

'Do'-periphrasis as a cross-linguistic predicate focus strategy

Abstract category: oral

Theme session: Predicate-centered focus types

Insertion of an auxiliary equivalent to English *do* into a sentence is a cross-linguistically common strategy for the expression of discourse functions such as predicate focus and topicalization. The sentences in (1) exemplify this. They are marked and contrast with non-periphrastic declaratives that do not highlight the predicate or parts thereof. Based on a sample of 200 languages I will show that this is in fact one of the major functional types of 'do'-periphrasis. It is argued that by virtue of their schematicity 'do'-auxiliaries lend themselves to pragmatic purposes and make this a likely strategy independent of genetic affiliation.

- (1) a. English (Indo-European):
Watch a film he did.
- b. Gude (Afro-Asiatic): [HOSKISON 1975: 228-229]
bələnə nə sətə ci John ada tə bwaya.
kill SUBJUNCTIVE thing CONTINUOUS John do OBJECT leopard
'John is KILLING a leopard now.'
- c. Fon (Niger-Congo): [LEFEBVRE 1991: 40-41]
àsó sò yì àxì-mè wè kókú qê.
crab take go market-LOCATIVE PROGRESSIVE Koku do
'It is bringing a crab to the market that Koku is doing.'
- d. Korean (Isolate): [HAGSTROM 1995: 32-33]
Chelswu-ka chayk-ul ilkki-nun ha-ess-ta.
Ch.-NOMINATIVE book-ACCUSATIVE read-TOPIC do-PAST-DECLARATIVE
'Read the book, Chelswu did.'

Languages with rigid word order often use 'do'-periphrasis to mark non-canonical clause types that display a deviant or irregular word order. The strategy maintains a close approximation of the regular word order, i.e. it upholds the relative order of verb and object. Functionally such clause types are strongly discourse dependent. If the change of canonical word order makes periphrasis obligatory, the resulting periphrasis appears grammatically conditioned, i.e. retaining canonical word order as its chief motivation. 'Do'-periphrasis, however, likewise occurs in languages with relatively free word order. Here the same form-function-relations apply. This suggests a cross-linguistic tendency to associate the aforementioned pragmatic functions directly with 'do'-periphrasis, where degrees of optionality indicate different stages of grammaticalization. That is to say that language A employs periphrasis optionally in contexts that are functionally similar to the contexts that make periphrasis obligatory in language B.

References:

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