Sporadic agreement in Mian discourse
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Mian is a Mountain Ok language of the Trans New Guinea family, spoken by about 1,700 people in Papua New Guinea (Fedden 2011). Its curious features include the fact that agreement with the object is restricted to a small subset of transitive verbs (Fedden 2019). Such "sporadic" agreement (Corbett 2006) is a rare and non-canonical type of agreement. Transitive verbs that agree with their object fall into two lexical classes. Both these classes agree in person and number with the object, and – depending on class – according to one of two different nominal classification systems. There are identified as systems 1 and 2 below. These two systems are based on and different semantic distinctions and use different means of formal marking (Corbett, Fedden & Finkel 2017), see (1) and (2). However the majority of transitive verbs do not index their object (3).

(1) ō   máam=e   a-nâ'-n-o=be
     3SG.F   mosquito=ART 3SG.M.OBJ-hit-REALIS-3SG.F.SBJ=DECL
     'She hit the mosquito.'

(2) nē   fút=e   tob-ò-n-i=a
     1SG   tobacco=ART   3SG.LONG.OBJ-take-SS.SEQ-1SG.SBJ=and
     'I take the tobacco leaf and (then I) …'

(3) ō   máam=e   bou-n-o=be
     3SG.F   mosquito=ART swat-REALIS-3SG.F.SBJ=DECL
     'She swatted the mosquito.'

We should ask how such a system works in discourse; in particular, how the presence or absence of agreement relates to the overt vs. null realization of arguments. A hypothesis that has been put forward concerning this relation is the *Complementarity Principle* (CP) (see Kibrik 2011; Haig & Schnell 2016). This is a principle of economy, and it claims that null arguments are favoured by overt agreement and vice versa.

To verify this hypothesis, I conducted a discourse study of Mian (based on a fully annotated Mian test corpus of approx. 4,000 words); this is similar to the study by Nichols (2018) on the Nakh-Daghestanian language Ingush. I measured the referential density (Bickel 2003), i.e. the ratio of actually overt arguments to possibly overt (i.e. grammatically permitted) arguments. It is very low in Mian: only about one quarter of grammatically possible arguments is expressed. We do find expected discourse effects, such as subjects tending to be null and objects among all argument types being most likely realized overtly; this is helpful, given that the study looks at objects. The table below summarizes the comparison of null vs. overt arguments to agreement vs. non-agreement. I include the expected percentages under full complementarity (i.e. 0% of objects overt with agreeing verbs, 100% of objects overt with non-agreeing verbs) to help contextualize actual figures.

	Verb agrees with object			Verb does not agree with object
	system 1	system 2	combined	
null object	50	118	168	203
overt object	21	97	118	159
% overt object	0.30	0.45	0.41	0.44
% prediction from CP	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00

The results do not support the Complementarity Principle. Despite the difference between the two systems the overall percentages of overtly realized objects are very similar when looking at agreeing verbs (systems 1 and 2 combined) and non-agreeing verbs; under complementarity we would expect significant differences, more specifically more overt objects with non-agreeing verbs. What is more, the majority of transitive verbs, whether in terms of type and or token frequency, do not agree with their object. According to the Complementarity Principle, referential density should be much higher.

References

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