

Argument structure and adjuncts: perspectives from northern New Guinea

It is assumed that arguments and adjuncts differ in that arguments are licensed by a predicate, while adjuncts are not. The nature and number of arguments is thus strictly delimited, while adjuncts are essentially unbounded. (1) and (2) demonstrate the restrictions placed on possible arguments by the predicate in English; (3) shows the lack of such restrictions on adjuncts.

- (1) She slept (*the cat) (*the hot water).
- (2) She admired *(the cat) (*the hot water).
- (3) She washed the cat (with the hot water) (in the laundry room) (for her sister) (with her daughter) (yesterday).

In a range of languages of North-Central New Guinea (I present data from two unrelated and noncontiguous languages, One and Skou) we find restrictions on the number of participants in a clause that can informally be stated as in (4).

- (4) Required: one SUBJECT
(lexically) specified by verb: one OBJECT
optional: time reference
Maximally one (per verb): co-agent, beneficiary, instrument, location, source or goal.

This means that trivalent clauses are not licensed by single verbs, and that maximally one oblique or adjunct may be present for any one verb. Some of these consequences are shown in (5) - (6) for Skou, which is SOV, while (7) presents a particular quandary for One ((5) and (6) are also ungrammatical in One).

- (5) * SUBJECT OBJECT_{recipient} OBJECT_{theme} V_{give}
- (6) * SUBJECT OBJECT V_{cook} INSTRUMENT LOCATION
- (7) * SUBJECT V_{fall} SOURCE GOAL

Resolution is achieved by the use of serial verb constructions — serialising with the same lexical verb when there is no appropriate separate verb with which to serialise — or with clause-chaining. Strategies used to render (5) - (7) grammatical are shown schematically for Skou in (5)' and (6)', and for One in (7)', showing the use of the same lexical verb twice.

- (5)' SUBJECT [OBJECT_{theme} V_{get}] [V_{give} OBJECT_{recipient}]
- (6)' SUBJECT [OBJECT_{instrument} V_{get}]-and [OBJECT_{theme} V_{cook} LOCATION]
- (7)' SUBJECT [V_{fall} SOURCE] [V_{fall} GOAL]

Both One and Skou adhere to the schema in (4), despite having very different grammars and different morphosyntactic resources. I demonstrate that for each of the languages an analysis in terms of positions in the clause, or case-marking differentiation, or even pragmatic positions, is not adequate to describe the data, and we must simply specify firstly a restriction on the number of adjuncts in the clause, and secondly (and less strongly, for Skou) a conflation of the distinction between oblique and adjunct in these languages. The fact that adjuncts are not freely adjoined to clauses, but are dependant on a verb, is challenging for any theory of syntax that relies on an argument/adjunct distinction.

References

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