Linguistic motivations for the development of a periphrastic perfect construction
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Periphrastic perfect constructions consisting of a participle and an auxiliary, although frequently associated with European languages, are also characteristic of the languages of Sri Lanka in the South Asian region (varieties of Sinhala, Tamil, and a small number of contact languages still spoken by dwindling, but increasingly culturally assertive minorities). In fact, the ubiquity of the construction type in the speechbund may be one of the factors contributing to its development as a contact phenomenon in local versions of unrelated exogenous languages, including Malay and Portuguese. Looking at the original Malay varieties brought to Sri Lanka, perfect marking was available as an option involving the pre-verbal marking of a lexical verb by free-standing elements resembling VP adverbs, a strategy that appears frequently across highly analytic grammars. In this sense, the adoption by the Sri Lankan Malays of the local periphrastic perfect construction, consisting of a participial lexical verb and an auxiliary that is homophonous with an existential verb, appears to have involved borrowing without a (semantic) functional gap to motivate it. There is also no superficial economy motive for the change, since it entails an increase in surface syntactic complexity.

In this talk, I will discuss this "new" periphrastic perfect construction in the Malay contact language, demonstrating why it should necessarily be analyzed as bi-clausal, based on evidence from negation, in sentences such as (1) and (2).

(1) *Musba nyanyi atu abis-tulis ada.*  
Musba song INDEF PTCPL-write AUX  
Musba has written a song.

(2) *Musba nyanyi atu abis-tulis tr-ada.*  
Musba song INDEF PTCPL-write FIN.NEG-AUX  
Musba has not written a song.

The auxiliary *ada*, etymologically an existential verb, can be negated. In that context, the finite negation element interrupts the adjacency of *ada* and the lexical verb. In non-periphrastic constructions, the same finite negation element precedes the lexical verb in the verbal complex. The fact that the finite negation element is a verbal prefix in this (contact) language, and the fact that it is prefixed to the auxiliary in (2) is what supports a bi-clausal analysis of this perfect construction. The preceding lexical participle is of course non-finite, and evidence for this status is found in the fact that it can, given an appropriate context, be independently negated with a non-finite negation element (*jang*), and only with such an element. The clause containing the lexical VP can be separated from the auxiliary to be focused or questioned, with the finite auxiliary as a potential response.

The resulting construction is, appearances to the contrary, not a perfect replica of the southern South Asian grammars on which it is modeled, and the local cross-linguistic variation itself raises interesting questions about why grammatical restructuring selects one potential trajectory over another. The most plausible motivations for the development of this periphrastic perfect in local contact varieties are intriguing for the extent to which they involve the interface between pragmatics (particularly information structure) and morphosyntax.