Aspect and modality in Malagasy maha
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The Malagasy prefix maha- is traditionally analyzed as being ambiguous between a causative and an abilitive (Rajaona 1972, Dez 1980). In addition, maha- appears to force otherwise atelic predicates to be telic. Phillips (2000) and Travis (2010) argue that maha- creates achievements. In this paper, however, we argue against the lexical aspect analysis. We also consider but reject treating maha- as encoding grammatical aspect (perfective or perfect). We explore instead a modal analysis.

As illustrated below, maha- can be interpreted as abilitive (1a) or causative (1b).

(1a) Mahaongotra ravina Rabe b. Mahafinaritra an’ i Soa Rabe
   ‘Rabe can pull out roots.’ ‘Rabe makes Soa happy.’

Phillips (2000) unites these two readings by considering the role played by the root. Phillips also argues that verbs with maha- are telic (2) and suggests they are achievements (see Travis 2010).

(2) Nahasambotra ny zaza # nefa faingana loatra ilay alika
   PST.AHA.captive DET dog DET child but quick too DEF dog
   ‘The child caught the dog. . . but the dog was too quick.’

The telic analysis of maha- faces empirical challenges. Unlike what has been observed for bare noun interpretation in telic contexts in languages like Chinese and Japanese (de Swart 2013), bare nouns in Malagasy retain their indefinite and number neutral reading with maha-.

(3) Nahafongana trano ny fahavalo.
   PST.AHA.destroy house DET enemy
   ‘The enemy destroyed house/s.’

Second, data from adverbs show that maha- verbs do not pattern with achievements. For example, saika ‘almost’ can be interpreted as scalar (the woman started but did not finish).

(4) Saika nahaorina trano iray io vehivavy io.
   almost PST.AHA.build house one DEM woman DEM
   ‘This woman almost built a house.’

Moreover, maha- verbs can be modified by adverbs such as ‘gradually’, which are incompatible with achievements (Piñón 1997). We therefore reject a lexical aspect analysis of maha-.

It can also be shown that maha- does not encode grammatical aspect. Unlike perfective, it is not used in narratives to show sequence of events, it does not create inchoatives with stative verbs, and it is compatible with the present tense. On the other hand, maha- verbs do pattern in many ways with the perfect; this analysis, however, leaves unexplained the abilitive reading (1a).

We follow Phillips (2000) in analyzing maha- as a morpheme that adds an external argument to a root. As well as modifying argument structure, maha- encodes an ability modal (Dez 1980). As with ability modals in certain other languages (Bhatt 1999, Hacquard 2006), however, there is an actuality entailment in the past tense.

(5) Nahatsidika an’ i Kanada aho # nefa nitety an’ i Amerika.
   PST.AHA.visit ACC DET Canada 1SG(NOM) but PST.AT.LOC ACC DET America.
   ‘I could have visited Canada but I went to America.

Unlike the languages discussed by Bhatt and Hacquard, Malagasy past tense is not perfective (see above). Therefore it is the ability modal itself that introduces an actuality implicature that can be cancelled in the present tense. We conclude with a discussion of the typology of the observed interactions between ability modals and aspect, as well as cross-linguistic variation in actuality entailments.
References