

Negation as a “Floating” Feature: evidence from Tamil

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The South Dravidian language Tamil has an interesting asymmetry in the expression of temporality in affirmative and negative clauses (see, e.g. Lehmann 1989: §1.39, 3.45). Where affirmative clauses have three verbal temporal suffixes *-t-*, *-kir-*, and *-v-* which appear in past, present, and future time contexts, respectively, in negative clauses, verbs instead have a single negative suffix *-illai* which appears in past and present (and occasionally future) time contexts, as well as two negative suffixes *-matt-* and *-aatu* exclusively for future time contexts. The selection of the future negation is based on whether the subject of the clause is *rational* (either an adult human or a deity) or not. This pattern is illustrated in examples (1–4) below, with the a. sentences illustrating affirmative clauses, and the b. sentences illustrating their negative counterparts (adapted from Lehmann 1989: 65–67).

- (1) a. **Pōṇa mātam nāṇ** Kumārai pār-**tt-ēṇ**.
last month I Kumar.ACC see-PST-1 SG
'Last month I saw Kumar.'
- b. **Pōṇa mātam nāṇ** Kumārai *pār-**tt-/pārka-villai/*māṭṭ-ēṇ**.
last month I Kumar.ACC see-PST-/see-INF-ILLAI/MATT-1 SG
'Last month I didn't see Kumar.'
- (2) a. Kumār **ippōtu** tūṅku-**kir-āṇ**.
Kumar now sleep-PRS-3 SG.M
'Kumar is sleeping now.'
- b. Kumār **ippōtu** *tūṅku-**kir-/tūṅka-villai/*māṭṭ-āṇ**.
Kumar now sleep-PRS-/sleep-INF-ILLAI/MATT-3 SG.M
'Kumar isn't sleeping now.'
- (3) a. **Aintu varuṭattil** Kumār veḷināṭṭiliruntu tirumpi varu-**v-āṇ**.
five in.years Kumar from.abroad return come-FUT-3 SG.M
'In five years Kumar will come back from abroad.'
- b. **Aintu varuṭattil** Kumār veḷināṭṭiliruntu tirumpi *varu-**v-/vara-māṭṭ-āṇ/*-ātu/?illai**.
five in.years Kumar from.abroad return come-FUT-/come-INF-MATT-3 SG.M/-AATU/ILLAI
'In five years Kumar won't come back from abroad.'
- (4) a. **Aṭutta vāram** pēruntu var-**um**.
next week bus come-FUT.3 SG.N
'The bus will come next week'
- b. **Aṭutta vāram** pēruntu *varu-**v-/var-ātu/*vara-māṭṭ-tu/*vara-villai**.
next week bus come-FUT-/come-AATU/come-INF-MATT-3 SG.N/come-INF-ILLAI
'The bus won't come next week.'

Amritavalli (2014) provides an analysis for this pattern, based largely on data from Kannada, another Dravidian language. She proposes that Dravidian languages are in general tenseless, with the markers *-t-*, *-kir-*, and *-v-* being aspectual in nature. They are ruled out in negative clauses because the Asp head is argued to be specified for positive polarity and is consequently not licensed by negative *-illai*. Negative clauses are thus completely lacking in temporal specification in Tamil. There are two main problems with this analysis. First, a parallel-corpus-based study has shown that the markers *-t-*, *-kir-*, and *-v-* distribute like deictic tense forms in Germanic and Romance, rather than non-deictic (perfective and imperfective) aspectual forms in the same languages (Suresh 2024). Second, since Kannada lacks cognates for the future negations *-matt-* and *-aatu*, Amritavalli focusses exclusively on the form *-illai* and her analysis is thus based on the incorrect assumption that negative clauses in Tamil lack temporal specification across the board.

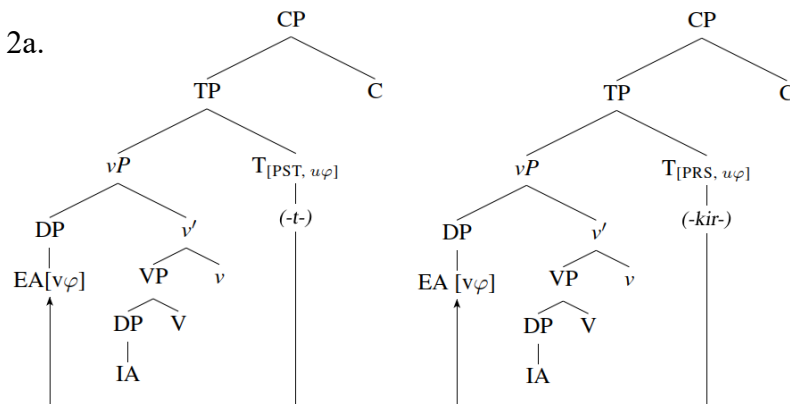
We proceed with the assumption (contra Amritavalli 2014) that the Tamil clause does in fact consistently have tense. In affirmative clauses, there is a past-present-future division of labour between forms, while in negative clauses, there is only a future-non-future division. The non-future negation *-illai* is available in a restricted class of contexts with future time reference, where the

affirmative sentence would use the marker *-kir-*. This possibility is also available in languages like English as in (5) below, termed *futurates* by Copley (2009)

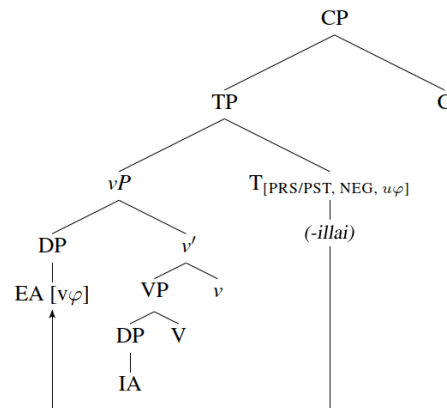
- (5) a. John arrives/is arriving tomorrow.
b. John doesn't arrive/isn't arriving tomorrow.

We explain the Tamil paradigm as follows: the forms *-illai*, *-matt-*, and *-aatu* are portmanteaus that spell out a combination of tense features, a negative feature, as well as valued ϕ -features all of which reside at the head of the TP. Additionally, in line with Copley (2009) and many others, the future tense is assumed to be inherently modal in nature, which we take to correspond to a feature termed FUT-MOD. This reduces the future-non-future split to a modal-non-modal split, which is a clearer binary. The derivations for the contexts in (1–4) are illustrated below.

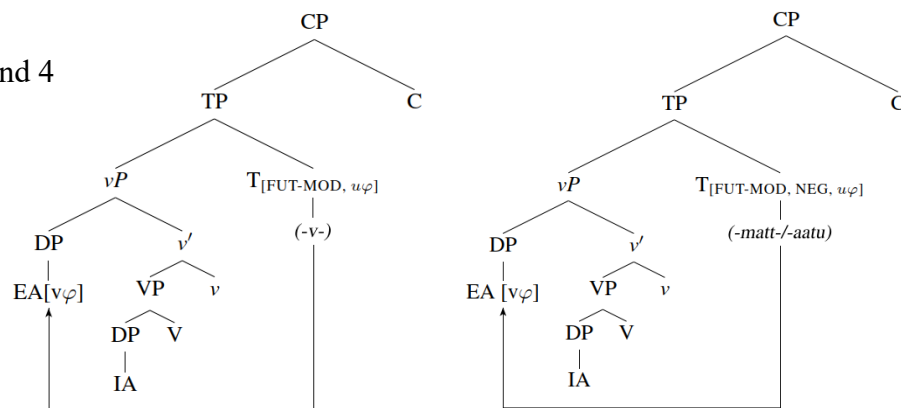
Trees for 1a. and 2a.



Tree for 1b. and 2b.



Trees for 3 and 4



It should be noted that we deviate from most conventional accounts of the syntax of negation in that we assume that the negative feature in Tamil does not head its own projection (cf. de Clercq 2020; Pollock 1989; Zanuttini 1997), but is merged along with tense and unvalued ϕ -features in the same head. We recognise that in principle, the Tamil data is not incompatible with a NegP-based account, with the Neg head subsequently ‘fused’ with or raising to the tense head by a (post-)syntactic operation to feed spell-out. We opt, however, for a NegP-free account on grounds of parsimony (see also Breitbarth 2017 for a historical argument against the ‘NegP-hypothesis’). We posit furthermore, that the availability of such a non-projecting “floating” Neg feature may account for a number of cross-linguistic occurrences of tense/aspect/mood conditioned splits in the expression of negation (de Clercq 2020). Indeed, even in a language like English which lacks any splits in the negative paradigm, the Neg feature may be argued not to project its own phrase. The main difference when compared to a language like Tamil under this analysis is that the default sentential negator *-n’t*, which Zwicky & Pullum (1983) show to be a suffix, only spells out the Neg feature itself, with a host auxiliary spelling out the temporal-aspectual-modal features (in the case of the simple past or present, the ‘dummy’ auxiliary *do*). Finally, we predict that the type of negative feature available to a given language (projecting or “floating”) is parametrically determined and that once set, a single language would not have both types of Neg features.

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