The Semantics of Verb-sequencing in Sri Lanka Malay (SLM)

I shall examine multi-verb constructions, using Nordhoff (2009, 2010) as a starting point, and attempt to bring further insights into the semantic import of various verb sequences in contemporary SLM.

I shall look into the ubiquitous *ambel* [ambil, 'take'] and its role as a vector in conveying particular shades of meaning. I shall then go on to examine some other verb combinations that instantiate the rich and varied range of idiomatic expressions in SLM, which seem to have been shaped by the Lankan adstrates, notably Tamil or, rather, its Muslim dialect (popularly known as "Shonam" within the Sri Lankan Moor community).

I will argue that the range of meanings instantiated in some of these constructions is difficult to summarize under a single semantic label. Indeed, on the surface they appear to reflect the type of idiosyncrasy that McWhorter (1998 and elsewhere) argues is typical of older languages. However, in the case of SLM, much of the idiosyncrasy is derived from the substrate languages on which these combinations are calqued.

Where appropriate, I will show that there are instances which suggest that the semantics of SLM verb combinations were determined by Tamil rather than Sinhala.

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