

Clause combining and serialization in an Oceanic Language of Papua New Guinea

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Saliba-Logea is an Oceanic language spoken by about 2500 people in Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea. The language has SOV and Genitive-Noun word order and postpositions (rather than VO, Noun-Genitive and prepositions as most Oceanic languages). There are subject prefixes and object suffixes on the verb so that every inflected verb is a potentially complete minimal clause. Both nuclear-layer and core-layer serialization are attested.

There is little evidence of hierarchical relationships between what one might on semantic grounds consider main clauses and subordinate clauses in the language. Clause boundaries may be overtly marked by conjunctions or particles but clauses can also simply be juxtaposed. In such cases the clause boundaries can typically be identified through intonation and or/the presence of pauses. However, in some cases intonational criteria and pauses do not clearly indicate clause boundaries. Some of these clause sequences seem to be formulaic and can probably be described as forming grammatical constructions such as core-layer serialization.

When a PP is preceded and followed by a verb without an overt indication of clause boundaries it can be unclear whether the PP belongs to the first or the second clause. Since the language has a general postposition which introduces a range of roles (including location, goal, source and instrument) there can be some ambiguity about the meaning that is expressed. For example, the PP may either be interpreted as the goal of an initial motion verb or as the location of the second predicate. This ambiguity does not pose any problem in terms of the success of the communicative event as, pragmatically, the two readings in such examples are compatible and there is no risk of misunderstanding. The discrepancy between the two readings does however pose a problem for the morpho-syntactic analysis of the sentences. It appears that in examples of this type, the PP is in fact claimed by both verbs and that it expresses the goal of the first AND the location of the second verb.

In this paper I discuss examples of this type and other cases of combined clauses and investigate the distinction or the continuum between clause combining and serialization and the question of where pragmatics turns into grammar. The research is based on a text corpus of transcribed spoken language of over 90 texts by more than 60 speakers between the ages of about 10 to 80, collected between 1995 and 2007. The corpus is text-audio linked and searchable in Toolbox.