



A Diachronic Hypothesis about Imperfective *unnu* in Malayalam

K.J. Gouthaman ^{a,*}

^a Research Scholar, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

* Corresponding author Email: gouthamanharipad@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54392/ijll2241>

Received: 21-08-2022, Revised: 01-10-2022; Accepted: 03-10-2022; Published: 07-10-2022



Abstract: Across languages, the imperfective is associated with three distinct readings – “event in progress”, “habitual or generic” and “continuous” with stative predicates. In Malayalam, the suffix *unnu* had been identified as the imperfective suffix in linguistic literature. However, it has been noted in subsequent studies that the “generic or habitual” reading with *unnu* is distinctly different from a typical generic reading and that such ‘typical generic’ readings are obtained by the modal *um* in Malayalam. This has also led to the claim that *unnu* is not an imperfective marker, but an iterative pluractional bundled with progressive aspect. This paper attempts to deal with this puzzle differently, arguing that *unnu* is a progressive marker in the process of becoming an imperfective in Malayalam. A description of the properties of *unnu*-sentences, contrasting them with sentences that use the progressive marker *uka* and sentences that use the modal/generic marker *um*, is attempted. The paper also explores the role of *uND(ə)*, the existential copula, in obtaining habitual and episodic readings with *unnu*. This alternative account for *unnu* is shown to be supported by opinions of traditional grammarians in history as well as theories of grammaticalization in diachronic semantics. It is also hypothesized that this process is blocked or halted in Malayalam by a suffix devoted to generic constructions and previously unexplored in the literature.

Keywords: Imperfective, Progressive, Grammaticalization, Genericity, Modality, Perfect.

About the Authors



Gouthaman K. J. is a research scholar at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, awaiting the viva voce examination. His primary research interests are syntax, semantics, and morphosyntax. He has worked on modal elements, aspect auxiliaries, and case markers during his doctoral research.

1. Introduction

Aspect is a grammatical notion related to the temporality of a proposition, like Tense. While Tense may be roughly equated with the temporal reference of an event, Aspect can be equated with a perspective about the “internal temporal constituency of a situation” (Comrie, 1976). Generally, a distinction is made between lexical aspect and grammatical aspect, the former referring to a lexical property of the verb such as ‘stative’ and the latter referring to some kind of relation between the event time (ET or E) and reference time (RT or R). Languages can express grammatical aspects such as perfective, imperfective, and progressive and progressive is widely accepted as a sub-case of imperfective aspect. In this paper, the primary focus is on the imperfective and progressive aspect markers in Malayalam.

Across many languages, it has been noted that the same morphological form is used to convey both ‘event in progress’ and habitual interpretations and there have been studies attempting to unify these two readings of the imperfective such as Deo (2009). There has also been a unifying attempt that considers the crosslinguistic similarity between habitual and counterfactual constructions as well (Ferreira, 2016). Although this paper adopts some notions



from these predecessors, it is not a unifying attempt using formal tools and counterfactual constructions are not discussed because of their structural dissimilarity with habitual constructions in Malayalam.

In Malayalam, a Dravidian language principally spoken in the southernmost state of India, Kerala, Tense and Aspect are realized as suffixes in agglutinated verbal constructions, which often involve auxiliaries, forming complex predicates that are sometimes called ‘compound tense constructions.’ The suffix *unnu* had been classified either as a present tense suffix or as an imperfective marker in earlier linguistic works on Malayalam (Asher & Kumari, 1997; Amritavalli & Jayaseelan, 2005). However, argues that *unnu* is an iterative pluractional bundled with viewpoint aspect Swenson (2019). One of the principal motivations for her account comes from Hany Babu (2006), who argues that *unnu*-sentences in Malayalam do not obtain truly generic interpretations. His argument is that the generic-like reading of *unnu* is because of an extensional generic operator and not because of the imperfective semantics of *unnu*. In section 2, I will briefly look at the various readings of *unnu* and demonstrate that *unnu* obtains a range of interpretations similar to an imperfective suffix, in spite of the exceptions. The exceptions are attempted to be descriptively accounted for, while also examining some of the core arguments from Hany Babu (2006) regarding some of these. In section 3, the arguments for the pluractional account in are reviewed and examined critically Swenson (2019). This section is also a further exploration of the properties of *unnu*. Section 4 attempts an alternative account and presents a diachronic hypothesis regarding *unnu*. Section 5 offers concluding remarks.

2. The range of interpretations of *unnu*— imperfective or progressive?

In English, the imperfective aspect, or informally the ‘Simple Present’ form, is not used to denote an ‘event in progress’. The progressive aspect, or the ‘-ing form’ is used to denote an ‘event in progress’. Similar is the case in many languages that have two distinct morphemes for progressive and imperfective aspects. However, in many languages, an imperfective aspect marker is used to obtain three different readings— “event in progress”, “habitual or generic”, and “continuous” with stative predicates. An example from Gujarati is given below.

1)

a.	niśā	(atyāre)	roṭli	banāv-e	che
	N.NOM.SG	now	bread.NOM.SG	make-IMPF.3SG	PRES.3SG
	‘Nisa is <i>making</i> bread (right now)’				<i>event in progress</i>
b.	niśā	(roj)	roṭli	banāv-e	che
	N.NOM.SG	everyday	bread.NOM.SG	make-IMPF.3SG	PRES.3SG
	‘Nisa <i>makes</i> bread (everyday)’				<i>characterizing</i>
c.	niśā	navsāri-mā	rah-e	che	
	N.NOM.SG	Navsari-LOC	live-IMPF.3SG	PRES.3SG	
	‘Nisa <i>lives</i> in Navsari’				<i>continuous</i>

(Deo, 2015, p14:4: 3a-c)

In Malayalam, the imperfective *unnu* can obtain all of these readings. This is exemplified in (2). However, there are indeed some differences from the Gujarati examples above. While the Malayalam sentences (2a) and (2c) are quite similar to the Gujarati examples structurally, the sentence in (2b) is a cleft construction and it requires the quantifier *ennum* (everyday) and the equative copula *aaNə* (be) to obtain the characterizing interpretation. In this paper, it is argued that this is generally how *unnu* receives characterizing interpretations in Malayalam.

2)

a.	amma	(ippoL)	dosa	uNDaakk-unnu	
	mother	now	dosa	make-IMPF	
	‘Mother is <i>making</i> dosa (right now)’				<i>event in progress</i>



b. amma	ennum	dosa aaNə	uNDAakk-unn-athə
mother	everyday	dosa EQ	make-IMPF-NOM

'Mother *makes*dosa everyday' (Lit. It is dosa that mother makes every day) *characterizing*

c. achu	haiderabaad-il	jiivikk-unnu
N.NOM	Hyderabad-LOC	live-IMPF

'Achu *lives* in Hyderabad'

continuous

The question is why an imperfective construction would require this additional support of a universal quantifier and an equative copula denoting i-level(individual-level) predication to obtain generic interpretations. The data becomes even more puzzling when we consider the fact that certain universal truths can be conveyed by *unnu*-sentences without clefting, as in (3). Hany Babu (2006) demonstrates that there is the possibility of obtaining certain habitual readings with *unnu* when there is a set time limit. An example of this is given in (4b). Hany Babu (2006) argues that this is because an episodic predicate with a situation argument gives an 'unbounded' reading when quantified by the extensional operator, giving rise to an undesirable interpretation that the event has been occurring from time immemorial, making sentences like (4a) unable to get generic interpretation. On the other hand, when the time limit is set as "for one week" or "since Monday", as in (4b), the quantification is over a limited set of episodes in the set time interval.

3)

suuryan	kizhakkə	udikk-unnu
sun	east	rise-PRES

'The sun rises in the east' (Hany Babu, 2006, p9:1b)

4)

a. ravi	(#ennum)	yoga	cheyy-unnu
N.NOM	everyday	yoga	do-IMPF

Intended: 'Ravi does yoga everyday'

Acceptable: 'Ravi is doing yoga'

b. ravi	thinkaL	mudal	ennum	yoga	cheyy-unnu
N.NOM	Monday since	everyday	yoga	do-IMPF	

'Ravi has been doing yoga every day since (last) Monday'

While it remains puzzling that *unnu* can obtain universal truth statements like (3), apparent habitual constructions denoting individuals' habits such as (4b) can be explained in a different manner. First, let's look at the non-generic use of *unnu* in (4a). (4a) is unable to receive a generic interpretation and even the quantifier meaning 'everyday' is barred in this sentence, or at least, unacceptable to most speakers. How is it then that (4b) with an adverbial PP becomes accepted as 'generic'? It is argued that this is actually not a generic sentence but a Universal Perfect construction. Note that the English translation also demonstrates this. As is conventional in Universal Perfect constructions, the left boundary of the Perfect Time Span (PTS) has to be specified by an adverbial, unless it is given by the context, and the right boundary is given by tense. In (4b), the left boundary is set as 'Monday' and the right boundary is given by an unmarked Present Tense (or a phonetically null Present Tense morpheme). Under this analysis of sentences like (4b) as Universal Perfect, it naturally follows that *unnu* is used as a progressive morpheme and not an imperfective marker in these constructions. There is also an unrealized Perfect operator in such constructions, as common in Malayalam Perfect constructions in the absence of a dedicated Perfect auxiliary in the language.

Hence, it appears that *unnu* is used as an imperfective only in universal truth statements such as (3) and with statives, as in (2c). Cleft constructions such as (2b) obtaining generic interpretations also remain relevant as



part of the puzzle. However, the progressive marker *uka* can also be used in such constructions to give generic readings, as in (5). This clearly indicates that the genericity in these constructions is because of the equative copula *aaNə* and the universal quantifier meaning 'everyday' and not because of an imperfective. Therefore, it appears that *unnu* is a progressive marker in most contexts (eventives) and an imperfective marker only with 'statives' and in universal truths.

5)

Amma	ennum	dosa	aaNə	uNDaakk-uka
mother	every day	dosa	EQ	make-PROG

'Mother *makes* dosa everyday' (Lit. It is dosa that mother makes every day)

Swenson (2019) makes a similar argument regarding *unnu*. The argument is against treating *unnu* as an imperfective marker and is in favour of treating it as a progressive marker. However, her argument is that *unnu* also has properties of an iterative pluractional. In the next section, this argument is briefly reviewed and it is demonstrated to be incorrect. While doing so, progressive constructions with *unnu* are compared with progressive constructions with *uka* and similarly, generic constructions with *unnu* are compared with other generic constructions in Malayalam.

3. Properties of *unnu*— Is it a Pluractional?

Pluractional markers are verbal suffixes used to denote a plurality of events, similar to plural markers on nouns. An iterative pluractional is a pluractional that allows for the plurality of events to be 'easily individuable' and not conceived as a single event (Henderson, 2015, p1). Swenson (2019) argues that the Malayalam *unnu* has iterative pluractional properties. She argues that sentences such as (6a) and (6b) denotes such a plurality of events and that the adverbs used in the corresponding English translations hints at this pluractional property.

6)

a.	avaL	tumm-unn-unD-aayirunnu
	she	sneeze-PROG-EX-be PAST

'She was in a state of sneezing every few seconds (say because she has a cold)'

(Swenson, 2019, p140: 24a)

b.	avan marikkumpoL	avan	avan-te	aatmakatha	ezut-unn-uND-aayirunnu
	he	die-UM-when	he	he-GEN autobiography	write-PROG-EX-be.PAST

'He was writing his autobiography when he died'

(Swenson, 2019, p138: 19a)

Firstly, let's examine the sentence in (6a). Although Swenson gives it a translation as given in the example, it could be very well translated as 'She had been sneezing', especially when there is a contextually salient temporal interval. This means that (6a), like (4b) we discussed earlier, is a Universal Perfect construction. It is also arguable that the existential copula *unDə* is actually used as the Perfect auxiliary in this case. However, since this argument is beyond the scope of this paper, I do not divulge into the details of this second claim. Treating (6a) as a Universal Perfect and considering the fact that 'sneeze' is a punctual semelfactive verb, it is only conceivable that multiple events of sneezing happened in the salient time interval, the PTS (Perfect Time Span). This means that the sentence in (6a) does not require a pluractional analysis to account for the 'multiple events reading'.

Next, let's discuss the sentence in (6b). In Swenson's argument, (6b) is acceptable only in a context where the individual's death occurs not while he is in the actual process of writing his autobiography (Context A). It is argued that only an *uka* progressive can be used to denote a context in which the person dies while actually writing his autobiography (Context B). This is an incorrect claim. While it is right to claim that an *uka* progressive can only be used in Context B, *unnu* construction can be used in both contexts A and B. Besides, the sentence in (6b) also appears to be a Universal Perfect and the correct translation would be 'He had been writing his autobiography when



he died'. This suggests that the "writing" started at an earlier point compared to the Reference Time given by Past tense. This is probably what creates the sense that multiple writing events 'had been happening' when the individual died. The argument in this paper is that such interpretations arise due to the properties of Universal Perfect and not because of any pluractional property. In order to see the contrast, look at examples in (7) without the auxiliary complex *uNDaayirunnu*.

7)

a. avaL tumm-unnu

she sneeze-PROG

'She is sneezing' (OK when there is only a singular event of sneezing)

b. avanavan-te aatmakatha ezut-unnu

he he-GEN autobiography write-PROG

'He is writing his autobiography' (OK even when he has just started writing it)

Hence, I have demonstrated that a pluractional account for *unnu* is uncalled for and that *unnu* generally acts as a progressive in episodic sentences with eventives. What remains to be explored is why and how it obtains generic interpretations in some cases and 'continuous' readings with statives. In the case of statives, there is a clear contrast between the readings of *uka*-sentences and *unnu*-sentences, as shown in (8) and (9). The sentence in (8) clearly denotes a 'continuous' state of his love towards her, while the sentence in (9) denotes some specific activity of affection he is showing towards her. Speakers might find (9) odd when uttered without a context, but in a given context, interpreting 'loving' as an activity or as a temporally contingent stativity, it is acceptable. Hence, in the case of statives, *unnu* seems to be performing the role of an imperfective, giving rise to 'continuous' interpretations, distinct from *uka* constructions.

8)

Avan avaL-e sneehikk-unnu

He she-ACC love-IMPF

'He loves her'

9)

Avan avaL-e snehikk-uka-aaNə

He she-ACC love-PROG-EQ

'He is loving her (showing affection in some manner)'

Next, the paradigm of generic constructions is examined to determine which of the constructions obtain generic or characterizing interpretations with *unnu*, contrasting these constructions with other generic constructions in Malayalam. As Hany Babu (2006) has noted, the default or the most common way of expressing genericity in Malayalam seems to be the modal/generic marker *um*. The modal *um* obtains generic interpretations in the case of universal truths, habitual statements about individuals and characterizing statements with kind-denoting nouns. Examples are given below in (10).

10)

a. suuryan kizhakkə udikk-um

sun east rise-MOD

'The sun rises in the east'

b. ammu ennum raavile kuLikk-um

N. NOM everyday morning bathe-MOD

'Ammu takes bath every morning'



c.	saibiiriyān kokkā	mey maasath-il	kerāLath-il	eth-um
	Siberian	crane	May month-LOC	Kerala-LOC reach-MOD
	‘The Siberian Crane reaches Kerala in the month of May’			

In the previous section, it was demonstrated that *unnu* does not give habitual statements about individuals like in sentence (10b) unless when clefted. It was argued that the genericity in such cleft constructions is not because of *unnu*. It was also discussed that universal truths can be expressed with *unnu*, as in (3). Hany Babu (2006) argues that sentences like (3) are accidental generalizations and not truly characterizing. However, this is an incorrect claim. As shown below, in (11a), *unnu* can express universal truths that are characterizing. In (11a), the earth’s revolution is its characterizing property rather than an accidental generalization. In (11b), it is shown that *unnu* can obtain generic readings with kind-denoting nouns as well. It is argued that (11b) is identical to the generic reading of (10c)

11)

a.	bhuumi	suuryān-e	valamvekk-unnu		
	Earth	Sun-ACC	revolve around-IMPF		
	“The Earth revolves around the Sun”				
b.	saibiiriyān	kokkā	mey maasath-il	kerāLath-il	eth-unnu
	Siberian	crane	May month-LOC	Kerala-LOC reach-IMPF	
	“The Siberian Crane reaches Kerala in the month of May”				

Hence, in summary, with statives, kind-denoting nouns, and in universal statements, *unnu* exhibits the properties of an imperfective and otherwise, with episodic eventives, it acts as a progressive marker. This is a pattern previously unexplored and unaccounted for, in the studies mentioned. In the next section, I will explore possible analyses for *unnu* in this new light and offers a diachronic hypothesis.

4. A hypothesis regarding the grammaticalization of imperfectivity

Grammaticalization is generally used to denote a process by which content words like nouns and verbs become functional words or inflectional markers over a period of time. Other than the grammaticalization of lexical words, it has also been noted that cross-linguistically, some functional words also change in their function over a period of time. Expressions of deontic modality acquire epistemic uses, resultative markers become perfect markers and past tense markers, and so on. One such path of grammaticalization is from the progressive to the imperfective. Expressions primarily employed in the description of ‘events in progress’, gradually acquire generic, habitual, and characterizing interpretations over time, and eventually new expressions dedicated to a ‘progressive’ meaning emerge in the language (Deo, 2015).

One of the important observations regarding the use of *unnu* in generic constructions is that it is not the preferred option, especially in non-literary usage. According to the early twentieth century grammarian A.R. Rajarajavarma, it is also a relatively newer construction compared to the use of *um* in generic constructions. He opines that Dravidian languages use the Future marker (*um*, in the case of Malayalam) to denote “matters pertaining to all times” and “habits” and that the present tense form (*unnu*) is also used in such cases now (Rajarajavarma, 1917). This observation is obviously a century old and by now, the use of imperfective *unnu* in generic constructions is not exactly recent. However, as we have seen, in many kinds of generic constructions, there is still a dis-preference for *unnu*, making the description of its properties ambiguous between an imperfective and a progressive. On the basis of this, it is hypothesized that *unnu* is a progressive marker in a stage of transition into becoming an imperfective marker.

The predecessor of *unnu*, ‘-inru’ in Old Tamil was used as a marker of ‘continuousness’ (Krishnamurti, 2003). In Modern Tamil also, ‘-inru’ is used in a similar role and this supports our argument that *unnu* was diachronically a progressive marker. However, this still does not explain why the transition of *unnu* to an imperfective is halted or incomplete. As observed in the previous section, generic interpretation of *unnu* is limited to kind-denoting nouns, universal truth statements, and statives. One possibility is that this could be because of the competition with other



lexical items that denote genericity in Malayalam. As previously discussed, the modal *um* is used to denote genericity in Malayalam. Nevertheless, it is argued that in addition to *um*, another lexical item denoting genericity is also responsible for the blocking of the grammaticalization. This generic denoting morpheme *aaR* is restricted to habitual statements with individuals and is of an extensional nature, such that it entails the VP event. An example is given below.

12)

Amma (ennum)	dosa	unDaakk-aaR-uNDə
Mother everyday	dosa	make-GEN-EX
"Mother makes dosa everyday"		

In example (12), unlike (2b), the quantifier denoting 'everyday' is optional to convey genericity. In the absence of the quantifier, it has an intermittent extensional reading such as "Mother makes dosa often". This is in contrast to similar constructions with *unnu* that obtains a habitual reading or a Universal Perfect reading. It is argued that this lexical item devoted to habitual readings and the modal generic marker *um* together blocks the grammaticalization of the imperfective *unnu* in Malayalam.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, the properties of the imperfective/progressive morpheme *unnu* in Malayalam is examined, while also discussing relevant arguments from previous studies. Insights from earlier studies regarding the competition with the modal generic marker and typological generalizations regarding paths of grammaticalization have been instrumental in forging the diachronic hypothesis about *unnu* that it is a progressive marker in transition towards an imperfective marker. It was also hypothesized that this transition is blocked by other lexical items that denote genericity, particularly the suffix *aaR*, used to denote habituality with individual-denoting nouns. A comprehensive semantic analysis is not attempted here, but the general understanding of the subset-superset relationship between the progressive and the imperfective and grammaticalization suffices as a beginning point in this venture.

References

- Amritavalli, R., & Jayaseelan, K.A., (2005). Finiteness and Negation in Dravidian, *The Oxford handbook of comparative syntax*, Oxford University Press, 178–220.
- Asher, R.E., & Kumari, T.C., (1997). *Malayalam*. Psychology Press, 491.
- Comrie, B., (1976). *Aspect: An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems*. Cambridge University Press, 156.
- Deo, A., (2015). The semantic and pragmatic underpinnings of grammaticalization paths: The progressive to imperfective shift. *Semantics and Pragmatics*, 8, 1–52. <https://doi.org/10.3765/sp.8.14>
- Ferreira, M., (2016). The semantic ingredients of imperfectivity in progressives, habituals, and counterfactuals. *Natural Language Semantics*, 24, 353–397.
- Hany Babu, M.T., (2006). Genericity, Quantification and Modality: The Many Faces of *um* and *-unnu* in Malayalam. *CIEFL Occasional Papers in Linguistics*, 12.
- Henderson, R., (2015). *Pluractionality in Mayan*. *The Mayan Languages*, Routledge.
- Krishnamurti, B., (2003). *The Dravidian Languages*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511486876>
- Peet, J., (1841). *A grammar of the Malayalam language, as spoken in the principalities of Travancore and Cochin, and the districts of North and South Malabar*. Church Mission Press. <http://doi.org/10.20345/digitue.12627>
- Rajarajavarma, A.R., (1917). *Kerala Panineeyam*. Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd, 364.



- Reichenbach, H., (2012). The tenses of verbs. Time: From Concept to a Narrative Construct: A Reader, De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110227185.1>
- Swenson, A., (2017). The Morphosemantics and Morphosyntax of the Malayalam Verb. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 256. <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/113774?show=full>
- Swenson, A., (2019). Malayalam Verbs: Functional Structure and Morphosemantics. De Gruyter Mouton, 137. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501510144>

Funding

No funding was received for conducting this study.

Does this article screened for similarity?

Yes.

Conflict of interest

The Author has no conflicts of interest to declare that they are relevant to the content of this article.

About The License

© The Author 2022. The text of this article is open access and licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

