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PAST TENSE MODALS IN MARI LANGUAGES

Abstract. The article provides an overview of the conditional expressions used in Mari languages. The phenomenon is studied as part of the continuum of Mari grammars. The interpretations of Mari past tense modals¹ are explained with the semantics along with some syntactical and contextual features of the verbal phrase.

Keywords: Mari languages, modality, conditionality, past tense modals.

1. Introduction

In this article, I will discuss how past tense verb forms are used in the Mari languages to express modality, i.e. I will illustrate how some temporal verb forms may have a conditional implication. My main focus is on the interpretations of the modality of the expressions in question. In other words, I will show what kind of features should be taken into consideration when interpreting the modality of those expressions. I will not so much concentrate on the definitions of modality or conditionality, but simply explain the usage of Mari past tense verb forms in conditional expressions.

I have used only written material, leaving out the features of spoken language, such as intonation and gestures, which might otherwise help to understand the modality of a certain expression. I have also limited my study to fiction, because the usage of moods is far more extensive in fiction than in non-fiction.²

2. Modality and conditionality

Modality has been defined by many scholars in many different ways from linguistic as well as from philosophical viewpoints and is often described as the most difficult grammatical category to define (see Nieuwint

¹ The term *past tense modals* has been adopted from F. R. Palmer (2001 : 204).

² In my master's thesis (Ahola 2005) I did also study some newspaper material, which confirmed my assumption that in non-fiction conditionals are practically absent.

1992 : 1). Therefore the terminology used to describe it has not been very comprehensive (see e.g. Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca 1994 : 176; Forsberg 1998 : 35). One approach is to explain modality as the speaker's attitude towards the situation or the status of the proposition (Palmer 2001 : 1).

Traditionally, studies of modality have been based solely on verbal constructions, concentrating in the main on Indo-European languages (Koskinen 1998 : 12). However, current trends in research have shown modality to be a much more extensive phenomenon: modality is semantically connected not only, or even primarily to the verb, but to the entire sentence. In many languages, modality is part of the verbal construction but it can also be expressed lexically. It is also possible that within one language, these grammatical and lexical changes may vary (Palmer 1986 : 5–7). There are several ways of categorizing modality (Palmer 2001 : 8–10; Itkonen 2001 : 111; Bybee, Perkins, and Pagliuca 1994 : 177–181). One way of categorization is to divide modality into epistemic, deontic and evidential types. However, conditionals are in several studies left out of these categories (Palmer 1986 : 188–199).

Conditional expressions (although the classification is not accepted by all linguists) are usually divided into two: the so-called real or open conditionals, which are sometimes called indicative conditionals, and the unreal or hypothetical conditionals, also known as subjunctive conditionals (see Nieuwint 1992 : 2–3; Palmer 1986 : 189–199).

The difference between the two types of conditionals is in the mood of the verb. Real condition is, in many languages, unmarked in the verb. In other words, the verb is in the indicative mood, but the sentence structure expresses some kind of a condition (Palmer 1986 : 189). Unreal condition, on the other hand, has a conditional or a subjunctive³ mood (Palmer 1986 : 191; Nieuwint 1992 : 3). In this paper, I will concentrate on unreal conditionals,⁴ which are, to some extent at least, marked in the verbal phrase.

3. Conditionality of Mari Past Tense Verb Forms

In this chapter I will explain and exemplify what kind of features should be taken into consideration when determining the modality of Mari past tense verbal expressions. Conditionality is a semantic feature, but in the case of Mari languages, semantics cannot be limited to a single morpheme or a single word. Instead, one has to consider how syntax is connected to semantics and how a text should be considered as a whole. Thus I want to emphasize the importance of context. In cases like Mari past tense modality one cannot always understand a solitary sentence or a single verbal phrase without knowing its context. But there is no simple and comprehensive way to define the adequate context for every situation. Sometimes a single

³ The irreal mood has different names in different languages. Erkki Itkonen (1966 : 277) uses the term *conjunctive*, which is common to all modals expressing the speaker's subjective viewpoint. I use the term *conditional*, because it is used in the grammars of Mari.

⁴ The term *conditional* is used here as the name of a morphological mood. It does not include any types of real modality.

word can be enough, but sometimes one needs to be familiar with the entire previous text to be able to understand the modality of a past tense verbal form. This should not be a problem in oral conversations, where the participants are familiar with the entire context and are able to ask questions if uncertain about something. But interpretation of written material sometimes requires knowledge of certain cultural issues. An extreme example of this has to do with regulations of a certain genre. Sirkka Saarinen (1991 : 56–57) claims that some clauses in riddles should be considered as conditionals because of the genre, and goes on to explain that for a riddle, the style and regulations of the genre operate as context, since riddles themselves are only a couple of sentences long, thus not having much of a context to go by. In this paper, however, I will give examples, which are more illustrative than the description above.

The following example 1 is an excellent case of how the interpretation of a sentence is bound to the context. This example also somewhat clarifies the entire topic of this paper.

M⁵ Мый тудлан шканже ыресым ш о г а л т е м ы л е!
 I he-DAT self-DAT-PX3SG cross-ACC put-1COMP.IMP.1SG
 H Мыйнь тейдылан шкыланжы крестым ш а г а л т ы н е м ы л ь ы!
 I he-DAT self-DAT-PX3SG cross-ACC put-1COMP.IMP.1SG
 'I (would) set up a cross for him'⁶

The sentence could mean either 'I set up a cross for him' or 'I would set up a cross for him.' Setting up a cross refers to a cross on somebody's grave. Therefore the modality of the sentence can hardly be recognized without answering the following questions: Who is the person referred to as he? Is this person alive or dead?

As a single sentence taken out of the context, the modality of the phrase would be quite impossible to understand.⁷ Nevertheless, the modality is easily read from the context. The person referred to is a man, who in the story is alive and has set up a couple of crosses for some persons who have died. This man is kind of an anti-hero of the story, and his death is somewhat hoped for. Therefore, the example above has a conditional meaning.

3.1. Protasis-apodosis sentences

A very typical conditional sentence is the type called protasis-apodosis sentences. This type of a sentence is formed by a condition and something that follows if the condition comes true, thus the sentence can be formulated as *if ... , then ...* . The following example is a typical example of such protasis-apodosis sentences. This sentence type is rather easy to detect, even though the use of the conjunction 'if' (М зын, H зынь) is not necessarily required in the sentence (Saarinen 1991 : 35).

⁵ In the examples I will use abbreviation H for Hill Mari and M for Meadow Mari.

⁶ There is no difference between the male and female pronouns in Mari, but I will only use 'he' for the sake of simplicity.

⁷ It could be claimed that the use of the pronoun 'self' adds a kind of emphasis to the phrase and therefore leads the interpretation towards conditionality.

- М А мый, рвезе-влак, [---] эрыкем лиешыле гын,
 And I, child-PL [---] freedom-PX.1SG be-1COMP.IMP.3SG if,
 Арсенийым кучем да ссылный кулакмыт деке
 Arsenij-ACC catch-1COMP.IMP.1SG and expelled kulak to
 лагерьыш колтемыле
 camp-ILL send-1COMP.IMP.1SG
- Н Мбнь ы л г е ц ы, рвезывля, [---] мыньын властем
 I be-PRES.COND.3SG, child-PL [---] I-GEN power-PX.1SG
 ы л г е ц ы, мямнан Арсенийым наламат, ссылкыштыш
 be-PRES.COND.3SG, us-GEN Arsenij-ACC take-PRES.1SG expelled
 кулаквлан лагерьыш покте н колтемылы
 kulak-PL camp-ILL evict-1COMP.IMP.1SG
 'And I, children, [---] if it was in my power, I would catch Arsenij and
 send him away to the camp of the expelled kulaks'

3.2. *ala* particle

There is a particle *ala* in the Mari languages. This particle, according to Arto Moisio's Mari-Finnish dictionary (1992), renders a sense of probability, expressing possibility, but it can also be used in conditional expressions.⁸ This particle can easily be confused with the homonymic conjunction *ala*, which has the meaning 'or'. Therefore, all expressions including periphrastic past tense verbs and *ala* cannot automatically be considered to be conditionals.

- М Ала, Сергей кугызан озанлыкше дене ушнаш гын,
 Perhaps, Sergej uncle-GEN household-PX.3SG join with if,
 сайрак лиешыле?
 good-COMP be-1COMP.IMP.3SG
- Н Анят, тьотяжын хозяйство доно иктыш
 Perhaps, uncle-GEN household with one-LAT
 пижаши келешылы?
 bond should-COND
 'Perhaps it would be best to hook up together with uncle (Sergej's)
 household?'

As in several other languages, the conditionals of Mari can be used for expressing politeness. In these cases, so-called conditional auxiliaries are often added to imperative verb forms (see 2.2). These polite expressions might also include the *ala* particle, as a suggestion 'perhaps' (Ahola 2005 : 45–46).

3.3. 'but' sentences

Since conditionals — especially conditionals with a past time reference — often express some kind of a desire or another action which has not become true or actualized, conditional sentences are often continued with another clause starting with the conjunction 'but'.⁹ This conjunction does not, of

⁸ A. Moisio gives the Finnish translation *-isi-*, which is the Finnish morphological marker for the conditional.

⁹ See also Matihaldi 1979 : 62.

course, always follow conditionals, but this kind of utterances could be seen as somewhat similar to the protasis-apodosis cases.

М Чыла сай лиешыле, да лач Трофим гына [---]
 Everything good be-1COMP.IMP.3SG, but only Trofim [---]
 Павликлан тудо ййштö шйман
 Pavlik-DAT he cold heart

Н Цила яжо линежы, дä вот Трофим [---] Павылым ак яраты
 Everything, but just Trofim [---] Pavlik-ACC NEG love-PRES.3SG
 'Everything would have been fine, but Trofim [---] (for some reason) does not love Pavel'.

5. Conclusions

Conditionality — as well as modality in general — is a complex linguistic category. The only universal of conditionals is probably the protasis-apodosis sentence structure. I would like to emphasize that the other ways of interpretation presented in this article are generalizations of a kind: in Mari languages the modality of periphrastic past tenses should always be determined not by a generalization or a rule, but solely by the context of the individual case.

Even though the past tense modality of Mari is rather complex in theory, my belief is that the interpretation of modality must be quite straightforward and clear in everyday communication. It is commonly known that a language in use has a tendency to simplify the way of expression. Therefore, if Mari past tense modals were (or had been) difficult to use and understand, it would lead (or would have been led) to the development of some other kind of conditional marker. But as has been the case with the Hill Mari morphological conditional suffix, the development has gravitated towards the opposite direction.

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ЭЛИНА АХОЛА (Турку)

**УПОТРЕБЛЕНИЕ ФОРМ ПРОШЕДШЕГО ВРЕМЕНИ
КАК СПОСОБ ВЫРАЖЕНИЯ МОДАЛЬНОСТИ
В МАРИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ**

В данной статье рассмотрены способы выражения условной модальности в мари́йском языке. В значении кондиционала используются определенные глагольные формы прошедшего времени. Эти формы являются также формами изъявительного наклонения (индикатива), которое служит средством выражения объективной реальной модальности. Опираясь только на морфологические средства, сложно установить тип модального значения в мари́йском языке. Для этого необходимо обратить внимание и на другие средства выражения условной модальности — лексические и семантико-синтаксические, а также на контекст.