TAMEAL Project

The interrelation of Tense, Aspect and Modality with Evidentiality in Australian Aboriginal languages

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Final publishable summary report

The TAMEAL project focused on the interplay between four major grammatical categories in Australian Aboriginal languages (whose documentation and study is urgent, as they are critically endangered, under-described languages): tense/aspect, modality and evidentiality or TAME (aspect expressing the speaker’s perspective on events unfolding through time, such as e.g. the –ing marking in English, whereas evidentiality serves to mark the origin/source of some information conveyed by a particular utterance, as in the English construction it sounds / looks like plus a tensed clause). Lasting 50 months (1. June 2009 – 31. July 2013), it involved nine European and Australian researchers, through a consortium regrouping five European institutions (the Université Paris-Diderot, the Université Paris 8, the CNRS, the University of Manchester and K.U. Leuven) based in three distinct European countries (France, the U.K. and Belgium), and two Australian universities (the University of Western Australia and the University of Melbourne).

Through a sustained mobility scheme (with a total of 22 person months of secondments between the partner institutions), TAMEAL members successfully developed a series of descriptive, experimental, theoretical and formal tools related to the study of the aforementioned grammatical categories in Australian languages – this was the project’s first and most important goal. The key scientific achievements the project should be credited with comprise:

- Two thematic issues of the Australian Journal of Linguistics (vol. 31, issue 4, 2011; vol. 32, issue 1, 2012) comprising a series of seven theoretical, formal and descriptive papers produced by project members, representing to this day the most extensive, state-of-the art collection of papers bearing on TAME in Australian languages
- Sets of theoretical concepts with descriptive and comparative value, designed for the analysis of TAME categories in Australian languages – said set can be conceived of as a ‘toolbox’ spanning tenses, grammatical aspects, modality and evidentiality markers of all kinds (including clitics and discourse particles)
- A database of roughly a hundred video stimuli (short films lasting between 5 to 40 seconds) for the elicitation of event descriptions during fieldwork, designed to accommodate both simple event descriptions, and more complex event descriptions (especially in languages possessing so-called complex predicate systems, which are quite common in the North of Australia) – the project has already received numerous requests from external researchers to use said database in order to do fieldwork in Australia
- Several successful international workshops organized by the project, as well as numerous conference presentations and invited talks (over 45) given by project members in order to disseminate research results (many of which remain unpublished to this day, but will be brought to publication status through future work).

From a purely scientific point of view, the following advances can be regarded as the project’s main contribution:

- A typological inventory of TAME systems and TAME categories across Australia was realized, based on a significant language sample (a dozen languages), having been investigated in an in-depth fashion – this involved a general re-assessment and scientific upgrading of TAME grammars where previous accounts were available, or pioneering work for languages lacking substantial descriptions of their TAME systems (as was the case with many of the languages pertaining to our language sample)
- A formal, context-sensitive semantic account of verbal derivation was formulated for the entire verbal system of Panyjima (a language spoken in the Pilbara region, Western Australia), and a novel scientific formal approach was developed for this analysis (based on a ground-breaking formal semantic framework capable of modelling predication in context, ranging from morphological to syntactic constructs); said account is clearly extensible to typologically similar derived verbs, both within and without Australia
- A novel typological distinction was established with respect to the interaction between modal and tense-aspect categories: in languages where combining overt aspectual and modal marking to construe certain

meanings (notably so-called hypothetical counterfactual meanings, as in if John came, Mary would leave), it was demonstrated that two kind of extremely different configurations existed among Australian languages

- In a first set of languages (such as e.g. Murrinh-Patha or Jaminjung, two non-Pama-Nyungan languages of the North), the modal element involved is essentially a verbal predicate type (comparable to e.g. an auxiliary) expressing a static mental attitude, and upon which bears the aspectuo-temporal element (generally some so-called imperfective tense marker, cf. e.g. ‘imperfects’ in Romance) – so that the verb stem (effectively the complement of the modal attitudinal predicate) is effectively ‘tenseless’, i.e. is not under the scope an aspectuo-temporal meaning
- In another set of languages (such as e.g. Enindhihlaykwa, also spoken in the North of Australia), it was demonstrated that the modal marker was not a verbal predicative element, but rather an adverbial, particle-like element, not contributing a verbal predicative content; so that the tense-aspect marker was interpreted as bearing on the verb stem (and not on the modal element dominating the verb stem). This results in a completely different TA/modality interaction, and one which had never been identified so far.

- The project also established that clitics or particles were the favoured grammatical means of expressing certain TAME meanings in Australian languages. Evidential systems notably turned to often involve such clitics or particles rather than inflections (thereby contrasting with systems found in some other major linguistic areas, such as Indo-European languages). Most strikingly, the project demonstrated the importance of temporal/focus clitics to ensure the proper ordering in events – in particular elements with mixed focus/temporo-aspectual meaning, whose context-sensitive readings can be best paraphrased by ‘now’ and ‘then’. The great grammatical significance of such items should be contrasted with the abundance of temporal/logical connectives and aspectuo-temporal adverbs found in narratives e.g. in Indo-European languages (the two latter kinds of items being very rare in Australian Aboriginal languages).

Beyond achieving specific scientific results, the project’s ambitions also extended to socio-scientific aims. The first of these aims was the constitution of a unified community of Australianist linguists sharing a double expertise in formal/theoretical linguistics, and descriptive/field work linguistics. This was effectively realized by means of intensive knowledge transfer between project members (specialists of Australian languages becoming engaged in training and research activities related to formal and theoretical approaches to TAME, while specialists of theoretical and formal approaches to TAME became involved in descriptive / fieldwork research activities bearing on Australian languages). Moreover, broader cross-community research actions were carried out, through several international workshops scientifically supported or organized by the project / project members (cf. e.g. the « Modality in the Indigenous languages of Australia and Papua-New Guinea » workshop and the « verbal systems of Australian languages » workshop respectively organized during the 42nd and 43rd conferences of the Australian Linguistics Society (Canberra, 2011 and Perth, 2012), or the « Tense, aspect, modality and evidentiality in discourse — Australian languages » panel organized as part of the 11th conference of the International Pragmatics Association (Melbourne, 2009)), as well as seminars and master classes held on various occasions – not to mention numerous talks given at project external international conferences (over 30 oral presentations of research results were thus effected by project members).

The project has been successful from a socio-economic point of view as well, in that it delivered the promise of bringing state-of-the-art methodology and tools to under-described (and from the point of view of TAME theory, understudied), endangered languages. There is no doubt that such a move will be beneficial to linguistic work done on said languages in general, and will play an instrumental role in facilitating (a) language documentation and (b) language revitalization. In this latter respect, the project can be regarded as significant to policy makers in Australia. The current state of most of Australian Aboriginal languages rendered particularly urgent the sort of work TAMEAL members had undertaken: indeed, subtle, highly context-sensitive categories such as TAME categories become increasingly difficult to study, and only competent, fully native speakers can be expected to offer valuable insight into such complex data. It was therefore of paramount importance to initiate now this particular research trend, given the current state of most Australian Aboriginal languages. It is our belief that the project’s results can be used to bolster or fertilize linguistic research, including applied linguistic work with socio-economic impact (e.g. language revitalization) in areas where Australian languages are still spoken.

For further details, please visit http://tameal.linguist.univ-paris-diderot.fr/

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