

Heritage languages and the ontogeny of grammaticalization processes: The case of *ada* in heritage Ambon Malay and Sri Lanka Malay

Heritage languages—minority varieties spoken in diaspora communities, typically across two to three generations (roughly 50–75 years)—provide a natural laboratory for studying language-contact phenomena as they unfold. Because change is often still emergent, heritage settings let us observe how innovative forms arise and spread through a speech community, and how processes such as contact-induced grammaticalization develop in real time. This makes it possible to relate incipient or ongoing changes in relatively young contact situations to outcomes that may become full-fledged in varieties with a longer contact history (Backus, Doğruöz & Heine 2011).

In this study, Heritage Ambon Malay in the Netherlands (also known as *Melayu Sini*) and Sri Lankan Malay provide a particularly informative comparison. Ambon Malay in the Netherlands represents a prototypical heritage language with roughly 75 years of contact with Dutch (Tahitu 1989; AUTHOR). Sri Lankan Malay, by contrast, has been spoken in Sri Lanka since the mid-seventeenth century and reflects a much longer and more intense contact history, one associated with more extensive grammatical restructuring (Nordhoff 2009, Slomanson 2013).

In this paper, I examine the trajectory of the (originally) progressive marker *ada*, which displays innovation in its usage in heritage Ambon Malay (see example 1) and it developed into the prefix *ar(à)-*, a present tense marker, in Sri Lanka Malay (see example 2).

(1) HERITAGE AMBON MALAY IN THE NETHERLANDS

Parampuang *ada* pata kayo jadi dua
girl PROG snap stick become two
'A girl snaps a stick in half (into two).' (AUTHOR)

(2) SRI LANKA MALAY

Java ar-omong cingala podiyeng buk-pəḍə=yang gulputi attu=na ε-kasi aḍa.
Malay PRS-speak Sinhala boy book-PL=ACC white.person INDF=DAT PRF-give AUX
'The Sinhalese boy who speaks (Sri Lankan) Malay has given the books to a white person.' (Slomanson 2013)

Compared with homeland speakers, heritage speakers of Malay in the Netherlands use *ada* more frequently, including in contexts like (1) where the event is punctual (e.g., snapping a stick) and thus does not naturally invite a progressive interpretation. This rise in frequency may be an early sign of contact-induced grammaticalization (Hengeveld 2011: 590). In the homeland variety, the existential marker *ada* can function as a progressive aspect marker; in the heritage variety, however, speakers often use it in a way that aligns more closely with the Dutch present tense. Put differently, the data suggest that *ada* is developing into a marker of present tense in Heritage Malay. Notably, this shift in both frequency and temporal function parallels a change reported for Sri Lankan Malay, where the former progressive marker *ada* has—under sustained contact with Sri Lanka's languages—developed into an obligatory present-tense marker with non-stative verbs.

By comparing the incipient reanalysis of *ada* in heritage Ambon Malay with its fully grammaticalized reflex *ar(à)-* in Sri Lanka Malay, the study shows that heritage varieties can shed light on different stages along the same contact-induced grammaticalization path from progressive marker to present-tense prefix .

References

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