

## A Morpho-syntactic Analysis of Finiteness in Telugu – Negatives

Kothakonda Suman

Ph.D scholar, Department of Linguistics and Contemporary English, EFL -University, India.

---

**ABSTRACT:** This paper calls attention to investigate finiteness with respect to negatives in Telugu and argues (abstract) tense decides finiteness in these clauses. Finiteness in Telugu is a complex phenomenon and it does not lend itself to a strait forward analysis. In general, clauses have been universally categorized as finite and non-finite. Yet languages seem to differ considerably in terms of the nature of the finiteness. Cross-linguistically, it has been observed that neither tense nor agreement comes under universal category. Therefore, anything which is chosen from the above two will be absent in a number of languages. However, we find that in Telugu tense is not always present overtly whereas agreement is present only in some constructions. Negatives and modals and a few embedded clauses lack agreement although they are considered to be finite. This paper examines and argues that tense plays primary role to decide finiteness in Telugu.

**KEYWORDS:** Finiteness, Negatives, Tense, Agreement, Nominative NP.

---

### I. INTRODUCTON

There are four major Dravidian languages in India. Telugu is one of them; the other Dravidian languages are: Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam. It is noted that in Telugu, Tamil and Kannada the finite verb inflects for both tense and agreement but in Malayalam the finite verb inflects only for tense. In this study, I would like to examine Telugu finite clauses and find out what determines finiteness in Telugu. In this language, the verb exhibits rich inflectional morphology. Telugu belongs to south-central and is sub-branch of Proto-Dravidian language family. Telugu is the official language of Andhra Pradesh (AP). The unmarked word order is SOV. However, In Telugu, the subject and object NPs can be permuted, but the verb generally sticks to its sentence –final position. In this language, it is too difficult to identify the feature which is responsible for finiteness.

This paper defines finiteness as a morphosyntactic feature and finds out what determines finiteness in the negatives. In Telugu, Negative markers occur in the post-verbal position before PNG features. We examine, in this paper, *-a* and *-Iē* two negative markers in Telugu with respect to tense and agreement inflections. In Telugu *-a* and *-Iē* negative markers which represent non-past and past. The negative verb root *-Iē* ‘to be not’ occurs as the main verb as shown in the below example (6). *-Iē* negative marker can also occur with the main verbs in the non-past tense when agreement presents in the sentences.

1. ataḍu ka:rya:layani-ki vell-a-ḍu  
He-nom office-dat go-neg-PNG  
He doesn't go office.

2. nenu ka:rya:layani-ki vell-a-nu  
I-nom office-dat go-neg-PNG  
I don't go office.

It is already noted that *-a* negative marker occurs in non-past only as shown in the above examples (1-2). Both of them show agreement but they have present tense reading but they lack overt tense marker. And they cannot occur with *ninna* ‘yesterday’.

3. \*ataḍu *ninna* ka:rya:layani-ki vell-a-ḍu  
He-nom yesterday office-dat go-neg-PNG  
He didn't go office yesterday.

However, we know that the above negative clauses (1-2) are finite as they can stand alone and moreover they have nominative NPs which are licensed by the tense.

4. wa:ru sinima-ki ra-**lē-ḍu**  
 They-nom movie-dat come-neg-def-agr  
 They did not come to movie.

5. aame sinima-ki ra- **lē-du**  
 She-nom movie-dat come-neg-def-agr  
 She did not come to movie.

In the sentences (4-5), the finite verbs don't inflect for tense and agreement overtly. But they can also be considered to be complete finite clauses. Because they can stand there own and they have a nominative subject.

6. ataḍu **ippuḍu** iṅṅilō **lē -ḍu**  
 He-nom now home-in neg-PNG  
 He is not at home now

7. ataḍu **ninna** iṅṅilō **lē-ḍu**  
 He-nom yesterday home-in neg-PNG  
 He was not at home yesterday

8. \*ataḍu **re:pu** iṅṅilō **lē-ḍu**  
 He-nom tomorrow home-in neg-PNG  
 He won't be at home tomorrow

Here, we assume that **-lē** negative marker can occur only in past tense in most of the cases. It represents the completion of the time. In the same way it can't occur in future reading as in sentence (8). This observation leads that there is an abstract tense which assigns nominative case. So, they are finite clauses.

9. ataḍu re:pu iṅṅilō **unḍ-a-ḍu**  
 He-nom tomorrow home-in is-neg-PNG  
 He won't be at home tomorrow

10. ataḍu re:pu iṅṅilō **unḍ-a(lē) ḍu**  
 He-nom tomorrow home-in is-neg-PNG  
 He can't be at home tomorrow

The above data leads us to assume that '**-lē**' can occur with/without main verb. When it comes to '**-a**' which is non-past negative marker can't occur alone/ without main verb. '**-lē**' can be used in the non-past also only when we talk about ability.

11. memu a: panini cey-**a-(lē) -mu**  
 we-nom the work do-neg-(neg)-PNG  
 We can't do the work

It is possible, in Telugu, two negative markers occurs in some constructions within a sentence as shown in (11). It is an independent clause and the presence of nominative NP signals this clause is finite. We have already argued that this nominative NP is licensed by the tense inflection. We can assume that tense is finiteness marker in Telugu until evidence to the contrary is found.

## II. CONCLUSION

In this paper, an attempt is made to define the notion of finiteness in Telugu. It discussed finiteness, in Telugu, is a morphosyntactic phenomenon and it is also stated that (abstract) Tense plays a vital role to determine finiteness in Telugu with respect to negatives or independent clauses. We argued the subject gets nominative case by the Tense not by the Agreement inflection. Finally, it is argued that finiteness is defined as a morphosyntactic feature. Here, I propose that (abstract) Tense is a decisive feature for finiteness in Telugu. Since the Telugu is morphologically rich language there is a lot to explore it.

**REFERENCES**

- [1] Amritavalli, R. and K.A. Jayaseelan, Finiteness and Negation in Dravidian. in Cinque, G. and R. Kayne (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Syntax*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 178-220.
- [2] Chomsky, Noam, *The Minimalist Program* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1995).
- [3] George, L., & Kornfilt, J, *Finiteness and boundedness in Turkish. Binding and filtering*, ed. by Frank Heny, 105-27. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1981).
- [4] Irina Nikolaev, *Finiteness Theoretical and Empirical Foundations* (Oxford University Press. New York, 2007).
- [5] Krishnamurti, B. *The Dravidian languages* (Cambridge University Press. 2003)
- [6] Subbarao, K. V., & Bhaskararao, P. Non-nominative subjects in Telugu. (*TYPOLOGICAL STUDIES IN LANGUAGE*, 2004) 61, 161–196.
- [7] Sudharsan, Anuradha, *A minimalist account of null subjects in Kannada*. Doctoral diss., HCU, Hyderabad, 1998.
- [8] Stowell, T, *The tense of infinitives*. (*Linguistic Inquiry* 13: 1982)561-569
- [9] Tirumalesh, K.V, *Tense, Aspect and Finiteness in Kannada*. *CIEFL Working Papers in Linguistics*. CIEFL Hyderabad. 1985.