Some languages do not respect the designs of linguists

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Baseret på tradition og på generationers erfaring har lingvister etableret en sprogmodel, gennem hvilken vi opfatter og analyserer nye sprog, som vi kommer i kontakt med. I denne artikel præsenterer jeg to tilfælde, hvor sprog ikke passer ind i lingvisters model.

I det første tilfælde optræder et hyppigt forekommende morfem tre helt forskellige steder i sproget og behandles derfor også tre forskellige steder i beskrivelsen af sproget.

Det andet drejer sig om et sæt personpræfikser, som i mayasprog traditionelt beskrives to forskellige steder og med to forskellige sæt funktioner, mens et forsøg på at identificere en fælles betydning for de adskilte forekomster ville fange deres grundlæggende funktion mere hensigtsmæssigt, men det ville bryde med den traditionelle syntaktiske analyse af sproget.

Min konklusion er at forstyrrende særheder i enkelte sprog burde tages mere alvorligt af typologer.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language typology can be viewed and discussed from two different angles, looking either from the general to the specific or vice versa. In the first instance, we focus on features that related and unrelated languages share, and on this basis classify these languages as belonging to a type. In the 19th century linguists looked at characteristic features of words and talked about isolating languages, agglutinative languages, etc.

But language typology also comes into play in the analysis of individual languages. Here, one discusses how certain features of the given language fit into current ideas about language types and language description in general.

Those who take the first view and look at what languages share are generally less interested in the fine details of the individual languages, focusing instead on general features and principles. This broad view of a great variety of languages has led to considerable progress in our understanding of language in general. Those who take the second view, on the other hand, will insist on the peculiarities of a given language, and in doing so they too contribute to a better understanding of language in general by obliging typologists to revise and refine their analyses.

This paper takes the second approach, focusing on problems in some of the generally accepted parameters in language description and on some of the generalizations advanced by typologists. It is not, however, a broad attack on typology as such. On the contrary, the two cases I present have simply always vexed me and given me problems from a descriptive point of view. Since these problems are of a general nature and not linked to any one linguistic theory, I refrain from theoretical discussion of specific designs and concepts.

The first case deals with restrictions laid down by the concepts of word classes and of inflection versus derivation, whereas the second case questions the idea of ergativity as applied to a Mayan language – or of the top priority universally given to subject and object in syntactic descriptions.

2. Case 1: Where should the morpheme *ta* be dealt with in a description of Tacuapan Nawatl?

The morpheme *ta* in Tacuapan Nawatl is used far more broadly than would normally be expected of inflectional or derivational morphemes. The result is that *ta* will appear and be described in at least three separate places in any grammar of the language, a result that I find problematic. Since its meaning and function – according to my analysis – is the same wherever it appears, such a threefold description clearly fails to capture a generalization, namely the specific nature of the morpheme in question.

Nawatl, the language of the Aztecs, is today spoken, in many distinct dialects, by between half a million and one million people. In my discussion here I use examples from Tacuapan, the dialect spoken by a community in the northern part of the state of Puebla, México, which belongs to a dialect area named Sierra de Puebla Nahuatl. The phenomenon that I wish to present differs little, however, from dialect to dialect, most of the differences being phonological: thus in other dialects it is pronounced *tla* or *la*.

In Nawatl the predicate is marked for both subject and object in transitive constructions:

(1) *na-kochi-h*
     S2PL-sleep-SPL
     'You (pl) sleep.'

(2) *Ø-kochi*   *no-ta:t*
     S3-sleep   P1SG-father
     'My father sleeps.'

(3) *ni-k-k^{w}a*   *in*   *taxkal*
     S1SG-O3SG-eat   DET   tortilla
     'I eat the tortilla.'

(4) *Ø-ki-k^{w}a*   *in*   *naka-t*   *no-ta:t*
     S3-O3SG-eat   DET   meat-ABS   P1SG-father
     'My father eats the meat.'

In the traditional description of Nawatl the suffix *-t* in *naka-t* is called an absolutive suffix. It indicates that the noun is not possessed, but it has nothing to do with case. Sentences (3) and (4) show that in transitive constructions the object position is filled even where an overt object is present, in this case *in taxkal* and *in naka-t*.

If the speaker wants to omit an object, the prefix *ta-* is used:

(5)   *ni-ta-kʷa*
       S1SG-ta-eat
       'I eat'

At first sight this prefix looks like a neat addition to the general set of object prefixes, providing a distinction between definite and indefinite objects in the third person singular, and in some descriptions of Nawatl the prefix *ta-* is actually called an "indefinite object pronoun" (Newman 1967: 192) or, more often, "unspecified" (Campbell 1985: 77) or "non-specific" (Andrews 1975: 44, 46). Andrews, who has written probably the most quoted description of Classical Nahuatl, translates the sentence – or word – *ni-tla-tta* as 'I see <u>something</u>' (emphasis mine) (Andrews 1975: 46). However, a genuinely independent, indefinite pronoun, *teh*, exists, and is cross-referenced with the object prefix, *k(i-)*.

(6)   *a:mo   teh   Ø-ki-kʷa-h*
       not   something   S3-O3SG-eat-PERF
       'He ate nothing.'

(7)   *teh-san   Ø-ki-kʷa-h*
       something-only   S3-O3SG-eat-PERF
       'He ate something.'

In other words, *ta-* differs from the other object prefixes by its lack of anaphoric function, and its primary role seems to be to demote the object, thereby creating an intransitive form of the verb, or what some might call an anti-passive construction.

This is not the only way in which *ta-* differs from the other object prefixes, for it always appears in the position immediately to the left of the verb root, whereas other elements may appear between anaphoric object prefixes and the verb.

(8)   *Ø-ki-olo:ch-kʷa*
       S3-O3SG-mixed-eat
       'He eats it mixed.'

(9)   *Ø-olo:ch-ta-kʷa*
        S3-mixed-ta-eat
        'He eats mixed.'

The affix *ta-* shares the lack of anaphoric function with incorporated objects, which are also inserted immediately to the left of the verb root.

(10)   *Ø-ki-kʷa*   *in*   *naka-t*
        S3-O3SG-eat   DET   meat-ABS
        'He eats the meat.'

(11)   *Ø-naka-kʷa*
        S3-meat-eat
        'He eats meat.'

(12)   *Ø-olo:ch-naka-kʷa*
        S3-mixed-meat-eat
        'He eats meat mixed.'

Since Nawatl excels in derivational devices for increasing and decreasing valency, an obvious analysis of *ta-* would be to consider it a derivational morpheme, and this indeed is how some linguists analyze verb forms with *ta-*. However, *ta-* is a misfit in the derivational system as well, since in Nawatl derivation is consistently expressed by suffixes.

(13)   *Ø-ki-Ø-kʷa-<u>ltia</u>*   *in*   *taxkal*[1]
        S3-O3SG-O3SG-eat-<u>CAUS</u>   DET   tortilla
        'He gives him the tortilla to eat.'

(14)   *Ø-ki-ta-kʷa-<u>ltia</u>*
        S3-O3SG-*ta*-eat-<u>CAUS</u>
        'He feeds him.'

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(15)   *ni-k-ka:wa*   *in*   *taxkal*
       S1SG-O3SG-leave   DET   tortilla
       'I leave the tortilla.'

(16)[1] *ni-k-Ø-ka:wi-<u>lia</u>*   *in*   *taxkal*
       S1SG-O3SG-O3SG-leave-<u>APPL1</u>   DET   tortilla
       'I leave the tortilla to him.'

In one type of derivation the prefix *ta-* collaborates with an applicative suffix. The suffix increases valency; however, one of the two object positions, the one indicating a non-human object, is obligatorily filled by *ta-*, which again serves to demote the object or create an anti-passive.

(17)   *ni-k-ko:wa taxkal*
       S1SG-O3SG-buy tortilla
       'I buy tortillas.'

(18)   *ni-k-ta-ko:w-<u>ia</u>*   *no-ta:t*
       S1SG-O3SG-ta-buy-<u>APPL2</u>   P1SG-father
       'I buy for my father.'

This construction contrasts with the following, in which both objects can be overtly expressed.

(19)   *ni-k-Ø-ko:wi-lia*   *taxkal*   *no-ta:t*
       S1SG-O3SG-O3SG-buy-APPL1   tortilla   P1SG-father
       'I buy tortillas for my father.'

So far we have seen that the prefix *ta-* has the function of demoting an object. However, it has other functions as well. With certain intransitive verbs it can fill the subject position. The most common examples are with verbs that refer to natural processes, such as plants budding, leaves becoming green, everything drying out, etc. When *ta-* is used with this type of intransitive verb, the verb refers to a general process and not to some specific thing undergoing that process.

(20) *Ø-wa:ki   in   iswa-t*
      S3-dry   DET   leaf-ABS
      'The leaf dries.'

(21) *ta-wa:ki*
      ta-dry
      'There is drought.'

As in the previous examples *ta-* has no anaphoric function, and here we have a case of subject demotion.

In some dialects this use of *ta-* is even more general. This is the case in Tacuapan, where it is used productively to indicate subject demotion in intransitive verbs in general – probably with the restriction that only intransitive verbs that take non-human subjects appear in this construction.

(22) *Ø-ihxi:ka   in   tasa:l*
      S3-drip   DET   clothes
      'The (washed) clothes drip.'

(23) *ta-hxi:ka   kali-ihtik*
      ta-drip   house-inside
      'It drips inside the house / there is dripping inside.'

Until now we have seen that *ta-* is used to demote an object and a subject; however, it has yet another function. The prefix *ta-* is also found with so-called relational nouns. Relational nouns are noun-like words that serve to express spatial or other relationships between two nouns. They are called relational nouns for two reasons: firstly because some of them are identical with actual nouns, typically body parts, and secondly because they are marked with possessor prefixes that are cross-referenced with whatever they relate to.

(24) *i-ikni:w   in   siwa:-t*
      P3SG-brother   DET   woman-ABS
      'The woman's brother.'

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(25) *no-kniw*

     P1SG-brother

     'My brother.'

(26) *i-pan kali*

     P3SG-on house

     'On the house.'

(27) *i-tech*   *se:*   *chikiwi-t*

     P3SG-in   a   basket-ABS

     'In a basket.'

(28) *no-tampa*

     P1SG-under

     'Under me.'

(29) *ta-tampa*

     ta-under

     'Underneath.'

(30) *xi-k-ta:li*   *ta-tampa*

     IMP-O3SG-place   *ta*-down

     'Put it down.'

Sentences (24) and (25) exemplify how possession is expressed in Nawatl; the possessum is marked by a person prefix indicating the person and number of the possessor; a third person prefix is cross-referenced with a noun. Examples (26), (27) and (28) show that expressions that correspond to prepositional phrases in western European languages are identical with possessive constructions. In (29) and (30) the prefix *ta-* is in place of a possessor person prefix, and as in the case where it replaces an object affix, its function is demotion. Here it demotes the possessor, and therefore corresponds to our adverbial locatives: 'underneath' versus 'under the table'.

Before I sum up and conclude on this first example, I should add that *ta-* has a sibling, namely *te:-* which functions like *ta-*, except for the fact that it is semantically plus-human, whereas *ta-* is non-human. Thus in talking about a wild animal, one would say:

(31)   *Ø-te:-kʷa*
         S3-te:-eat
         'It devours (humans).'

The affix *te:-* is used far less frequently than *ta-*. However, whenever speakers use kin terms, which are obligatorily possessed, without referring to any possessor, they will use *te:-*, *te:-ta:t* 'a father'.

For the sake of completeness, the origin of the two prefixes deserves mention. They can apparently be traced back to ProtoUto-Aztecan where reconstructed ***ta-*** "marked unspecified <u>subjects</u> [...] while ***t-*** marked unspecified <u>objects</u>" (Langacker 1976: 129) (emphasis mine). In other words, descendents of speakers of ProtoUtoAztecan have shifted the meaning of these two elements in Nawatl from covering two well-defined syntactic functions in ProtoUtoAztecan, viz. unspecified subject and unspecified object, to sharing the same syntactic function: simply that of demotion, while at the same time establishing two new semantically defined areas: that of 'human' versus 'non-human'. *Ta-*, meaning 'non-human', has become the most frequently used of the two, which is also why I have limited myself to *ta-* in this presentation.

To conclude: the prefix *ta-* has the same function, demotion, wherever it appears. Depending on the word, it demotes the object, the subject, or the second part in a locative expression. However, in descriptions of Nawatl, *ta-* is never analyzed as a single unitary element: a fact that is not surprising, for where should it be dealt with? As I have shown, it does not fit into the system of inflectional prefixes, nor does it belong with the derivational suffixes. I am convinced that it should be treated under a single generalizing heading, and I tentatively suggest that it belongs in the sphere of pragmatics. One reason for this suggestion is that speakers of Nawatl make use in their speech of their rich system for decreasing and increasing valency, and for this purpose *ta-* is well suited. An event is often described by a gradual introduction of the various

elements and participants. An exaggerated and simplistic example would sound something like: 'people sowed', 'the two brothers sowed', 'the two brothers sowed beans', 'the two brothers sowed beans for someone', 'the two brothers sowed beans for the master'.

My problem is not how to understand the use of this ubiquitous affix, which clearly contributes to pragmatic flexibility, but rather where in a description of the language to deal with all its occurrences under a single heading.

3. CASE 2: WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT MAM IS AN ERGATIVE LANGUAGE?

The second case comes from the Mayan language Mam, which is spoken in the western highlands of Guatemala by at least some 200,000 speakers. I did field work in a community, Todos Santos Cuchumatanes, in 1966-67 and again in 1968. My PhD thesis was a description of the Todos Santos variety of Mam.

Mam is considered an ergative language. It has two sets of person prefixes, traditionally and conveniently called set A and set B. Set B is used for the subject of intransitive sentences and the object of transitive sentences, while set A is used for the subject of transitive sentences.

	SET A	SET B
SINGULAR		
first person	n, w	chin
non-first person	t	tz, tz', Ø
PLURAL		
first person	q	qu, qu'
non-first person	k^y	chi, chi'

The following sentences demonstrate how the two sets are used:

(32) *ma   chi-k^{y}im*
      PAST   BNON1PL-die
      'They died.'

(33) *ma*   *chin-t-il*
      PAST   B1SG-ANON1SG-see
      'He saw me.'

However, there are very few sentences in my text corpus with examples as simple as these. Most sentences in Mam – above all those with a transitive predicate – contain two verbs, a main verb that indicates the process or action, and a directional verb that identifies the direction in which the action takes place. Some typical examples would be:[2]

(34) *ma*   *chi-kub'*   *n-b'iy-o'n*   *ka:b'ə*   *karne:l*
      PAST   BNON1PL-go.down   A1SG-kill-PP   two   sheep
      'I killed two sheep.'

(35) *chi-kub'-e:l*   *n-b'iy-o'n*   *ka:b'ə*   *karne:l*
      BNON1PL-go.down-FUT   A1SG-kill-PP   two   sheep
      'I will kill two sheep.'

In these sentences the two verbs are *kub* 'go down' and *b'yo-'n* 'kill'. The object *ka:b'ə karne:l* 'two sheep' is cross-referenced with *chi* from set B on the directional verb, and 'I' is cross-referenced with *n* from set A on the main verb. Aspect is marked on the directional, *chi-kub'* vs *chi-kub'-e:l*.

The two sets are generally analyzed as marking the ergative and the absolutive roles respectively, a description that is illustrated in the above examples.

As in other Mayan languages, set A has an additional function. In nominal phrases it marks the possessor on the possessed object.

(36) *n-χa:*
      A1SG-house
      'My house.'

(37) *t-χa:*   *n-man*
      ANON1SG-house   A1SG-father
      'My father's house.'

These two distinct uses of the same morphemes, as the subject of transitive verbs and the possessor of nouns, have not caused any great commotion among linguists, none of whom has suggested a possible common semantic or functional denominator for the possessor and the subject of transitive verbs. Instead we simply learn "the facts", and the two functions are dealt with separately in their respective "places" in the grammar.

Furthermore, like other Mayan languages, Mam is not a consistently ergative language; rather, it operates with a split system. This means that there are constructions in which the two sets of person prefixes are not used according to the rules described above. In Mam this fickleness appears in most types of subordinate clauses where set A takes over and marks the subject of intransitive verbs.

(38) *ma*   *tz-u:l*   *ṣin*
      PAST   BNON1SG-come   CL:man
      'He has come.'

(39) *teχ*   *t-u:l*   *ṣin* [...]
      when   ANON1SG-come   CL:man
      'When he came [...]'

(40) *teχ*   *t-kyim*   *ṣin* [...]
      when   ANON1SG-die   CL:man
      'When he died [...]'

(41) *teχ*   *w-u:l*   *e:wa*   *Ø-w-il*   *ak'ah*   *ʃoq'*
      when   A1SG-come   yesterday   BNON1SG-A1SG-see   new   pot
      'When I came yesterday I saw the new pot.'

In (38) we have an independent clause in which the subject of the intransitive verb 'come' is marked – as expected – by a morpheme from set B. In (39) we have the corresponding subordinate clause in which the subject is now indicated by *t-* from set A. (40) and (41) are further examples of the same phenomenon.

A split ergative system, such as I have sketched for Mam, is by no means unique. On the contrary, many linguists will undoubtedly recognize similarities in other ergative languages. Indeed, by far the majority of ergative languages display a split system; "non-split" ergative systems are apparently extremely rare.

In order to have common descriptive terms for both nominative systems and ergative systems some typologists have established the following terminology: A (agent) for the subject of transitive verbs, S (subject) for the subject of intransitive verbs, and P for the patient (object) of transitive verbs. However, this does not make it any simpler to describe the split ergative system found in Mam.

My problem with the – by now – generally accepted description of Mam is related to the first case, from Nawatl, that I presented: we have a set of morphemes that are used in several constructions, in this case as (1) the subject of transitive verbs, (2) the possessor, and (3) the subject of intransitive verbs in some types of subordinate clauses, constructions that are not traditionally dealt with from a unitary point of view. In the Nawatl case it was easy to identify the common function of *ta-* in its various distinct uses; in this second case from Mam, the shared features are not so obvious. However, in accordance with good linguistic practice we must decide whether we are faced with an accidental homonymy here, or whether the identical morphemes are "the same" in their three distinct uses.

A case of accidental homonymy in grammatical morphemes is found in the final morphemes of the English words *cat-s* and *eat-s*; to my knowledge, nobody has suggested that these two morphemes should be described under one heading. Nor, on the other hand, have the many divergent uses of most of the Latin cases led grammarians to establish a more numerous case system based on the argument that they represent accidental homonymy.

As far as set A of person prefixes in Mam is concerned, it seems in every way counterintuitive to consider them four cases of accidental homonymy; and if

this is the case, we must look for features that the three major uses of these prefixes share, a task which – as far as I know – no one has yet undertaken. This is not a simple task; it requires a detailed and thorough study of all the uses of the person prefixes in question, and it also involves an analysis of the syntactic constructions in the language. I have not even approached this overwhelming task. My aim in this article is merely to draw attention to what I see as an obvious disregard for a generalization, and perhaps a slighting of features that make Mam – and the Mayan languages in general – diverge from traditional syntactic design.

4. CONCLUSION

The peculiarities of individual languages should be taken more seriously by typologists, and we must continue to respect the linguistic sign with its interrelated content and expression. For my own part, I hope to be able some day to give a partial analysis of the intricacies of Mam syntax – on its own terms.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ANON1SG	Set A, non-1st person singular
A1SG	Set A, 1st person singular
APPL1	Applicative 1
APPL2	Applicative 2
ABS	Absolutive
BNON1PL	Set B, non-1st person plural
BNON1SG	Set B, non-1st person singular
B1SG	Set B, 1st person singular
CAUS	Causative
CL	Classifier
DET	Determiner
FUT	Future
IMP	Imperative
NONPOSS	Non-possessed
O3SG	Object, 3rd person singular
PERF	Perfect tense
PL	Plural possessed
PP	Past participle
P1SG	Possessor, 1st person singular
P3SG	Possessor, 3rd person singular
SPL	Plural of subject
SUNSPEC	Unspecified subject
S1SG	Subject, 1st person singular
S2PL	Subject, 2nd person plural
S3	Subject, 3rd person

NOTES

1   The argument for using Ø for the second object in ditransitive verbs is that in a few cases an affix is overt:

   ti-ne:ch-<u>in</u>-ki:xti-lih   *no-tzkʷi-wa:n*

   S2SG-O1SG-<u>O3PL</u>-take-APPL₁   P1SG-dog-PL

   'You took my dogs from me.'

2   It has been suggested that directionals in this type of construction are to be considered cliticized elements rather than full verbs. However, at least in Mam of Todos Santos

they have the same form in the construction in question and when used as simple directional verbs:

ma   *chi-kub'*

PAST   BNON1-go.down

'They went down.'