Projecting morphology and agreement in Morori

Abstract

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Morori is a highly endangered Trans New Guinea language, actively spoken by only several speakers out of 119 Marori people in Kampung Wasur, around 12 kms east of Merauke, Indonesian Papua. This paper discusses the challenges in capturing the intricacy of morphosyntax interface in Morori, focussing on the projection of morphology within a complex functional agreement system.

The widely accepted notion of agreement in the literature is typically morpho-syntactic in nature (Corbett 2006), showing 'distributed exponence' (Ackerman and Stump 2004); i.e., expressing one and the same attribute value in more than one location in syntax. However, agreement in sublexical structure appears to have been largely overlooked in the literature. I provide fresh data, demonstrating that the information of PERS, NUM and TNS features in Morori may come from more than one location sublexically (i.e., distributed exponence in sublexical structure, hence the term 'sublexical agreement'). For example, the referential features of the argument of the verb *fedfed* 'squat' in (1) come from the formatives of the auxiliary verb (i.e., the prefix, the AUX stem and the suffix). I propose that that sublexical and postlexical agreement in Morori be given the same analysis.

More importantly, the analysis must capture unique functions of the agreement, not simply as part of 'feature-checking' redundancy system, but also as part of jigsaw-like resources in referential inference system. Thus, a DUAL referent in (1)b is established by combining the agreeing affixal elements that carry NSG (non-singular), *yar-*, and NPL (non-plural), *–mon.* This kind of agreement holds both sub-lexically and syntactically.

Couched within LFG-style lexicalist framework, I discuss theoretical issues arising from the empirical findings in Morori. These include the issue of formulating a precise two-way projection (i.e., spreading) of relevant agreement features within and across lexical items. I argue that the features be formulated in typed-feature structures, allowing multi-dimensional cross-cutting hierarchical underspecified classes to capture different types of syncretism (cf., Baerman, Bown, and Corbett 2005) found in this language. While the data from Morori might lend some support for distributed morphology with words showing some sublexical 'syntax' (Lieber 1992), it is demonstrated that these characteristics can be also nicely handled within a feature-based lexicalist approach where syntactically relevant information nested inside word-internal structures can be projected out to phrasal syntax, without a need to reduce morphology to syntax.

(1). Verbs inflected for the first person near PAST AUX in Morori[1]

    a. *na*   *fedfed*   *yu-nggra-mon*
       1SG   squat   1SG-AUX.1/2SG.NFUT-1.NPL.NRPAST
       'I squatted'

    b. *nie*   *fedfed*   *yar-ngguara-mon*
       1NSG squat   1NSG -AUX.1/2.NSG.NFUT-1.NPL.NRPAST
       'We two squatted'

    c. *nie*   *fedfed*   *yar-ngguara-bon*
       2NSG squatted   1NSG-AUX.1/2.NSG.NFUT-1.PL.NRPAST
       'we (more than three) squatted'

References

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[1] AUX=Auxiliary, NSG= Non Singular, NPL=Non Plural, NFUT-=Non Future, NRPAST = Near Past, SG = Singular.