

A NOTE ON THE PITTAPITTA NOMINATIVE CASE AND  
THE FUTURE TENSE

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It is known that some Australian languages show overt tense inflection on nominal arguments, correlating with the tense of the verb (i.e., with the complex consisting of the V and the T which selects it). In the Wellesley Island languages of North Queensland, for example, the marked tenses, future and non-future, are represented overtly not only on the verb, but on the other constituents of the verb phrase. This is exemplified by the Lardil sentence in (1)—a simple transitive sentence in the future tense, with object and instrument within VP, the subject external to VP:

- (1) Ngada barrki-th-ur thungal-ur jurwindil-ur-ur.  
I chop-CNJ-FUT tree-FUT axe-INST-FUT  
'I will chop the tree with an axe.'

This can be contrasted with the plain form, in which the verb is unmarked for tense; rather, it is marked for perfective aspect by means of the preverb *yuurr*. The object is overtly marked for accusative case, but neither the object nor the instrument is marked for tense:

- (2) Ngada yuurr-barrki thungal-in jurwindil-ur.  
I PERF-chop tree-ACC axe-INST  
'I chopped the tree with an axe.'

The situation represented in (1) conforms to the pervasive general principle of suffixal concord in the language:

- (3) Concord:  
If *H*, the head of a phrase, is overtly inflected for a category by suffixal morphology *S*, then any constituent locally dominated by a projection of *H* bears the same suffixal morphology *S* (modulo allomorphy). That is to say, operationally, the inflection *S* is copied from *H* onto certain constituents within the phrase projected by *H*.

The relation of local domination remains to be determined; it is invoked to ensure that inflectional morphology be "local" in relation to the head, i.e., not separated from it by any barrier—what remains to be determined is exactly what counts as a barrier. For present purposes, this question can be set aside.

Concord is pervasive in the morphosyntax of Lardil, and the other Wellesley Island languages. The following illustrates accusative case concord within the noun phrase:

- (4) Ngada yuurr-barrki [diin-in karnan-in thungal-in].  
 I PERF-chop [this-ACC tall-ACC tree-ACC]  
 'I chopped this tall tree.'

The behavior exemplified in (4) is quite familiar, of course. It is found in those Indo-European languages which have to some degree retained rich inflection in their nominal systems. While tense concord, as illustrated in (1), seems rather exotic at first blush, it is nevertheless nothing other than this familiar phenomenon of concord.

Like Lardil and most other Australian languages, the western Queensland language Pittapitta has suffixal concord. And like Lardil, it also inflects nominals for tense—future tense specifically (Blake and Breen, 1971; Roth, 1897). But there is an important difference; and this will be the principal topic of these remarks.

In Pittapitta, the subject of a clause in the future tense, whether transitive or intransitive, is overtly inflected for that tense. The verb of future-tense clauses is itself generally unmarked for tense (as in (5-8) below), though the purposive and potential (overt verbal inflections) count as future, in the sense that they are construed with the future inflection on the subject (as exemplified by (9)):

- (5) Yanthurru-nha nganyu marri.  
 food-ACC 1SG.FUT get  
 'I will get food.'
- (6) Nganyayinu nganyu karnta.  
 tomorrow 1SG.FUT go  
 'I will go tomorrow.'
- (7) Ngapiri-ngu thawa paya-nha. (L)  
 father-FUT kill bird-ACC  
 'Father will kill the bird (with missile thrown).'
- (8) Thithi-ngu karnta pathiparnta.  
 EBro-FUT go morning  
 'My elder brother will go in the morning.'
- (9) Wama-ngu nhu-ngu-parra (ina) paja-lhira.  
 snake-FUT that-FUT-obl (2SG.ACC) bite-POT  
 'That snake (there at the side) might bite you.'

As expected, Pittapitta shows concord in conformity with (3). This is seen in (9), where both the noun and the determiner are inflected for future tense. But this is not the phenomenon which is of interest here, being standard behavior for languages in this region. Instead, our attention is drawn to the very unusual property of this language that the subject is inflected for the tense of the clause.

This happens only in the future tense (including the potential and purposive). It does not happen in the present or past, as shown in the following:

- (10) Papa-nha ngathu ngulyakurri-ya.  
seed-ACC 1SG.ERG make-PRES  
'I am baking a damper (bread).'
- (11) Ngathu manhakurri-nya puri-nha. (W)  
1SG.ERG mishandle-PAST money-ACC  
'I lost (my) money.'
- (12) Ngamari-lu takuku-nha wajama-ya.  
mother-ERG child-ACC wash-PRES  
'Mother is washing the baby.'
- (13) Karna-lu pithi-ka majumpa-nha.  
man-ERG kill-PAST kangaroo-ACC  
'The man killed the kangaroo.'
- (14) Pukarra-nha thaji-ya majumpa-lu.  
grass eat-PRES kangaroo-ERG
- (15) Karna-lu nganya thithi-ka.  
man-ERG 1SG.ACC hit-PAST  
'The man hit me.'
- (16) Karna nhuwaka nhangka-ya ngurra-yina.  
man he sit-PRES camp-LOC  
'The man is sitting in camp.'
- (17) Ngapu nhuwaka tirnpa-ya.  
water it run-PRES  
'The water is running.'
- (18) nganja wakakanha-ka tipu-nga.  
1SG.NOM work-PAST money-GEN  
'I worked for money.'

In these tenses, a "three-way" ergative system of case inflection is revealed (cf. Bittner and Hale, 1996a,b). Accordingly, the subject of a transitive is inflected for ergative case, while the object is inflected for accusative case, as seen in (10) through (14). The subject of an intransitive appears in the unmarked, or nominative, case (also called absolutive in the ergativity literature).

In Hale (1998), the Pittapitta system of future tense inflection was attributed to the ergativity of the language. Under the assumption that the

subject is a distinguished adjunct to the verb phrase and, therefore, in the c-command domain of T(ense), the realization of future tense on the subject could be understood to be a consequence of the familiar tense concord observed in the non-ergative Wellesley Island languages—in which the subject is external to VP and in which, therefore, concord affects just objects, not subjects. This idea cannot be right, however, since Pittapitta future tense inflection affects *all* subjects, not just the subjects of transitive clauses, i.e., not just the subjects which, by hypothesis, remain adjoined to the verb phrase at PF, where tense concord is assumed to apply. The subjects of intransitives are expected to raise to Spec of T to satisfy the Case Filter and consequently should not be affected by tense concord, contrary to what is seen in (6) and (8) above.

There is a much more credible alternative conception of what is going on in Pittapitta, although the details will have to be worked out. At this point the alternative is simply announced, on the assumption that the details, and supporting evidence, will be forthcoming.

The idea is this. Pittapitta is a so-called “split ergative” language, the split being correlated with tense. The language employs the nominative-accusative case system in the future tense, and it employs the ergative (more precisely, three-way) case system in the non-future tenses. If this is correct, then it follows that all subjects will be treated the same in the future tense. Furthermore, all subjects will be in the nominative and, accordingly, are raised to Spec of T.

It is a peculiarity of the Pittapitta future tense that it is realized (spelled out) on the subject, not on T itself—i.e., not on the V-adjoined T, head of TP. In this, the future differs from the non-future tenses, which show the more conventional realization according to which they are spelled out on T.

The behavior of the future tense in Pittapitta is suggestive of the recent proposal of Pesetsky and Torrego (1998) that nominative case is identified with tense. This might in fact be part of a general puzzle in the study of nominative case, normally the “unmarked case,” the “non-case.” Normally, tense (and nominative case, its alter ego), are realized on T alone, leaving the subject in its canonical unmarked form at PF. But there are well known exceptions to this standard unmarked condition of the nominative (e.g., the overt nominative of the Yuman languages, the nominative of Japanese, and others). These exceptions may well not be exceptional at all, but rather, overt realizations of T as the so called nominative case on the subject.

#### References

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