Syntactic Object Marking in Tapo

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Abstract

This paper describes syntactic object marking in Tapo, a Nilo-Saharan language, with original fieldwork carried out in Wanke village in Ethiopian, border of Sudan. The data collected through elicitation and analysis of documentation corpus of the language. Tapo has relatively flexible word order in both the transitive and intransitive clauses. The basic word order is Agent-Verb-Object in transitive and, Subject-Verb in intransitive. The other orders are Verb-Object-Agent and Object-Agent-Verb in transitive verbs and Verb-Subject in intransitive verbs. These syntactic constituents are marked by shifting the constituent order. Consequently, the language does not have a major morphological case system, except the comitative that marks mainly oblique case. Tapo marks object based on semantic feature of entities belong to +HUMAN, +ANIMATE and -ANIMATE. The most dominant semantic feature is +HUMAN as a beneficiary following the verb, followed by animate and inanimate entities that would take secondary object position whenever the object constituents are composed of animate and inanimate entities, +HUMAN > +ANIMATE > -INANIMATE. A predicate incorporates indirect and direct OBs constituencies, +HUMAN followed by in +ANIMATE. If this order changes to +INANIMATE > +HUMAN, it becomes a possessive clause. Similarly, +ANIMATE follows the verb as a benefactive, and inanimate entities follow the benefactive as a direct OB. In cases where both objects are inanimate, the consumer as a beneficiary proceeds the consumed. Reversed indirect OB and direct OB yields a Noun-Noun phrase.

Keywords: - Syntax, Object Marking, African Languages, Koman Languages, Nilo-Saharan language

Introduction

The Upou currently settle in Wanke and Merra Kebeles (the smallest administration unit in Ethiopia) under Itang Special Wereda found in northern Gambella. They settle along the course of the River Phil, which flows from north Gambella to Southwest, located approximately around 8°19'12.7"N 33°53'14.3"E.

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The Upou call themselves upɔ 'people' and their language T'apɔ. [2] *Tapo* is spoken in the border areas of Ethiopia and South Sudan. The exact number of speakers is not known. According to the CSA (2007a:92) there were 1,751 *Tapo* speakers in Ethiopia. Whereas the CSA (2007b:43) reports 999 speakers of the language in Gambella region. There is a discrepancy in the two reports regarding the number of speakers of this language. A survey carried in 2013 by Agricultural office of Itang Wareda reports there are 1,108 households in Wanke and Merra Kebeles[3]. Tapo has been labeled as 'critically endangered language' for the fact that the youngest speakers use the language partially and infrequently (Moseley, 2010). The majority of the Upou speak more than one language. Almost all adults from Wanke area speak Nuer as a second language and understand Anwak too.

The number of dialects of *Tapo* mentioned in the literature varies from three to seven. According to Cornfield (1938), quoted in Bender (1976:476), Tapo has three dialects. These are closely related Kigille and Kusgilo and the more distant Buldit. In contrast, Lemi (2010:1), quoting a mother tongue speakers, reported that Tapo has seven closely related and mutually intelligible dialects which have also been confirmed by speakers of the language in Wanke. According to the speakers of Tapo in Wanke, the language has seven different varieties. The names of the language varieties are also used to refer different clans who speake the dialects or varieties. The varities are *tˈa dana*, *tˈa bikol*, and *tˈa kigile*, spoken in Republic of South Sudan; *tˈa pilakoj* and *tˈa mudin* spoken in Merra Kebele in Ethiopia, *tˈa bɪlugu* spoken in Wanke kebele of Ethiopia and *tˈa pame* spoken both in Merra and South Sudan. The main focus of this study is the *tˈa bilugue* variety which is spoken in different villages of Wanke Kebele. The villages in which this variety is spoken include: Akula Lankue, Kella, Taijiba, Abebo, Bonga, Botiang, Jijian and Abol. The speakers in these villages claim that the Tapo spoken in their village is different from the Tapo spoken in other villages. According to the speakers of the *tˈa bilugue* variety in Wanke, the variety of Tapo spoken in South Sudan is quite distinct from the Tapo spoken in their villages. Tapo Speakers in Merra (t'a pilakoj, t'a mudin) considers the Katin (t'a

[2] The word *t'apɔ* is a compound noun, from t'a 'mouth' and upɔ 'person' which literally means 'tongue of the *Upou*'. This study uses the self-name *upɔu 'Upou' to refer to the people and tˈapɔ* 'Tapo' to refer the language of the Upou.

[3] Personal communication, Mr. Ukach Malut, March 2013.

kigile) variety in South Sudan more similar to their variety than the Wanke variety. Speakers of both Wanke and Merra underlined that the Tapo spoken in Dajo (spoken among the Dana in South Sudan) is the most distinct dialect of Tapo. However, these claims of intelligibility vs. unintelligibility among the different varieties need further investigation, for the fact that these different dialect names seem also names of the different clans of the Opuo.

The Upou's economy is mainly depends on agriculture, fishing, and poultry. Though it is very limited currently, hunting used to be a common domestic economic practice. The Upou who resides in Merra Kebele also practices apiculture as an additional economic activity. The main staple food crops are maize and sorghum. The Upou do not rare animals.

Tapo belongs to the Koman sub-family under Nilo-Saharan language family (Bender 2000, Ehert 2001). However, the exact phylum it descended is still under argument. There are three different views concerning the classification of Koman languages. These are the isolative views of Greenberg (1950), and Tucker and Bryan (1956); the Nilo-Saharan thesis of Greenberg (1966), Bender (1983a, 1983b, 1985, 1997, 2000, 2005) and Ehret (2001); lastly the recent exclusion of Koman from Nilo-Saharan by Dimmendaal (2008, 2010) and considering Koman sub-family as a language isolate by Dimmendaal (2011).

Methodology

The research employed a descriptive method. The data used for this descriptive study is collected through elicitation and *analysis of* documentation corpus (Alemu 2014). The data was obtained from native speakers of Tapo selected by purposive sampling. The data was described using IPA writing system and glossed using 2015's Leipzig glossing rules. A free translation in English is given for every phrase and sentence.

Sentence Word Order

Tapo has relatively flexible word order in both the transitive and intransitive clauses. The basic word order is Agent-Verb-Object (AVO) in transitive and, Subject-Verb (SV) in intransitive verbs. As Otero (2019) outlined this word order is common in declarative main clauses among Koman languages.

S[4] V

1. hɔ an-ø-si
   rain 3N- PST-rain
   'The rain rained.'

A V O

2. ʊ-tɛ-ni ar-ø-sa ma
   3M-he-DT 3MSG-PST-eat food
   'He ate food.'

A V O

3. ʊ-tɛ-ni ar-ø-so wark't'a
   3MSG-he-DT 3MSG-PST-buy paper
   'He bought a paper.'

The other word order varieties in Tapo's are VOA and OAV in transitive verbs and SV and VS word order in intransitive verbs.

V O A

4. ar-ø-sɔ wark'at'a ʊ-tɛ-nɪ
   3MSG-PST-buy paper 3MSG-he-DT
   'He bought paper.'

In OAV order the insertion of DO in the verb is obligatory needed as in e.g.6 and constructions such as 5 are ungrammatical for the fact that following the dislocation of the object there should bound object pronoun as incorporated 3N object in e.g. 6.

[4] - morpheme boundary, # word boundary, * reconstructed or proto form/ ungrammatical, /.../ underlying or phonemic form, [...] phonetic form or phrase marker, ~ reduplication/variation, > becomes, 1 first person, 2 second person, 3 third person, A agent, AUX auxiliary, BEN benefactive, ATR Advanced Tongue Root, C consonant, CAU causative, COJ conjunction, COM commutative, COND conditional, DEM demonstrative, DO direct object, DT distal, EX exclusive, EXIST existential verbs, F feminine, FUT future tense, IMP imperative, IN inclusive, INSR insertion, IO indirect object, IPFV imperfective aspect, ITV itive, LINK linking vowel, LOC locative, Lil. literal meaning, M masculine, N neutral, NOM nominalizer, NUM numeral, OB object, OD ordinal, P person, PASS passive, PL plural, POSS possessive, PROG progressive, PST past tense, PX proximal, Q question, RDP reduplication, S subject, SG singular, SB subject, V verb, VEN ventive

	O	A	V
5.	*wark'at'a	ʊ-tɛ-ni	ar-ø-sɔ
	paper	3MSG-he-DT X	3MSG-PST-buy
	'He bought [Paper].'		

6.	wark'at'a	ʊ-tɛ-ni	ar-ø-so-an
	paper	3MSG-he-DT3	MSG-PST-buy-3N.OB
	'He bought [Paper].'		

Syntactic Object Ordering

Tapo marks S, A, and O through position. As a result, the language does not have a morphological case system, except the comitative that marks mainly oblique, the language marks object based on semantic hierarchy of entities belonging to human, animal and inanimate. The most dominant hierarchy being human entities as a beneficiary mostly placed following the verb, then animates and lastly inanimate entities that would take secondary object position whenever the object constituents are composed of animate and inanimate entities as the labeling in number 7 below sums up[5].

7. HUMAN > ANIMATE > INANIMATE

The predicate has two nouns in e.g. 8. These are the indirect object (IO) and direct object (DO) constituents, the first being a beneficiary or indirect object ʊtɛni 'he' and the second nakɔtɔsɔ 'hoe' a direct object DO. This could be summed up in human followed by in animate as in human > inanimate. If this order changes to INANIMATE > HUMAN, it would become a possessive clause as in [na-kɔtɔsɔ ʊtɛni] 'The man's hoe' in e.g 9 below. The human nominals mana '1PL' in e.g. 10 and ba-pa 'woman' in e.g. 11 followed the verb as a beneficiary. Whereas the DO [kumuka] 'hen egg' and suma 'meat' followed the indirect object mana '1PL.EX' and ɓapa 'women', respectively. Similarly in 12 and 13 animals like a-dɪmɛ 'child' and mɛ 'goat' follow the verb as a beneficiary

[5]Such animacy based nominal referent hierarchies are commonly observed in Bantu languages (Hyman 1982).

and in animate entities like suma ‘meat’ and nasa ‘food’ follows the beneficiary as a DO. In e.g.14 a case in which both OBs are inanimate, the consumer (wut’i ‘fire’) as a beneficiary preceded the consumed c’a ‘wood/tree’. If the indirect object and direct object in e.g. 14**Error! Reference source not found.** reversed, it would become [ca ut’i] ‘fire wood’, i.e. an NN phrase as in e.g.15 . All the above of syntactic objects hierarchies also can be marked in the verb through benefactive (BEN) marker.

	A	IO	DO	IO > DO
8.	ɓa-niaɓ-ø-ki	[**ʊ-tɛ-nin**	**a-kɔtɔsɔ]**	human > inanimate
	3FSG-DT 3FSG-give	3MSG-he-DT	NOM-dig	
	‘She gave the hoe to the man.’			

	A	DO	DO
9.	ɓa-niaɓ-ø-ki	**[na-kɔtɔsɔ ʊ-tɛ-ni]**	inanimate- human
	3FG-DT3FSG-PST-give	NOM-dig M-he-DT	
	‘She gave the man his hoe.’		

	A	IO	DO	IO > DO
10.	ɓa-ni aɓ-ø-ki	mana	[kumu ka]	human > inanimate
	3F-DT 3F-PST-give 1PL	egg	hen	
	‘She gave us an egg.’			

	A	IO	DO	IO > DO
11.	ʊ-kaɟ ar-ø-ki	**ɓa-pa**	suma	human > inanimate
	3MSG-man 3MSG-PST-give 3FSG-woman		meat	
	‘The man gave meat to the woman.’			

	A	IO	DO	IO > DO
12.	ʊ-kaɟ ar-ø-ki	**a-dɪmɛ**	**suma**	animal > inanimate
	3MSG-man 3MSG-PST-give	3N-child	meat	

'The man gave the child meat.'

	A	IO	DO		IO > DO
13.	ɓa-ni	aɓ-ø-ki	**mɛ**	**na-sa**	animal > inanimate
	3FSG-DT	3FSG-PST-give	**goat**	3N-eat	

'She gave the goat food.'

	A	IO	DO		IO > DO
14.	ɓa-ni	aɓ-ø-ki	**ut'i**	**ca**	inanimate > inanimate
	3FSG-DT	3FSG-PST-give	fire	wood	

'She burned the wood.'

	A		DO [NN]	
15.	ɓa-ni	aɓ-ø-ki	[ca	ut'i]	inanimate – inanimate
	3FSG-DT	3FSg-PST-give	wood	fire	

'She burned the fire wood.'

All the above hierarchies of objects are syntactical in the case of trivalent verbs. However, these constructions can also be carried out the verb through BEN and bound subject/object pronouns except in negation (see e.g. 18). In affirmative and passive sentences, the BEN marks the beneficiary in affirmative and passive sentences as shown in e.g. 16 and 17, the BEN marks the beneficiary '3FSG'.

16. ar-ø-ki-**aga**-ɓ-an
    3MSG-PST-give-**BEN**-3MSG-3N
    'He gave it to her.'

17. un-ø-ki-**a-ga**-ɓ-an
    PASS-PST-give-ITV-BEN-3MSG-3N
    'It is given to her.'

18. un-du-k'u-aɓ-an ø-ki
    PASS-NEG-EXIST-3FSG-3N PST-give

'It is not given to her.'

Conclusion

Tapo is one of the critically endangered languages in Ethiopia. The main purpose of this study is to investigate syntactic object marking in the language. For this purpose the researcher has collected elicitation and documentation corpus. Tapo has relatively flexible word order with a basic word order of Agent-Verb-Object and Subject-Verb. In most instances Tapo marks object based on semantic feature of entities belong to +HUMAN, +ANIMATE and -ANIMATE. +HUMAN as a beneficiary following the verb is found to be the dominant one, followed by animate and inanimate entities that would take secondary object position. Though it is necessary to carry further investigation on the role of Tone in cases marking, as this preliminary study shows Tapo marks object based on semantic hierarchy.

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