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Estate Tamil: A Morphosyntactic Study

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Abstract

The primary objective of this dissertation is to provide a syntactic analysis of morphology in Estate Tamil, a dialect of Tamil spoken in tea estates, particularly in the Haputale area, in Sri Lanka.

Tamil is significant for the theory of morphology not only because it is rich in a number of inflectional and derivational suffixes, but also because it exemplifies the co-occurrence of these two types of suffixes in the same lexical element, e.g. in participial and gerundive nouns. Further, these nouns have verbal morphology inside the nominal suffixes. Thus, the data from Tamil challenge the hypotheses that assume a distinction between inflection and derivation.

Consequently, hypothesizing that all bound morphemes with selectional properties are functional heads, I explore morphosyntactic properties of deverbal nominals. In chapter 1, I claim that Estate Tamil is a distinctive dialect, contrary to the assumption that it is the same as Indian Tamil. Chapter 2 discusses some data and the questions that they raise for the theory of morphology. I argue that the criteria suggested for determining the distinction between inflection vs derivation and lexical rules vs syntactic rules are not adequate. Consequently, suggestion is made that all bound morphs with selectional properties can be analysed syntactically. Chapter 3 distinguishes lexical and functional categories and describe some theoretical assumptions in which morphology in Tamil is analysed in this dissertation. In Chapters 4 to 6, I analyse verbal morphology because the deverbal nominals contain verbal suffixes. Chapter 7 provides an account of morphology in deverbal nominals incorporating the verbal analysis given in the previous chapters. Finally, Chapter 8 describes the implications and consequences of the morphosyntactic analysis of Estate Tamil.

The present study is significant in several ways. First, it introduces Estate Tamil to the linguistic world as a separate dialect. Second, it develops an approach which expands the notion 'functional' category to include 'auxiliary' verbs as well as nominal suffixes. Third, the analysis shows that functional categories have varying degrees of functional status. Fourth, I suggest that S-structure is a significant level of the grammar since it operates as a domain of some licensing principles. Fifth, the approach is able to explain the traditional criteria of determining 'word' in a principled way, and it partially answers the question 'Where's morphology?'.