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Missing Topics in Malagasy Headlines

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1.   Introduction

One hallmark of headlines in French and English is that they appear to have reduced structure.

(1)   a.   Céline Dion malade.
       b.   Risque d'avalanche maximal ce weekend.
       c.   Young inmate punished after game.
       d.   Hazardous waste site to open near I-94.

In particular, looking at (1), we see examples of missing tense, copulas and determiners. If the absence of these grammatical markers is the defining characteristic of "headlinese", what happens in a language with obligatory tense marking and no copulas? In this paper, I consider data from Malagasy and I show that headlines in this language have all the usual tense markings, but they have special word order (SVO instead of VOS) and subjects lack determiners. My goal is to argue that despite the presence of tense, Malagasy headlines do have reduced structure.

   The organization of the paper is as follows: I begin with a brief discussion of headlines in general and some background on Malagasy clause structure. In section 3, I provide examples of Malagasy headlines and in section 4, I argue that headlines are topic-less sentences (thetic judgements). Section 5 provides an overview of some alternative analyses and section 6 concludes.

2.   Background

Stowell (1991) shows that English headlines lack grammatical markers such as determiners, tense, and copulas. Based on these data and examples from French and other languages, Vinet (1993) and Paesani (2006) argue that headlines are root small clauses. For Vinet, the small clause is AgrP, while for Paesani any lexical projection can be a small clause.

   Turning now to Malagasy, the data in (2) show that there is no copular verbs and that the language lacks infinitives. (2a) illustrates the use of adjectival and nominal predicates without a copula. In (2b), I provide a standard paradigm of tense marking (on an active verb) and in (2c), we see that even in contexts

where we might expect an infinitive (the complement of a control verb), the embedded verb is marked for tense.

(2) a.   Marary/lehilahy   Rabe.
          sick/man   Rabe
          'Rabe is sick/a man.'

        b.   Mihira/nihira/hihira   Rabe.
              AT.sing/PST.AT.sing/FUT.AT.sing   Rabe
              'Rabe is/was/will be singing.'

        c.   Nanomboka nivovo   ny   alika.
              PST.AT.start PST.AT.bark DET dog
              'The dog began to bark.'   [Randriamasimanana 1986: 346]
              (lit.) 'The dog began barked.'

Two other aspects of Malagasy syntax are important in this paper. First, the unmarked word order is subject-final (VOS) and second, subjects must be (formally) definite (e.g. a proper name or headed by a determiner) (Keenan 1976; Law 2006). The first property is illustrated in (2) and the second by the ungrammaticality of (3).

(3) *Nivovo   alika.
       PST.AT.bark dog
       'A dog is barking.'

3.   Headlines in Malagasy

Let us now consider headlines in Malagasy. Looking at a range of examples covering several months, I have found that SVO is common. Moreover in all examples, the verbs are fully inflected for tense, aspect and voice. Much like other Western Austronesian languages, Malagasy has a rich voice system, as indicated by verbal morphology, and it is possible to find examples of headlines with all the difference voices.[1] The examples in (4a,b) are active, (4c) is passive and the verb in (4d) is marked for the circumstantial voice.

(4) a.   Lehilahy   nangalatra bisikileta.   ✔HL/*SM
          man   PST.AT.steal bicycle
          'Man stole bicycle.' (08-01-2007)

        b.   Minibus nandratra ankizy telo.   ✔HL/*SM
              minibus PST.AT.hit child   three
              'Minibus hit three children.' (05-02-2007)

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[1] For the remainder of this paper, I indicate whether each example is a possible headline (HL) or a possible sentence in standard Malagasy (SM).

    c.   Lehilahy   voatifitra   teo   amin'ny   feny.   ✔HL/*SM
        man   PASS.shoot there P'DET   thigh.3
        'Man shot in thigh.' (10-01-2007)

    d.   Fiara mpitatitra   nianjeran'ny   hazo.   ✔HL/*SM
        car   transporter PST.CT.fall'DET   tree
        'Bus fallen on by tree.' (22-03-2007)

The above examples also illustrate the presence of tense: (4a,b,d) are all marked overtly for past tense.[2]

    A second salient property of headlines, and one that also distinguishes them from normal sentences, is that the subject must be indefinite.[3] Therefore definite descriptions and names cannot be in the subject position of a headline.

(5)   a. * Ny lehilahy nangalatra   bisikileta.   *HL/*SM
         DET man   PST.AT.steal bicycle
         'The man stole bicycle.'

      b. * Ravalomanana   nangalatra   bisikileta   *HL/*SM
         Ravalomanana   PST.AT.steal   bicycle
         'Ravalomanana stole bicycle.'

Thus we see that headlines have a special word order and impose a definiteness restriction on the subject position.

    Before continuing, I should point out that VOS is also found in headlines, as seen in (6).

(6)   Voaheloka   efa-taona ny jeneraly randrianafidisoa. ✔HL/✔SM
      PASS.condemn   4-year   DET general randrianafidisoa
      'General Randrianafidisoa was condemned to four years.' (03-01-2007)

But unlike what we saw with SVO headlines, here the subject must be definite (just as in (3)).

(7) * Voaheloka   efa-taona   lehilahy.   *HL/*SM
     PASS.condemn   4-year   man
     'A man was condemned to four years.'

In other words, VOS headlines appear to have the same structure as normal sentences in Malagasy and I set them aside here.

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[2] Yves Roberge (p.c.) suggests that the past tense marking is not real tense, but a kind of default. Native speakers judge present tense in headlines to be acceptable, but in the data I have collected, most examples are marked for past tense. For the moment, therefore, I assume that there is full tense in headlines, but this issue deserves further study.

[3] SVO order is possible in standard Malagasy only if there is a clear pause between the subject and the rest of the clause. (5a,b) are therefore grammatical with this marked intonation, but are not possible headlines.

4. Analysis

I base my analysis in part on the clause structure proposed for Malagasy by Pearson (2005). Pearson argues that the clause-final subject is in an A-bar position, TopP. He notes that if the subject is in fact a topic, he can explain why it must be definite (cross-linguistically, topics tend to be definite). I will follow Pearson, therefore, in assuming that TopP is the locus of the formal definiteness requirement. I also assume that the presence of tense marking in headlines is an indication of the presence of T° (but see footnote 2).

Let us now consider the interpretation of headlines. Linguists and philosophers sometimes distinguish between two types of sentences: categorical and thetic (Kuroda 1972, Sasse 1987). Categorical sentences are sometimes called complex judgements and have the standard subject-predicate structure. Thetic sentences, on the other hand, are called simple judgements and merely report events (they are typical responses to the question "What happened?"). I suggest that headlines are thetic judgements – that is, they are simply event reporting and therefore lack a topic. In structural terms, this means that headlines lack the TopP projection entirely and are instances of TP. In other words, headlines are structurally reduced in comparison with "normal" sentences.

Let us now consider the structure of headlines in more detail. As shown in the example below, the subject moves to [Spec, TP] to satisfy EPP features on T.

(8) a. Lehilahy   nangalatra   bisikileta.   ✔HL/*SM
       man   PST.AT.steal   bicycle
       'Man stole bicycle.' (08-01-2007)

    b. [$_{TP}$ lehilahy$_i$ [$_{T'}$ T [$_{vP}$ t$_i$ nangalatra [$_{VP}$ bisikileta]]]]

To account for the indefiniteness of the subject, I propose that the T found in headlines lacks case features, so the subject must also be merged without case features of its own. I follow a suggestion in Progovac (2006), and claim that default case is linked to the absence of determiners.

As a piece of evidence in favour of the proposed structure, we can see that the subject is outside of vP – it precedes pre-predicate particles (e.g. *toa* 'seem' and *tokony* 'should').

(9) Lehilahy   toa   nangalatra bisikileta.   ✔HL/*SM
    man   seem   PST.AT.steal bicycle
    'A man seems to have stolen a bicycle.'

(10) Vehivavy   tokony hahazo   ny   loka voalohany. ✔HL/*SM
     woman   should FUT.AT.get DET   prize first
     'A woman should get the first prize.'

If these particles adjoin to vP, the above data indicate that the subject has moved to a higher projection.

Second, like other thetic judgements, headlines are not possible with individual level predicates.[4]

(11) a. * L'actrice Sophia Loren belle.   [Vinet 1991: (7c)]

     b. Lehilahy   Ravalomanana.   *HL/✔SM
       man   Ravalomanana
       'Ravalomanana is a man.'

If we add a modifier to make a stage level predicate, the headlines improve.

(12) a. L'actrice Sophia Loren toujours belle.   [Vinet 1991: (9c)]

     b. Tena   lehilahy   Ravalomanana.   ✔HL/✔SM
       indeed   man   Ravalomanana
       'Ravalomanana is really a man.'

There remains, however, one problem with claiming that headlines are thetic judgements: other thetic judgements in Malagasy, such as weather expressions, always have topics.

(13) Mandrivotra ny   andro.   ✔HL/✔SM
     AT.wind   DET   day
     'It is windy.'   [Keenan 1976: (16)]

Thus it appears that there is no direct correlation between thetic judgements and the absence of topics. The lack of correlation may arise due to a Malagasy-particular constraint that requires all utterances to have a topic.[5] Given that headlines are a different register and therefore subject to different constraints, this requirement can be overridden.

     In sum, the proposed analysis links the interpretation of headlines (thetic judgement) to reduced structure. At the same time, given the presence of tense morphology and the position of the subject with respect to certain particles, the proposed structure includes a functional projection, T, higher than vP. I also suggest that the indefiniteness of the subject in headlines is a result of default case.

5.   Alternative accounts

In the following sub-sections, I explore alternative structural accounts of Malagasy headlines.

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[4] In (11b), I have used a VOS example because indefinite subjects are generally unacceptable with individual level predicates.

[5] The main exception is existentials, but these, too, can have topics (see (28)).

5.1 Clefts

As a first alternative analysis, consider clefts. In Malagasy, clefts are another instance of (apparent) SVO with indefinite subjects. In (14), I provide an example of a real headline that has been modified to be a cleft (by adding the cleft particle *no*).

(14) Lehilahy no nangalatra bisikileta. ✔HL/✔SM
 man CL PST.AT.steal bicycle
 'It was a man who stole a bicycle.' (08-01-2007, modified)

Given that (14) is a possible headline, one could treat headlines as a kind of reduced cleft (lacking the cleft particle *no*). This analysis, however, cannot adequately account for the differences between clefts and headlines. In a cleft, the initial element (*lehilahy* 'man' in (14)) acts like a predicate (Paul 2001). For example, it can be preceded by the particles *toa* 'seem' and *tokony* 'should' (these particles typically occur pre-verbally).

(15) Toa lehilahy no nangalatra bisikileta. ✔HL/✔SM
 seem man CL PST.AT.steal bicycle
 'It seems to have been a man who stole a bicycle.'

(16) Tokony vehivavy no hahazo ny loka voalohany. ✔HL/✔SM
 should woman CL FUT.AT.get DET prize first
 'It should be a woman who gets the first prize.'

In headlines, however, these particles cannot precede the subject.

(17) * Toa lehilahy nangalatra bisikileta. *HL/*SM
 seem man PST.AT.steal bicycle
 'A man seems to have stolen a bicycle.'

(18) * Tokony vehivavy hahazo ny loka voalohany. *HL/*SM
 should woman FUT.AT.get DET prize first
 'It should be a woman who gets the first prize.'

Instead, as we saw in (9) and (10), the particles occur between the subject and the verb (i.e. in their typical pre-verbal position). Note that these particles are permitted with VOS headlines, but again are strictly pre-verbal.

(19) Tokony hanampy ny miaramila Ravalomanana. ✔HL/✔SM
 should FUT.AT.help DET soldier Ravalomanana
 'Ravalomanana should help the soldiers.'

The data thus show that the clause-initial subject in SVO headlines is not a predicate and we can conclude that headlines should not be assimilated to clefts.

5.2 Relative clauses

As a second possible structure for headlines, I turn to relative clauses. In other words, perhaps headlines are really DPs modified by a relative clause, not propositions. The structure is given below (note that relative clauses follow the head in Malagasy, so this structure is plausible).

(20) [$_{DP}$ mpangalatra bisikileta [$_{Rel\ cl}$ naiditra   am-ponja]]
          thief   bicycle   PST.TT.enter to-prison
      'Bicycle thief put in prison.' (02-02-2007)

As a first consideration, note that relative clauses are optionally marked with *izay*.

(21) ny   vehivavy   (izay) manasa   lamba
      DET   woman   REL   AT.wash   cloth
      'the woman who is washing clothes'   [Keenan 1972: (3)]

If we add *izay* to (20) to force the relative clause reading, the result is still a possible headline, but the interpretation changes.

(22) [$_{DP}$ Mpangalatra   bisikileta [$_{Relative\ clause}$ izay naiditra   am-ponja]]
          thief   bicycle   REL   PST.TT.enter to-prison
      'A bicycle thief who was put in prison'

Whereas (20) sounds more like a "normal" headline, announcing a story about the event described, (22) suggests that the article will talk about the thief. Moreover, I have found no instances of overt *izay* in my headline corpus. For these two reasons, I reject the relative clause analysis of headlines.

5.3 Small clauses

I now turn to two more plausible analyses of headlines: small clauses and existentials.[6] As mentioned in section 2, Vinet (1993) and Paesani (2006) both argue for a small clause analysis of headlines in English and French: AgrP for Vinet and any lexical projection for Paesani. Is it possible to extend this analysis to Malagasy? A small clause structure is initially plausible because other possible small clauses in Malagasy exhibit subject-initial word order, as illustrated below:

(23) Mijery [ny   namany   miady]   i Sahondra.
      AT.watch DET   friend.3   AT.fight   Sahondra
      'Sahondra is watching her friends fight.'
      [Paul and Ranaivoson 1998: (21a)]

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[6] Given that the complement to the existential verb may be a small clause, these two analyses may in fact be the same.

(24) Nahatonga   [ny orana   tsy   ho   avy] ny rivotra.
     PST.CAUS.arrive   DET rain   NEG   FUT   come DET wind
     'The wind caused the rain not to come.'
     [Andrianierenana 1996: (6a)]

(25) Tsy   miasa   androany   Rabe satria
     NEG   AT.work   today   Rabe because
     [ny   vadiny   marary].
     DET   spouse.3   sick
     'Rabe isn't working today because his wife is sick.'
     [Pearson 2001: (163a)]

Thus the word order found in headlines thus fits with other (potential) small clauses. Note that the small clause subjects in (23)-(25) are definite, unlike what we saw for headlines. This difference, however, could be linked to default case mechanisms in root small clauses (see Paesani 2006 and Progovac 2006 for discussion).
      The main drawback of the small clause analysis is that in Malagasy headlines don't look "small" – as seen earlier in (4), we find the full range of tense, aspect, and voice marking.[7] The presence of these grammatical elements suggests the presence of rich functional structure, such as T˚. Moreover, we saw in (9) and (10) that the subject appears to raise out of the *v*P. Thus headlines require more structure than a simple small clause.[8]

5.4   Existentials

Given their thetic nature and indefinite subjects, headlines resemble existential sentences. An analysis that takes this resemblance seriously could posit a null existential verb in headlines.

(26) (Misy) zaza roa   maty nianjeran'ny   trano. ✔HL/(✔)SM
     exist child two   dead PST.CT.fall'DET   house
     '(There were) two children killed, crushed by a house.'
     (05-02-2007, modified)

The presence of the existential verb would (partially) account for the definiteness effect found in headlines (compare (27) with (5)).

(27) *Misy Ravalomanana maty nianjeran'ny   trano.
      exist   Ravalomanana dead PST.CT.fall'DET   house
      'There was Ravalomanana killed, crushed by a house.'

There are however, some problems with this analysis. I first discard one apparent problem: although (27) is ungrammatical, definites are permitted in existentials.

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[7] Note that this is also true in (23)-(25), calling into question the existence of small clauses in this language.

[8] Vinet's AgrP could account for the raising of the subject to a higher position.

(28) Misy ny   zaza   mitomany.
    exist DET   child AT.cry
    'There are children who are crying.'   [Law 2005: (2b)]

As argued by Law, however, *ny zaza mitomany* is in fact the subject/topic, not the complement to *misy*. The structure of examples such as (28) is therefore different. I now turn to three more serious problems.

    First, existentials in Malagasy (unlike English) are not sensitive to the stage/individual level contrast.

(29) a.   Misy mpamono   afo   vonona.
              exist killer   fire   available
              'There are firefighters available.'

      b.   Misy mpamono   afo   kinga saina.
              exist killer   fire   quick mind
              'There are firefighters intelligent.' [adapted from Law 2005: (21)]

We have already seen that headlines only permit stage level predicates.

    Second, Law (2005) argues that the complement to the existential verb is consistently an NP modified by a relative clause – we have already seen in section 5.2 that this doesn't seem to be correct for headlines.

    Third, extraction of locative PPs is possible out of existentials, but not in headlines.[9]

(30) a.   Teny amin'ny   arabe no nisy   olona natory.
              there P'DET   street CL PST.exist   person PST.AT.sleep
              'In the street there were people sleeping.'

      b. * Tany Antsirabe no trano   iray narodan'ny orana.   *HL/*SM
             there Antsirabe CL house   one PST.TT.topple'DET rain
             'In Antsirabe one house was toppled by the rain.'

Thus although existentials and headlines bear some resemblances, there are enough structural differences to treat them differently.

6.   Conclusion

Data from Malagasy headlines show that this register differs from other utterances in two ways: SVO word order and indefinite subjects. I have argued that these two distinctive properties are signals of missing structure, in particular that headlines lack a TopP projection. As such, headlines in Malagasy are reduced, just as in other languages such as English and French, despite the different properties of headlines in these languages.

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[9] One possible explanation of the ungrammaticality of extraction in headlines is that as TPs, they lack the relevant structural positions for extraction (e.g. CP).

This paper raises the question of how to identify small clauses in a language with obligatory tense marking. More refined tests are required to distinguish between, for example, small clauses and TP, and to see what these tests tell us about headlines. Also in question is the indefiniteness of subjects in Malagasy headlines. Unlike in English, where subjects can be bare or not bare in headlines, there is a very strict definiteness restriction on subjects in Malagasy headlines. Whether this falls out from default case or some other structural property of headlines deserves further research. Finally, I believe that the results of this paper suggest that the headline register can provide new insights into the structure of particular languages.

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