Restructuring of tense and aspect morphology in Indian English

Aspectual distinctions have been found to affect the use of tense systems in L2 speech (Rohde 1996; Bardovi-Harlig 2000; Langman & Bayley 2002), L1 learning (Brown 1973; Bloom et al. 1980; Wagner 2001), and creoles (Bickerton 1981; Singler 1990; Winford 1996). The Primacy of Aspect Hypothesis (POA, Andersen & Shirai 1996; Bayley 1999) proposes a universal preference among language learners to restrict past/perfective marking to telic verbs, progressive marking to activities, and imperfective marking to states. In this paper we examine variation in the usage of tense-aspect morphology by speakers of Indian English, based on 10 individuals from a larger bilingual dataset. Our findings correspond partly to POA, but exhibit some divergent features that we account for using a formal semantic theory of aspectual variation and change.

Indian English tense-aspect usage is found to exhibit four characteristic usages: (i) Habitual, stative, and, more generally, atelic events occurring in the past time (as well as present time) are often expressed with present-tense (null past) morphology (e.g. *We study English in those days*).

(ii) Past marking is far more often overt when used with telic events (e.g. *I left in 1986*). This distribution of English present and past tense forms suggests a reorganization of a tense-based system along aspectual lines in Indian English, supporting the basic claim of POA. It suggests that Standard English past tense morphology realizes perfective aspect in Indian English, while present tense morphology realizes a temporally unrestricted imperfective aspect (see Bybee et al 1994). The other two features, however, do not directly follow from POA. These are: (iii) use of the perfect form *had*+*V* for marking past telic events (e.g. *This is the second time that such an object had been sighted here*, Sharma 2001), and (iv) use of progressive -*ing* with habitual or lexical stative predicates (e.g. *People coming to Berkeley for shopping*; *We are knowing each other*).

We account for the use of perfect and progressive morphological forms in perfective and habitual/stative contexts respectively by characterizing the perfect and the progressive as specialized instantiations of the more general categories of perfective and imperfective. This treatment of the perfect and the progressive is independently motivated by grammaticalization paths in tense-aspect diachrony (Bybee et al 1994; Dahl 1985, 2000), and by the synchronic distributional and interpretational properties of perfective and imperfective aspect markers. We argue that the occurrence of perfect and progressive morphology with past telic events (perfective aspect) and stative events (imperfective aspect) respectively is an instance of typologically observed grammaticalization. On our analysis, the English perfect and progressive are reanalyzed as exponents of perfective and imperfective categories within Indian English. Deo (2006) analyses Indo-Aryan historical development and dialectal variation, demonstrating that (a) the Indo-Aryan TMA system is fundamentally based on an imperfective-perfective contrast and (b) the progressive-to-imperfective and the perfect-to-perfective shift is instantiated as complete or ongoing change in various Indo-Aryan languages. This suggests that Indian English TMA restructuring is reinforced not only by typologically unmarked paths of reanalysis but also by substrate transfer.

Word count: 498
References


