On the special status of instrumentals

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It is widely known that adjuncts with different semantics roles do not always have the same syntactic status. Apparent differences have been addressed within the domain of lexical semantics (Davis 1997), but more commonly within syntax, appealing to a thematic role hierarchy where different syntactic behaviours are explained by different rankings of these roles (Foley and Van Valin 1984, Bresnan and Kanerva 1989, Alsina and Mchombo 1990 and others). In this paper we explore this issue further, presenting evidence from Austronesian and Papuan languages which shows that the instrumental is syntactically distinguished from other adjuncts, and in some senses behaves more like a term. We conclude that these data can be explained by allowing the instrumental role in certain predicates to have a higher syntactic status than other adjuncts.

The absolute ranking of thematic roles in the thematic hierarchy remains controversial. The different proposals share certain core features, such as agent being the highest ranked role, and locations ranking below themes and patients. However, the positioning of the instrumental and benefactive roles is controversial; they are more ‘central’, but their ranking with respect to each other is problematic. We propose that in addition to these ranking considerations, instruments, and not benefactives, often show behaviour that suggests they are subcategorized for by the verb; that is, they are stipulated by the lexical semantic structure of the verb. In support of this, we provide evidence from grammatical subject relativization and voice in Tukang Besi and Bilaan.

Relativization in Tukang Besi (Donohue 1995 and elsewhere) works by fronting the relativized nominal and affixing morphology, cognate with the well-known Philippine voice morphology, to the verb to indicate the syntactic status of the relative clause head. (1) illustrates a plain clause predicated with the verb ‘fetch’ and containing optional adjuncts. (2) and (3) show that if either the core arguments (the A or P syntactic roles) are relativized (here presented in cleft constructions), not only is the nominal fronted, but the verb is also morphologically marked to indicate the syntactic role of that argument in the relative clause.

(1) No-ala te uwe (ako te embere / kene embere).
3R-fetch CORE water BEN/INSTR CORE bucket COM/INSTR bucket
‘They fetched water with a bucket.’

(2) Te amai na [RC <um>ala te uwe kene embere].
CORE 3PL NOM fetch.SI CORE water COM/INSTR bucket
‘It was them who fetched water with a bucket.’

(3) Te uwe na [RC i-ala=no kene embere].
CORE water NOM PP-fetch=3GEN COM/INSTR bucket
‘It was water that they fetched with a bucket.’

(4) shows that when the instrument is relativized no extra verbal morphology is required. The following sentences show that in order for a non-instrumental adjunct to be relativized it must first be applicativized with the suffix –pi as in (5), in which case the verbal morphology is the same as for a regular P (as shown in (3)).

(4) Te embere na [RC ala te uwe].
CORE water NOM fetch CORE water
‘It was the bucket that (they) fetched water with.’

(5) Te embere na [RC i-tau-pi=no nu kahitela].
CORE water NOM PP-place-APPL=3GEN GEN corn
‘It was the bucket that they put the corn in.’
An attempt to relativize on the locative adjunct without verbal marking of any sort is unacceptable, as seen in (6). The construction seen in (4) may not be used.

(6) *te embere na [RCl-tu(-pi) te kahitela].
    CORE water NOM place-APPL CORE corn
    ‘It was the bucket that they put the corn in.’

Another Austronesian language, Bilaan (Abrams 1961; Rhea 1972), evidences similar special treatment for the instrumentals. The data from Bilaan illustrate the prototypical voice marking associated with the argument being identified as subject when its syntactic role is that of an A or an S in (7) and (8), or a P (9).

(7) K<am>lang agu kayu di bulul.
    cut.AV 1SG.NOM tree(s) OBL hill
    ‘I cut trees on the hill.’

(8) M-anwe agu dini.
    live.AV 1SG.NOM here
    ‘I live here.’

(9) K<am>lang=gu kayu di bulul.
    cut.PV=1SG.GEN tree(s) OBL hill
    ‘I cut trees on the hill.’

However, (10)−(12) illustrate that a verb unmarked with any voice morphology can single out the S, P or instrumental adjunct as the subject of the sentence. It is not possible for an A to be the subject of an unmarked verb form, nor for other adjuncts (goals, locations, beneficiaries) to appear as subject with no voice morphology.

(10) Kel agu malfábi.
    arrive 1SG.NOM yesterday
    ‘I arrived yesterday.’

(11) Dsù=gu i anok di tulus.
    sacrifice.PV=1SG.GEN DET chicken OBL spirit
    ‘I sacrifice a chicken to the spirit.’

(12) Klang=gu kayu falakol.
    cut=1SG.GEN tree(s) hatchet
    ‘I cut trees with a hatchet.’

The data from both Tukang Besi and Bilaan suggest that the instrumental argument has a special syntactic status, as being the first (or only) adjunct after the A, Sand P arguments to be able to assume privileged status. We argue that the reason for this is its higher lexical salience compared to other semantic roles typically associated with adjuncts, due to it being an intermediate agent in those predicates that allow it special behaviour. Supporting evidence from unrelated languages from New Guinea also suggests that, while there are good reasons to assume that core arguments behave differently to other participants in a clause, an instrumental shows behaviour intermediate between these two camps. This result also supports a version of the hierarchy originally proposed to account for Bantu (Bresnan and Kanerva 1989) suggesting that the thematic hierarchy may have more universality than originally assumed, at least for subject-identifying syntactic constructions. In the very least, these data should be considered in any cross-linguistics proposal concerning variability in the organization of thematic hierarchies.

References