-go		2SG-IRR-be.quiet	
	'That he goes!/He went.'		'Be quiet!'	

The Nanti irrealis category can be compared to these languages morphologically and semantically, even though not formally.

References

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