

TOPIC and Subordination in Whitesands

This paper examines subordination constructions in *Narak* (alias Whitesands, WSN, ISO: TNP), an under-described Oceanic language of southern Vanuatu spoken by roughly 5000 speakers. The primary data presented here was collected in situ by the author. In particular, I address various syntactic problems found in the Echo Subject switch reference-like system (see Lynch 1983 and Crowley 2002 for background on the system in related languages). Special attention is given to the properties of co-subordinate clauses, serial verb constructions and relative clauses. I argue that posited information structure categories, such as TOPIC, can account for some of the syntactically tricky data and that the behaviour of these subordinate clauses supports this hypothesis.

The Echo Subject *m-* 'ES' is an inflection used on adjacent clauses to mark that there is some kind of co-reference between the clauses. It contrasts with the full predicate inflection which indicates a Different Subject from the preceding clause. In (1), the canonical usage, the ES marks the antecedent as the subject of the preceding clause (1SG.EXCL). It also replaces the tense *am-* 'PST'. Contrast this to (1') which marks different subject with the full inflection.

- (1) *ia-am-at-∅-asua* *apa itehi m-uen m-at-eiwi* *apa pah,*
1.EXCL-PST-PROG-SG-paddle LOC sea **ES-go** ES-PROG-pull LOC seawards
I was paddling out in the sea, I went to fish at sea.
- (1') *ia-am-at-∅-asua* *apa itehi t-am-asiru* *la-k*
1.EXCL-PST-PROG-SG-paddle LOC sea **3SG-PST-help** DAT-1SG
I was paddling out in the sea and he helped me.

In most cases the Echo Subject does exactly as its gloss suggests. It states that the predicate is coreferential with the preceding clause's subject. I argue that all ES clauses are subordinate because they must share tense operators (and also illocutionary force) with a preceding matrix clause. It is used in both event coordination and serial verb constructions (especially those with direction – such as *m-uen m-at-eiwi* 'I went to fish' in (1)). However, a corpus of natural data, including conversation, narratives and public speaking, puts forward exemplar that does not conform to this paradigm. Firstly, the ES can have anaphoric reference to non-adjacent clauses. The second *m-* 'ES' in (2) shows this, where the preceding clause has a grammatical subject of 3SG, yet the ES is coreferential with the 1SG.

- (2) (I held tight the line, I couldn't hold it well, I held it, it was strong)
m-at-eiwi *t-at-uen* ***m-eiwi*** *m-eiwi m-ua,* *t-uen*
ES-PROG-pull 3SG.NPST-PROG-go **ES-pull** ES-pull ES-come 3SG.NPST-go
I was pulling it, and it went. I pulled and pulled it towards me and it went.

Secondly, there is use of ES that only includes partial coreference with the preceding subject. That is the ES inflection is capable of picking up discourse referents of differing grammatical functions and combining them in the new clause. In (3) we can see that the referents for *m-l-un* 'ES-TR-eat.TRNS' are a combination of the two non-macro roles of the preceding text and the actor/subject. In fact there are examples that combine both of the problematic behaviours of 'non-subject' Echo subject usage.

- (3) (And he_x gave one_y his_y food, and he_x gave another_z his_z food and he_x took his_x own food)
 ko m-l-un m-a:-l-uen
 then ES-TR-eat.TRNS ES-PROG-TRIAL-go
 And then they_{xyz} (TRIAL) ate the food and they_{xyz} went along.

There is at least one other type of subordinate clause, the relative clauses in WSN, that provide some ideas towards a solution of the problem. They are complete finite clauses but do not interact with the ES phenomena. This means that it cannot use the ES marking nor does it influence the use of ES in the following finite clause. In the (4), the relative clause *tem t-eeḗḗt* ‘the person who is biggest’ does not allow the next finite clause *t-iuvəŋ* ‘3SG.NPST-jump’ to use the ES as its antecedent. That is, *t-iuvəŋ* is still contrasted with original matrix clause *t-oh* ‘3SG.NPST -hit’.

- (4) t-oh nete-n ko [tem t-eeḗḗt]_{relative CL}
 3SG.NPST-hit child-3SG DEIC person 3SG.NPST-big
 t-iuvəŋ m-aharaŋ apaha luan-tehi
 3SG.NPST-jump ES-sit LOC deep-saltwater
 She hit her eldest child and he flew out and sat down in the sea

I suggest that the relative clause, while non-new information, is primarily associated with non-TOPIC reference. It introduces background information but not TOPICS, i.e. it is somewhat ambiguous in its level of reference as it is inherently clarifying the referent. So while they are subordinate, the relative clause is used both complementarily with TOPIC and Echo Subject. This suggests that Echo Subject and TOPIC may be inherently connected.

To solve this paradigm of behaviour in subordinate clauses, I hypothesize that the selection and use of the Echo Subject construction is sensitive to the discourse phenomenon TOPIC. Further, this linking with TOPIC can be disambiguated with the obligatory number inflection on the predicate. We find that in WSN, TOPIC can be defined as the most activated participant(s), i.e. most recent, that tends to be of high animacy or agency. TOPIC is distinct from the category subject and thus is not necessarily sentence initial reference phrases (although TOPIC commonly corresponds to subject hence the misnomer “Echo Subject”). Having this context-grounded category present in the formal syntactic constructions allows for better predictions on when the Echo Subject is used, indeed much more consistent than just having a grammatical subject category.

References

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