

Reality status in Nanti and the typological validity of the realis/irrealis contrast

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Although many linguists employ a category of ‘realisness’ or ‘reality status’ (Elliott 2001) in descriptive and typological work (e.g. Givón 1995, Palmer 2001), doubts linger regarding its cross-linguistic validity (e.g. Bybee 1998). Skeptics of its validity point to semantic inconsistencies in putative reality status systems and the lack of languages exhibiting an obligatory binary realis/irrealis contrast in all major construction types. Skeptics consider particularly damning the fact that no attested language exhibits a reality status system that is semantically consistent and also grammatically obligatory and pervasive across major construction types. The purpose of this paper is to present precisely such a system, that of Nanti, an Arawak language of southeastern Peru.

Reality status is an inflectional category in Nanti. All finite verbs exhibit a binary contrast between realis and irrealis, and the marking of reality status in main clauses follows directly from typical notional definitions of the realis/irrealis contrast (i.e. a contrast between ‘actualized’ events and ‘unactualized’ ones (Mithun 1999)). Indicative verbs in positive polarity clauses with non-future temporal reference take realis marking, while verbs in negated, counterfactual, and hypothetical clauses, or ones with future temporal reference take irrealis marking. Nanti even structurally distinguishes doubly irrealis clauses (i.e. clauses that exhibit two notionally irrealis semantic parameter values), such as negated clauses with future temporal reference, from singly irrealis ones, providing support for centrality of realis/irrealis semantics in the Nanti inflectional system.