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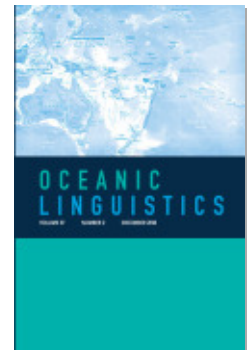
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A grammar of Nungon: A Papuan language of northeast New Guinea by Hannah S. Sarvasy (review)

Lourens De Vries

Hannah S. Sarvasy. 2017. *A grammar of Nungon: A Papuan language of northeast New Guinea.* Grammars and Sketches of the World's Languages: Mainland and Insular South East Asia. Leiden: Brill. xxi + 637 pp. ISBN 978-90-0433750-3. $167, hardcover.

This grammar is a strikingly comprehensive reference grammar of the Papuan language Nungon, belonging to the Finisterre-Huon family and spoken by just around 1,000 people in the Morobe Province of Papua New Guinea. The book has thirteen chapters covering not only the traditional topics of a reference grammar (phonology, morphology, syntax of phrases and clauses, clause combining) but also aspects of discourse, cultural pragmatics of communication, greeting practices, and nonverbal communication. The book is based on the PhD thesis that the author defended at James Cook University, in Cairns, Australia, in 2015. In its approach to language description and linguistic theory, the book follows the tenets of Basic Linguistic Theory (Dixon 2010). In that respect. but also in the thorough approach to field work and in the deep interest in cultural and social aspects of languages and speech communities, the book clearly and fruitfully reflects the perspectives of her supervisors R. M. W. Dixon and Alexandra Aikhenvald.

Nungon is a Papuan language of the familiar nuclear Trans-New Guinea (TNG) type, with clause chaining, switch reference, simple nominal and complex verbal morphology, basically nominative alignment (with occasional ergative marking in quite a few TNG languages), and rich in markers of informational status that interact with semantic case role markers in encoding grammatical relations in the clause. There is a restricted set of formal types of switch reference systems in Papuan languages, dependent on the various grammaticalization paths they followed (Roberts 1997; de Vries 2010). A common grammaticalization path is to turn the distinction between finite and nonfinite verb forms into a cataphoric different subject and same subject distinction in clause sequences. Nungon also followed this path: when a verb in a medial clause has no number and person marking for its subject, it counts as a same subject form; and when that marking is present, it counts as a different subject form.

Nungon discourse reflects the recapitulative, thematizing, and quotative framing tendencies of very many nuclear Trans-New Guinea languages (and beyond), with tail-head linkage (de Vries 2005), conflated relative/adverbial clauses with theme or setting function ((Foley 1986: 201), a key role for verbs of speaking in the domains of intention and purpose (Reesink 1993), and various other features (Foley 2000).

The comprehensiveness of this grammar, based on solid field work in the immersion tradition and with an emphasis on recording, transcribing, and analyzing many hours of relatively spontaneous verbal interaction, makes it extremely valuable because it adds depth, nuance, and important new observations on phenomena we thought we knew. For example, the chapter on nonfinal verbs has a fascinating section on noncanonical uses of medial verbs, in appended medial clauses, nonfinal clause types concluding clause chains, and in imperative strategies. That chapter enriches our knowledge of Papuan clause chaining, in itself a familiar phenomenon, very significantly and innovatively. The

same can be said of other topics: for example, the rich description of Nungon number marking. The comprehensiveness combines with crystal clear exposition of complex data and well-argued analyses. The grammar is 637 pages long, but only 31 pages are devoted to texts, which is a pity in an otherwise comprehensive grammar.

Sarvasy does not mention the literature on the (nuclear) Trans-New Guinea group as a genetic group that includes the Finisterre-Huon language family. This could be because the author reasons that the Trans-New Guinea hypothesis is not based on rigid bottom-up reconstructive work but on less rigid top-down mass comparative reconstruction. But this has also blinded the author somewhat to Trans-New Guinea as a typological context for the Nungon data, and for Finisterre-Huon languages more generally.

This typological nuclear or mountain Trans-New Guinea profile (with some extensions into the lowlands) has to do with clause chaining and switch reference, with topical subordinate clause structures that combine the functions of adverbial and relative clauses, with basic nominative alignment systems combined with occasional ergative marking, and with many other things including highly frequent topic and focus markers arising from shared ways of handling discourse coherence, especially in tense-iconic narratives.

Part of the typological profile of the nuclear Trans-New Guinea type of languages with special relevance for Nungon is the way these highly frequent and pervasive informational markers interact with the marking of semantic relations, especially those of peripheral arguments (instruments, places, times, circumstances, and so on). The pragmatic postpositions (interacting and conspiring with intonational and constituent order to reflect and indicate information structures) adjust utterances to the constantly shifting and developing informational and interactional contexts.

These discourse adjusting markers tend to be optional and may descend on pretty much any element of the clause that they like, given the pragmatic needs of speakers and addressees. In the case of peripheral arguments with semantic roles such as place, time, manner, instrument, or circumstance, this means that when, say, an instrument is focused, the semantic function of instrument and the informational function of focus coincide on one argument and compete for expression in ways that markers within the group of peripheral semantic relations never compete with each other: an argument is unlikely to be encoded for, say, both instrument and time, but any instrument or time argument can contextually become the speaker's focus or topic. Now, when speakers focalize or topicalize an argument with a semantic function that also wants to be expressed postpositionally, they may either stack semantic case role and pragmatic informational postpositions or decide to leave either the semantic function or the pragmatic one unexpressed, at least with postpositions. In TNG languages we often see pragmatic function marking overriding or suppressing the marking for semantic function.

Sarvasy treats topic and focus marking postpositional clitics as part of a group of grammatical relation-marking postpositions in ch. 8 without distinguishing between postpositions that encode informational functions (topic, focus, theme, afterthought-tail) and those that encode semantic functions of (core and peripheral) arguments of clauses (agent, manner, location). Such a distinction of two subgroups of postpositions would have been helpful for the description of Nungon, as it allows us to understand why (some) Nungon postpositions behave the way they do.

For example, in 8.2.3, Sarvasy describes focus marking =*ho* as marking manner, and in 8.2.2 describes =*ho* as marking instrument arguments (385). However, rather than analyzing =*ho* there as marking both informational statuses and semantic functions, these might very well be cases of suppression: the instrumental or manner semantic role of the argument is left grammatically uncoded, left to the addressee to infer from the context, in favor of the focal pragmatic adjustment to the context that is grammatically coded by the focus marker =*ho*.

The (very) high frequency in language use makes pragmatic markers vulnerable to bleaching and weakening of their informational force and open to further grammaticalization, adding functions in other domains or shifting to other domains entirely. We often find in Trans-New Guinea type languages very short (often just a vowel) erstwhile pragmatic clitics developing into connectives with mostly processing functions (pause, hesitation, sometimes with residual topical force) and/or into connectives with syntactic functions (for example, markers of subordinate status of clauses of modifier status within noun phrases [Wester 2014]).

This may have happened to Nungon =*ho* in contexts where it was so frequent that it became obligatory and developed new functions that were less dependent on contextual information structure factors. For example, =*ho* has become obligatory with inanimate A arguments (383). Sarvasy argues that =*ho* is still a focus marker with inanimate A, but it may very well be that its obligatoriness in inanimate A conditions means that it is on its way to becoming, or has already developed into, an occasional ergative marker of the type found in several nuclear Trans-New Guinea languages, including languages of the Lani family (Dixon 1994:58), Mek family (Riesberg 2018), Greater Awyu family (Wester 2014:160), and Finisterre-Huon languages (Lauver and Wegmann 1994:56–57).

Sarvasy describes in rich detail the many functions of =*ma*. She analyzes =*ma* convincingly as a marker of referentiality rather than as a topic marker: it turns various elements into referential expressions (or part of referential expressions to limit the possible referents), essentially turning clauses into referring arguments that refer to states of affairs as if they were entities. Likewise, adjectives are turned by =*ma* into referring arguments ('the green one') or into modifiers that limit the possible referents of a noun phrase ('the boy who is tall'). The clauses turned into referring arguments by =*ma* can in turn be marked by pragmatic markers of topicality when speakers want to present them as settings or topics to be taken as a given starting point relevant for assertions that follow. In many nuclear Trans-New Guinea languages, the resulting thematized clauses may have both "adverbial clause" or "relative clause" readings in English, depending on the comment that follows the topic (de Vries 2006):

(1) a. given that you stole the pig, it is my pig
         > relative clause reading: the pig you stole is my pig

     b. as for/given the thing that you stole the pig, it is my pig
         > relative clause reading: the pig you stole is my pig

(2) as for/given the thing that you stole the pig, I am angry
     > adverbial clause reading: because you stole the pig, I am angry

(3) as for/given the thing that you stole the pig, I did not punish you
     > adverbial clause reading: although you stole the pig, I did not punish you

The device that turned the clause into a nominal constituent makes it eligible for taking semantic and/or pragmatic markers, just like nouns and noun phrases. Formally, some Trans-New Guinea languages turn the conflated adverbial/relative clause into a relative clause modifier of a dummy noun that originally meant something like 'word/speech' and/or 'thing'. The referential domain thus created (the thing that you stole the pig) is then marked by a pragmatic marker of theme status (*given* or *about* the thing that you stole my pig/concerning the thing that you stole my pig), but this is not necessary. The dummy noun (sometimes) further grammaticalizes into a postpositional clitic that creates referential domains with various ranges of nominal properties.

Although Sarvasy does not say so, perhaps Nungon =*ma* is such a shortened dummy noun (turned postposition) derived from a Nungon noun (perhaps a shortened form of *maa* 'speech'?). And when =*ma* is attached to a clause, it creates a similar kind of conflated adverbial/relative clause that presents an event or state of affairs generically as an entity or as a thing about which or with respect to which the following assertion(s) are relevant. That would explain the repeated observations of Sarvasy that the =*ma* marked subordinate "adverbial" clauses have so many similarities with relative clauses.

Now, =*ma* in Nungon indeed turns a clause into a referential argument with nominal properties. But =*ma* in itself is not a thematic marker. Often the theme status of conflated adverbial/relative clauses will be formally unmarked, as it is clear from the context, but speakers of nuclear Trans-New Guinea languages, including Nungon, often resort to anaphoric demonstratives to mark them as themes, or at the very least, to separate the theme and the comment, often partly or wholly developing into topic markers. In Nungon, the topic marker -*i* combines with the demonstrative *wo* (*woi*) to form such an anaphoric thematic marker in what Reesink (1994) aptly called domain-creating constructions.

The topic marker -*i* (allomorph –*u*) looks very much like other weakened topic markers in nuclear Trans-New Guinea languages that are rather bleached and very much shortened, often calling for the rise of fresh topic markers that strongly mark topicality or theme status. The bleached and shortened topic markers may acquire or add syntactic functions in Trans-New Guinea type languages, arising from the syntactic contexts in which they frequently marked topicality: for example, turning into a subordinating connective when they occurred with thematic adverbial/relative clauses. Nungon =*i* indeed is found often as a connective on =*ma* marked subordinate clauses. It still has a topic marking function, but this is weakened and often needing "help" from *woi* as a stronger marker of topicality.

The domain *par excellence* where demonstratives develop into markers of topicality is the verbless clause (de Vries 1995). Because thematization strategies are a highly frequent way to package information, the default form of verbless clauses is: extraclausal NP marked with demonstrative-based topic clitic followed by a verbless clause with an optional resumptive demonstrative or personal pronoun as subject and a nonverbal predicate: that John, that/he (is) crazy. The extraclausal slot for a thematic NP may also be filled with final or fully finite clauses, creating the typical conflated adverbial/relative clause structures.

When resumptive demonstratives gradually attach to the preceding extraclausal NP, they develop into topic markers, and a new resumptive deictic or personal pronoun is

needed as subject in the verbless clause: 'John, he/that (is) crazy'> 'John=that, he (is) crazy'. It would seem that Nungon *woi* has both functions, as topic marker with extra-clausal themes and as resumptive demonstrative in the verbless clause. It looks very much as if the Nungon data fit this pattern, and this would mean that the demonstrative-based topic markers *wo* and *woi* in Nungon in the examples 10.16–10.18 (458) do not mark the subject of the verbless clause, as Sarvasy analyzes these data, but rather the extraclausal NPs. This is supported by the fact that intonationally, *woi* seems to be integrated with the extraclausal theme rather than with the verbless clause in at least some examples. At least, Sarvasy places a comma after the *wo/woi* marked extraclausal theme. Further support for the development of *woi* into theme marker is that it also marks themes with verbal clauses, and not just verbless clauses, as in example 10.18 (458).

Sarvasy discusses the pragmatic markers not just in ch. 8 but also in ch. 13, the final chapter on discourse. That chapter is at times somewhat confusing. For example, section 13.1.2 is announced to be about the topicalizing suffix *-u* but called a focusing suffix in the same section referring to the suffix in example 13.12 on p. 550. But that suffix *osug-u* (at.first-TOP) is glossed as topic. In the example 13.11, the suffix *-i* , also analyzed as a topic marker, is glossed as focus. Now, under the definitions of topic and focus used by Sarvasy, from Radetsky (2002), a topic constituent may indeed be in focus in specific contexts (for example, contrasted topics) but the examples 13.11 and 13.12 do not seem to be such contexts.

(4) Sabar-u   wo-i   ma=bure-Ø-k
    Sabbath-TOP   that-FOC   NEG=be.finished-NP-3SG
    'As for the Sabbath, it is not finished.'   (= example 13.11)

In fact, in example (4) the contextual focus is on the verbal predicate, especially on the negation, and the demonstrative topic marker *woi* marks either the extraclausal NP as the theme or resumes the theme as topical subject in the comment clause. Whatever the analysis is, *woi* can hardly be glossed as Focus in a context where people are admonished not to do work because the Sabbath is *not* finished, and the negative would be in focus.

In example 13.19, I do not understand why *worokoi* is glossed as that-2SG=FOC-LINK. Perhaps the *2SG* is a glossing mistake because *-rok* is also a 2SG suffix. Since *worokoi* contains a demonstrative *wo* that is often used to mark themes, the preceding clause can be interpreted as a thematic clause, subordinated by the connective -i and with its theme status marked by the demonstrative-derived theme marker *wo*. In this example, the subordinated thematic clause is also marked as focus, and this triggers the "despite this state of affairs" reading ('despite the fact that my feet were hurting, I went on'). Under this analysis, the glossing would be *wo-rok=ko=i* TOP-SEMBL=FOC=SUB.

In example 13.17, the author offers the possibility that the frequent *woi* in that example functions as a syntactic filler, to ease the flow of the discourse (552). However, under the analysis of *woi* as a demonstrative-derived thematic marker, the role in this example can be explained from the general Trans-New Guinea (or perhaps wider Papuan) preference to package information in the form of (often multiple) topic/theme-comment information structures, with both phrases and clauses in the theme slot and with demonstrative-based markers intonationally integrated with the preceding theme and/or occurring as a subject in the comment clause, as a resumptive anaphoric of the extra-

clausal theme. The *-i/-u* weakened topic marker seems a more likely candidate to bleach in some contexts into a kind of syntactic glue.

My minor critical comments and tentative alternative proposals do not diminish in any way my great admiration for this grammar, which forms an exemplary model and sets a high standard for future grammarians of New Guinea languages. Precisely because the exposition is so clear and the description so rich, the book both allows and invites the reader to participate in the scholarly conversation about Nungon, so brilliantly started by Hannah Sarvasy in this book.

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