

On resolving prominence conflicts – exceptional case marking in Tima and Yali

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1 Introduction

This paper compares two genetically and areally unrelated languages, Tima (Niger-Congo, Sudan) and Yali (Trans-New Guinea, West Papua) with regard to one mechanism employed in resolving prominence conflicts. The mechanism in question is exceptional case marking (ECM), specifically exceptional agent marking (also known as optional ergative marking).

In both languages, core arguments are usually unmarked for case, the more agentive argument preceding the less agentive one. In Tima, basic word order is AVP,¹ in Yali it is APV. Importantly, neither of the two languages makes use of voice alternations to handle prominence conflicts.

In Tima as well as in Yali, initial edge-position is reserved for the most prominent discourse referent. This is usually also the agentive argument. But if, in a particular discourse context, the non-agentive argument happens to be more prominent than the agentive one, the former is placed initially and the latter occurs later, obligatorily case-marked.

In terms of prominence, ECM can be interpreted as a mechanism to resolve conflicts between competing prominence hierarchies. Discourse prominence pertains to the status of a given participant in the current discourse world, where at any one moment only one participant can be the most prominent one. Prominence status here changes on a moment-by-moment basis (cf. von Heusinger & Schumacher 2019; see also Himmelmann & Primus 2015). Agent prominence is built in, as it were, into the semantics of (many) verbs in many languages, with the agent argument being the most prominent argument by default. ECM in this view then signals the fact that the usual agent prominence does not apply: the agent is not discourse prominent but it is still the most prominent verbal argument. Alternatively, but with essentially the same result, ECM can also be interpreted as signalling that the participant referred to with the case marked expression has an unexpected thematic role in the event, or as a means to stress agentivity, e.g. when an inanimate participant assumes the agent role.

2 Resolving prominence conflicts in Tima and Yali

When there is *no* conflict in prominence status between the two arguments, i.e. when the inherently prominent agent is also more discourse prominent than the patient, a transitive clause in both languages will have unmarked word order, with the agent occurring in edge-position and (usually) being unmarked for case. Example (1) illustrates this for Yali, elicited with Task 5 from Skopeteas et al. (2006), in which an agent is presented in a first picture, who then, in a second picture handles a newly introduced patient. A parallel unmarked structure to (1) (though AVP) is invariably produced by Tima speakers when describing comparable stimuli with given A. Note that in both languages, a reduction strategy may be

¹ In addition to abbreviations covered by the Leipzig Glossing Rules, we use the following abbreviations: A = agent (or actor), antip = antipassive, ds = different subject, ref = referential, P = patient (or undergoer), p = person marker for 3sg and 3pl, plur = pluractional, seq = sequential, ss = same subject, im = immediate, V = verb. (Abbreviations in small caps; A, the first P and V with capitals).

used, in which the given A argument is not expressed in the second clause, if coreferential with the agent of the first clause, as indicated by the brackets.

Figure 1: Stimulus with given agent



(1) Yali

- a. *ap misig inggik yunggul oho unduhuk*
 man one hand fold ADV.PTCP ('participle' acc. to LGR) stand
 'A man is standing with his arms folded.'
- b. (*ap itno*) *horiye-ruk angge wa-lug waha-ruk*
 man DET sit-PROG 3SG.GEN:thing take-SEQ come-PROG
 'He (The man) is bringing a chair (lit: sitting thing).'

Though ECM in Tima and Yali differs in many aspects, some of the usage conditions that trigger agent marking are actually identical. Consider examples (2) and (3), again elicited with the same stimulus set, but this time prompting the patient as the prominent argument. Here, the 'chair' is introduced in an intransitive construction by using a semantically vague verb, 'stay'/'exist', and unlike in (1), it is now discourse prominent at the moment the next clause is planned. When this referent then becomes the patient in the second picture, a prominence conflict between the discourse prominent 'chair' and the inherently prominent agent arises. In many of the elicited responses in both languages, this second clause exhibits marked word order, and the agent receives case marking. Thus, the 'chair' remains in the edge-position of the second clause, i.e. it remains the prominent discourse referent. As is the case with regard to the given agent in (1)b, mentioning the given patient in (2)b and in (3)b (i.e., *horiyeruk angge itno* and *ɬakidakweej*) is optional. That is, clausal edge position is only one indicator for discourse prominence, the other one is to make use of the reduction strategy. But, importantly for present purposes, the agent is not discourse prominent and receives ECM in both cases.

Figure 2: Stimulus with given patient



(2) Yali:

- a. *horiye-ruk angge itno wereg=ma*
 sit-PROG 3SG.GEN:thing DET exist=DS.SEQ
 'There is this chair (lit: sitting thing).'

- b. (*horiye-ruk angge itno*) *ap itno=en wa-lug la-ruk*
 sit-PROG 3SG.GEN:thing DET man DET=ERG take-SEQ go-PROG
 ‘The man takes it (the chair) away.’

(3) Tima:

- a. *c-akidak=na hslak kɔ-hɔwan=na*
 SG-seat=DEM.PROX stay:AP SG-empty=DEM.PROX
 ‘This chair is staying (there) empty.’
- b. (*c-akidak=ween*) *aŋ-kɔt-ɪ j=c-ida kɔɔ=nɔ*
 SG-seat=DEM.REF 3PRF-take-TR ERG=SG-body family=DEM.PROX
ɔ-diik-aa cɛ-hɔndɔnɔ-waa
 P-walk-INS 3IPFV-sit.down-INS
 ‘This person (lit: the body of the family) has taken it (that chair) and walked away with it to sit down on it.’

Considering examples (1)–(3), the situation seems straightforward. After the introduction of a referent, be it the agent or the patient of the following clause, this referent remains discourse-prominent. If the patient occurs in the prominence signalling sentence-initial position, the agent is case marked.

Yet, prominence conflict resolution as displayed in (2) for Yali and (3) for Tima is not constrained to ECM. Other strategies are possible, as demonstrated with the Tima example in (4) (elicited with Task 3 of Skopeteas et al. 2006). Again, a referent is introduced, here by an event-centralthetic statement in the first clause (cf. Becker & Schneider-Blum 2020), and then becomes the patient argument of the second clause, thus resembling the situation in (2) and (3). But this time the new agent is introduced in an intransitive SV construction (*wɔɾɿsmaadɔh idiyɿŋ* ‘a man comes’). A fuller account of prominence management in the two languages thus would have to include a very basic level choice as to how to introduce the new participant: by a construction primarily serving the purpose of explicitly introducing the participant, as in (3)b, and thereby open the ground for a prominence switch or by including it in a more complex construction that involves an intransitive SV clause which assigns the new participant immediate prominence, as in (4)b. In natural discourse, it seems to us, that the former option is the much more common and typical one.

(4) Tima:

- a. *ku-duwɿ=li σ-dɔwa parna*
 SG-seat=FOC.SG P-stay [IDEO]
 ‘There is a pole standing somewhere.’
- b. *wɔɾɿsmaadɔh i-diyɿŋ, u-tuuh*
 SG.man P-come P-pull:PLUR
 ‘A man comes and pulls (at it).’

Examples (2)–(4) show that a given patient is only a sufficient, not a necessary factor for the use of the ergative construction.

Furthermore, in both languages, we find situations, in which a discourse prominent agent is marked for ergative, i.e. where ergative marking takes place without there being a prominence conflict that would motivate its use. In the Tima example in (5), the ‘boy’ has been discourse-prominent for several clauses, hence unmarked for case and, except for the very first mention, not even overtly expressed. Then, all of a sudden, we find him as ergative-marked argument *minɿ* ‘ERG3SG’. The verb, i.e. *ɔdɔɔwaa*, lit: ‘(with this) (s)he/they stood

up’, is basically intransitive and semantically relatively empty (note that speakers translate it with ‘then/and then’). This verb obligatorily triggers case marking on the agent. Other markers, verbal as well as adverbial, which are used in the language to enhance the storyline have no such influence on the construction. I.e., the speaker could have chosen a discourse marker that does *not* trigger ECM on the following noun. We hypothesize that *σdɔɔwaa* (and its related form *dɔɔwaa*) indicates the boundary between episodes, with the speaker, as it were, pressing a kind of reset button. It is difficult to say whether the clause in (5) is actually at the end of the finished episode or at the beginning of the new one (see further below).

(5) Tima:

[‘A boy (lit: child) came by bicycle, he came and found the person up (in the tree), he found the baobab fruits (which) the person had gathered on the ground, nnn, a basket, in a basket and secretly took the basket and put (it) on the bicycle by theft/stealing.’]

[...] *σ-dɔɔ-waa* *ɔ-daa-waa* *mina* *η=ajala*
 P-stand.up-INS P-run-INS ERG3SG INS=bicycle
 ‘Then **he** ran away with it on the bicycle.’

In Yali, ergative marking can occur in very similar situations. Consider the following example (discussed in more detail in Riesberg 2018):

(6) Yali:²

[‘After (the child) together with the dog has woken up, they see it. (There is) only the jar, there is only the jar itself. Eh, the frog that had been sitting there, isn’t there anymore. It escaped. It escaped. They thought that it escaped.’]

[...] *pehesareg*
 pe-ehesa-teg
 think-3PL.IM.PST-SS.SEQ

itanoen malik itnoente yahiye itno hira suruk ari
 itanoen malik itno=en=te yahiye itno hira su-tuk ari
 then child DET=ERG=TOP frog DET look.for do-PROG DEM
 ‘After they thought like this, then **the child** is searching for the frog.’

Like in the Tima example above, in example (6) from a Yali re-telling of the ‘Frog Story’ (the children’s book *Frog, where are you*, Mayer 1969) all participants have already been introduced into the discourse and the agent has been topical for quite some time. In the clauses preceding this example, the child and his dog discover that the frog, which they had kept in a jar, has disappeared while they were asleep. Then follows a description how they wonder what might have happened, but like in Tima, the agent referent(s) is/are not overtly realised in this passage. Only when the speaker announces what will happen next (i.e. the child will be searching for the frog), is the child realised as a full NP plus determiner, and marked by the ergative.

The Tima example (5) as well as the Yali example (6) can be considered what Heeschen (1998: 308ff) calls “forms of summarizing” (for similar observations in Papuan languages,

² Unlike in Tima, marked word-order structures are actually relatively rare in Yali, and unlike Tima, Yali allows for exceptional agent marking also in unmarked word order. The final clause in example (6) exhibits such a structure, i.e. an ergative marked agent in unmarked APV order. While PA_{ERG}V and A_(ERG)PV constructions clearly follow different usage conditions in Yali, both are related to prominence management.

see also de Vries 2006). These forms include all relevant referents realised as overt NPs and are usually used to summarize what has been said before, as an “utterance-final comment or a concluding statement at the end of an episode” (Heeschen 1998: 311). They can, however, also function as introductory clauses for what is to happen next, i.e. as “the summarizing headline of the story the narrator is going to tell” (Heeschen 1998: 309). In fact, it may not be necessary (or possible) to clearly allocate a summarizing clause to the preceding or following paragraph. Maybe it is literally a boundary between two episodes. Examples (5) and (6) suggest that both languages employ such summarizing forms at episode boundaries and that they can include an ergative marked agent. How frequently this is the case remains to be investigated, using larger amounts of data.

3 Conclusion

To summarize, in both Tima and Yali, ECM plays an important role for prominence management in discourse. Despite differences in the usage conditions of ECM (cf. Riesberg 2018; Schneider-Blum & Hellwig 2018), we find evidence for very similar strategies in both languages. This includes the use of ECM for resolving prominence conflicts between two participants (as in (2) and (3)), but also more generally for structuring discourse (as in (5) and (6)). Not all details are fully understood yet, but it is clear that the concept of prominence as a dynamic notion, with its central idea that “the prominence status of an entity changes over time [...] as the discourse unfolds” (von Heusinger & Schumacher 2019: 118; see also Himmelmann & Primus 2015), is well positioned to capture and account for the distribution of ECM across the two languages and beyond.

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