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Complex predicates in South Asian languages: An introduction

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Complex predicates are an areal feature of the South Asian region. Cross-linguistic literature has discussed these grammatical features under the name of serial verbs, compound verbs and conjunct verbs. In modern South Asian linguistics, early investigations into complex predicates focused on the formal structure and functions of complex predicates from the morphosyntactic perspective (Hook 1974; Bhat 1979; Kachru 1982; Steever 1988; and Verma 1993; among others). The late 1980s saw growing interest in the semantic aspects of complex predicates (Abbi and Gopalakrishnan 1991) and cross-linguistic comparisons across language families of South Asia (Kachru 1980; Anderson 2007; Subbarao 2012). There have been some very insightful works on explaining complex predicates through theoretical frameworks in the 1990s (Butt 1994–1995, Vaidya 2015), followed by corpus based computational studies focused on extracting complex predicates from electronic corpora (Bhattacharyya et al. 2006; Soni et al. 2006; Rao et al. 2010). In the new millennium, focus on language documentation has led to several accounts of the complex predicate phenomenon in the lesser known languages of South Asia.

In the present set of papers, we bring together investigations on languages as varied as Bengali, Betta Kurumba, Hindi and Malto. The aim is to arrive at a typological perspective on complex predicates in the context of the South Asian language families/sub groups such as Dravidian and Indo-Aryan, and supplementing the existing studies on complex predicates on South Asian languages. While the studies on Bangla and Hindi provide newer perspectives to the existing studies on complex predicates, Betta Kurumba and Malto are sparsely documented lesser known Dravidian languages for which the present set of papers provides first time information on complex predication. Of particular interest will be the structural and semantic properties of complex predicates in relation to notions such as semantic composition, grammaticalisation, transitivity, valency, aspectual and modal modification, and semantic restructuring involving causation, precursion, manner etc.

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Bhattachrja details Bengali verb morphology from the perspective of Whole Word Morphology to explain how information relevant to predication is structured. He points out a few problems with handling complex predicates in morphology in the light of atomistic models of word formation, i.e. models that must involve units smaller than the word. He proposes that depending on the speaker-hearer a number of complex predicates in Bengali must be part of his/her individual lexicon, which together with other words form adequate pairs that license Word Formation Strategies. His paper attempts to develop an understanding of how Bengali can be typologically classified on the basis of the complex predicate construction.

Coelho provides a description of the various complex predicates in Betta Kurumba, ranging from word-internal sequences of root plus suffix, to morphological compounds with multiple roots, to synthetic compounds consisting of multiple words. The paper discusses significant aspects of their morphosyntactic and semantic properties, and includes a brief account of the role of grammaticalization in the historical development of some of the constructions. For purposes of comparison, the paper also includes a brief discussion of complex verb forms containing auxiliary verbs or inflectional suffixes that developed historically from verbs; these are contrasted with the complex predicates in which the contribution of the final verbal element is derivational in nature, since it participates in the formation of new lexemes.

Puttaswamy discusses the classification of verbal constructions in Malto based on functions expressed through the co-occurrence of verb words at various levels within clauses. Multi-verb constructions in Malto are discussed within the framework of the theories of juncture and nexus proposed by Van Valin and LaPolla (1997). The functional classes of multi-verb constructions in Malto discussed in her paper include compound verbal constructions comprising explicator compound verbs, conjunct participle constructions, and reduplicated verbs. Rank-defining properties, where the inflectional properties are related to the concept of finiteness in verbs, are compared with rank shift in Malto. This includes several possibilities such as two clauses coalescing into a single core, category change where nominals are derived from verbs by attaching a nominaliser, or verbs functioning as adverbials by virtue of their position relative to a finite verb.

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