Tense and mood: semantics of the Djambarrpuyŋu verbal paradigm

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Abstract

In Djambarrpuyŋu — a Yolŋu language spoken in northern Australia — verbs stems are inflected for one of four different inflectional categories. Previous descriptions of these categories’ functional domains have eschewed a unified analysis of their semantics. The reason for this is the apparent polyfunctionality of each inflection, in large part driven by a number of striking phenomena, notably: (1) **Cyclic Tense** (the temporal interval/s that are compatible with each inflection are ostensibly discontinuous) and (2) **Asymmetric Negation** (where a mood/reality status distinction available in positive clauses is unavailable in negative ones.)

In this talk, I provide a branching-times-theoretic analysis of of Djambarrpuyŋu’s inflectional categories as tense/mood markers by appealing to two privative semantic features: a temporal one (**precontemporaneity**) and a modal one (**nonveridicality**).

(1) **Temporal reference and verbal inflection in Djambarrpuyŋu**

a. ɲarra ɲa nhá-ma mukulnha (dhiyaŋ bala)  
    1s ipfv.I see-1 aunt-acc now  
    ‘I see/am looking my aunt (right now).’

b. ɲarra nhá-ŋal mukulnha gáthur  
    1s see-III aunt-acc today  
    ‘I saw my aunt this morning.’

c. ɲarra nhá-ma mukulnha barpuru  
    1s see-1 aunt-acc yesterday  
    ‘I saw my aunt yesterday.’

(2) **Negation interacting with inflection category in Djambarrpuyŋu**

a. báyŋu ɲarra gi nhá-ŋu mukulnha dhiyaŋ bala  
    neg 1s ipfv.II see.II aunt-acc now  
    ‘I don’t see my aunt (right now).’

b. báyŋu ɲarra nhá-nha mukulnha gáthur  
    neg 1s see-IV aunt-acc today  
    ‘I didn’t see my aunt this morning.’

c. báyŋu ɲarra nhá-ŋu mukulnha barpuru  
    neg 1s see-II aunt-acc yesterday  
    ‘I didn’t see my aunt yesterday.’