

Comparing (ir)reality in Vanuatu languages

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In this presentation I will highlight similarities and differences in the semantics of Realis and Irrealis categories in a number of North and Central Vanuatu languages. The grammars of languages from various families (e.g. Australian, Papuan, Austronesian) have been described as possessing Realis and Irrealis verbal categories, through the use of which speakers apparently categorise events in terms of whether or not they have been realised. However, the division between 'real' and 'unreal' contexts is claimed to be far from uniform across languages, and this point has led some scholars to reject the notion of Realis and Irrealis as cross-linguistically valid categories (see e.g. Bybee *et al* 1994). This objection instantiates a fundamental theoretical point of debate in language typology, namely whether universal grammatical categories exist at all, or whether alternatively, grammatical categories can only be considered as language-specific entities, deriving their meaning from the oppositions in the systems which they belong to. The latter view is the classic Structuralist position which essentially renders cross-linguistic studies if not impossible, at least problematic.

I will apply Haspelmath's (2008) "comparative concepts" approach in my comparison. This approach reconciles the two seemingly incongruous positions - of recognising the particularities of individual language categories on the one hand, and engaging in meaningful cross-linguistic comparison on the other - by setting up comparative concepts against which language-specific categories can be matched. Findings show that there is considerable consistency in the contexts of use in which Realis and Irrealis categories occur within this set of languages yet at the same time some significant contrasts exist between even very closely related languages.

References

- Bybee, Joan L., Revere D. Perkins, and William Pagliuca. 1994. *The evolution of grammar: tense, aspect and modality in the languages of the world*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2008. Comparative concepts and descriptive categories in cross-linguistic studies (draft paper July 2008).