COMPARING OLD AND NEW INFORMATION IN BISLAMA: NOMINAL DELETION WITH *OLSEM*

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This paper considers the strategies available in Bislama for comparing two NPs using the preposition *olsem*, which means 'like, as'.[1] I will show that Bislama allows two structures, one with *olsem* preceding a noun and one with *olsem* following the noun. However, I will suggest that even though this looks like freedom of movement in the placement of *olsem*, *olsem* in fact consistently precedes nouns. However, whether the nominal argument of a prepositional phrase headed by *olsem* surfaces overtly is constrained by the information status of the two nominals being compared.

For the purposes of this paper I will make my focus quite narrow and consider the use of *olsem* in only one kind of comparison, that is, similes or comparisons where two nominals are being equated or instantiated (e.g. a light like a diamond; teams like the All Blacks; Clark, as leader of the Labour Party; etc.). I will not be considering other uses of *olsem* in Bislama, for instance, it is also used to compare verb phrases, and to introduce reported or direct speech, nor will I discuss other kinds of comparison in Bislam (e.g. comparisons of greater than or less than relationships).

The data used in this investigation are equative comparisons using *olsem* found in written Bislama. Most of the examples discussed in this paper are taken from an exhaustive sample of the equative comparisons in the Bislama language pages of the national newspaper, the *Vanuatu Weekly/Hebdomadaire*, over two months in 1994–95. I have retained the original spellings and punctuation used in the *VWH* even though this results in some inconsistencies between examples and means that the examples in this paper do not correspond to the standards recently established in Vanuatu for written Bislama. However, in my discussion of examples I have followed the new standards. A written database of Bislama proved to be the best environment for gathering tokens of *olsem* in equative comparisons, since this use of *olsem* turns out to be proportionately more common in written Bislama than it is in spoken Bislama. In spoken Bislama, *olsem* serves a range of different (though semantically related) syntactic and discourse functions. These functions are outlined in Meyerhoff and Niedzielski (1995).

The variation we are concerned with takes the following form. The Bislama preposition *olsem* occurs both before and after nouns, as shown in (1) and (2):[2]

NP + *olsem* + NP

(1)a. *I   gat **plante fres frut olsem popo**.*
        PRED have plenty fresh fruit like   papaya
        There are **plenty of fresh fruit like papaya**.

   b. *Hemi faenem i   had tu blong winim **wan***
        3SG   find   PRED hard too to   beat   a

        ***tim olsem St Louis**.*
        team like   St Louis
        They also found it hard to beat **a team like St Louis**.

   c. *Hemi talem se ino   stret   blong singaotem **trip***
        3SG   tell   that PRED.NEG straight to   call   trip

        blong wan gavman   minista olsem turis   from...
        of   a   government minister like   tourism because
        He said it's not fair to call **a minister's trip 'tourism'** because...

NP + *olsem*

(2)a. *...from taem hemi   smol pupu   hemi   mekem*
        because time 3SG.PRED small grandson 3SG.PRED make

        ***wan nakamal olsem**.*
        a   nakamal   like
        ...because when he was a small boy he built **a similar *nakamal***
        (i.e. ceremonial house).

   b. *Ino   gud blong stap konfiusum pipol long ol*
        PRED.NEG good to   HAB confuse   people to   PL

        ***kaen tingting olsem**.*
        kind   thoughts like
        It's not right to confuse people with **those kinds of ideas**.

   c. *Vanuatu i   wan gud   ples blong setemap **kaen***
        Vanuatu PRED a   good place to   set.up   kind

        ***projek olsem**.*
        project like
        Vanuatu is a good place to set up **such projects**.

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2   Abbreviations used in this paper are as follows:

ANT	anterior	IRR	irrealis
CONT	continuous	NEG	negation
DU	dual	PL	plural
EXC	exclusive	PRED	predicate marker
HAB	habitual	SG	singular
INC	inclusive	SPEC	specificity marker

The problem appears to be that *olsem* can be both a preposition and a postposition. It is the postposed forms which stand out most. Bislama is an SVO language: it has prepositions, adjectives usually precede nouns (e.g. *wan gudfela fren* 'a very good friend'), and tense/aspect marking precedes the main V (e.g. *mifala i stap wet* 'we are waiting', *hem i bin askem* 's/he asked'). There are a small number of notable exceptions to this generalisation of right branching. There is a postnominal determiner, *ya*, which marks specificity in Bislama. The placement of *ya* with respect to the NP contrasts with the placement of the other determiners, *ol* 'PL (definite)' and *sam* 'some' and *wan* 'a', all of which are prenominal. Historically, *ya* derives from an adverb (i.e. 'here'), and presumably this partly accounts for why *ya* holds the anomalous position of a postmodifier. In addition, *nogud* 'bad' is a postmodifier of nouns, and people's local affiliations are invariably expressed through N + modifier constructions (e.g. *man Malo* 'person from Malo; a Malo guy'). Thus, it is not a purely logical possibility that *olsem* might be a postmodifier in Bislama. There are limited, though salient, exceptions to the right-branching structure more general to Bislama syntax.

One possible explanation would be that we are dealing with two meanings of *olsem* and that these are systematically distinguished by their placement with respect to the noun. This does not seem to be the case here though, since both have essentially the same meaning and both are used to equate or identify through comparison.

However, closer inspection reveals that the nature of the comparison is not exactly the same in the structures exemplified in (1) and (2). With prenominal *olsem*, as in (1a-c), the second noun being compared is new or non-redundant information which adds to or helps develop a shared mental schema between the writer and reader. For example:

(3)a. *Ol driver i   yusum **rod ia**   olsem **wan mein strim.***
        PL driver PRED use   road SPEC like   a   main   stream
        The drivers use that road as a main thoroughfare.

   b. ***Mi   olsem wan ex-studen   blong Lycee LAB,** mi wandem*
        I   like a   ex-student of   Lycee LAB I want

        sherem tingting blong mi...
        share   thought of   me
        As a former Lycee LAB student, I'd like to share my thoughts...

   c. *Taem yumi   lukluk long rigen mo kolosap moa **ol brata***
        time we.INC look   to   region and close   more PL brother

        kaontri blong yumi   olsem Solomon o PNG...
        country of   we.INC   like Solomons or PNG
        When we consider the region and, even closer to home, our neighbouring
        countries like the Solomons or PNG...

In all such cases of NP + *olsem* + NP, the information in the second NP, which I will call the 'comparator', is novel and not necessarily predictable given the first NP, which I will call the 'benchmark'. What the benchmark is being equated or instantiated with is new information to the reader. By providing this new information, the comparator helps to establish a jointly constructed discourse universe of shared knowledge where there had previously been none. In other words, when we see prenominal uses of *olsem* the benchmark is identified or instantiated in new or non-obvious ways by the comparator.

It seems clear to native speakers of Bislama that with postposed *olsem* there is, in fact, an implied comparator but that in these cases the comparator is identical with or entirely predictable given the benchmark and/or the wider discourse. In these cases, what is being instantiated by the benchmark is already well-established or old information in the discourse. I would suggest that because this information is given already, it is perceived to be redundant and can therefore be deleted, as might be predicted from pragmatic principles of relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1986) or the "Given-New Contract" proposed by Clark and Havilland (1977). Both Relevance theory and the Given-New Contract essentially state that in orderly discourse, familiar or redundant information need not be spelt out in full if, for instance, an unambiguous referent can be computed from memory, unless the speaker wishes some other inference or conclusion to be drawn from the spelling out.

Thus, it follows from these principles that a perfectly straightforward NP + *olsem* + NP equative comparison may be transformed into the anomalous looking NP + *olsem*. If the need to instantiate the benchmark (i.e. the first NP) has been trivially satisfied by the discourse as a whole, it becomes unnecessary to spell out the comparator; the discourse context satisfies this need. If you ask native speakers of Bislama to fill out these constructions they can do so, but in doing so they always repeat the benchmark as the comparator, often modifying it slightly to explicitly indicate that the focus is on the benchmark. In other words, speakers treat (4a', b') as underlying (4a, b).

(4)a.   *...from   taem   hemi   smol   pupu   hemi*
          because time   3SG.PRED small grandson 3SG.PRED

          mekem   wan   nakamal   olsem.
          make   a   nakamal   like
          ...because when he was a small boy he built a similar *nakamal.*

   a'.   *...from   taem   hemi   smol   pupu   hemi*
          because time   3SG.PRED small grandson 3SG.PRED

          mekem   wan   nakamal   olsem   nakamal   ya.
          make   a   nakamal   like   nakamal   SPEC
          ...because when he was a boy he built a *nakamal* like this *nakamal.*

   b.   [*Depo-Provera*] *hemi*   *sef   mo   ol   toktok   blong*
          [Depo-Provera] 3SG.PRED   safe and PL   talk   of

          rod   olsem   i   no   tru   nating.
          road like   PRED NEG true nothing
          D-P is safe and such rumours are completely unfounded.

   b'.   [*Depo-Provera*] *hemi*   *sef   mo   ol   toktok   blong*
          [Depo-Provera] 3SG.PRED   safe and PL   talk   of

          rod   olsem   tufala   toktok ya   i   no   tru   nating.
          road like   two   talk   SPEC PRED NEG true nothing
          D-P is safe and rumours like those two rumours are completely unfounded.

The article that (4a) is drawn from is about the opening of a *nakamal* on Pentecost which had been built by an old man using traditional construction methods. Thus, it is this larger discourse topic that determines that the comparator of *wan nakamal olsem*, if made explicit, is singular. Similarly, information provided by the immediately preceding discourse requires

that the comparator of *ol toktok blong rod olsem*, when made explicit, be plural. Two rumoured side effects are raised and addressed:

> *Long saed blong ol toktok long rod we sam mama oli bin stap talemaot abaot stik o method ia se hemi save mekem bodi i fatfat o samfala i save grow mustas, Misis Ronolea i dinaem ol toktok ia.*

> Mrs Ronolea denied the rumours that some mothers have been repeating concerning the injection or this method [i.e. Depo-Provera], namely that it can make you put on weight or some women can grow beards.

Other advantages to this analysis of *olsem* are:

(a)   it is consistent with other structures in Bislama (which I will illustrate shortly) that are sensitive to whether the referent is hearer-new information or hearer-old, and

(b)   it allows us to explain the interpretation of sentences like (5) and (6) and determine how they should best be represented underlyingly.

In (5) and (6) we find examples of what appear on the surface to be nominals postmodified first by *olsem* and then by some other constituent, a PP in (5) or CP in (6). However, again, it seems clear that contextually redundant information has been omitted and speakers of Bislama flesh these implicit comparisons out along the lines of (5a') and (6a').

(5)a.   *Long ples ia   3 man i   bin ded, 2 yia I*
        in   place SPEC 3 man PRED ANT dead 2 year PRED

        *pas   nao folem **ol kaen aksen olsem blong PNG Difens Fos.***
        pass now follow PL kind action like   of   PNG Defence Force
        Three people were killed here two years ago following similar activities by the PNG Defence Force.

    a'.   *...folem ol   kaen aksen olsem ol   aksen blong PNG*
        follow   PL kind action like   PL action of   PNG

        Difens Fos tedei.
        Defence Force today
        ...following similar activities to today's by the PNG Defence Force.

(6)a.   *Hemia   i   bin   longtaem blongwet long **sam help***
        3SG.SPEC PRED ANT   longtime of   wait from some help

        olsem we bae i   kam long gavman.
        like   that IRR PRED come from   government
        It's been a long wait for such help that's come from the government.

    a'.   *...Blong wet long   sam   help olsem help ya   we   bae*
        to   wait from   some help like   help SPEC that IRR

        baei kam   long gavman.
        PRED come   from   government
        ...to wait for help like this help that has come from the government.

One possible analysis of *olsem* in examples such as these might take the position that *olsem* is not, in these sentences, a preposition. Crowley's (1990:196, 258) discussion of *olsem* distinguishes between its use as a preposition and its use as an adverb, meaning 'thus' or 'so' (e.g. *mifala i wokem olsem* 'we made it thus/like that', or *huia i talem olsem?* 'who said so?'). However, it is easy to show that postposed *olsem* is not functioning as an adverb

in the equative comparisons in (5) and (6). This is ruled out by virtue of constraints on the placement of adverbs within NPs. When an adverb like *longwe* 'there' modifies a noun, it must follow a PP modifying the same noun, as shown in the elicited data in (7):

(7)a.   *Yu lukim haos blong mi longwe?*
         Have you seen my house over there?

   b.   **Yu lukim haos longwe blong mi?*

There appears to be more freedom in the placement of *olsem* and a relative clause modifying a noun, however, I interpret the grammaticality of (5), and two other examples of the sequence N + *olsem* + PP found in the corpus as showing that *olsem* in these sentences is not functioning as an adverb.

Perhaps of greater relevance to the argument that apparently postposed cases of *olsem* involve deletion of an argument, are cases where head nouns are modified by both *olsem* and the specificity marker *ya.* For example:

(8)   *Fulap famili tedei oli   fesem **problem olsem   ia.***
       many   family   today PRED   face   problem   like   SPEC
       Lots of families today face problems like these [just cited].

(9)   ***Kaen prodak   olsem   ia***   hemi   tabu   tumas   blong karem
       kind   product   like   SPEC   3SG.PRED forbidden very   to   bring

       i   kam   long   Vanuatu.
       PRED come to   Vanuatu
       Products like these [under a photo and description] are completely prohibited from being brought into Vanuatu.

It is clear that in sentences like (8) and (9), *ya* is functioning in its well-established role in Bislama as the "demonstrative cum definiteness marker" (Crowley 1990:285). It is not the case, as described by Sankoff and Brown (1976) for Tok Pisin, that the meaning of *ya* has been bleached and that it is functioning simply to mark the rightmost boundary of a clause, or in this case a phrase.

However, placement of *ya* is also revealing of the discourse status of the N it modifies. *Ya* may occur immediately after the head N it modifies or another phrase can intervene between *ya* and the head N. But when *ya* occurs immediately adjacent to the head N, the interpretation is that the N is given information, cf. the following elicited examples:

(10)a.   *Mi mas go long   ofis   longwe   ya.*
         I   must go to   office there   SPEC
         I had to go to the office over there.
         (hearer may not know which office exactly)

    b.   *Mi mas go long ofis ya longwe.*
         I had to go to that office over there.
         (hearer knows exactly which office, it is given information in the discourse or it has been pointed out)

(11)a.   *Long tiket we mi bin   nidim ya,   oli   putum stam*
         to   ticket that I   ANT   need SPEC PRED put   stamp

     blong olgeta.
     of   3PL
     They put their stamp on the ticket that I needed.
     (a specific ticket exists, but is not necessarily identifiable to hearer)

  b. *Long tiket   ya   we mi bin   nidim, oli   putum stam*
     to   ticket SPEC that I   ANT need   PRED put   stamp

     blong olgeta.
     of   3PL
     They put their stamp on this (very) ticket, which I needed.
     (speaker might be waving ticket)

The problem appears to be the following. Examples (10b) and (11b) show that a reading of maximally given or identifiable information is preferred when *ya* occurs immediately next to the N it modifies. But Bislama speakers' intuitions about strings of N + *olsem* + *ya*, are that the benchmark N, from which the *ya* is separated by *olsem*, is likewise identifiable discourse-old information. This suggests that even though it might be possible to analyse N + *olsem* + *ya* sequences as Ns followed by two postmodifiers, given the way the information status of the nominals is interpreted, this analysis is not the most appropriate.

Thus, I am claiming that the difference between NP + *olsem* + NP and NP + *olsem* constructions is the recoverability of the second element in the comparison string. An interesting question then becomes whether this pragmatic distinction has any structural reflexes. Are there consistent qualitative differences between the benchmark NPs in NP + *olsem* + NP constructions and the benchmark NPs in NP + *olsem* constructions? And are there consistent qualitative differences between the comparators in the two constructions?

The second question is simultaneously easy to answer and impossible to test. The account I have argued for here is built around my assertion that there is a qualitative difference between the form of the comparator in the two constructions. I noted that Bislama speakers interpret NP + *olsem* constructions as having an implied comparator that is always discourse-old, and showed that, when asked to, speakers consistently spell out the deleted comparator with a specific NP, usually of the form N + *ya*. Thus, I cannot compare the form or information status of the comparators in the two constructions, as I have analysed one set of comparators as being of invariant form.

However, we can compare the form of the **benchmark** nouns in the two constructions, and the results of this comparison for the 201 equative comparisons found in the *Vanuatu Weekly* are presented in the following table. Definite and specific benchmarks have been grouped together and these form a natural class with zero arguments, since Bislama appears to allow license zero arguments largely on pragmatic grounds, for example, when the referent is retrievable from prior utterances (though this remains to be systematically tested). Obviously, definiteness and specificity are determined by the discourse, and are not purely formal measures, thus the examples provided in this column (i.e. a noun followed by *ya* and *ol* with a head noun) are by no means exhaustive. A relative clause or a prepositional phrase could make a head noun specific, for instance.

TABLE: COMPARISON OF THE FORM OF THE **BENCHMARK** NOUNS IN THE CONSTRUCTIONS

NP + *olsem* AND NP + *olsem* + NP

	FORM AND REFERENTIAL PROPERTIES OF BENCHMARK				
	No. of tokens	definite/specific, e.g. N *ya*, *ol* N	zero	indefinite,e.g. *wan*, *sam* N	generic N or abstract N
NP + *olsem*	66	32% (21)	0% (0)	33% (22)	35% (23)
NP + *olsem* + NP	135	53% (71)	18% (25)	15% (20)	14% (19)
Total	201	46%	12%	21%	21%

We can see that the benchmark noun in NP + *olsem* constructions (where the comparator is discourse-old information) is more likely to be an indefinite, abstract or generic NP than it is in NP + *olsem* + NP comparisons. For example:

(12) *Hemi   wan blong ol hae panismen   we Kot i*
      3SG.PRED a   of   PL high punishment that court PRED

      givimlong wan rep keis olsem.
      give to   a   rape case like
      This is one of the heaviest punishments the court can give in a rape case like [this].

(13)a. *Be hemi   pruvum se tede woman tu i   save*
       but 3SG.PRED prove   that today woman too PRED can

       holem top position   olsem.
       hold   top position   like
       But this proves that today women too can hold senior positions like [this one].

    b. *Situesen olsem ia   nao yumi   save talem se   ol*
       situation like   SPEC now we.INC can tell   that PL

       pleia oli   lusum konsentresen blong olgeta.
       player PRED lose   concentration of   3PL
       In a situation like this [situation], we can say the players have lost their concentration.

Note that (13b), in which the comparator that has been deleted is something like *situesen ya* 'this situation', indicates that it is important to maintain a distinction between hearer-old information and discourse-old information (Walker & Prince forthcoming). Deletion of the comparator is possible in this example because it is given by the discourse (every event is situated in time and space), that is, it is discourse-old, not because there has been prior use of the phrase *situesen (ya)*, which is a requirement for something to be considered hearer-old.

In NP + *olsem* + NP comparisons (pace the examples given in (1)), the benchmark is more likely to be definite/specific than indefinite or generic, as shown in (14), and in this *olsem* construction, the benchmark is more likely to be definite/specific than the benchmark in NP + *olsem* constructions.

(14)a. *Tufala   i   askem olgeta kastom jif   blong   karem taem ia*
        3DU   PRED   ask   3PL   custom chief   to   take   time SPEC

      olsem wan taem blong fogetem ol   rabis   tingting...
      like   a   time to   forget   PL   rubbish   thought
      They asked the traditional chiefs to make this time a time for forgetting bad
      feelings...

   b. *Mifala   i   stap   lukaot   hem olsem wan stret pikinini*
       we.EXC   PRED   CONT   care.for him   like   a   real   child

       of   mifala.
       blong   we.EXC
       We're looking after him like he was one of our own children.

In conclusion, then, I have argued that what looks like freedom in the placement of *olsem*
with regard to benchmark nouns in equative comparisons is, in fact, a regular pattern of
nominal premodification. However, the presence or absence of the comparator is constrained
by pragmatic factors, namely whether or not the comparator, which functions as an
instantiation of the benchmark, is discourse-old and is therefore easily retrievable by the
hearer/reader. I have discussed constraints on the interpretation and placement of *olsem* when
it occurs with adverbs and the specificity marker *ya* and shown that two other possible
analyses of NP + *olsem* constructions, namely one in which *olsem* is an adverb and one in
which it is a nominal postmodifier similar to *ya* are ruled out on syntactic and pragmatic
grounds respectively. In other words, use of *olsem* in Bislama seems to be another instance
of syntactic variation that is best explained by the structure of the discourse and the
information status of the referents being compared.

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