

Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe

Source: <http://sci.tech--archive.net/Archive/sci.lang/2005-11/msg00616.html>

- *From:* "Neeraj Mathur" <neemathur@xxxxxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* Sun, 13 Nov 2005 14:17:14 -0000
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"Douglas G. Kilday" <fufuns@xxxxxxxxxxx> wrote in message
news:43759a05_2@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

>

> I'm not sure how realistic "mass migration and mobility" is for medieval
> civilians.

I was thinking in particular of the movements of Germanic peoples from the
5th century on; when do things settle down, as it were?

>> I can see the second stage as being consistent with a general movement
>> towards higher analysis in the languages in question: the preterite is
>> abandoned because of its 'synthetic' morphology.

>

> Aaugh, how Jespersenish! Much more plausible is devaluation of the
> "normal"
> unmarked form (the simple preterite) followed by atrophy of its usage and
> eventual abandonment for the "emphatic" marked form (the compound past).
> But eventually new devices for emphasis must be introduced, and eventually
> the "compound" is phonetically reduced to a "synthetic" inseparable form.
> And the wheel rolls on. The notion of "progress" is no more appropriate
> to
> language than it is to Sisyphus.

I'm not sure this is different from what I was thinking, despite the
inadequacies of my ability to phrase myself. I do not conceive of 'progress'
in language change. Rather, I have noticed that IE languages generally
speaking move towards analysis, with more rigid word orders, analytic
constructions and the loss of inflections. This can be seen from the Celtic
to the Indo-Iranian branches. Only Slavic and Baltic seem to preserve a rich
set of inflections; Tocharian was adding cases to the system before it died
too (and Greek and Sanskrit likely filled out verbal paradigms). I'm aware
that analytic languages may tend to become agglutinative; I've seen some
ingenious descriptions of French in these terms.

So the question becomes, why is the preterite unmarked in relation to the
compound past? I would suggest that the mechanics of the process, their
instigation, and their result are compatible with the general move towards
analysis that IE is undergoing. (It's also a bit problematic to talk about

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their being phonetically recombined into a new synthetic, inseparable form; this does not seem to be happening in these languages, where adverbs etc. force separation.)

- >> Does this sound reasonable? If so, what do we make of American English:
- >> is
- >> its development completely unrelated? (The aspect system of English is,
- >> of
- >> course, significantly different from anything on the continent; when does
- >> this develop?)
- >
- > When English-speakers started adopting periphrastic expressions used by
- > native Insular Celtic-speakers in their ESL, leading to the progressive
- > aspect?

Sounds sensible; then again, the periphrastic forms in Celtic (Welsh is the one I know best) do not exist in an aspectual contrast with inflected forms; they have replaced them (in the present at least). Were they once in an aspectual distinction?

Does anybody know the process, or the appropriate literature, on the development of periphrastic presents in Indo-Aryan? Hindi for example has two presents, both periphrastic, with an aspectual distinction; I wonder how this arose.

Neeraj Mathur

- **Follow-Ups:**

- ◆ **Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe**
◇ From: Douglas G. Kilday

- **References:**

- ◆ **Past Tenses in Western Europe**
◇ From: Neeraj Mathur
- ◆ **Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe**
◇ From: Dik T. Winter
- ◆ **Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe**
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