

Case marking and clause structure in Mēbengokre (Kayapó)

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Introduction This paper discusses the case marking difference surfacing in the progressive construction in Mēbengokre (Kayapó), an understudied Jê language spoken in the northeastern Amazon region, in Brazil. In the standard view of cross-linguistic generalization, if a language shows aspect-driven case split, it displays ergativity in perfective forms, and accusativity in imperfective forms (Dixon 1994). This is the case in Hindi (Mahajan 1990) but not in Basque where perfective and imperfective forms show ergative case, yet the progressive form never displays ergative subjects (Laka 2006). I argue that in Mēbengokre the surface difference on the realization of the argument bearing the overt case arises from the nominal property of the positional verb.

The facts Mēbengokre is a very strict head-final language with a split ergative case system. The progressive aspect in this language is expressed by means of a periphrastic construction composed by positional verbs such as *dʒa* ‘be standing’, *ɲũ* ‘be sitting’, *nõ* ‘be lying down’, preceded by the light verb *ɔ* ‘make’. In such constructions the verbal complex ‘light verb+positional verb’, takes a nominalized sentence as its complement. But the subject argument can be realized in two different ways: with the nominative (unmarked) case, as in (1), or with the ergative case, realized by means of the ergative pronoun *kutɛ*, as shown in (2). While the embedded verb *krɛn* remains the same in (1) and (2) the positional verb lacks person-agreement in the former but it is inflected in the latter. In addition to the difference in person-agreement, the verb in those clauses show different stem morphology. In Basque transitive subjects bear ergative case in the perfective (3a) and imperfective (3b) while in the progressive they do not (3c). Laka (2006) argues that aspect-driven case split is a reflex of the type of the syntactic structure associated with progressive and imperfectives. According to Laka the progressives involves a biclausal structure in which there are two verbs available for licensing the absolutive (=Nominative) case while perfective and imperfective clauses are associated with a monoclausal structure. Mēbengokre seems to posit some problems for Laka’s analysis since it predicts that in progressive, with a biclausal structure, the ergative it is not expected to surface.

The analysis Following Laka’s ideas I argue that in both clauses the complex predicate (“*make*+*positional verb*”) takes a nominalized sentence as its complement and I show that the nature of the element heading those clauses, rather than the syntactic structure they are associated with, plays an important role in the case-assignment.

Data

Positional verb: stem = verbal

- (1) kubẽ tɛp krẽ-n ɔ dʒa
barbarian fish eat-PART make be-standing
“The barbarian is eating fish.”

Positional verb: stem = nominal

- (2) kubẽ kutɛ tɛp krẽ-n ɔ ʃ-ã-m
barbarian 3Erg fish eat-PART make 3Abs-stand-PART
“The barbarian is eating fish.”

Basque (Laka 2006)

- (3) a. emakume-a-k ogia-a jan du
 woman-det-Erg bread-det eat-prf 3A/pl/have/3E
 ‘The woman has eaten bread’
 b. emakume-a-k ogia-ak ja-ten d-it-du
 woman-det-Erg bread-det eat-impf 3A/pl/have/3E
 ‘The woman eats bread’
 c. emakume-a ogi-a jaten ari da
 woman-det bread-det eating prog is
 ‘The woman is eating bread’

References

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