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Spatial orientation and verb serialisation in Kilmeri

The paper deals with Kilmeri, a language of the Border-Family, Bewani subgroup. The Border-Family languages are spoken in both the states of Papua New Guinea and Indonesia north of the main mountain range.

In Kilmeri, the cognitive-semantic dimension of spatial orientation and the formal technique of verb serialisation are connected in an intriguing way. Verb serialisation has two main functions: (i) it modifies the meaning of the main verb of the serial construction with respect to manner; (ii) it also modifies the meaning of the main verb of the serial construction with respect to spatial orientation. In the latter case serialisation is a formal substitute for adpositions, in particular for topological spatial adpositions. As for these adpositions, Kilmeri is rather poorly equipped. The unmarked way of expressing topological relations is the usage of the general locative suffix *-yo*. Then, the topological relation between FIGURE and GROUND is the prototypical one: *yeni-yo* means ‘on the table’, but *ipi-yo* means ‘in the pot’, and *sû-yo* means ‘over the fire’. Non-prototypical relations as ‘under the table’ are expressed by postpositions developed from local nouns: *yeni sikilyo* ‘under the table’. However, this construction type holds only for static relations, whereas dynamic relations employ verb serialisation: *laye-kûne* lay-go down ‘to lay down’, *woni-bue* call-go up ‘to call upward’ [e.g., to somebody sitting in a tree]. Note that also transitive verbs are used in serial topological constructions: *koniye-pake* swallow-throw ‘to swallow down’, *sepei-pane* drill-put ‘to drill into’. Thus, verb serialisation is connected with dynamic topological relations, while postpositions are used with static topological relations. From a cognitive point of view this is a remarkably well-organised solution.

It should be mentioned that there is a further serialisation pattern that expresses relative or viewpoint based spatial orientation; here the spatial verb precedes the main verb: *dori-wili* turn back-carry ‘to carry back’. The focus of the paper, however, is on topological relations.

Unfortunately, on this topic there are no comparative data available in the Border-Family. Therefore, it would be of great interest to search for relevant data in the Taikat subgroup of the Border-Family which is predominantly spoken in Indonesia.

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