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Irrealis? Issues concerning the inflected t-form in Sylheti

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Abstract

Among the discussions about cross-linguistic comparability of grammatical categories within the field of linguistic typology (cf. Cristofaro 2009; Haspelmath 2007), one in particular seems to be especially controversial: is there really such a category as irrealis? This term has been used extensively in descriptive works and grammars to name all kinds of grammatical morphemes occurring in various modal and non-modal contexts. However, cross-linguistic evidence for a unitary category that shares invariant semantic features has not been attested (Bybee 1998:266). Moreover, many scholars doubt there is a cross-linguistic functional distinction between realis and irrealis (Bybee 1998; Cristofaro 2012).

The Indo-Aryan language Sylheti, like many of its relatives, features a verbal category that is often referred to in linguistic descriptions as ‘irrealis’, namely the inflected t-form (inflT). It occurs in various contexts, such as counterfactual conditionals, negations of the future tense, and before modal verbs. Furthermore, the same form is used to mark verbs in the past habitual tense. While some scholars describe this dichotomy as two separate categories (e.g. Plettner 2004), others attempt to find common features to justify the identical form (e.g. Masica 1991).

This paper intends to describe and analyse the various functions of Sylheti inflT. A diachronic viewpoint explains its multifunctional nature, while a synchronic analysis: (1) discusses whether the functions share common semantic features that allow a unified analysis as one grammatical category; (2) questions whether the functions match a cross-linguistic category ‘irrealis’ and what that might be; and (3) argues for a thorough analysis for each of its uses when a multifunctional morpheme is identified as an irrealis marker.

1. Sylheti Verb Morphology

Sylheti is an Eastern Bengali language belonging to the Indo-Aryan language family, spoken by around eleven million speakers in Eastern Bangladesh, Assam state, India, and diaspora communities, including London, UK (Lewis, Simons & Fennig 2015; Simard, Dopierala & Thaut, this volume). It is closely related to Assamese, and Bengali (Bangla), and often seen as a non-standardized and non-literary form of Bangla due to the latter’s prominent status in Bangladesh. Sylheti morphology follows a rather agglutinative structure and has five slots in the verb encoding grammatical categories (Baratashvili 2016):

VERB – CAUSATIVE – CONJ – ASPECT – TENSE/MOOD – PERSON/NUMBER/HONORIFICITY

- (1) *gotoxail Sara foxal ur-s-i-l-a*
 yesterday Sarah early wake up-PFV-CONJ-PST-3SG.FL
 ‘Yesterday, Sarah woke up early.’ (2016-03-22_h14f4/78)¹

Example (1) illustrates the slots (other than causative) for the verb *ur-* ‘wake up’. Note that between the verbal stem and the TAM-suffixes, an element *-i* may occur, which is glossed CONJ (conjunctive). Its function is unclear and regarded here as an epenthetic vowel.

As illustrated in (1), there is one slot which marks tense or mood. Four suffixes can occupy that slot: *-r* (PRG), *-l* (PST), *-b* (FUT) and *-t* (inflT), only the last of which carries a modal meaning. It is the only overt mood marker on inflected verbs in Sylheti, apart from the imperative. Other modal meanings such as deontic and epistemic modality are expressed through modal verbs, adverbs, and participles, as well as tense changes.²

¹ Examples are drawn from the SOAS Field Methods class corpus and referenced by date of recording, annotation file, and utterance number, e.g. 2016-02-19_h10f1/79 refers to example 79 recorded on 19 February 2016 and annotated in ELAN file h10f1.eaf. Abbreviations in the glosses are: A – agent, COND – conditional converb, CONJ – conjunctive, COP – copula, FL – formal, FUT - future, HM – human, IF – informal, inflT – inflected t-form, INS – instrumental, LOC – locative, M – male, NEG – negation, OBJ – object, P – person, PFV – perfective, PL – plural, POSS – possessive, PRG – progressive, PST – past, SG – singular, STN – strong necessity, V – verb, VIF – very informal. I am grateful to Farhana Ferdous, a Sylheti speaker from Moulvibazar (Bangladesh) based in London, who patiently helped the class gain fieldwork experience and gather and analyse the presented examples.

² Tenses can express modality in Sylheti, e.g. future is used to express epistemic necessity: *Baruna oxon bazaro u oibo*. ‘Baruna must be at the market now.’

The following sections explore the various functions of the inflT affix, and the semantic features that can be expressed by these functions in particular constructions.

2. Uses of the inflected t-form

The affix glossed inflT is has five different functions: (1) to mark the past habitual tense; (2) with negated verbs in the future tense; (3) in both the protasis and apodosis of counterfactual conditionals; (4) in complement clauses; and (5) preceding some modal verbs appearing in the inflT.

2.1 Past habitual tense

If the inflT affix occurs on a main clause verb, is the only inflected verb form, is not negated, and is not part of a conditional sentence, then it usually expresses a past habitual meaning. Plettner (2004:7) regards this function as a separate grammatical category that happens to have the same form as the other uses discussed below:

PAST HABITUAL TENSE or the historical past tense – is conjugated exactly the same as the conditional tense. It reflects action which was habitual or continuous in the historical past such as *I used to live in Dhaka*. The context determines whether it is being used in the Past Habitual or Conditional Tense.

The use of the past habitual can be observed in the following examples:

- (2) *ami* *φotex* *din* *nas-t-am*
 1SG every day dance-inflT-1P
 ‘I danced every day.’ (2016-02-05_h9f2/14).
- (3) *he* *beṭa-re* *mar-t-o*
 3SG.IF.M man-OBJ.HM beat-inflT-3P.IF
 ‘He used to hit the man.’ (2016-01-08_h6f1/108)

2.2 Negation

From a logical perspective, negated sentences are considered to be irrealis since they do not express a real situation. In fact, Payne (1997: 245) claims that ‘[s]ome languages [...] treat all negative clauses as irrealis.

In Sylheti, clauses are negated by adding *na* after the verb or using the negative copula *nae*. However, the future tense cannot simply be negated by

adding *na*, as Plettner (2004: 32) notes: ‘the negative of the future tense is not expressed by adding [na] or [na-e] to the future tense, but is expressed by adding [na-e] to the conditional tense’. Example (4) shows an affirmative future verb, while (5) shows the negated future of the same verb in the apodosis of a conditional.

- (4) *guma-ni-t* *dʒa-i-b-e*
 sleep-VN-LOC go-CONJ-FUT-2SG.VIF
 ‘You will go to sleep.’ (2016-01-08_h6f1/76)
- (5) *zodi meg o-e* *ami aʃ-a* *dʒa-i-t-am* *nae*
 if rain become-3P.IF 1SG walk-VN go-CONJ-inflT-1P NEG.COP
 ‘If it rains, I won’t go for a walk.’ (2016-04-29_h14f1/20)

2.3 Conditionals

Sylheti makes a basic distinction between general and counterfactual conditional sentences, which differ in verbal marking. In both constructions, the protasis is introduced by the subordinating connective *zodi* ‘if’, which appears before the first NP or after the first personal pronoun (as in example (5)). However, it can be dropped if the verb of the protasis appears in the conditional converb form (marked by *-le*, see Dopierala, this volume).

In general conditional sentences, possible implications are made to express potential states of affairs. The verb in the protasis therefore appears in the present tense, whereas the verb in the apodosis appears in the future. In the corpus there are no other tense combinations (apart from zero-copulas and the conditional converb).³

- (6) *zodi meg o-e* *he* *bitr-e* *tax-b-o*
 if rain become-3P.IF 3SG.IF.M inside-LOC stay-FUT-3P.IF
 ‘If it rained, he would be inside right now.’ (2016-03-22_h14f4/21)
- (7) *ama-r* *gor* *baŋg-i* *ge-le* *ami*
 1SG-POSS house break-CONJ go-COND 1SG
 za-i-t-am *nae*
 go-CONJ-inflT-1P NEG.COP
 ‘If my house breaks, I won’t go.’ (2016-02-05_h9f2/107)

³ Note that the inflT in example (7) is caused by negation of the verb in the future tense.

Counterfactual conditionals express a condition that is not assumed to become real, together with its hypothetical result. In such sentences, both the verb of the protasis and apodosis appear in the inflT. However, the verb of the apodosis can also appear in the past form (marked by *-l*) if the counterfactual particle *ne* appears after it.

- (8) *ami zodi boi an-t-am ami oxon φor-t-am*
 1SG if book bring-inflT-1P 1SG now read-inflT-1P

φar-t-am
 can-inflT-1P

‘If I had brought my book, I could read now.’ (2016-03-22_h14f4/17)

- (9) *tumra Portugal na oi-le tumra-re dex-l-am ne*
 2PL.IF Portugal NEG become-COND 2PL.IF-OBJ.HUM see-PST-1P CFC

‘If you had not been in Portugal, I would have seen you.’
 (2016-04-19_h15f1/27)

2.4 Complements

The use of the inflT marker in complements is limited to complements of the verb *xoa* ‘tell’, which is also used to form periphrastic causative constructions (‘make someone do something’), and in impersonal constructions involving *oibo*⁴ to express deontic necessity (example 11). The verb within the complement takes the inflT form.

- (10) *he ama-re xo-i-s-i-l ami sub*
 3SG.IF.M 1SG-OBJ.HM tell-CONJ-PFV-CONJ-PST 1SG quiet

tax-t-am
 stay-inflT-1P

‘He told me to be quiet.’ (2016-02-26_h11f3/31)

Concerning the modal semantics of this complement (example 10), the verb ‘to be quiet’ describes a situation that has not yet started and therefore predicates of an unrealised state of affairs.

The verb *oa* ‘become’ is used in an impersonal future construction, and must appear in the informal third plural form in the future tense (*oibo*) expressing deontic necessity. It describes an unrealised state of affairs that the speaker judges necessary to be realised.

⁴ *oibo* in these constructions has third person marking without a third person referent. It is therefore impersonal, similar to *il faut* in French.

- (11) *tumi* *φor-t-ai* *oi-b-o*
 2SG.IF read-inflT-2P.IF become-FUT-3P.IF

‘You should read!’ (2016-02-26_h11f3/2)

The corpus does not feature any other instances of inflT in complement clauses. Other complements, like those of the verb *zana* ‘know’, contain verbs in other TAM-forms than the inflT. Such complements, however, describe a state of affairs that is not so readily assigned to a possible ‘irrealis’ category as they are assumed to be real by the speaker.

- (12) *Rofid* *zan-oin* *φaruk-e* *φatto* *tul-t-a* *φar-b-a*
 Rashid know-FL Faruk-A stone lift up-inflT-FL can-FUT-FL

‘Roshid knew that Faruk can lift that rock.’ (2016-03-22_h14f4/11)

2.5 Modal verb constructions

Modal verbs, as part of the modal system, can express epistemic, evidential, deontic, and dynamic modality (Palmer 2001: 100). In Germanic languages, such as English or German, such modals appear in a finite form, carrying grammatical information and, in German, subject-agreement; the lexical verb carrying the main semantic information appears in a non-finite form (McCawley 1995: 1329).

Many modal verbs in Sylheti require a verbal noun, which can also be seen as a non-finite form (example 12). Other modal verbs, however, require the lexical verb to appear in the inflT, which is a finite verb form that also carries subject-agreement. These examples are presented in the following subsections.

2.5.1 The verb *φara*

Epistemic and deontic necessity are both expressed by the modal verb *φara* ‘can/might/may’. It requires the main verb to be in the inflT form sharing the same subject.

- (13) *oxon* *ran-t-o* *φar-b-o*
 now cook-inflT-3P.IF can-FUT-3P.IF

‘She can cook curry now.’ (2016-03-22_h14f4/7)

- (14) *Amin* *Daxa-t* *dʒe-i-t-o* *φar-e*
 Amin Dhaka-LOC go-CONJ-inflT-3P.IF can-3P.IF

‘Amin may go to Dhaka.’ (2016-03-22_h14f4/2)

2.5.2 The verb *sawa*

Intentions and wishes are expressed by the modal verb *sawa* ‘want’. Like *φara*, it requires the main verb to be in the inflT form sharing the same subject. This construction even appears without the verb *sawa*, which opens the discussion whether to add a further function to the inflT: the desiderative. We regard these desiderative constructions as an ellipsis of the verb *sawa*, but the common features of the multifunctional inflT, such as the expression of unrealized state of affairs, can be applied to the desiderative function as well.

- (15) *tara* *tibi* *dex-t-o* *sa-i-s-i-l*
 3PL T.V. see-inflT-3P.IF want-CONJ-PFV-CONJ-PST

‘They want to watch TV.’ (2016-02-05_h9f2/81)

2.5.3 The verb *asa*

Sentences with the copula *asa* in combination with a verb in inflT were translated by the consultant as expressing an intention. Although the copula is not a modal verb, these constructions are presented here because they are similar to those with *sawa* ‘want’ (Section 2.5.2).

- (16) *he* *lex-t-o* *as-i-l*
 3SG.IF.M write-inflT-3P.IF be-CONJ-PST
- kintu* *guma-i* *ge-s-e*
 but sleep-CONJ go-PFV-3P.IF

‘He wanted to write but he fell asleep.’ (2016-02-19_h10f1/10)

2.6 Summary of functions

The majority of the occurrences of the inflT presented above involve the modal semantics of an unrealised state of affairs. Verbs in the inflT describe an unrealised situation that is either potentially realisable, like in complements and light verb constructions, or is assumed to not be realised, like in future negations and counterfactual conditionals.

The only function that does not seem to match this abstract feature (UNREALISED) is the past habitual. As it marks a continuous or recurring state of affairs in the past, it documents a real situation that, according to the speaker, definitely took place.

3. Diachronic view on the inflT

In order to better understand the variety of functions of the inflT in Sylheti, its historical development needs to be investigated. This section gives a diachronic perspective on the modal semantics of the inflT. Moreover, the synchronic perspective is extended by comparing the inflT to cognate forms in ancestral and related languages.

Regarding the incongruity of the two main functions of the inflT, i.e., marking an unreal state of affairs and marking the past habitual, the question arises whether this multifunctionality came about through the merger of two distinct forms or whether the two functions diverged from the same form.

Since older stages of Indo-Aryan languages are well attested, diachronic research is rather unambiguous. Scholars agree that the *-t* suffix in languages like Hindi, Bengali, and Sylheti has its origins in the Middle Indo-Aryan present participle marker *-anta* (cf. Masica 1991: 272). Učida specifies the development of the inflT from Prakrit, a middle Indo-Aryan ancestor, to Chittagong, a language of Bangladesh closely related to Sylheti, as *-aṃta- > -ot- > -it-* (cf. Učida 1970: 63).

Without specifying the time frame, Masica (1991) mentions a more recent stage in Indo-Aryan where an aspectual three-way distinction between perfective, past non-perfective and present non-perfective was found: ‘{-Y-} marking Perfective, {-t-} marking Non-Perfective in the past, and {ZERO} for Non-Perfective in the present’ (Masica 1991: 272). This distinction still exists in the modern Indo-Aryan language Marwari, and to some extent in Gujarati (*ibid.*).

The past habitual meaning must therefore have emerged from the non-perfective past meaning. The development of inflT’s other uses, however, is not explained. Masica (1991: 272-273) accounts for the other functions by expansion through the past conditional, which shares at least the feature [+past] with the original past imperfective:

An apparent anomaly which is only apparent is the use of this Non-Perfective marker {-t} to indicate also the so-called Past Conditional or Contrafactive (Magier’s more apt term) in all NIA [New Indo-Aryan] languages except Kashmiri, Sindhi, Assamese, and Oriya.

For the stage of New Indo-Aryan, Masica (1991) claims that these two functions have always been linked. Indeed, other Indo-Aryan languages like Hindi, Marawi, Punjabi, and Bengali still retain the same form for both functions, while others minimally differentiate them (*ibid.*). Hindi and Bengali both employ the suffix *-t* (Montaut 2004; Thompson 2012). The use of the inflT in Bengali seems to be identical to its use in Sylheti. Thompson (2012) distinguishes the two main functions as past habitual and hypothetical; the latter is also used in counterfactual conditionals.

4. The notion of irrealis

As discussions about linguistic categories are often fuelled by unclear terminology and the lack of distinction between semantic-functional and morphological categories, this section starts with an explanation of the terminology employed.

Modality is a semantic-functional category that is concerned with the status of a proposition (Comrie 1976:3). As distinguished by Palmer (2001), modality can be expressed through mood or through a modal system. While mood is ‘modality crystallized as morphology’ (Timberlake 2007: 326), and comprises all relevant grammatical morphemes expressing modality, the modal system consists of all other methods like the use of modal verbs, particles, etc.

Moods such as the subjunctive in Romance languages can often have various functions such as epistemic and deontic modality. This is why moods in individual languages can hardly be compared, while their functions can, as Bowerman (1998) proposes: ‘[g]rounding a definition of modality in function (not form) provides a solution to those who argue that modals, such as the “subjunctive”, cannot be compared cross-linguistically because they mean different things’.

When comparing irrealis in different languages, one must bear in mind that we can hardly compare morphological categories such as moods cross-linguistically. If we were to call the presented inflT-mood *irrealis* and compare it to moods in other languages that are equally called *irrealis*, we could probably not find an exact equivalent.

On the other hand, if we were to assume that irrealis as a functional category exists, we must look for cross-linguistic evidence for such a functional category. A possible way to do this would be to search for a set of atomized functions that is typically attributed to a particular mood in different languages.

A basic contrast between the categories *realis* and *irrealis* seems to be the first major distinction scholars make when introducing the topic of modality. Although the notion of *irrealis* has been widely discussed, and its general applicability as a category for language typology has been doubted, many scholars still regard the term as useful for language description. Palmer (2001), for example, uses the distinction as a basis for other modal categories.

Usually, *realis* refers to states of affairs that have either been realised already or are assumed to be realised in the future. *Irrealis*, on the other hand, refers to states of affairs that are hypothetically realisable, but whose actual realisation the speaker is uncertain about, or states of affairs that are assumed to be unrealisable.

Payne (1997: 244) has a slightly different conception of *irrealis*, and defines it through lack of assertion: ‘[i]rrealis mode does not necessarily

assert that an event did not take place or will not take place. It simply makes no claims with respect to the actuality of the event or situation described’.

The actual use of the term ‘irrealis’, however, differs greatly from researcher to researcher. Cristofaro (2012) distinguishes two main ways of using the term in the existing literature. First, it is used to label constructions ‘encoding some type of unrealized states of affairs’ (Cristofaro 2012: 1). Second, it is used to refer ‘to a general distinction that is assumed to be reflected in the grammar of the language’ (ibid.). The latter notion of a conceptual distinction is also assumed by Payne (1997: 244), who proposes a continuum between realis and irrealis.

In language description, the term ‘irrealis’ is often used in a language-particular way as a morphological category (mood) with a range of functions (cf. Cristofaro 2012: 1–4; Bybee 1998). These constructions often include some that actually express unrealised states of affairs, but often also some expressing realised states of affairs. This weakens the claim for a universal distinction between realis and irrealis that is reflected in particular languages. In fact, there is little evidence in descriptive grammars for a cross-linguistic category ‘irrealis’. Michael (2014), for example, presents a ‘reality status system’ in the Amazonian language Nanti which is an obligatory verbal inflection that seems to match a distinction between realized and unrealized states of affairs. Similarly, Mithun (1995) describes the category of ‘reality’ that must be marked in every sentence of Central Pomo, spoken in Northern California.

Conversely, other grammatical distinctions such as perfective/imperfective have been asserted by demonstrating close semantic correspondences between the functions of grammatical morphemes of various languages (cf. Dahl 1985; Comrie 1976).

Since the evidence for an invariant, cross-linguistically recurring irrealis category is scant, the discussion regarding the universality of an irrealis category will be left with the conclusion of Bybee (1998: 269):

We simply do not know whether language users form abstractions across many uses of highly grammaticized forms, or whether they manipulate more specific constructions with more concrete meanings and contexts of use. [...], for some very difficult areas of modality, the evidence favors the latter conclusion.

But how else should these grammatical categories, which often express various modal functions, be called? Bybee (1998) argues that grammaticalisation is a major reason for the rise of multifunctional categories, which spread to gain diverse functions. She claims that they should be labelled separately instead of referring to their diachronic similarity: ‘[irrealis] is sometimes used to cover etymologically related elements in very different constructions that are perhaps not synchronically related’ (Bybee 1998: 264).

As the term ‘irrealis’ seems to be used for morphemes that have become multifunctional through grammaticalization, it is clear that the comparability of such morphemes is not a given. In order to make comparison possible, there is no alternative to providing a detailed description and analysis of each of their various functions. This would allow us to arrive at a set of atomized functions, which are then easier to compare with sets of functions in other languages.

Summing up, when using ‘irrealis’ as a miscellaneous category language-specifically, which has been a common practice in language description, it is necessary to provide a detailed analysis of the various functions of such a labelled form.

5. Irrealis in Sylheti?

When describing the structure of Sylheti, one encounters exactly the problem of labelling a multifunctional grammatical morpheme as Bybee (1998) mentions. As seen in Section 3, grammaticalisation of inflT has extended the original meaning of past imperfective to multiple meanings in different contexts, without diverging into separate forms.

The functions that have been described above are the following:

- Past Habitual
- Negated Future
- Counterfactual
- Subjunctive (in complements and light verb constructions)

The past habitual does not share any features with the other categories, and is the least suitable candidate for inclusion in the term ‘irrealis’. Wallace (1982) mentions a significant interaction between mood and aspect, while Payne (1997: 245) proposes that: ‘habitual aspect clauses are less realis than perfective aspect clauses since habitual aspect describes an event type that is instantiated from time to time by actual events’. However, there is no reason for considering the past habitual as irrealis, while the present habitual is left unmarked. Also Masica (1991: 273) mentions that both past habitual and counterfactual can be expressed through ‘would’ in English, yet this does not justify a unified ‘irrealis’ analysis of that particular modal verb.

All remaining functions of inflT have been shown to be employed to express unrealised states of affairs. While both features, negative and future, correlate with the notion of unrealised state of affairs from a logical perspective, counterfactuals feature hypothetical language and the subjunctive is only used in light verb constructions and complements that

express unrealised state of affairs.⁵ The terms ‘counterfactual’ or ‘conditional’ do not apply to all of these functions, and the term ‘subjunctive’ can be misleading as it does not cover the negated future. For this reason, although not valuable perhaps for typological use, the term ‘irrealis’ is most suitable to cover the remaining three functions of the inflT (negated future, counterfactual, and subjunctive) and expresses the combining semantic feature of an unrealised state of affairs.

6. Conclusion

There are difficulties that apply to use of the term ‘irrealis’ cross-linguistically, and this paper presents a language-particular example of some of the complexities involved. Although there is not sufficient evidence for a cross-linguistically invariant category of ‘irrealis’, the term is suitable for use language-specifically to name a category that expresses unrealised states of affairs.

The importance of specific analyses for multifunctional forms has been stressed as necessary prerequisites to make comparison possible. As forms that are commonly labelled ‘irrealis’ often cover multiple functions, defining separate grammatical categories for the different functions should be considered, even if they are etymologically related.

Sylheti’s inflT verb form has been described and shown to be separable into at least two different grammatical categories because there is no common semantic feature covering all of its expressed meanings. Alongside its past habitual grammatical function, there is a set of other functions that are considered to be suitably labelled ‘irrealis’, since they encode modal expression of an unrealised state of affairs.

Future research on the syntactic structure of modal verb constructions with the inflT verb form could improve this analysis, as both the modal and the full verb appear in an inflected form. The appearance of multiple inflected verbs in a single clause could beg the question of whether terms like ‘subjunctive’ are appropriate for describing this sub-function of the inflT.

⁵ As opposed to complements of verbs like ‘know’ (example 12).

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