TRANSITIVITY AND COGNATE OBJECTS IN AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES

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1. INTRODUCTION

Linguists describing the structure of Australian Aboriginal languages have generally taken as uncontroversial a dichotomy between transitive verbs (and clauses) and intransitive verbs (and clauses). The clearest statement of this position is in Dixon (1980) where we find that: "Every verb in an Australian language is strictly transitive—occurring with subject (A) and object (O) core NPs—or strictly intransitive—occurring just with a subject (S) core NP. It is usually a simple matter to determine transitivity [p. 378]." In most instances this statement appears to hold and verbs will divide neatly into the two classes. However, in a number of Australian languages, there are verbs that resist subcategorization in this way. In this paper I wish to focus on two types of deviation from the simple pattern, namely:

1. In some languages there are verbs that occur with an A NP (which is case marked as "ergative" if a common noun, "nominative" if a pronoun—see Silverstein, 1976; Dixon, 1979) and which can *never* take an O NP. An instance is Bandjalang.

2. In some languages there are verbs that occur with an S NP (case marked as "absolutive" if a common noun, "nominative" if a pronoun)

37

and a complement noun phrase which has some or all of the morphosyntactic properties of a transitive object NP. Examples of this are found in Diyari, Bayungu, Djaru, Guugu Yimidhirr, and Yidiny.

In the following discussion it is shown that these two phenomena are related and that the verbs involved all take so-called cognate objects. An explanation of the morphosyntactic facts is proposed drawing on the framework of Hopper and Thompson (1980) who suggest that transitivity is a continuum and not a simple dichotomy. Cognate object constructions in Australian languages have a natural explanation in this framework.

2. COGNATE OBJECT CONSTRUCTIONS

2.1. Bandjalang

The Bandjalang language is spoken on the north coast of New South Wales. In the Waalubal dialect described by Crowley (1978) there are a number of verbs that occur with a transitive subject noun phrase but can *never* take a transitive object. They can all be characterized semantically as cognate object verbs where the understood object is highly specific. Crowley (1978:107) lists the members of this set as:[1]

ginyjaama	'defecate'	*banma*	'put on' (clothing)
jaluba	'urinate'	*yarrbi*	'sing'
birrma	'yawn'	*wulbi*	'make' (noise)
ngaarri	'dance'	*juuma*	'smoke' (cigarette)

Examples of their use in sentences are:

(1)   *Mali-yu jaajam-bu jaluba-ni.*
      that-erg child-erg   urinate-past definite
      'That child urinated (some urine)'.

(2)   *Mali-yu dandaygam-bu yarrbi-ni.*
      that-erg old man-erg   sing-past definite
      'That old man sang (a song)'.

Bandjalang has an antipassive construction (Silverstein, 1976; Dixon, 1979) which applies only to transitive verbs changing the A NP to an

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[1] In these and following examples (except for Guugu Yimidhirr), original transcriptions have been changed to a practical orthography using digraphs, where *th, nh* and *lh* are laminodental stop, nasal and lateral; *rt, rn,* and *rl* are apicodomals (retroflexes); *j, ny,* and *ly* are palatals; and *ng* is a dorsovelar nasal. Long vowels are written double.

S NP and adding *-li/-le* to the verb root; an example is the pair (Crowley 1978:108):

(3) *Ngaju juga-ala   nyabay.*
     I-erg   drink-pres water-abs
     'I am drinking water'.

(4) *Ngay juga-le-ela   nyabay.*
     I-nom drink-antipass-pres water-abs
     'I am drinking water (repeatedly)'.

Now, the eight cognate object verbs can all appear in the antipassive and hence behave syntactically like normal transitive verbs:

(5) *Ngay gala   juuma-le-ela.*
     I-nom this-nom smoke-antipass-pres
     'I here am smoking (a cigarette)'.

Thus, Bandjalang has a class of verbs that are transitive from a syntactic point of view yet can never appear in a clause with an overt transitive object noun phrase. Clearly, cooccurrence with A and O NPs cannot be a necessary and sufficient condition for defining transitive verbs, and some explanation of the apparently deviant behavior of these particular verbs is required.

2.2. Diyari

Diyari is spoken in the northeastern corner of the state of South Australia; data are from Austin (1981). In this language we find a construction type that poses problems for any simple definition of transitivity.

Diyari has a group of six verbs which occur with an S NP (in nominative or absolutive case depending on constituent type) and a further complement noun phrase whose head noun is marked as absolutive case. These verbs are:

yatha	'to speak' (a language)
kirli	'to dance' (a ceremony)
thurrara	'to lie, sleep'
pirrki	'to play' (a game)
wirri	'to wear' (clothing)
widi	'to be painted' (a pattern)

Examples of their use are:

(6) *Nganhi diyari yawada   yatha-yi.*
     I-nom   Diyari language-abs speak-pres
     'I speak Diyari'.

(7) *Thana   karna   pukartu wima   kirli-rna   wanthiyi.*
     they-nom person-abs ochre   ceremony-abs dance-ptcple aux
     'Those people danced the ochre ceremony'.

The nominal complements of these verbs occur in absolutive case as
(6) and (7) illustrate. In addition, they have two syntactic characteristics
in common with transitive object NPs (coded as absolutive or accusative
case depending on constituent type). First, when a demonstrative is
included in the complement NP it inflects for ACCUSATIVE case just like
an O NP. Thus, we have:

(8) *Nganhi nhinha-ya   yawada   yatha-yi.*
     I-nom   this-acc-here language-abs speak-pres
     'I speak this language'.

Compare this with the transitive sentence:

(9) *Ngathu nhinha-ya   nganthi   thayi-yi.*
     I-erg   this-acc-here meat-abs eat-pres
     'I eat this meat'.

Second, when nominalized a transitive verb can take an object nominal
immediately before it, forming a type of phrasal compound (no other
constituents can intervene between the object and nominalized verb but
phonologically they are not a single word). Examples of agentive nom-
inalizations illustrating this are:

nganthi thayi-rnayija meat eat-agent nominal	'meat eater'
ngapa thapa-rnayija water drink-agent nominal	'water drinker'
kupa nanda-rnayija child hit-agent nominal	'child beater'

Nominalizations of intransitive verbs cannot take such a nominal element
preceding them; yet the six verbs that have been listed here can occur
in nominalizations with their complements which thus function syntac-
tically like O NPs:

yawada yatha-rnayija language speak-agent nominal	'language speaker'
wima kirli-rnayija ceremony dance-agent nominal	'ceremony dancer'

As far as nominalization and case marking of demonstratives are con-
cerned, complements of cognate object verbs in Diyari function exactly

like transitive objects. Their subjects, however, function like intransitive subjects.

2.3. Bayungu

Bayungu is spoken on the central coast of Western Australia; data are from Austin (1978). In Bayungu three basic clause types are found:

1. Intransitive clauses where the subject (S) NP is in absolutive (if a noun) or nominative case (if a pronoun or demonstrative). An example is:

(10)   *Ngunha kanyara nyina-yi.*
        that-nom man-abs sit-pres
        'That man is sitting down'.

2. Middle clauses where the subject is marked like an intransitive subject and there is a complement NP in dative case:[2]

(11)   *Yinha   kupuju   pirungkarri-yi ngurnu kaparla-ku.*
        this-nom child-abs fear-pres   that-dat dog-dat
        'This child fears that dog'.

3. Transitive clauses where the subject (A) is in ergative case (except for the first person pronoun which collapses S and A as nominative) and the subject (O) is in accusative (if a pronoun, demonstrative or noun with animate reference) or absolutive case (all other nouns). Examples are:

(12)   *Yulu   kupuju-lu ngunhanha kaparla-nha pujurrpa-nma*
        this-erg child-erg that-acc   dog-acc   see-past
        'This child saw that dog'.

(13)   *Ngulu   kanyara-lu ngunhanha murla   warni-nmayi.*
        that-erg man-erg   that-acc   meat-abs cut-past
        'That man cut that meat'.

There are two verbs in the Bayungu corpus which do not fit into this pattern; they take an intransitive subject and an absolutive case complement noun:

Verb		Complement	
ngurnta	'to lie'	*pungurn*	'sleep'
wangka	'to speak'	*kujurru*	'language'
		piyal	'story'

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[2] A number of Australian languages have this type of construction—see Blake (1977) for discussion and examples.

An example is:

(14) *Ngunha kanyara piyal   wangka-yi.*
      that-nom man-abs story-abs tell-pres
      'That man is telling a story'.

Unfortunately, I have no examples of these nouns cooccurring with a demonstrative so I am not sure if they take accusative case-marked demonstratives (like O NPs). However, there are some data that suggest that these complements function like transitive objects.

In nonfinite clauses in Bayungu, transitive objects take case marking that is different from the marking they receive in finite (main) clauses. For present purposes all that is necessary is the information that in certain nonfinite participial clauses O NPs take dative case marking, for instance [cf. (13)]:

(15) *Ngunha kanyara nyina-yi murla-ku warni-lkarra.*
      that-nom man-abs sit-pres meat-dat cut-ptcple
      'That man is sitting down cutting meat'.

Now, the complement of *wangka* 'say' is also marked with the dative case in this type of clause:

(16) *Ngunha kanyara nyina-yi piyal-ku wangka-rra.*
      that-nom man-abs sit-pres story-dat say-ptcple
      'That man is sitting down telling a story'.

It is clear that in (16) *piyal* is functioning like a transitive object as far as the details of case marking are concerned, yet it occurs in clauses with an S NP. Bayungu cognate object verbs thus resemble those of Diyari.

2.4. Djaru

Djaru is spoken in the Kimberleys district of northern Western Australia; data are from Tsunoda (1978). Djaru has two verbs which Tsunoda (1978:111) states are "intransitive" but take an "intransitive direct object," namely *marn-* 'to speak, talk' and *ruyu marn-* 'to play, perform (a corroboree)'. Examples are:[3]

(17) *Ngaju nga-rna jaru   marn-an.*
      I-nom aux-I   Djaru-abs speak-pres
      'I speak Djaru'.

[3] Tsunoda (1978:112) states that similar constructions occur in the neighboring languages Malngin, Wandjira, and Ngardi.

(18)   *Mawun nga-lu   junpa   ruyu marn-an.*
        man-abs aux-they corroboree-abs perform-pres
        'The men are performing a corroboree'.

Tsunoda calls the complement nouns in (17) and (18) intransitive direct objects because they, like true direct object nouns, may be incorporated into nominalizations, as in the following example (Tsunoda 1978:113):

(19)   *Ngaju nga-rna jaru-marn-u-waji*
        I-nom aux-I   Djaru-speak-nominal-agent
        'I am a Djaru speaker'.

Djaru thus presents evidence analogous to Diyari, showing that cognate objects are like direct objects, yet cooccur with intransitive subject NPs.

2.5. Guugu Yimidhirr

Guugu Yimidhirr is spoken in northern Queensland; data are from Haviland (1979). In his description of Guugu Yimidhirr, Haviland (1979) draws a contrast between transitive verbs and intransitive verbs but is faced with a problem in describing the category of the verb 'to speak'. He notes: "the verb *yirrgaa* 'speak' is somewhat indeterminate between transitive and intransitive; it normally has an ABSolutive (or NOMinative) subject, but also allows an apparent object (usually a word like *guugu* 'language' or *milbi* 'story') [p. 83]." Note here Haviland's phrase "an apparent object"—he provides some slight evidence that the complement of *yirrgaa* does function syntactically like a transitive object. In Guugu Yimidhirr transitive verbs can be detransitivized and made "reflexive" by suffixing a derivational affix to the root; intransitive verbs do not take this affix. The verb *yirrgaa* does occur in the "reflexive," as in the following example:[4]

(20)   *Yurra   yirrga-ayi.*
        you all-nom speak-reflex-imper
        'You all have a talk'.

It seems then that *yirrgaa* has characteristics of both transitive and intransitive verb types.

2.6. Yidiny

Yidiny, described in Dixon (1977), was formerly spoken in northern Queensland, just south of Guugu Yimidhirr. Regarding transitivity in this

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[4] The morpheme sequence "reflexive" plus imperative inflection is realized as -V*yi*, where V is a vowel identical to the last vowel of the verb root.

language, Dixon (1977) states categorically that "every Yidiny verb is inherently transitive or intransitive, and its transitivity is of the utmost importance for the syntactic operations that can be applied to it [p. 273]." Yet there are some verbs whose syntactic behavior does not fit this rigid pattern, and as a result they produce problems for the analysis, one of which Dixon (1977) briefly alludes to in a note:

> There are two kinds of construction in Yidiny that it is difficult to know how to classify. With a verb such as *nyanggaaji-n* 'talk' the noun describing the language that is being used can occur in absolutive case, apparently within the S NP. . . . And the noun *wabar* 'a walk' commonly functions in the same way with verbs like *gali-n* 'go':
>
> [787]   *ngayu wabar galing*   'I'm going for a walk'
>
> In the absence of any reason for treating them in any other way, it seems simplest to suggest that these may be a type of 'inalienable possession', with 'language' and 'walk' being regarded as 'part' of the actor in those cases! It would probably need a native speaker trained as a linguist to decide whether in fact this is a valid assignment [p. 364].

Clearly there are a number of problems raised by this quotation, not the least of which is the provision of semantic interpretation so that 'I' and 'walk' in (787) can refer to one individual. A search of the grammar shows that there are at least two other verbs that function in a way similar to those mentioned in the passage cited here.[5] In a note on page 472, Dixon states that *wugu burrgi-n* 'go working' (where *wugu* is a noun 'work' and *burrgi-n* is an intransitive verb 'go') is syntactically identical to *wabar gali-n* 'go walking' [cf. Example (787), cited here]. Also, in example (989) on page 471 we find:

[989]   *Ngayu wurrmba   wunaany.*
          I-nom asleep-abs lie-past
          'I lay asleep'.

In the vocabulary at the end of the grammar (pp. 546–549) *wuna-n* is given as an intransitive verb and *wurrmba* as an adjective meaning 'asleep', followed by the parenthetical note "& N a sleep?". I suggest that *wurrmba* does function as a noun in (989) and that all these verbs are intransitive, taking an objectlike complement. Dixon does not provide any syntactic evidence that these nouns have properties shared with transitive object NPs (other than absolutive case marking) but they are clearly parallel to constructions involving the same semantic concepts in the other languages described in this paper.

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[5] Dixon (personal communication) also notes that the verb *nyamba* 'to dance' takes an intransitive subject plus a noun denoting the dance style, as in *ngayu warrma nyambaany* 'I danced Warrma-style'.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Disregarding Bandjalang for the moment, we find that the following verbs occur with objectlike complements in the languages surveyed:

	Verb	Complement
In all languages	'talk'	'language' 'story'
In all except Djaru and Guugu Yimidhirr(?)	'lie'	'sleep'
In Yidiny, Djaru, and Diyari[6]	'dance'	'ceremony'
In Djaru and Diyari	'play'	'game'
In Yidiny	'go'	'walk' 'work'
In Diyari	'wear' 'be painted'	'clothing' 'pattern'

These verbs all belong to the semantic class of "cognate object" verbs; they take highly specific objects which can be understood as closely connected semantically with the meaning of the verb.

Syntactically, clauses containing these verbs and their complements have characteristics of both transitive and intransitive clauses:

1. The clause contains two NPs, one of which has some or all of the morphosyntactic properties of a transitive object.
2. The other NP is case marked as if it were an intransitive subject. These clauses are thus part way between fully transitive clauses and fully intransitive clauses, as the following table shows.

Sentence type			Verb class
1. NP noun:ergative pronoun:nominative	NP noun:absolutive pronoun:accusative	V	transitive verb
2. NP noun:absolutive pronoun:nominative		V	intransitive verb
3. NP noun:absolutive pronoun:nominative	NP noun:absolutive pronoun:accusative	V	cognate object verb

These facts can be straightforwardly explained in terms of the theory of transitivity proposed by Hopper and Thompson (1980). In their paper, Hopper and Thompson propose that transitivity is a continuum defined

[6] See Note 5.

by a set of components: Clauses with more highly transitive components are more likely to be coded as transitive than those with fewer transitive components. One of these transitivity components is "individuation" of the object NP, that is, the degree of distinctness of the object from the subject and from the background (which will be a function of other parameters such as animacy, number, definiteness, and referentiality—see Hopper and Thompson, 1980). Cognate objects are low in individuation, they are not distinct from the situation described by the verb, and hence we might expect clauses containing them to be lower in transitivity than canonical transitives. This is clearly the case in the languages described here; they have subjects case marked as if they were INTRANSITIVE subjects.

Bandjalang also reflects this lower transitivity of cognate object constructions, not in having subjects case marked like intransitive subjects, but in *never* allowing an object, just as fully intransitive clauses do not have objects. Thus, cognate object constructions are part way between transitive and intransitive constructions in Bandjalang also (although it reflects the fact in a way different from the other languages surveyed).

An examination of cognate object constructions in six Australian languages has shown that the claim that transitivity is a simple dichotomy is untenable. Linguists working on these languages must be prepared to accept that some clauses will be neither fully transitive nor fully intransitive but show features which place them between these two poles on the transitivity continuum.

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