

FORMULAICITY AND PRODUCTIVITY IN VERB-ARGUMENT INTERACTIONS: THE ROLE OF GENDER AGREEMENT IN MAWNG VERBS

Full presentation

Ruth Singer

University of Melbourne

In the Australian language Mawng, a number of verbs select for an argument of a particular gender. Or alternatively, we could say that the gender of some arguments select for a particular verb sense. For example, the intransitive verb *-wukpa* means '(wind) blow' with Edible gender subject agreement and *marlu* 'wind (ED)' or a specific name for a wind such as *jimurru* 'west wind (ED)' as either its overt or implicit subject. When it has canonical agreement *-wukpa* means 'cool' or 'dry' and can be either transitive or intransitive. The first impression the field linguist has about these verbs, which I term *restricted argument verbs* (Singer 2006), is the strong association between a specific sense of the verb and a gender agreement pattern. Since Mawng's five genders have a strong semantic basis, gender agreement gives information about the nature of the argument. Verbal gender agreement in Mawng functions similarly to the incorporation of generic nouns in other northern Australian languages in that it narrows down the range of possible arguments and interacts with verb sense (c.f. Baker (2002)).

Mawng restricted arguments verbs are similar to English verbs described as having lexically specified indefinite null arguments by Fillmore (1986) and also cognate object verbs, including those in other Australian languages (Austin 1982). All these types of verbs have a default argument type specified in their meaning which need not be expressed with an NP even when it is new and not identifiable from the context.

The role of verbal gender agreement in Mawng verbs sheds light on the complex interactions which occur between verb senses and argument senses. These interactions are complex in all languages but verbal gender agreement in Mawng adds a level of complexity. Verbal gender agreement allows restricted argument verbs to 'swallow' their arguments, blurring the predicate-argument distinction. Mawng restricted argument verbs are best understood as semi-productive expressions, located on a continuum somewhere between verb-argument idioms and verbs with many combinatorial possibilities.

Austin, P. 1982. Transitivity and cognate objects in Australian languages. *Studies in Transitivity, Syntax and Semantics* 15, ed. by P. J. Hopper and S. A. Thompson. New York: Academic Press. 37-47.

Baker, B. 2002. How referential is agreement? The interpretation of polysynthetic dis-agreement morphology in Ngalakgan. *Problems of Polysynthesis*, Studia Typologica, Neue Reihe, ed. by N. Evans and H.-J. Sasse. Berlin: Akademie Verlag. 51-85.

Fillmore, C. 1986. Pragmatically controlled zero anaphora. *Berkeley Linguistics Society*, 16:95-107.

Singer, R. 2006. *Agreement in Mawng: productive and lexicalised uses of verbal gender agreement in an Australian language*. PhD thesis, School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne.

Keywords: Australian Aboriginal languages ; syntax ; semantics ; formulaicity

17 McLachlan Street, Tel. 03 4989 1002, rsinger@unimelb.edu.au