

Argument relations in Abawiri: Grammar, semantics, and pragmatics

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Abawiri [flh], a Lakes Plain language of Papua, Indonesia, lacks grammatical relations. It has no grammatical structures that would signal a grammatical argument position such as Subject or Ergative. There are no bound pronominal forms on verbs, and nominal postpositions mark only semantic and pragmatic relations. Further, constructions such as coordinated clauses, relative clauses, and clause chains do not favor any grammatical argument position over another. One construction, which appears to be quite similar to the optional ergativity found in many Papuan languages (Donohue 2006; McGregor & Verstraete 2010; Riesberg 2018), is shown to be related to agentivity and discourse prominence, and has not grammaticalized into an ergative marker. In the absence of grammatical resources to disambiguate between arguments in a clause, speakers rely on semantic resources such as verbal valency and information-structural resources such as topic and focus markers. Most of the languages for which this has been claimed are of the morphologically isolating type such as Riau Indonesian (Gil 1999), Mongsen Ao (Coupe 2007), and Mandarin Chinese (LaPolla 1993). However, this is rather unexpected in a Papuan language such as Abawiri that has many other highly grammaticalized constructions typical of Papuan languages: extensive verbal morphology, a wide range of postpositions on NPs, and strongly verb-final word order. At least some other Lakes Plain languages also lack bound pronominal forms on verbs, including Iau (Bateman 1986) and Sikaritai (Martin 1986); however, it is not yet known whether these languages encode grammatical relations in other parts of the grammar.

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