

Re: Past Tenses in Western Europe

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Douglas G. Kilday wrote:
[...]

This fits well with my view of laziness as the principal engine of linguistic change. The lazy person uses superfluous emphasis to draw attention to his utterances, since it requires less effort than clever phrasing, or for that matter actually doing something notable. Over time, emphatic expressions gradually crowd out normal ones.

There is also the fact that sound changes can obliterate endings and make homophones out of what were different sounding words.

[...]

I don't know, but I don't think it matters to the theory. What matters is that English-speakers (in the theory) picked up expressions like "I am on going to London" from Celtic ESL-speakers, and this new form of conveying the immediate present ("I am a-going" > "I'm going") was eventually interpreted as marking an aspectual distinction in English.

What about all the other languages that (have) developed a progressive? Are you going to posit contact influence in every case? If not how does it come about, why is English different? See Bybee et al, 'Evolution of grammar' for the large number of similar cases.

Tamil is an interesting case: The old present now lives on as future and habitual/generic (though books tend to call it just 'future'). A former progressive (based on literary evidence, the form arose in 6/7 c. CE) is now limited to 'present habitual' (habitual now but did not obtain in the past). There is a new progressive, in regular use. But the past progressive is also used for past 'blocked' habitual: Thus 'Madurai Mani Iyer nanRAka pAtuvAr' is roughly 'MMI was a good singer', [the point is that Mr. Iyer has been dead for years.] but one would say, 'X nanRAka pAtikkoNTiruntAr. ToNTTaiyil kancer vantu viTTatu, pAvam' = 'X used to sing well, but poor guy, got cancer of the throat.'

Here 'pAtuvAr' is what grammar books tend to call the 'future', while 'pAtikkoNTiruntAr' is past progressive.

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I don't see what contact we can find for this.

Nath Rao

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