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Nominal tense in Movima

Tense marking is generally thought of as a verbal, not as a nominal category. However, some languages productively mark tense on nominal constituents. In their cross-linguistic study of this phenomenon, Nordlinger and Sadler (2004) distinguish two types of nominal tense marking: "independent," where tense features of the nominal alone are specified, and "propositional," where tense marking on a dependent nominal provides the tense information for the entire proposition. The languages in their sample either mark independent or propositional tense, but none of them does both.

   Movima (unclassified, Bolivia) not only has the unusual property of productively marking tense (past vs. nonpast) on noun phrases. In addition, it can be shown that while its nominal tense marking is basically of the independent type, it is also the main device of indicating propositional tense. Independent nominal tense is illustrated in (1). Here, the article form *os* signals that the referent of the NP has ceased to exist, while the TAM-particle *loy* ('intentional') implies future tense. The cooccurrence of a nominal tense marker with a deviating clausal tense marker is a clear signal of independent nominal tense.

(1)   ***loy***   *iɬ*   *ajalo:maj*   ***os***   *no:no*   *di'*   *pa:ko*
       ITN   1   speak_about   ART.n.pst   pet   REL   dog
       'I'm going to speak about my (deceased) pet dog.'

In (2), where no contrasting TAM-particle is present, the article *os* is automatically interpreted as marking propositional past tense. Here, the article does not necessarily imply that the referent of the NP has ceased to exist, but the entire proposition receives a past-tense interpretation.

(2)   *iloni--yɬi n-**os***   *chaṁmo*   (-- external cliticization)
       walk--1pl obl-ART.n.pst   forest
       'We walked in the forest.'

   In my paper, I will illustrate this system in more detail and present a possible explanation which goes along the following lines. In Movima, both temporal (existence vs. ceased existence) and spatial (presence vs. absence) properties of a referent are expressed by one single system of reference markers (containing articles, pronouns, demonstratives). The lack of a strict separation between spatial and temporal deictic categories may explain the existence of nominal tense marking in the first place. The interpretation of basically independent nominal tense as propositional tense can be explained by taking two parameters into account: time stability and relevance. The lower the time stability of a referent, the more likely it is encoded by a past-tense NP in a past-tense context. Since subordination in Movima involves action nominalization, which means that non-time-stable concepts are frequently encoded by NPs, independent nominal tense marking can assume the function of indicating tense in discourse. Likewise, the less relevant the existence of a referent at the moment of speaking is, the more likely it is for this referent to be denoted by a past-tense NP in a past-tense context. Here, past-tense marking does not encode a property of the referent, but serves to indicate propositional tense alone (cf. (2) above).

   Thus, while highly unusual from a cross-linguistic perspective, the Movima system can be shown to be straightforward when cognitive and pragmatic factors are taken into account.

References:
Nordlinger, Rachel & Louisa Sadler 2004. "Nominal tense marking in crosslinguistic perspective," in: *Language* Vol. 80 No. 4. pp. 776–806.