

Functional categories in the syntax and semantics of Malay

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Abstract:

Since the 1980s, most formally-inclined work in syntax has assumed the existence of functional categories and projections headed by them. This assumption has been particularly important in two domains, the clause and the nominal phrase. For Malay varieties, however, surface configurations do not easily lend themselves to an analysis which uses functional categories above N and V. In this paper I take Standard Indonesian as representative of formal Malay varieties and illustrate the problems which arise when functional projections above NP and VP are assumed. I examine evidence from texts to show that explicit anchoring of events with respect to the temporal deictic centre (the moment of utterance) is a rare strategy in Malay discourse. If there is some functional category above VP (or several such categories), this evidence suggests that in many cases the semantic content of these categories, at least for tense and aspect, must be treated as being derived from the context in which an utterance is made by pragmatic inference. If the functional categories are absent, pragmatic inference will be required in any case, and therefore it can be argued that using those functional categories adds unnecessary complexity to the analysis. This argument leads to the conclusion that it is necessary to take a more nuanced view of functional projections in Malay, with some (polarity and modality) being seen as obligatory and others (tense/aspect and determiners) being seen as optional.

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