Languages of Southeast Asia : a stake for linguistic theories

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In descriptions of Southeast Asian languages, notions of grammaticalization and secondly pragmaticalization, occupy an important place. This focus on grammaticalization is well justified according to the assumption that, unlike Indo-European languages, there is no obligatory category in these languages [cf. Bisang, 2009 for discussion].

This kind of approach is based on the hypothesis that it is possible to establish a distinction between grammar and lexicon. In Indo-European languages, this distinction has a certain **empirical** base, especially due to the importance of morphology, but in view of other language families, starting with Southeast Asian languages, such distinction could not be established on a **theoretical** ground.

In recent years, the issue of **universality** of categories is subject to numerous discussions (cf. Haspelmath, 2007). In our opinion, a category is viewed as a set of concepts and abstract operations that define invariable formal properties. Through a selection and a combination of such properties, various groupings can be formed that lead to a multiplicity of possible realizations according to the languages in question. From this perspective, a strict distinction between grammar and lexicon cannot be maintained. Depending on the markers at stake, each language can be considered a particular realization of such and such category. Taking into account the diversity of possible realizations contribute in return to the enrichment of general reasoning regarding the status of the category at stake.

These considerations will be demonstrated through a discussion on the status of two categories in certain Southeast Asian languages:
-   **plurality** that we will oppose to the category of "number", founded on the singular/plural opposition in Indo-European languages;
-   **aspect.** We will review the relevance of the distinction between "perfective" and "imperfective" used by various scholars (cf. Jenny - 2005 for Mon, Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom - 2005 for Thai, Romeo - 2008 for Burmese) in order to define certain methods of determining the process.

Review of the status of categories and the lexicon/grammar distinction is inseparable from the issue of polysemy and semantic identity of items: we will defend the hypothesis (put into play in the descriptions that we have proposed for *baan, ʔaɔj, trew*) that there is no reason to prefer any one meaning as primary. Once again, diversity of languages becomes a stake for linguistic theory, as shown by the following examples where the same notion/cognate can be expressed by a lexical unit (French/English), by a prefix attached to the verb (Russian), or even by a serial construction (Paamese, Khmer), suggesting that the distinction between grammar and lexicon varies from one language to another.

> ❖ **French** : *tuer un cochon* **English** : *to kill a pig*
>   **Russian** : *u* (prefix) - *bit* to beat*, svinju* pig
>   **Paamese** (Cowley, 2002) :   *inav ni-vasi wasi hee-mate*
>   1sg 1sg-to beat pig 3 sg - '*to die*';

> ❖ **French** : *trouver* **English** : *to find*
>   **Russian** : *na* (prefix) *idti* aller
>   ***Khmer*** : *rɔk* look for + *baan* obtain.

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