

Typology Meets Sociolinguistics: Associational Semantics in Meyah

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Meyah is a language of the East Bird's Head family spoken in the hinterland of Manokwari. Like other languages of the New Guinea bird's head, Meyah is a relatively isolating language with basic SVO word order. However, compared to other isolating SVO languages, Meyah exhibits some exceptional features pertaining to its compositional semantics and the morphosyntactic marking of thematic roles.

The point of departure of this paper is a cross-linguistic experiment designed to examine the basic clause structure of isolating SVO languages. The experiment focuses on the following two features: (a) the availability of a zero-marking option (ie. absence of a preposition) for a variety of oblique and otherwise peripheral noun phrases; and (b) the availability of OV(S) as an alternative word order. The experiment is premised on assumption that the availability of zero-marked oblique and peripheral noun-phrases and alternative word orders are two manifestations of a single deeper property of languages, that of being *associational*. A language may be considered associational to the extent that it is lacking in distinct construction-specific rules of semantic interpretation, such as those which make reference to the presence of semantically specific prepositions, or to word order. Instead, in associational languages, most of the compositional semantics is based on a single general rule of association, formulated in terms of an association operator A, as follows. If X and Y are expressions with interpretations M and N respectively, then the meaning of the derived expression XY is A (M,N), the result of the association operator applied to M and N. In plain English, what this says is that the meaning of XY is associated in some way with the meanings of X and of Y; but nothing more than that. This mechanism is referred to as *associational semantics*, and features (a) and (b) above are characterized as instantiating *apparently associational interpretations*.

The experiment is ongoing; at the time writing, it had been conducted on the following languages: Meyah; 8 different varieties of Malay/Indonesian; Sundanese and Minangkabau (western Indonesia); Vietnamese and Cantonese (mainland Southeast Asian); Jul'hoan (Khoisan); Twi, Fongbe and Yoruba (West African); Papiamentu, Sranan and Bislama (creoles); plus also Hebrew and English (non-isolating control languages). For each language, the experiment is conducted on a population of 30 or more subjects conforming to a Baseline Sociolinguistic Profile: uneducated, low-to-middle class, over 12 years of age, living in a community where the test language is spoken, and tested in their home community, in a public or semi-public area. In addition, for most languages, a contrasting population of university students are also tested.

The results of the experiment reveal a considerable amount of diversity with respect to the availability of apparently associational interpretations. Within the Baseline Sociolinguistic Profile, much of the variation can be attributed to the interplay of two factors, one typological, the other sociolinguistic:

(1) *Articulation Index:*

The availability of apparently associational interpretations is inversely related to the articulation index, which represents the amount of obligatory overt marking of grammatical categories such as number, definiteness, tense, aspect and so forth.

(2) *Number of Speakers:*

The availability of apparently associational interpretations is inversely related to the size of the speech community.

For Meyah, the results of the experiment show that within the Baseline Sociolinguistic Profile, the availability of apparently associational interpretations is quite high, greater than most of the languages tested, though less than in Sundanese and Minangkabau. These results are predicted, in (1) and (2), by the low-to-mid-range articulation index of Meyah coupled with the small number of speakers of the language.

Within individual languages, the results of the experiment also reveal a considerable amount of sociolinguistically governed variation. Specifically, for most languages, the following generalization holds:

(3) *Level of Education:*

The availability of apparently associational interpretations is inversely related to the level of education of the subjects.

Thus, subjects conforming to the Baseline Sociolinguistic Profile tend to exhibit greater availability of apparently associational interpretations than do university students. However, for Meyah, and Meyah alone, this pattern is reversed, and it is the university students who show greater availability of apparently associational interpretations than subjects conforming to the Baseline Sociolinguistic Profile. In fact, of all the populations tested, across languages and sociolinguistic groups, the Meyah university students stand out as having the highest degree of availability of apparently associational interpretations. In conclusion, some speculations are offered as to why Meyah university students should exhibit this remarkable pattern.