

Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

Murrinh-Patha agreement: implications for the relationship between theory and description

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Implications for the relationship between theory and description

The relationship between formal linguistic theory and language description is at its best when each informs the other: language description throwing up new empirical challenges for theoretical assumptions, and linguistic theory providing insight into the nature of complex data. In this paper I exemplify this bi-directional relationship through the discussion of two agreement puzzles in Murrinh-Patha (Australia), and their analysis within the framework of Lexical-Functional Grammar.

Murrinh-Patha (non-Pama-Nyungan, Australia) has a serial verb construction that is used to encode imperfective aspect. In this construction, one of a set of seven intransitive verbs is serialised to the end of the main verb, as shown in the examples below in which the serial verb is given in bold font. Note that Murrinh-Patha is one of a number of northern Australian languages in which main verbs are usually complex predicates (see McGregor 2002 for general discussion). In Murrinh-Patha main verbs are generally formed by combining one of 38 bound classifier stems (traditionally glossed with a number) with a bound lexical stem; these are both underlined in the following examples.

- (1) dirran-nintha-nu-bath
3sS.28.nFut-du.m-RR-watch
'They (two) looked at each other.'
- (2) dirran-nintha-nu-bath=**pirrim**
3sS.28.nFut-du.m-RR-watch=3sS.STAND(3).nFut
'They two are looking at each other (while standing)'

Previous descriptions of Murrinh-Patha (e.g. Walsh 1976, Street 1987) state that the serial verb in the imperfective aspect construction must agree with the main verb in terms of subject person and number, and tense/aspect/mood. In fact the situation is not as straightforward as this would suggest and agreement mismatches arise in a number of ways. Firstly, the serialised verb encodes a different set of subject number categories than the main verb so that serial verbs and main verbs operate according to a different set of number agreement principles. In (3) we see that *pumpan* as a main verb has plural subject agreement, and cannot be used to refer to dual or paucal subjects.

- (3) *pumpan*
3plS.GO(1).nFut
'They (plural, *dual, *paucal) are going'

In (4), however, we see that *pumpan* is used as the serial verb even though the main verb is marked for paucal subject number:

- (4) panganka-nunggu-bath-neme=**pumpan**
3paucS.28.nFut-RR:PAUC-watch-pauc.m=3plS.GO(6).nFut
'They're (paucal) going around watching each other.'

Secondly, the serial verb actually agrees with the object, not the subject, in experiencer object constructions as the following example demonstrates:

- (5) dem-ngi-ralal=**ngurran**
3sS.POKE:RR(21).nFut-**1sO**-thirsty=**1sS.GO(6).nFut**
'I'm thirsty.'

In this paper I present the full range of these agreement puzzles in Murrinh-Patha serial verb constructions and discuss the challenges they pose for linguistic analysis. I argue that they can be accounted for through the use of different types of underspecification and show how this can be captured using the formal theoretical framework of Lexical-Functional Grammar. I show that the data challenges the theory on the one hand, while the theory helps to make sense of the data on the other, highlighting the important relationship that exists between language description and formal linguistic theory.

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