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The Dravidian zero negative :
conceptualisation and diachronic context of its morphogenesis

The Dravidian 'zero negative', as Master (1946) called it, is a unique morpological construction which is stricking by its simplicity and the soundness of its logical conceptualization. Descriptively, it is a negative declarative paradigm which is devoid of any overt sign of negation, being built on the schema : verb root+person suffixes. Its negative meaning rests on a systematic opposition to the positive paradigms which are built on : verb + tense + persons. Therefore the negative exhibits a 'zero' structural morpheme in place of the 'tense' morphemes of the positive paradigms.

Its interpretation requires a proper evaluation of the semantic relationships between the elements that constitutes the system. The 'tenses' initially encoded in the basic Dravidian morphological system (past/non-past/negative) pertain to the internal temporal development of a process, more akin to different phasal 'aspects' of a verb than to its localisation in an external temporal frame. In this view, the absence of tense marker iconically signifies that the process has no temporal extension, i.e. that the process, which actually needs 'time' (of whatever extent be it) to get realized, does not occur.

In the proposed communication I will summarizes the principles of this conceptualisation which have been detailed in previous papers (see for instance Pilot-Raichoor 1998). To broaden the scope and assert that this building of negative meaning is not so unique, I will mention typological connections with similar processus of negation ('suspensive-réassertive', cf. Forest 1993) and other uses of a semantics of distanciation and/or void which are characteristic of the paradigmatic negation in Dravidian.

I will also precise the diachronical context which favour its development. The zero negative paradigm is an innovation which occurs only in the South subgroup of the Dravdian languages. Its development occurs in the wave of a major typological shift that can be traced in the very early stages of Tamil. The language change, from an earlier isolating type to an agglutinative one, allowed the development of a categorizing morphology in which the 'verb' –opposed to the 'noun'- become specified by the encoding of 'time' in its morphology.
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References

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