

When ‘still’ comes to signal a near past

In unrelated and geographically non-adjacent languages we find uses of expressions meaning ‘still’ as signals of a near past; the examples in (1, 2) are illustrations.

- (1) Western Dani (Barclay 2008: 440)

At awo wa-gaarak.
3SG still come-PST.3SG
‘He has just come.’

- (2) Gitsxan (Anouki 2021: 69)

K’ay hlis bax=hl gimxdī-’y win ’witxw ha ’w-i’y ky’oots.
still finish run=CONN sister-POSS.1SG SUBORD arrive go_home-1SG yesterday
‘My sister had just finished running when I came home yesterday.’

In my talk, I address such uses in seven languages from four continents: Bende (Bantu), Datooga (Nilotic), Gitsxan/Nisga’a (Tsimshian), Kekchí (Maya), Tunisian Arabic (Afro-Asiatic), and Western Dani (Trans New Guinea).

I first take a synchronic perspective and show that –as far as can be judged from the available data– the relevant constructions share several semanto-pragmatic characteristics. First, the notion of proximity they signal can relate to intervals other than the time of speech, as can be observed in (2), and in (3) below. That is, we are not dealing with tense in the sense of an ordering between topic time and utterance (Klein 1994). Secondly, the aspectual viewpoint is fully contained in the situation’s post-time (anterior aspect a.k.a. “perfect”). Closely related, in coherent discourse ‘still’-as-near-past is consistently found in backgrounded clauses, such as in (3).

- (3) Tunisian Arabic (Afro-Asiatic, Singer 1984: 651)

Kun-t ānā māzil-t kīf bdī-t n-umgud fī tarf
COP.PFV-1SG 1SG still-1SG when/how begin.PFV-1SG 1SG-chew.IPFV in piece
il-lham haḍāya u-zarṣt-i rā-hi
ART.DEF-meat(M) PROX.SG.M and-molar(F)-POSS.1SG PRESTT-3SG.F
tnaṭr-it tanṭīra waḥd-a.
slip_out.PFV-3SG.F slip_out.NMLZ(F) one-SG.F
‘I had just begun chewing on the piece of meat when all of the sudden my molar tooth came flying out.’

Elaborating on this comparison, I discuss the etymologies of the expressions involved and sketch out two major diachronic pathways leading from ‘still’ plus anterior aspect to a near past. In the first scenario, the notion of persistence (< ‘still’) is projected from the runtime of a situation itself onto the post-time portion (< anterior aspect) of the time span characterized by its occurrence: ‘still in the post-arrival period’ > ‘have just arrived’. In the second scenario, first proposed by Anouki (2021) for Gitsxan *k’ay*, the link between the two uses lies in a left-adjacent runtime of the situation: ‘the (now completed) arrival has taken until now’ > ‘have just arrived’. A variation of this theme, in the form of a more indirect link, is found in Kekchí, where *toj* as a near past signal can be traced back to a restrictive ‘not until’ function of the same item. Both, the restrictive use and *toj* as ‘still’ likely share a common ancestor in delimitative ‘until’ (cf. Kockelman 2020).

In throwing a comparative and diachronic light on this hitherto understudied phenomenon, my talk thus contributes to our understanding of the multifarious histories of “phasal polarity” (van Baar 1997) expressions.

References

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