The verbal complex in Makalero

Juliette Huber, LUCL

Makalero is a non-Austronesian language, commonly grouped into the Trans-New Guinea phylum, spoken in East Timor by a population of some 8000. It is largely isolating with basic SOV word order.

Makalero exhibits a range of interesting characteristics in the verb phrase, most of which are related to what I call the verbal complex. The verbal complex is a combination of two verbs (henceforth V1 and V2) into a morpho-syntactic unit. On the morphological side, this is shown through the fact that some verbs have special bound forms which occur only in verbal complexes. On the syntactic side, which will be the focus of this presentation, the verbal complex has important effects on the expression of verbal arguments and thus allows interesting insights on the concept of transitivity in Makalero, as well as the interaction between syntactic structure and argument structure.

Makalero verbs have one complement at most; syntactically, there are no ditransitive verbs. Any additional participant has to be expressed in a separate predication, usually with the verb *mei* 'take', as in (1). In a verbal complex, such as (2a), the V1 appears to fill the complement position of the V2, as shown through the fact that the undergoer object to the V2 cannot stand in the same predication, but must appear in a separate clause with *mei* 'take'. For comparison, (2b) gives a regular transitive clause with a simple verb.

The V1's complement position, however, is empty, hence its object can stand in the same predication. An example is given in (3), with a transitive locative verb as V1, but an intransitive verb as a V2, which shows clearly that the complement in question belongs to the V1, not the V2. Interestingly, thus, an intransitive verb such as *tia* 'sleep' syntactically also has a complement position. Since its argument frame does not include an undergoer, this position only ever takes V1s.

The V1 and its complement in fact constitute a full, though subordinate, VP dependent on the V2, as is shown through the position of verbal modifiers such as aspect markers. In a VP with a simple verb, the aspect marker *hai* follows the undergoer object, as in (4). In the case of a verbal complex as in (5), *hai* can be placed either before the whole of the verbal complex, as in (5a), or within the subordinate VP, as in (5b), as indicated by the bracketing. Unfortunately, such variant constructions are not markedly different in reading; there is, however, one case in which a clear semantic difference is found, involving the adverbial verb *hau* 'all, finish'. With stative verbs, *hau* is generally read as 'high / excessive degree', while with non-statives, it denotes the completion of an action. The fact that *hau* is read as excessive degree in (6b) clearly shows that it modifies only the stative V1 *mutu* 'inside (bound form)', rather than the whole complex, as in (6a), where it has completive meaning.

A verbal complex is, hence, not a combination of two verbs, but in fact a combination of a VP and a verb. I believe this VP fills the V2's complement position, causing its undergoer argument to be shifted into a separate clause. Sentences such as (3) with an intransitive V2 show that both transitive and intransitive verbs syntactically have the same complement structure, but differ in the argument frames associated with them.

I am not aware of a similar phenomenon, allowing an equally good insight into a language's concept of valency, in any of the other Timorese languages, both Austronesian (e.g. Hull and Eccles 2001) and non-Austronesian (e.g. Engelenhoven (in press), Schapper 2009).[1] It would be interesting to find out whether a similar concept of transitivity is known from other languages of the larger area.

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[1] Though there is a possibility that it is present, in some form, in Makasae (see Huber 2008).

Examples

(1)   *Wer-laa   [ni=mata   mei]=ni   [Fransisku   tamu]*.
            2DEM-PL   REFL=child   take=LNK1   F.   name
            'They called their child Fransisco.'

(2a)   *... papa   were   [ani tafi   mei]=ni   [rau-pase]*.
              Indonesian   2DEM   1s   true   take=LNK1   good-beat
            '… the Indonesian beat me thoroughly.'

(2b)   *Kiloo   ani   pase.*
            3s   1s   beat
            'He beat me'.

(3a)   *… oko   ni=a'awein   mutu-dia…*
              still   REFL=bed   inside-sleep.BD
            '… (he) is still sleeping inside his bed…'

(4)   *Antoni kareta ki=ofara   hai   teuh.*
            A.   car   ATTR=new   NSIT   buy
            'Antoni bought a new car.'

(5a)   *Kiloo   [hai [ili-mana   mutu]-seke]*.
            3s   NSIT   stone-hole   inside.BD-difficult.BD
            'He is stuck in a cave.'

(5b)   *Kiloo   [[ili-mana hai   mutu]-seke]*.
            3s   stone-hole   NSIT   inside.BD-difficult.BD
            'He is stuck in a cave.'

(6a)   *Kiloo   [hai hau   [putil=e   mutu]-puna]*.
            3s   NSIT   all   bottle=DEF   inside.BD-look
            'He finished looking into the bottle.'

(6b)   *Kiloo   [hai [putil=e   hau   mutu]-puna]*.
            3s   NSIT   bottle=DEF   all   inside-look
            'He is looking into the bottle too much.'

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