

The two presents of Romani: historical and typological investigations

Romani dialects display in present tense two different inflection patterns, called respectively short present and long present. The latter differs from the former only in having a morpheme *-a* (cfr. e.g. Kalderašitska *sováv* "I sleep" vs Lombard Sinti *sováva* "id."). In the dialects in which the long form expresses present tense (Lombard Sinti, Arli, Burguži, Sepeči etc.), the short one usually has the value of an achronic subjunctive mood, mainly used in subordinated clauses. In other dialects (Erli, Kalderašitska, Lovaritska, Romungro, Finnish Romani etc.) the long form expresses future tense or some rare modal content, such as confirmative function, and the short one the present tense (Boretzky-Igla 1994, p. 394; Matras 2002, pp. 156-157). From a historical point of view the short inflection is the only one that can be directly traced back to Middle and Old Indo-Aryan present inflection (cfr. e.g. *sov-* "to sleep": 1s *sov-av* < MIA *suvāmi*, OIA *svapāmi*, 2s *sov-es* < MIA *suvasi*, OIA *svapasi*, 3s *sov-el* < MIA *suvadi*, OIA *svapati*; Sampson 1926, pp. 187-188; Matras 2002, pp. 143-144; Beníšek 2020, p. 33), while the long inflection, with its final *-a*, is surely an innovative form. Final *-a* of the long present has been considered an indicative mood marker that contrasts with the zero-marked subjunctive form (Matras 2001, p. 167 and 2002, p. 155). As for the etymology of the morpheme *-a*, it is very probable that it derives from a process of grammaticalization of some originally free and later cliticised form, but the very reduced phonological form makes difficult to individuate an ancestor in MIA or OIA; a first step in this way could be a better definition of the original meaning of *-a* in verbal inflection. It is very remarkable that the verb *ǰan-/ǰin-* "to know" does not show the long inflection with *-a* in those dialects in which the long form is the default form for present tense. This unexpected morphological irregularity could be a trace of some original content of the morpheme *-a* that was incompatible with the inner semantic of a stative verb like "to know". As stative verbs are usually incompatible with progressive aspect (cfr. English *I know* but **I am knowing*, Spanish *yo se* "I know" but **yo estoy sabiendo*), a possible hypothesis is that *-a* was in origin a morpheme indicating progressive aspect. Put after the person-number markers of the old short present, the morpheme *-a* probably added to the verbal form a progressive meaning, forming a progressive present. In the history of Romani this original meaning of *-a* would have gone lost and the long present would have become in some dialects a future tense, in other dialects the default form for present tense. This supposed evolution finds a noteworthy typological parallel in the history of Armenian (Vaux 1995, p. 137). Last, but not least, the emergence of new present tense forms from progressive periphrasis and the evolution of OIA present towards subjunctive functions are phenomena well attested in NIA languages.

Bibliography

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