

Shiwiar Aspect Markers: A Case of Aspectual Bleaching?

Main Sessions: Aspect

Shiwiar is a so far undocumented Jivaroan language spoken by around 1,000 people in the Ecuadorean Amazon. Description and documentation of the language was started in 2011. Shiwiar has rich verbal morphology which includes extensive marking for tense, aspect and mood, as well as indexing of arguments. Every verb has a number of aspectual stem types that can be used, including imperfective, perfective and durative. Each stem type is formed by the addition of an aspectual suffix to the root, as in (1) – (3).

(1) *atji-a-*
grab-IPFV

(2) *atji-ka-*
grab-PFV

(3) *atji-ma-*
grab-DUR

Unsurprisingly, the choice of a particular stem type can affect the aspectual reading of a verb. For example, in (4) and (5) the verb is in the (morphologically unmarked) present tense: when the verb has an imperfective stem it has a present continuative/progressive reading, but when it has a perfective stem it has an immediate past/completed reading.

(4) *atji-a-wa-i*
grab-IPFV-3SG.SUB-DEC
'He's grabbing.'

(5) *atji-ka-wa-i*
grab-PFV-3SG.SUB-DEC
'He has just grabbed.'

Furthermore, the use of different aspectual stems may trigger significant semantic shifts in the meaning of the verb, as in (6) and (7).

(6) *ha-a-wa-i*
die-IPFV-3SG.SUB-DEC
'She's ill.'

(7) *ha-ka-wa-i*
die-PFV-3SG.SUB-DEC
'She's just died.'

However, the choice of stem type is mostly morphologically conditioned, i.e. most morphological environments require a particular stem type regardless of the intended semantic reading. Recent past tense, for example, requires a perfective stem type, as in (8). When used in the recent past tense, every verb in Shiwiar uses a perfective stem, even if the speaker is referring to a continuative action (which is not typically expressed by perfective aspect).

(8) *numi-na* *atji-ka-ma-ha-i*
stick-ACC grab-PFV-RECPST-1SG.SUB-DEC
'I grabbed a stick.'

As free choice of stem type is extremely limited in Shiwiar, this means that, for the most part, aspectual markers in verbs like the one in (8) are not contributing to the semantics of the utterance, but are being used simply as morphological “formatives”, ie. semantically empty components that are necessary solely for the morphological well-formedness of a verb.

In this talk, I will propose that aspectual markers in Shiwiar have started to undergo semantic bleaching. While they are still contrastive (and carry aspectual semantics) in certain morphological environments, they no longer have aspectual value in others. In the latter case, they have become semantically empty morphemes which are required in all inflected verbs but entirely conditioned by the morphology rather than the intended semantics of an utterance. This will be supported by a thorough descriptive account of the use of Shiwiar aspect markers.