Argument alternation and argument structure in symmetrical voice languages: A case study of transfer verbs in Amis, Puyuma, and Seediq

This study argues for the symmetry of Philippine-type “voice” system by examining the argument structure/alternation of transfer verbs in three Formosan languages: Amis, Puyuma, and Seediq. To begin with, I assume the three-way classification (i.e. give, send, throw) proposed in the literature (Croft et al. 2001), and provide a thorough description of the lexical variation of these transfer verbs. With respect to morphological composition, a clear distinction between give/send-type verbs and throw-type verbs is attested. The finding conforms to the semantic basis of these transfer verb subclasses: give-type and send-type verbs lexicalize caused possession and caused motion, respectively, while throw-type verbs are two-argument verbs with no involvement of causative semantics (Levin 2008).

With respect to argument structure, Formosan languages exhibit subclass internal variation which cannot be readily explained by the existing typological frameworks. While some transfer verbs allow argument alternation between the recipient/goal and the transported theme by means of locative/circumstantial voice (LV/CV) marking, some other member(s) in the same subclass may not allow argument alternation, as a particular voice form may actually involve a thematic role (e.g., location, instrument, beneficiary, patient) other than those in a transfer event. To account for the presence of a transfer sense in certain voice forms but not in others, I argue in line with Huang & Huang (2007) that symmetrical voice marking adds a constructional meaning to the root (Croft 2012). Inspired by Malchukov et al.’s (2010) semantic map methodology, I show that Formosan LV marking is responsible for designating among a number of conceptually contiguous thematic roles (see also Tsukida 2015), while CV marking targets roles including transported theme, instrument, beneficiary, and stimulus/cause. I further discuss how the contiguity among these roles can be established based on the localist approach (Talmy 2000) and the causal approach (Croft 1991, 1994).

Finally, I demonstrate how current generative theories can account for the argument structure of voice-marked verbs across Formosan languages. In particular, I evaluate the applicative analyses of Formosan LV/CV verbs (e.g. Aldridge 2004; Chen 2007; Chang 2011, 2015; Shi & Manqoqo 2014) by raising some empirical concerns upon scrutiny of various verb types across LV/CV constructions. I point out that applicative approaches (e.g. Pylkkänen 2002; Georgala 2012) assume a pre-existing subcategorization frame of the verb/root; the assumption fails to hold in symmetrical voice languages, where roots are found to be category-less, and thus argument-less prior to voice affixation (Foley 1998). Alternatively, I propose an event-based analysis under Borer’s (2003; 2005) exo-skeletal approach, which severs both external and internal arguments from the “verb.”
Selected References: