On the diachrony of grammatical transversality: Exploring the sources of nominal tense, aspect, and mood

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Nominal tense has been a topic of lively debate among linguists at least since Nordlinger and Sadler's (2004) seminal paper, which led to a series of new investigations on the matter and also to a reactive questioning of some of its core assumptions (Tonhauser 2007). Nominal tense, in both its independent and propositional instantiations, has been described in different languages in recent years (Haude 2006, 2010; Adamou 2011; Carol 2011, 2015; Chang 2012; Arka 2013; Mihas 2013; Leisiö 2014; Nikolaeva 2015; Rose 2018; Montes 2019; Aikhenvald 2022; Terhart 2024). Examples (1a-b) illustrate independent nominal tense in Bolivian Guaraní (Bertinetto 2020: 317; PROSP stands for 'prospective' and RETR for 'retrospective'):

(1) a. *A-echa che ro-rã*
1SG-see 1SG house-PROSP
'I see/saw my future house'
b. *A-echa-ta che ro-kue*
1SG-see-FUT 1SG house-RETR
'I will see my former house'

New advances in research have broadened the scope of this phenomenon, which is no longer regarded as a striking feature of just a handful of rare languages across the world. It is, on the contrary, rather widespread in some regions, like e.g. some parts of the Amazonia. In several Mataguayan and Guaicuruan languages, for instance, propositional nominal tense seems to be in the process of becoming grammaticalized. This development may be facilitated by the coexistence of complex deictic determiner systems with evidential semantics and the absence of tense marking in verbal morphology in this group of languages (Grigoreva 2025).

According to different authors, some semantic traits of nominal tense are perhaps best analyzed as pertaining to the domain of aspect, mood, and even evidentiality (for the role of some of these distinctions, see Bertinetto 2020 and Aikhenvald 2022). On the other hand, nominal tense (as well as aspect and mood) can be viewed as a specific manifestation of grammatical transversality or transcategoriality, the ability of grammatical features to be realized or expressed in different lexical classes cross-linguistically. Besides the features already mentioned, this would include others like gender, person, and case (for verbal case, see Evans 1995, Evans & Nordlinger 2004). From a general perspective, features are not exclusively associated with any particular lexical class.

Unfortunately, it turns out that we know very little about the history of these nonverbal markers and their relationship, if any, to their verbal counterparts. A few of those affixes may certainly be diachronically secondary with respect to verbal markers; in other cases, there might be autonomous nominal developments as well. One of the main difficulties in approaching their diachrony is of course the absence of historical records that could shed direct light on the possible evolution of all these markers.

The workshop aims at bringing together historical linguists and typologists who study languages with nominal (or nonverbal) tense in order to identify the possible sources of nominal tense or TAM markers and elucidate pathways of change that can lead to them. In this vein, the research questions we would like to address include (but are not limited to) the following ones:

i) What do we know (or can reasonably infer) about the origin and evolution of nominal tense (mood, aspect) markers?
ii) To what extent can we rely on the comparative method or the internal reconstruction devices to recognize the primacy (or else historically secondary status) of certain forms and values?
iii) What are the possible pathways of change giving rise to nominal tense (aspect, mood) in particular languages?
iv) Do these paths conform to well-known patterns of evolution (like, e.g., grammaticalization, morphologization, etc.)? Are there highly idiosyncratic changes that also result in nonverbal tense?
v) Can independent and propositional nominal tense have different sources? Are we in a position to identify them?
vi) What can be said about the possible diachronic links between values like nominal future and irrealis, on the one hand, and the so-called destinative value of some markers, on the other?
vii) Can the rise of nonverbal tense or TAM be contact-induced, either through matter or pattern replication?

The answers to these (and possibly other) questions will contribute to our understanding of the ways in which nominal tense, as well as other nonverbal features, can arise in languages, while also permitting us to better understand the typological phenomenon as a whole. For this reason, we hope that this workshop will be of interest not only to experts in specific languages, but also to a broader audience of typologists and diachronists.

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