

Object agreement without subject agreement in Blanga (Austronesian, Solomon Islands)

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The purpose of this paper is twofold: to analyse a typological rare situation, and to illustrate how a thorough analysis is made possible when documentation and description meet a theoretical framework (RRG in this case) that firmly upholds and accounts for the data.

Blanga/Blablanga (iso 639-3 code blp) is an endangered Austronesian (Oceanic>Northwest Solomonian) language spoken by 1150 people (latest unofficial census, 2009) on Santa Isabel Island, Solomon Islands. It was first documented in the late 2000's (Voica 2007-2009) and partially described and analysed in Voica (2017). The language consists of three distinct but very similar dialects: Northern, Southeastern, and Southwestern Blanga. The data in this paper come exclusively from the northern variety.

Oceanic languages index the person and number of subject and object on transitive verbs by affixes or clitics. In the canonical pattern (Ross 2004:496), a subject marker is part of the first element of the verb complex, while an object marker follows the last element (1).

- (1) N-**o** falehe=**ri** agho kokorako are.
REAL-2.SG.S CS.die=3.PL.O 2.SG chicken DEM.N.PL
'You are killing those chickens.' (Kokota - Palmer 2009: 279)

Usually, the single argument of intransitive verbs is also indexed. Blanga, however, does not observe the canonical pattern. There is no argument coreference on intransitive verbs, no matter if the single argument is an actor (2) or an undergoer (3).

- (2) Tahni manei, tahni fa dou eu
cry 3.SG cry CS be.big be.thus.IRR
'S/he is crying, s/he is crying loudly, that's it.' (054A260208; text)

- (3) Gazu ana ne knusu.
tree DEM.N.SG REAL be.cut
'That piece of wood is cut.' (021AV120408; elicitation)

In a transitive predication, an indexing enclitic often attaches to the verb complex core (4), (5), unless the undergoer is non-specific.

- (4) Mane ana efra=**nigho** agho.
man DEM.N.SG see=2.SG.AGR 2.SG
'That man sees you.' (029A140118; elicitation)

- (5) Zone na ne-ke ngau=**di** kokorako=ro.
PN DEM.N.SG REAL-PERF eat=3.NSG.AGR chicken=DEM.NV.PL
'John ate those chickens.' (193A171109; elicitation)

The indexing enclitic is always in the same person and number as the affected participant, in other words it is the (specific) undergoer argument that is co-referenced on the Blanga transitive

verb. Since there is no voice alternation in the language, it looks like the undergoer will always map onto the direct object (and the actor onto the subject) in a transitive predication. The question that immediately comes to mind is whether agreement is triggered by semantic (macro) roles, or by grammatical relations (GRs)?

A proposal dating back to Johnson (1977:157) and Moravcsik (1978:364) and perpetuated in subsequent works (Croft 1990:106; Moravcsik 1988:102) postulates that verb agreement is assigned according to Johnson's (1977:156) hierarchy of GRs:

subject > direct object > indirect object > oblique

However, as data from recently documented languages (not necessarily Austronesian) become available, so do descriptions of languages that index only object, without indexing subject (Haan 2001; Davis 2003; Klamer 2010) and the findings have already started to have theoretical impact (Fedden & Brown 2010 and Fedden et al. 2011). Moreover, the "attractively simple" (Corbett 2006:59) formulation of the universal in terms of GRs ignores the fact that agreement may be triggered by other factors. For instance, Siewierska's (2011) analysis of a 378-language sample, reveals that 24 of them (6.4%) display agreement only with the *non-agentive* argument of a transitive verb (my emphasis). Siewierska uses terms such as "agentive" and "patient argument", which are normally associated with semantic roles, rather than with GRs.

The Blanga data confirm the construction-specific (and, perhaps, language specific) character of GRs. Only few cases have been identified where the employment of the abstract concept of GRs is necessary for an accurate analysis of a particular construction. Among those is the agreement pattern presented above. The lack of a voice opposition in the language makes it impossible to dissociate between semantic macroroles and GRs if one looks at *transitive clauses* alone, and is mainly responsible for the lack of more complex evidence for GRs in the language. It is, thus, very tempting to analyse that pattern as undergoer agreement, rather than object agreement, an error that I made in an earlier paper (Voica 2011). Nevertheless, the lack of any argument coreference in *intransitive clauses* suggests that the agreement must be with an NP bearing a grammatical relation. In RRG terms, we are dealing here with a restricted neutralisation of the semantic opposition actor-undergoer for syntactic purposes (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997:251-263).

This does not only identify a grammatical relation for a *transitive* predicate but also proves the existence of an S relation, defined as the grammatical relation borne by the single argument of an *intransitive* predication. The affected argument of a Blanga transitive clause is, thus, the controller of the agreement, therefore the privileged syntactic argument (PSA) of the construction. The restricted neutralisation mentioned above can be formalised as [SA_T], where S is the single argument of an intransitive predication and A_T the actor of a transitive predication.

If the controller of the agreement is indeed a grammatical relation, then Blanga appears to be one of the typologically rare languages that, in more traditional terms, have object agreement without subject agreement.

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