1. Object Language

Prinmi is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken exclusively in the mountainous region of southwestern China. The autonym of this ethnic group is “prin-mi”. Due to a split in identity in terms of official nationalities, native speakers of Prinmi are classified as Pumi in Yunnan (pop. 30,000) and as Zàng (or Tibetan) in Sichuan (mainly in Muli and Yanynan; pop. 40,000). As use of language is not included in Chinese censuses, field observation suggests the total number of active speakers, in two major dialectal groups, is not likely to exceed 50,000.

Data collection:
- December, 2004 Kunming, Yunnan, China
- January, 2005 Lijiang, Yunnan, China
- January–April, 2005 Ninglang, Yunnan, China
- December, 2005 Lijiang, Yunnan, China

3. Empirical Observations

3.1 Syntax

Elicitation using experimental stimuli in the Project has corroborated that Prinmi has no passive voice. The large set of data in the Visibility task is designed to test the effect of agent visibility and argument animacy. Elicited data show that words which mean “someone” or “something” and body parts such as “hand” or “foot” are consistently used when the identity of agent is unclear in the context.

On the other hand, the 64 carefully-designed tasks have revealed some interesting properties of expressing arguments in transitivity situations. In stark contrast to unidentifiable agents, which always receive explicit expression in transitive clauses, a contextually established argument is often expressed implicitly as a zero pronoun. The use of implicit arguments relies on complex sentences to handle information status of NPs before zero pronouns are exploited.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 illustrate data collected for all transitivity situations intended in the experiment, although a few are rendered as intransitivity. The Topic Comment Construction is employed in Figure 2, but not in Figure 3. In this specific experiment, the topic constituent in the construction is either marked by the topic clitic ggi, indicated by [Tp] in the label, or marked by a fusion of the topic and ergative clitics — ggon, indicated by [Er] in the label.

As the task is not designed to elicit the topic-comment construction, speakers tend to use it relatively less. The data reveal that this discourse sensitive construction, when taking simplex structure, favors explicit expressions of both arguments of transitive verbs.

2. Information Structure

As is typical with understudied languages, the information structure of Prinmi has not been thoroughly investigated. Ding (1998; 2003) notes the following fundamental properties of information structure in Prinmi:

- WORD ORDER, aided with morphological means, is employed to yield Topic Comment Constructions:
  - Simple Topic Comment Construction: Topic + Comment
  - Double Topic Comment Construction: Topic1 + Topic2 + Comment
  - Embedded Topic Comment Construction: Topic1 + (Topic2 + Comment2) + Comment1
  - Chained Topic Comment Construction: Topic + Comment1 + Comment2 + ...
  - Anti-Topic Construction: Comment + Topic

Topic marking ny means of clitics is complex, as the person hierarchy is involved and sometimes the topic can receive no overt marking.

CLEF T CONSTRUCTIONS: The copula can be used with the Topic Comment Construction together to produce a cleft-like construction, which often takes the following form:

- VP Topic (clausal topic) + NP Comment (focused element) + Copula.

ELLIPSIS is a crucial and effective way for foregrounding/backgrounding selected information in sentences.

3.2 Phonology

Intonation can be used for emphasis, e.g. in correcting information. As Prinmi has a fully-fledged pitch-accent system (Ding 2001), the basic shape of lexical pitch on an emphasized word remains unchanged, but the range of pitch is expanded. The following is an illustration, where the first instance of “Ciri” receives a higher pitch range, to indicate information corrected from the previous sentence:

Figure 5: Range Expansion

The pitch-accent system is sensitive to phonological domain. Some speakers tend to merge the phonological domain of a verb with that of its object or a preceding word. This happens in faster speech, which requires reduction in the number of phonological phrases, as less time is available.

4. Summary

The following points have been learned from the QUIS elicitation tasks regarding the information structure of Prinmi:

- Effect of intonation on lexical pitch-accent system in Prinmi: pitch range expansion
- Non-existence of passive voice in Prinmi
- Agents and patients are expressed explicitly in a simplex Topic Comment Construction
- Ellipsis is a complex device for conveying discourse information in Prinmi, which involves more than merely the general condition of givenness. It is best approached with the concept of zero pronoun.

All 64 tasks in the Visibility task contain an argument whose information status is “given” after its introduction in the first picture. There is only one instance of a zero pronoun directly in a simplex sentence when describing transitivity situations. In all other cases where the zero pronoun occurs, speakers use a complex sentence to handle the new argument in the second picture, and then render one of them (or both, in rarer cases) in accordance with the speaker’s need to create an appropriate information structure.

5. References


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