

WORD ORDER AND TRANSITIVE CLAUSES IN MALAGASY

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1 Introduction

Malagasy has been considered to have a Verb-Object-Subject (VOS) word order (Keenan 1976, Keenan and Ochs 1979, Randriamasimanana 2000).¹ This paper argues that a distinction between Verb-Agent-Patient (VAP) and Verb-Patient-Agent (VPA) clauses is a better characterization of the language. The scope of this study focuses on the motive behind the choice of these two types of transitive clauses.

This paper starts by addressing issues with considering Malagasy as having a VOS transitive construction. Then, in order to understand the proposed solution, it is necessary to both have a minimum grasp about transitive construction types in the language and present the methodology used for the analysis. The final parts of the paper discuss the results of topicality measurement done on a series of narrative texts.²

2 The assumption of a single transitive clause form

Considering the language as having a single transitive clause form leads to the assumption that VOS (1a) is the basic word order. From this standpoint, constructions such as (1b) are taken to be passive clauses (Rabenilaina 1991, Keenan and Ochs 1979, among others):

- (1) a. n-an-shuratra ilai taratashi ilai umbiashi.
PST-EA:A-write DEF letter DEF soothsayer
'The soothsayer wrote the letter.'
- b. n-u-shuratra-ana ilai umbiashi ilai taratashi.
PST-u-write-EA:P DEF soothsayer DEF letter
'The letter was written by the soothsayer.'
'The soothsayer wrote the letter.'

Claiming that (1b) is a passive clause does not take into account several facts. First, constructions like (1a) and (1b) are different in terms of word order. For (1a) the arguments' order is patient-agent, hence the word order Verb-Patient-Agent (VPA) while for (1b) the order is agent-patient, hence the word order Verb-Agent-Patient (VAP).

Furthermore, the difference of word order is accompanied by verbal morphology alteration. In (1a), the verb is structured as tense-external argument-root while in (1b) the

¹ Malagasy is an Austronesian language spoken in Madagascar.

² All clauses used in the text counting are from a series of folk tales taken from *Hafatry ny ombi-asy iray ho an'ny zanany* by Rainandriamampandry and Ranaivosoa (1900s). There were about 250 clauses in whole, of which 219 were considered for this study.

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structure is tense-root-external argument. Permuting the word order without changing the verb morphology results in ungrammatical clauses:

- (2) a. **n-an-shuratra ilai umbiashi ilai taratashi*.
 PST-EA:A-write DEF soothsayer DEF letter
 ‘The letter wrote the soothsayer.’
- b. **n-u-shuratra-ana ilai taratashi ilai umbiashi*.
 PST-u-write-EA:P DEF letter DEF soothsayer
 ‘The letter wrote the soothsayer.’

Third, missionaries and linguists (Cousins 1897, Keenan 1976, Randriamasimanana 2000 among others), who analyzed the language, brought up the fact that, in actual spoken instances, speakers have a preference for constructions such as (1b). If this type of clause was really a passive construction, it might not be expected to have such a high frequency of occurrence.

Finally, depending on the word order, the arguments’ constituency is variable. A temporal adverb test is used in this analysis to differentiate constituency. The adverbial phrase *umali* ‘yesterday’ is used between each pair of words. For both VAP and VPA constructions, if the result produces a grammatical construction, then the words on the left and on the right of the temporal adverb do belong to two separate units. If the result is ungrammatical, then the words on the right of the temporal adverb cannot be separated from the words on the left. Hence, they belong to the same unit. With VPA construction, separating the noun phrases *ilai taratashi* ‘the letter’ and *ilai umbiashi* ‘the soothsayer’ with the temporal adverb results in a grammatical clause (3a) while separating the verb *n-an-shuratra* ‘wrote’ from the noun phrase *ilai taratashi* is not (3b). Therefore, *ilai taratashi* and *ilai umbiashi* belong to different units while *ilai taratashi* forms a unit with the verb phrase:

- (3) a. *n-an-shuratra ilai taratashi umali ilai umbiashi*.
 PST-EA:A-write DEF letter yesterday DEF soothsayer
 ‘The soothsayer wrote the letter yesterday.’
- b. **n-an-shuratra umali ilai taratashi ilai umbiashi*.
 PST-EA:A-write yesterday DEF letter DEF soothsayer
 ‘The soothsayer wrote the letter yesterday.’

With VAP construction, inserting the temporal adverb *umali* ‘yesterday’ between the two noun phrases *ilai umbiashi* ‘the soothsayer’ and *ilai taratashi* ‘the letter’ yields a grammatical clause (4a) while putting the adverb between the verb *n-u-shuratra-ana* ‘wrote’ and *ilai umbiashi* results in an ungrammatical clause (4b). Consequently, *ilai umbiashi* and *ilai taratashi* belong to different units but *ilai umbiashi* forms a unit with the verb phrase:

- (4) a. n-u-shuratra-ana ilai umbiashi umali ilai taratashi.
 PST-u-write-EA:P DEF soothsayer yesterday DEF letter
 'The soothsayer wrote the letter yesterday.'
- b. *n-u-shuratra-ana umali ilai umbiashi ilai taratashi.
 PST-u-write-EA:P yesterday DEF soothsayer DEF letter
 'The soothsayer wrote the letter yesterday.'

Phrases forming a unit with the verb phrase (e.g. *ilai taratashi* in (3b) and *ilai umbiashi* in (4b)) are referred to here as *internal arguments* (IA) while those that can be separated from the verb phrase are referred to as *external arguments* (EA). Readers should note that the terms internal and external argument are therefore used here in a way which does *not* correspond directly to the use of the same terms in transformational grammar/Chomskyeen linguistics (where the internal argument of a verb is always its object, and the external argument its subject).

3 Transitive Clause Types

Because of the constituency distinction and because of the difference in terms of argument definiteness, Malagasy transitive clauses represent, at least, three different categories (i.e. VAP, VP_iA, and VP_dA constructions).

External arguments of transitive clauses must be definite. The use of indefinite external arguments results in ungrammatical sentences. Compare examples in (5) with those in (1):

- (5) a. *n-an-shuratra ilai taratashi ø umbiashi.
 PST-EA:A-write DEF letter IDEF soothsayer
 'A soothsayer wrote the letter.'
- b. *n-u-shuratra-ana ilai umbiashi ø taratashi.
 PST-u-write-EA:P DEF soothsayer IDEF letter
 'The soothsayer wrote a letter.'

For VPA constructions, the internal argument can be either definite (as in 1a) or indefinite (as in 6):

- (6) n-an-shuratra ø taratashi ilai umbiashi.
 PST-EA:A-write IDEF letter DEF soothsayer
 'The soothsayer wrote a letter.'

Because of the difference of internal argument definiteness, VPA constructions are distinguished as VP_iA, for indefinite internal argument, and VP_dA, for definite internal argument.

For VAP constructions, this paper will not consider sentences where the internal argument is indefinite, as illustrated in (7):

- (7) ?n-u-shuratra-ana ø umbiashi ilai taratashi.
 PST-u-write-EA:P IDEF soothsayer DEF letter
 'A soothsayer wrote the letter.'

Although clauses such as in (7) may be grammatical, I will only consider VAP constructions in which both internal and external arguments are definite, as in (1b).

4 Methodology

Coorman (1982)'s and Givón (1983)'s topicality measurement is applied throughout this analysis to establish the difference between Malagasy transitive constructions. *Topicality* is a property of a noun (or noun phrase) when it is recurring through discourse (Givón 1990). According to Thompson (1994), a topical argument is one that carries some weight of importance and predictability within a text. An argument is important when, after its current mention, it appears often within the following discourse, and it is predictable when it is mentioned at least once in a previous nearby clause.

Cooreman and Givón define *anaphoric reference* (Referential Distance in Cooreman and Givón's terminology) as the number of clauses between the present occurrence of the referent and its last occurrence in the preceding clauses. When a referent is located in the clause immediately preceding the present occurrence, the value of 1 is assigned. If there is an occurrence in two or three clauses before the present occurrence, the value of 2 or 3 is respectively assigned. If the present occurrence is the first mention of the referent or there are no occurrence of the referent in the three preceding clauses, the value of >3 is assigned. Referents with values between 1 and 3 are said to be topical while those getting values >3 are said to be less or non-topical.

Cataphoric reference (Topic Persistence in Cooreman and Givón's terminology) is defined as the number of times a referent is mentioned in the next 10 clauses following its present occurrence. If the referent is not mentioned at all within the next 10 clauses the value of 0 is assigned. If it is mentioned 1, 2, 3, ..., or 10 times the value of 1, 2, 3, ..., or 10 is assigned. Referents with values greater than two (i.e. >2) are said to be topical while those getting values between 0 and 2 are said to be less or non-topical.

In the series of narrative text used for this study, for each type of transitive clause, both anaphoric and cataphoric references are counted in order to determine the topicality of the arguments.

5 VP_iA-Type Clause Arguments Topicality

For anaphoric reference, the text count for VP_iA constructions shows that agent arguments are commonly present in the previous three clauses while patients are not. In table 1a, the number of agent arguments receiving a value between 1 and 3 is much higher than patients: