

The ‘Perfect’ Converb? Semantically-Related Functions of the Sinhala Conjunctive Participle

This paper argues that two seemingly disparate functions of the Sinhala conjunctive participle (CP)—its use as a converb or non-dependent predicate—are semantically-related. When used as a converb, the conjunctive participle serves as a clause-linkage strategy, expressing simple (cf. 1) or complex (cf. 2) event-sequences. These functions are typical of converbs in South Asian languages (Bickel 1998, Genetti 2005; Sinhala is an Indo-Aryan language spoken in Sri Lanka). However, the same verb form is also used as a non-dependent predicate to express perfect aspect, as in (3). This use of the conjunctive participle distributionally violates two prototypical converbal criteria: dependency and non-finiteness (Genetti 2005, Haspelmath 1995).

- (1) wandura kehelgediya kaa-la mæruna
 monkey banana eat-CP die-PST
The monkey ate a banana and died.
- (2) miniha gall-ak ussə-la wandura-tə gaha-lla duwə-la heṅguna
 man rock-IND lift-CP monkey-DAT throw-CP run-CP hide-PST
The man picked up a rock, threw it at the monkey, ran away, and hid.
- (3) mamə Renu-wə dækka habei dæn æyə gihi-lla
 1SG R-ACC see:PST but now 3SG:F go-CP
I saw Renu but now she has gone.

The functional variation illustrated by (1) and (2), in contrast to (3), poses a descriptive question, namely, how best to characterize the relationship between the different functions. One possibility is to analyze the syntactically-distinct uses as indicative of two morphologically-identical, homonymous forms. However, such an account would overlook semantic similarities between the conjunctive participle’s different functions. Consequently, this paper argues for a polysemy analysis of the Sinhala conjunctive participle.

Based on a corpus of ten texts, as well as data from structured elicitation and published sources, our analysis shows that certain qualities of the construal traditionally accorded to the expression of perfect aspect crosscut interpretations of the two grammatical functions performed by the conjunctive participle. Specifically, we observe a parallel between a state’s continued relevance to a reference time, such as the speech event, and the conceptual interrelatedness of certain event sequences. Example (3) illustrates the former, in which the continued relevance of Renu’s having gone persists until the time of speaking. Similarly, in (1), the events sequenced are related in such a way that the state of having eaten a banana relevantly persists until the time of the monkey’s death. In this way, the two events exhibit a high degree of correlational coherence, such that each event constitutes a subpart of a more complex macro-event. This coherence, evidenced also by (2), involves a relation strikingly similar to that expressed by perfect aspect—namely, the continued relevance of a prior state to a subsequent narrated event, or the speech event itself.

This paper contributes to the current typological dialogue on converbs and related constructions by presenting findings relevant to the crosslinguistic semantic analysis of such forms.