

A historical account of trimorphous verb bases in Betta Kurumba

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Betta Kurumba (BK) has developed three verb bases (past theme, nonpast theme, and bare theme) to which suffixes of various inflectional and derivational categories are attached. The past and nonpast themes are formed with stem increments derived from Proto-Dravidian (PDr) past and nonpast tense plus voice suffixes; the bare theme does not have these stem increments. The PDr tense-voice suffixes have lost their original meanings and are semantically empty increments in the current grammar of BK. The loss of tense-voice meaning is evident from the fact that the BK past theme is used as the base for the present progressive suffix, although this inflectional category does not encode past tense. In this, BK resembles Toda and Kota, which use reflexes of PDr past stems as the base from which to form present-future verbs.

My paper argues that the PDr tense and voice suffixes did retain their original meanings in a pre-BK stage, in which the language had compound verbs (containing conjunctive participles), tense-marked verbs, and verbs with causative stems. Historical mergers in these verb forms obscured the distinctions that were present in pre-BK, leading to the current system in which reflexes of PDr tense and voice suffixes are distributed in a manner that appears arbitrary because there is little systematic link in the modern language between tense/voice and grammatical category. Despite the current appearance of arbitrariness, it is possible to trace the pre-BK use of PDr tense and voice suffixes through two factors: (a) A morphophonological alternation in certain verb classes provides solid evidence for an earlier compound verb structure, which accounts for the use of PDr suffixes in a large set of derivational and inflectional categories. (b) The semantics of the remaining categories in modern BK provides evidence for the earlier presence of distinct tense- and causative- stems, which subsequently underwent merger. In tracing such semantic evidence, the paper includes a brief description of the function of nonfinite clauses, as well as TAM, in modern BK. Where relevant, it compares BK verbs to cognates in Tamil, Kodagu, Kannada, Irula, Telugu, discussing whether shared innovations are due to inheritance or contact.