The semantic weakening of the irrealis marker in negatives of Tunis Arabic

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This presentation aims to demonstrate how the irrealis marker works in the negatives of Tunis Arabic, and also to explain its semantic weakening in negative environments from a diachronic perspective.

Tunis Arabic has two types of negatives: realis negatives and irrealis negatives (Kumakiri 2019, 2022). The realis negatives are formed by the negative prefix *maː-* and negative polarity items (NPIs) such as *ʃajj* ('thing') and *ħadd* ('someone').

(1)   **maː-klaː**   **ʃajj**
           NEG-he.ate   thing (NPI)
           He didn't eat anything.

The realis negatives always represent categorical negation, stating negative facts situated in the real world alongside positive facts (the concept of realis negatives is also discussed in Mithun 1995 and Elliott 2000 from different perspectives). The negative event described in (1) involves the refusal or avoidance of eating by a certain person.

In contrast, irrealis negatives depict non-actual events that do not correspond to the real world (Elliott 2000, Palmer 2001, Squartini 2014). They are formed using the negative prefix *maː-* and the irrealis suffix *-ʃ* (IRR), as shown in example (2).

(2)   **maː-xðaː-ʃ**   fluːs
           NEG- he.took-IRR   money
           He didn't take money.

The example (2) simply describes an event that did not occur. Therefore, it does not reflect any facts of the real world. The suffix *-ʃ* also functions to mark questions and express uncertainty. Therefore, *-ʃ* can be considered an irrealis marker. However, in prior researches, *-ʃ* in negative environments has been treated as part of a negative circumfix formed with *maː-*, or as an expletive, a meaningless suffix. Although these views are incorrect, it is worth considering why this irrealis marker in negatives seems to lack meaning.

From a diachronic perspective, the negative prefix *maː-* alone used to form categorical (realis) negatives. This usage still persists in idiomatic expressions, as shown in (3).

(3)   illiː   *maː-*jnaːm   il-liːl
           REL   NEG-he.sleeps   the-night
           The one who never sleeps at night (that is, the God).

In this stage, the distinction between realis negatives and irrealis negatives was made by the irrealis marker **-ʃ**.

However, later on, negative polarity items (NPIs) were developed in realis negatives. Since most realis negatives came to be formed by the negative prefix **maː-** and NPIs, the NPIs became markers of realis negatives. Now, the distinction between realis and irrealis negatives is made by realis markers, not the irrealis marker **-ʃ**. This has weakened the functional importance of **-ʃ** in negative environments, rendering it as a meaningless suffix.

References
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