

**On Asymmetries in the Expression of Temporality
in Tamil Affirmative and Negative Clauses**
Rishabh Suresh (University of Göttingen)

The South Dravidian language Tamil has an interesting asymmetry in the expression of temporality in affirmative and negative clauses (see, e.g. Lehmann 1989: §1.39, 3.45). Where affirmative clauses have three verbal temporal suffixes *-t-*, *-kir-*, and *-v-* which appear in past, present, and future time contexts, respectively, in negative clauses, verbs instead have a single negative suffix *-illai* which appears primarily in past and present (and occasionally future) time contexts, as well as two negative suffixes *-matt-* and *-aatu* exclusively for future time contexts. The selection of the future negation is based on whether the subject of the clause is *rational* (either an adult human or a deity) or not. This pattern is illustrated in examples (1–4) below, with the a. sentences illustrating affirmative clauses, and the b. sentences illustrating their negative counterparts (adapted from Lehmann 1989: 65–67).

- (1) a. **Pōṇa mātam** nāṅ Kumārai pār-**tt-ēṅ**.
last month I Kumar.ACC see-PST-1SG
'Last month I saw Kumar.'
- b. **Pōṇa mātam** nāṅ Kumārai *pār-**tt-/pārkkā-villai/*māṭṭ-ēṅ**.
last month I Kumar.ACC see-PST-/see-INF-ILLAI/MATT-1SG
'Last month I didn't see Kumar.'
- (2) a. Kumār **ippōtu** tūṅku-**kir-āṅ**.
Kumar now sleep-PRS-3SG.M
'Kumar is sleeping now.'
- b. Kumār **ippōtu** *tūṅku-**kir-/tūṅkā-villai/*māṭṭ-āṅ**.
Kumar now sleep-PRS-/sleep-INF-ILLAI/MATT-3SG.M
'Kumar isn't sleeping now.'
- (3) a. **Aintu varuṭattil** Kumār veḷināṭṭiliruntu tirumpi varu-**v-āṅ**.
five in.years Kumar from.abroad return come-FUT-3SG.M
'In five years Kumar will come back from abroad.'
- b. **Aintu varuṭattil** Kumār veḷināṭṭiliruntu tirumpi *varu-**v-/vara-māṭṭ-āṅ/*-ātu/?illai**.
five in.years Kumar from.abroad return come-FUT-/come-INF-MATT-3SG.M/-AATU/ILLAI
'In five years Kumar won't come back from abroad.'
- (4) a. **Aṭutta vāram** pēruntu var-**um**.
next week bus come-FUT.3SG.N
'The bus will come next week'
- b. **Aṭutta vāram** pēruntu *varu-**v-/var-ātu/*vara-māṭṭ-tu/*vara-villai**.
next week bus come-FUT-/come-AATU/come-INF-MATT-3SG.N/come-INF-ILLAI
'The bus won't come next week.'

Tense conditioned splits are not cross-linguistically rare, but explanations for their existence have largely appealed simply to lexical variation (e.g., de Clercq 2020). One alternative account for the Tamil case, based largely on data from Kannada, another Dravidian language, has proposed that Dravidian languages are in general tenseless (Amritavalli 2014). The markers *-t-*, *-kir-*, and *-v-* are instead assumed to be aspectual in nature, and are ruled out in negative clauses because the Asp head is specified for positive polarity and is consequently not licensed by negative *-illai*. Negative clauses are thus completely lacking in temporal specification in Tamil.

There are two main problems with this analysis. First, a parallel-corpus-based study has shown that the markers *-t-*, *-kir-*, and *-v-* distribute like deictic tense forms in Germanic and Romance, rather than nondeictic (perfective and imperfective) aspectual forms in the same languages (Suresh 2024). Second, since Kannada lacks cognates for the future negations *-matt-* and *-aatu*, Amritavalli focusses exclusively on the form *-illai* and her analysis is thus based on the incorrect assumption that negative clauses in Tamil lack temporal specification across the board. The present work presents new data that directly addresses this second issue in the form of Tamil native-speaker judgements collected through two tasks. In the Grammaticality Judgement Task, speakers were asked to judge target sentences with the purported non-

future negation *-illai* in contexts with overt future time reference to address the question of whether this form is truly ambiguous with respect to temporal reference as suggested by Amritavalli. In the Affirmative-Negative Sentence Matching task, participants were presented with a set of affirmative clauses in future time contexts and asked to identify their negation from a set of four options. The tense marker in the affirmative clause could either be the future marker *-v-* or the present marker *-kir-* (what Copley 2009 would term a *futurate* use), and options for the negative counterparts always included versions with both *-illai* and *-matt-*.

The results are summarised Table 1 below and support the claim that negative clauses also have specific temporal interpretations with the form *-illai* being a predominantly past and present time negation (modulo futurates that have a specific reading), and *-matt-* and *-aatu* being future time negations. Participants broadly rejected the use of *-illai* as the negation in future time contexts, though *-illai* was significantly more acceptable in the negative counterpart of a futurate.

Table 1: (Left) Number of “grammatical” judgements in GJT for each time-negation combination, and (Right) number of times *illai*, *matt*, or both were selected as the appropriate negation depending on the affirmative tense marker.

| | Grammaticality Judgement Task | | | Affirmative-Negative Sentence Matching Task | | |
|--------------|-------------------------------|------------|--------------|---|------|-------|
| | future | non-future | | | matt | illai |
| <i>illai</i> | 9 | 139 | <i>-kir-</i> | 110 | 25 | 24 |
| <i>matt</i> | 131 | 17 | <i>-v-</i> | 130 | 12 | 17 |

We take this to indicate that that the Tamil clause does in fact consistently have tense. In affirmative clauses, there is a past-present-future division of labour between forms, while in negative clauses, there is only a future-non-future division, with the caveat that the present forms *-kir-* and *-illai* have a restricted use with future time reference as futurates.

We explain the facts as follows: Tamil does indeed have a TP, but the negative feature does not head its own phrase in the clause. Instead, it is merged along with tense features and unvalued phi-features into the T head. Additionally, in line with Copley (2009) and many others, the future tense is taken to be inherently modal in nature, which we take to correspond to a feature termed FUT-MOD. This reduces the future-non-future split to a modal-non-modal split, which is a clearer binary. The specific pattern illustrated in (1)-(4) and data collected for the present work may then be accounted for by proposing the following vocabulary items (VIs) as in a Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993; Harley & Noyer 1999) framework:

- (5) a. $t \leftrightarrow [\text{PST}] / V +$ d. $illai \leftrightarrow [\text{NEG}, v\phi] / V +$
b. $kir \leftrightarrow [\text{PRS}] / V +$ e. $matt \leftrightarrow [\text{FUT-MOD}, \text{NEG}, v\phi (\text{rational})] / V +$
c. $v \leftrightarrow [\text{FUT-MOD}] / V +$ f. $aatu \leftrightarrow [\text{FUT-MOD}, \text{NEG}, v\phi (\text{non-rational})] / V +$

Having a single VI for *-illai* which is underspecified for temporo-modal features accounts for the fact that it is inserted in negative contexts with a featural composition of either [PST, NEG] or [PRS, NEG] without having to postulate two distinct but homophonous forms *-illai*. Futurates differ from simple futures in that they refer to events that are asserted to take place based on conditions at the time of utterance, and can thus only be used in a subset of future time contexts (see Copley 2009 for an illustration of this for English futurates). It follows that they then also have the temporal feature [PRS] and are thus expressed by *-kir-* in affirmative clauses, and *-illai* in negative clauses.

The present proposal deviates from most conventional accounts of negation by allowing the negative feature to merge along with another functional feature in a single head instead of projecting its own phrase (cf. de Clercq 2020; Pollock 1989; Zanuttini 1997), and has the potential to explain a number of cross-linguistic occurrences of tense/aspect/mood conditioned splits in the expression of negation.

Selected References: Amritavalli, Raghavachari. 2014. Separating tense and finiteness: anchoring in Dravidian. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 32. 283–306.; Copley, Bridget. 2009. *The semantics of the future* (Repr). Routledge.; de Clercq, Karen. 2020. *The Morphosyntax of Negative Markers : A Nanosyntactic Account*. De Gruyter Mouton.; Lehmann, Thomas. 1989. *A Grammar of Modern Tamil*. Pondicherry: Pondicherry Institute of Linguistics and Culture.