

On three interpretations of past determiners in Somali

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0. The modal use of a past morphology (e.g., in conditional or hypothetical clauses) is a well attested phenomenon in natural language. Informal treatments suggest that past tense does not receive a temporal interpretation, but rather expresses a modal ‘displacement’. Iatridou (2000) proposes that a unified account of temporal/modal ‘displacement’ can be formally construed as a set-theoretic exclusion relation between a topic time or world and a speaker time or world. In her terms, past morphology realizes an exclusion feature (ExclF) whose meaning in the temporal domain is that the topic time (i.e., the time interval (set of times) we are talking about) excludes the utterance time, and whose meaning in the modal domain is that the topic worlds exclude the speaker’s worlds (actual world). Izvorski (1997) takes the same approach in her pioneering study of (indirect) evidentiality, suggesting that ExclF interacts with ‘higher’ domains of modality, such as evidentiality—the linguistic expression of a speaker’s source of knowledge.

1. The purpose of this presentation is to support such accounts, by providing a new perspective. More concretely, I argue that deeper insight can be gained by the study of systems where nominal expressions encode temporal and modal distinctions, such as the languages of the East Cushitic family. In Somali, a specific *-ii* morphology suffixed to the definite article, which I will refer to as past morphology, can take on a purely temporal meaning (1), or an epistemic modal (2) or evidential value (3), respectively:

- (1) *sánnad-ka/*-ii dambe / sánnad-kii/*-a hore*
year-detM next / year-detM[+past] before
next year / last year
- (2) *Wáx-íi aad rabtá-na lagugú síinayaa*
thing-detM.past 2S want.pres.gen-and one.2S.to give.pres.prog
And we will give you what you want
- (3) *Qálinkáy-gíi /*qálinkáy-gu méeyey?*
pen-detM.Poss1S.past[+nom] pen-detM.Poss1S.[+nom] Q.is.ms
Where is my pen?

Nominal tense is inflectional in Somali (tense agreement and deletion processes occur within a tensed DP) : past morphology in (1) receives a temporal past interpretation, and so future-oriented adverbials are excluded. In free relatives (2), nominal past morphology is incompatible with the *de re* reading of the (underlined) DP. The assertion here is not ‘we will give you the specific thing that you want now’ (in which case the present tense *wáx-a* must be used), but ‘for each accessible world, we will give you what you want in that world (not necessarily the same thing in each world)’. Past DPs in generic

and habitual sentences, as well as adverbial and conditional clauses in the present tense, also illustrate the case where the *-ii* morphology does not provide any temporal information : rather, it introduces a modal dimension into the interpretation, by allowing variability of reference of the DP. Finally, (3) illustrates the use of past as a direct (i.e., perceptual) evidential. When uttering (3), the speaker may 'know' that the pen is somehow 'present' (e.g., on his/her desk), but using the *-ii* morphology, s/he also asserts that s/he lacks visual experience. If the correlation present/visible versus past/invisible were a mere coincidence, we would have to explain why it is so widespread crosslinguistically (East Cushitic, Tibeto-Burman, Wakashan, Salishan...). Intuitively, as present nominal tense is interpreted as direct evidence, it is incompatible with what the speaker knows in the actual here and now. The fact that evidential past sometimes may be used to talk about the future, despite the overt past nominal morphology, suggests that we are dealing here with modal, not temporal, exclusion. The fact that the invisible referent can be epistemically present (e.g., when talking about a hidden referent) suggests that ExclF operates on a different layer of 'knowing'.

2. I explore the possibility that Kratzer's (1991) notion of 'doubly relative' modality might lead to a unified analysis of the tense/modality connection, including the one found in nominals. The necessary elements are an epistemic modal base, including worlds that are compatible with what is known (the semantic meaning) and a pragmatic ordering of the worlds that conform to the modal base. The different layers of modality depend on the kind of ordering source salient in the context. Exclusion from what is known in the speaker's actual world derives the quantificational reading of the past DP (2). For evidential modality, we might assume an ordering source that singles out the accessible worlds which come closest to an ideal in which the speaker has direct evidence—a perceptual ordering source, which relates informational access (e.g., seeing) to current knowledge : as I will show, deictic anchoring to the present tense is crucial for the evidential meaning to obtain. Exclusion from this more restricted set derives the 'invisible' meaning.

References

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