

Verbal agreement in Blanga (Blablanga), an Austronesian language of the Solomon Islands

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1. INTRODUCTION¹

A proposal dating back to Johnson (1977:157) and Moravcsik (1978:364) and perpetuated in subsequent works (Croft 1990:106; Moravcsik 1988:102) postulates that verb agreement is assigned according to Johnson's (1977:156) hierarchy of grammatical relations: if, in a given language, there are cases of verb agreement with some NP bearing a particular function on the hierarchy, then there must also be cases of agreement with NPs bearing functions placed to the left.

subject > direct object > indirect object > oblique

As data from recently documented languages become available, so do descriptions of languages that index only object (*e.g.* Haan 2001; Davis 2003; Klamer 2010) and the findings have already started to have a theoretical impact (Fedden & Brown 2010 and Fedden *et al.* 2011). In addition, the 'attractively simple' (Corbett 2006:59) formulation of the universal in terms of grammatical relations ignores the fact that in different languages agreement may be triggered by different factors. It is quite tempting, for instance, to take Siewierska's (2011) analysis of a 378-language sample, of which 24 (6.4%) display agreement only with the non-agentive argument of a transitive verb, as further counterevidence to the claim. Notice, however, that Siewierska uses terms such as 'agentive' and 'patient argument', which are normally employed with reference to semantic roles.

I present here the case of Blanga, a language in which only the affected argument of a transitive predication can be indexed on the verb or there can be no indexing. Agreement relates directly to semantic roles and there is no need to make use of grammatical relations in order to explain the assignment process.

2. THE BLANGA LANGUAGE

The language known as Blablanga (ISO code blp) but currently referred to by its speakers almost exclusively as Blanga is an Oceanic language belonging to the Isabel subgroup of the Northwest Solomonian linkage and spoken by approximately 1800

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people on Santa Isabel Island, Solomon Islands. Four more languages currently spoken on the island also belong to the Isabel chain: Kokota and Zabana (Kia) to the west and Cheke Holo (Maringe) and Gao to the east of the Blanga territory. There are three Blanga varieties:

- 1) Northwestern Blanga (Loghahaza Blanga), spoken mainly in Kolosori and Popoheo and with a minority of speakers in Hovukoilo and Sogholona;
- 2) Southeastern Blanga, in and around Biluro; and
- 3) Southwestern Blanga (Zazao Blanga), spoken in Kilokaka and its adjacent settlements.

Zazao is listed in the literature as a separate language (Tryon & Hackman 1983) and consequently has been assigned a different ISO code (jaj). However, there is enough evidence today that Zazao is a Blanga dialect (Voica, in preparation). Blanga is limited to communication at village level and seriously threatened by its quite vigorous neighbour Cheke Holo. The data presented here are from Loghahaza Blanga but the differences between varieties are minimal.

3. FORMAL ARGUMENT INDEXING IN BLANGA

Canonical Oceanic languages (Ross 2004:496) are described as indexing the person and number of subject and object on transitive verbs by affixes or clitics, a subject marker preceding or being part of the first element of the verb complex and an object marker following the last element, as in example (1). Normally, the single argument of intransitive verbs is also indexed.

- (1) *N-o* *fa-lehe=ri* *agho kokorako are*².
 REAL-2.SUBJ CS-die=3.PL.OBJ 2.SG chicken those³
 ‘You are killing those chickens.’
 (Kokota – Palmer 2009: 279)⁴

In Blanga, however, there is no argument coreference on intransitive verbs, as illustrated below with state (2), (3), (4) and activity (5), (6) predicates.

² I have used the digraph gh to transcribe the voiced velar fricative in both Blanga and Kokota.

³ For consistency, I have adjusted the glossing style to the one used in my own examples.

⁴ The abbreviations used in this paper are 1 = first-person, 2 = second-person, 3 = third-person, A = actor, AGR = agreement marker; ART = article, CNT = contrastive, CS = causative, DL = dual, EMPH = emphatic, EXC = exclusive, FOC = focus, GEN = general, HAB = habitual, IMM = immediacy marker, INC = inclusive, INCPT = inceptive, LMT = limiter, NEG = negation, NSG = non-singular, OBJ = object marker, P = possessive, PART = particle, PERF = perfective, PL = plural, PN = proper noun, PREP = preposition, PROG = progressive, REAL = realis, SBD = subordinator, SG = singular, SUBJ = subject marker, TR = trial, TRANS = transitiviser, U = undergoer, V = verb, VOC = vocative.

- (2) *Gazu ana na ne knusu.*
 tree that ART.SG REAL be.cut
 ‘That piece of wood is cut.’
 (021AV120408)
- (3) *Au=nga ne au fati tharakna=de.*
 exist=IMM REAL exist four family=these
 ‘[Once upon a time] there was this family of four.’
 (150A020608)
- (4) *Botolo=na ne au phile paka.*
 bottle=that REAL exist side paka
 ‘That bottle is on the *paka* side [of the table].’
 (078AV270408)
- (5) *Ara ne nonolo ka hmata.*
 1.SG REAL walk PREP bush
 ‘I was walking in the bush.’
 (090A120408)
- (6) *Tahni manei, tahni fa-do'u, eu.*
 cry 3.SG cry CS-be.big be.thus
 ‘S/he is crying, s/he is crying loudly, that’s it.’
 (054A260208)

In a transitive predication, on the other hand, an indexing enclitic often attaches to the verb complex core. The examples below illustrate the co-referential pattern with verbs of perception (7), cognition (8), emotion (9) and desire (10). Example (8) also demonstrates the clitic status of the agreement marker. Here the host is a possessive construction functioning as a postverbal core modifier and conferring a sense of immediacy to the event expressed by the predicate.

- (7) *Mane ana efra=**nig**ho agho.*
 man that see=2.SG.AGR 2.SG
 ‘That man sees you.’
 (029A140118)
- (8) *Ara pukuni gonu no-gu=**ni** bla nahnga=na=na.*
 1.SG really confound GEN1.SG.P=3.SG.AGR LIM name=3.SG.P=that
 ‘I’m really mixing up his name right now.’
 (186A151109)

- (9) *No-na ido na, tana ghoi,*
 POSS.GEN-3SG.P mother ART.SG then VOC
nahma=gai ghai fa-keli eu.
 love=1.NSG.AGR 1.PL.EXC CS-be.good be.thus
 ‘Our mother, man, loves us very much.’
 (092A130408)
- (10) *Ghai manahaghi=gau ghau, mane Khilo ’au=de,*
 1.PL.EXCL want=2.NSG.AGR 2.PL man Christian=these
ta haghe ta age Loghahaza.
 SBD ascend SBD come PLN
 ‘We want you, missionaries, to come up here to Loghahaza.’
 (12A051207)
- The pattern is further illustrated with verbs of performance (11), consumption (12), creation (13), transfer (14), and cut-and-break verbs (15).
- (11) *Me koze=ni=nga maneri khoze ine, ke=u.*
 INCPT sing=3.SG.AGR=IMM 3.PL song this PERF=be.thus
 ‘They started to sing this song, it was like that.’
 (244A241109)
- (12) *Zone na ne-ke ngau=di kokorako=ro.*
 PN ART.SG REAL=PERF eat=3.NSG.AGR chicken=those
 ‘John ate those chickens.’
 (193A171109)
- (13) *Frihnge=ni agho kikilova ne=u.*
 Work=3.SG.AGR 1.SG thatch REAL=be.thus
 ‘I build the thatch roof, it’s like that.’
 (047AV230408)
- (14) *Fa-age=di sa’u nga su’a hnala’u=ne*
 CS-go=3.NSG.AGR apple IMM child male=this
ka thilo su’a hnala’u=de.
 prep three child male=these
 ‘The boy gave the apples to those three boys.’
 (005AV020308)
- (15) *Mane Zone=na ne toka=ni gazu=na ka hirama.*
 man PN=that REAL cut=3.SG.AGR tree=that PREP axe
 ‘John is cutting that tree with an axe.’
 (043A160208)

Having established the theoretical background, it is easier now to follow the process through which agreement is assigned. No trivalent verbs have been identified in Blanga. In a transitive predication, the language identifies the two macroroles and agreement is mapped onto the argument placed higher on the undergoerhood hierarchy. If one or both core arguments are not overtly expressed in a particular clause, as is many times the case, the subcategorisation frame of the verb indicates their presence and they are identified from the previous context. The remaining participants, if any, are expressed as obliques. In (15) above, in which all three participants are in the third person singular, the verb *toka* ‘chop’ subcategorises for two core arguments: an agent and a patient. The NP *mane Zone=na* ‘John’ denotes a participant that is animate and able to act volitionally and is thus assigned the macrorole ACTOR as an AGENT. The participant, *gazu=na* ‘that tree’ is affected and a good candidate for PATIENT, therefore it represents the undergoer and the agreement is mapped onto it. The third participant, *hirama* ‘axe’, is manipulated and in no way affected by the action, therefore eligible for neither macrorole and thus expressed as an oblique instrument. In (16) below, where there are only two participants, *nute* ‘wind’ has the role of FORCE and *khoilo* ‘coconut’ is a THEME. The former is the only candidate for actorhood and the latter the only candidate for undergoerhood. The agreement is again mapped onto the undergoer.

- (16) *Nute ke fa=grofo=ni=na khoilo=na.*
 wind PERF CS=fall.over=3.SG.AGR=that coconut=that
 ‘The wind knocked down the coconut.’
 (051A240208)

In (17), there are three participants again. The argument highest on the actorhood hierarchy is identified as *nakodo'u* ‘woman’; the argument higher on the undergoerhood hierarchy is identified as *pohe* ‘cloth’, which is a theme, and the agreement is mapped onto it. Since the verb subcategorises for only two core arguments, *tevo* ‘table’, a location, is expressed as an oblique.

- (17) *Nakodo'u=na ne thoku khave=ni pohe=na ka tevo.*
 Woman=that PERF touch descend=3.SG.AGR cloth=that PREP table
 ‘The woman lays the cloth on the table.’
 (118A300408)

It is possible for two participants to have identical potential for actorhood, in which case the language needs other means of identifying their semantic roles. It should be emphasised that, in Blanga, clause constituent order is not one of those means. The language can be described as non-verb-final but shows significant variation with respect to the position of the actor (A) and undergoer (U) arguments relative to the verb. The default constituent order is VAU but AVU, UVA and VUA patterns are also possible and, in conjunction with morphological and prosodic means, encode aspects of information structure (Voica, in preparation). Of the complexity of situations, a few basic facts are schematically presented here to illustrate some

functions of the four orders possible for transitive main clauses with both arguments overtly expressed. VAU is taken to be the default order since it does not specifically mark participants as topic or focus. The example in (18) is illustrative only in comparison with the others. AVU tokens are actually more frequent in my corpus than VAU but this is precisely because the pre-verbal clause-initial position is the marked position for topics, *i.e.* it is favoured by topics that are not expressed by zero anaphora. These may be, among others, participants whom the addressee is inherently aware of, including herself and the speaker (19a), or participants that have been mentioned in the previous sentence as undergoers (or even oliques) and are now expressed as actors (19b).

- (18) *Kathu=ni=la* *mhogo* *ta=u=ne*
 bite=3.SG.AGR=IMM snake SB=exist=this
 V A
- ghahe=na* *khera=gu=na* *ara.*
 leg=3.SG.POSS friend=1.SG.POSS=that 1.SG
 U
- ‘That snake bites my friend’s leg.’
 (090A120408)

- (19) a. *Ara=hi* *ne* *dak-i=ni* *kaisa hmogo.*
 1.SG=EMPH REAL step-TRANS=3.SG.AGR one snake
 A V U

- (19) b. *Hmogo* [...] *ne* *kath-i=ni* *ghahe=gu=na.*
 snake REAL bite-TRANS=3.SG.AGR leg=1.SG.POSS=this
 A V U
- ‘I stepped on a snake. That snake bit my leg.’
 (048A230208)

Undergoers can also be topicalised, yielding the structure UVA, as in (20). Notice that here the focus particle *si*, cliticised to a dummy particle *ia*, indicates that the whole sentence is in focus. Clause-final position is usually associated with focus but the position of the noun *gogholi* ‘giant’ in (20) is merely the result of the object being placed before the verb. In (21), on the other hand, *mane sua* ‘child’ is the argument that the speaker intends to foreground and thus placed in the marked focus position. Hence, the constituent order becomes VUA.

- (20) *Ghitatilo* *ne-ke* *ngau* *koko=ghita* *gogholi* *si=ia.*
 1.INC.TR REAL=PERF eat throw=1.INC.AGR giant FOC=PART
 U V A
- ‘The giant swallowed the three of us.’
 (149A020608)

- (21) ...*ngau sa'u ta=u ana mane sua=o.*
 eat apple SB=exist that man child=that
 V U A
 'The boy was eating the apple.'
 (149A020608)

Such variation is enough to dismiss the possibility of a direct correlation between the order of constituents in a clause and the semantic roles of arguments⁵. When two participants in a predication have identical actorhood potential, either the verb semantics or some cultural knowledge, or both, may play a crucial part in identifying macroroles. In (19a) above, both participants are animate and can act volitionally. However, the action denoted by the verb *daki* 'step' can only be performed by the participant with feet. The actor is clearly identified as the walking creature referred to as *ara* 'I' and the undergoer as the legless *hmogo* 'snake'. In (20), consultants identify *gogholi* 'giant' as the actor since in the Blanga narrative tradition giants feed on humans and not the other way around. When things are not straightforward (22), the ambiguity is solved at discourse level. In natural language, the speaker and addressee have access to the discourse context, and that is exactly what is needed here in order to identify participant roles.

- (22) *Mane Zone=ne ne thupi=ni Polo=ne.*
 man PN=this REAL punch=3.SG.OBJ PN=this
 'John punches Paul.'
 (206A181109)

Blanga displays undergoer agreement. In order for the agreement to map onto the right argument, participant roles need to be clearly identified and many times clues can only be found by looking beyond sentence level.

5. OMISSION OF AGREEMENT MARKERS IN BLANGA

In some cases, agreement is not present on the Blanga verb. No systematic analysis of the conditions under which the omission of undergoer markers is possible in the language has been performed to date. A few insights into the matter are, however, offered by the examples quoted throughout this paper. Both animate and inanimate as well as topical and non-topical undergoers can be indexed; cross-referenced NPs can be both nominal and pronominal, while the presence or absence of the agreement is not conditioned by the predicate type.

A factor that does seem to play a role is specificity. In (23), the affected argument is non-specific. However, this is rather an example of noun incorporation, which is quite frequent in the language, and incorporated nouns are necessarily non-specific. They are distinguished in Blanga by the fact that they cannot take outer modifiers. It

⁵ As well as between constituent order and grammatical relations, as a matter of fact.

is impossible for *letasi* ‘letter’ in (23) to be modified by a relative clause in the same way the non-incorporated *gazu* ‘stick’ is in (24). Notice also the presence of the agreement marker in the latter example.

(23) *Manei e riso letasi.*
 3.SG HAB write letter
 ‘He writes letters.’
 (048A230208)

(24) *Ara fakae=ni gazu [ke poma=ni mane hmeke=na].*
 1.SG see=3.SG.AGR stick [PERF hit=3.SG.AGR man dog=that]
 ‘I saw the stick with which the man hit the dog.’
 (043A160208)

By reducing the valency, incorporation leaves no actual undergoer argument to be indexed. There are, nevertheless, cases of non-indexed undergoers in which incorporation is clearly not involved, such as (25), where the verb and noun are not in adjacent position. In almost all such examples, undergoers appear to be non-specific.

(25) *Sage bla Gibati khoilo.*
 carve LIM PN coconut
 ‘Gilbert is simply carving coconut.’
 (094A130408)

6. CONCLUSION

In Blanga, agreement is triggered by semantic roles and not by grammatical relations. The undergoer argument of a transitive predication is often indexed on the verb by enclitics attached to the last element of the verb core. Agreement markers can be present on any type of transitive verb but there are instances when they can be omitted. In such cases, their absence does not seem to be conditioned by their animacy, word class or pragmatic factors, such as topicality, but by their degree of specificity. The assignment of agreement requires the identification of the participant that bears the role placed higher on the undergoerhood hierarchy and, by implication, also of the participant bearing the highest role on the actorhood hierarchy. Verb semantics, pragmatic and cultural factors as well as the discourse context help to disambiguate cases in which both core participants have the same potential for actorhood. Macroroles cannot be inferred from constituent order since the verb and its arguments can virtually occupy any position relative to each other as long as the verb is non-final. Constituent order variation represents a means of encoding aspects of information structure. As long as the universal presented in the introduction to this paper is formulated strictly in terms of grammatical relations, it cannot be claimed that Blanga represents a real counterexample. The agreement pattern in the language makes, however a case for the necessity of integrating data from newly described languages into the process of building and reshaping linguistic theory.

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