Surveying inflectional synthesis of the verb

Our survey concentrates on the synthesis of inflectional categories with verbs. The prime candidates for this are categories like agreement, tense/aspect/mood, evidentials/miratives, status (realis, irrealis, etc.), polarity (negation), illocution (interrogative, declarative, imperative), and voice. Apart from the better-known and common inflectional categories, the following categories proved to have verbal inflectional reflexes in at least one language: nominalizers, connectives or switch-reference markers (as in Fijian), inverse marking (as in Cree or Chukchi), honorificity (as in Japanese or Korean), pluractionals (e.g. repetition marking in Karok), verb focus or emphasis (as in Maricopa or Pirahã), transitivity markers (as in Fijian), reciprocal affixes and object classifiers. In addition, causatives were judged inflectional in some languages, where these categories are worked into the same paradigms as regular voice values.

Measuring synthesis

Within the same language, verbs can be used with more or less synthesis: the English past, for example, is more synthetic than the future. For surveying purposes, we looked for the maximally inflected verb form, i.e. the one form that is most synthetic, and determined its category-per-word value (“cpw value”). In English, the maximally inflected verb form expresses two categories: agreement (in the present: -s) and tense (past: -ed). The English verb has therefore a synthesis degree of 2 cpw (=categories per word). At one extreme in the sample is Vietnamese, where we found no evidence for any synthetic inflectional category in the verb. The maximally inflected verb in Vietnamese therefore has 0 cpw. At the other extreme are languages like Koasati, whose inflected verb forms can include up to 13 cpw.

In some languages, the same or a similar category can be expressed at various places in the verb. When these places were sufficiently distinct, we counted the category twice (or more). An example is certain kinds of aspect in addition to other kinds of aspect-marking. On the other hand, when two semantically related categories cumulated into one single inflectional slot or morpheme, we counted this as one category (see Chapter 21 on exponence). In particular, unless tense, aspect, and mood were clearly distributed in distinct positions, we counted these as one category (thereby avoiding difficult decisions as to whether something is aspect or tense or mood). When categories were not related, however, we treated them as distinct. Hence, cumulated exponence of agreement and tense, as in German, was coded as two categories. All these issues can be illustrated by an example from Kewa:

**Kewa** (Engan; Papua New Guinea, Franklin 1971: 49f.)

a. ʻiri-b-e
cook-INCEPTIVE-1.SG.PERF.EGOCENTRIC
‘I have begun cooking it’

b. ʻira-paa-ru
cook-COMPLETIVE-1.SG.PST.ALTROCENTRIC
‘I finished cooking it (for someone)’

c. ʻira-wa-de
cook-1SG.PST.EGOCENTRIC-PUNCTILIAR
‘I cooked it’

In such a case, we disregard the issue of whether the perfect is more a tense or an aspect (or neither) and simply count this as one category (“tense/aspect”). This category cumulates with agreement and diathesis-marking (called altrorcentric vs. egocentric benefaction, but akin to active vs. middle voice). Since agreement and diathesis are not related to tense/aspect, we count them each as one category. In addition to the perfect/past marking, there is an inceptive/completive/punctiliar distinction. Since this is marked in a clearly separate position and shows different behavior from the perfect/past distinction, we count this as an additional, separate aspect category. The Kewa forms thus combine the 4 categories (aspect, tense/aspect, agreement, diathesis) shown here (plus polarity and evidentiality not shown here). Agreement was always counted as one category per role (subject agreement, object agreement etc.), no matter how many features are affected by agreement. Thus, agreement in gender was counted the same way as agreement in person, number, gender, and honorificity, etc.