

Number in Meryam Mir

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The presentation is based on an MPhil thesis submitted for examination on 30 April 2015: some of the presentation content has developed further since submission. Because of time constraints, the presentation will consider number category accessibility, verbal and argument number, and will touch on number feature systems. Further notes on feature systems are given in the handout.

Meryam Mir is a Papuan language spoken in the eastern Torres Straits. It has a complex number system with four number categories, SG, DU, PC, PL. Number is marked on pronouns and verbs. Nouns may mark DU number and/or group membership, but this is not obligatory. Verbs show subject and object number agreement, and there is an extensive set of suppletive verb-stem pairs that also indicate number.

I begin by re-presenting data on number from Piper (2013), supplemented with data from Ray (1907). The overall data corpus is only 4200 words. The four number categories are not always distinguished by morphological alternation. Pronouns mark a SG/NSG number distinction. Verb prefixes (which agree with transitive object argument number or the subject or unaccusative intransitive verbs) mark either a SG/NSG distinction or a {SG, PL}/{DU, PC} distinction. Verb suffixes have two patterns for Group I and Group II verbs. Group I verbs are intransitive: their suffixes mark the presence of SG/DU subject number. Group II verbs may be transitive or intransitive. They have portmanteau suffixes which, in addition to information on tense, aspect and mood, mark the four-way category distinction SG/DU/PC/PL. These suffixes most frequently agree with subject number. However, in some cases a number hierarchy operates, in which case a PC or PL object is marked on the suffix in preference to a lower-valued subject number. There is an extensive set of suppletive verb stem pairs which Piper analyses as varying with argument number: sometimes this is described as a NPL/PL distinction and sometimes as a {SG, DU}/{PC, PL} distinction. For transitive verbs the agreement is often associated with the object, although there are transitive verbs where agreement is with the agent. Piper also describes cases where there is a clear lack of agreement between number marked on the verb stem and any of the verb's arguments.

Following Durie (1986), I propose that verb stem alternations are better analysed as representing verbal number rather than argument number: the alternation is often associated with the absolutive argument and examples of mismatch between verb-stem and prefix/suffix number values can be accounted for semantically.

As different number category distinctions are marked by different morphological alternations, and there are some category distinctions that are not observed, I explore that potential number feature set that may generate these distinctions. Following Dalrymple et al. (2009), I conclude that the four number categories are not always available from morphology, although there is a core SG/NSG distinction that is always available.

For argument number, Sadler (2011) and Arka (2012) have both proposed feature sets to account for number categories observed in Hopi and Marori respectively. I show that these feature sets, which are defined differently by the two authors, are compatible, and that Meryam Mir number categories can also be generated by a feature set that is compatible with Sadler's, although it uses

For verbal number in Marori, Arka (2012), assumes the same set of number features as for argument number. I show that this assumption cannot generate the observed patterns in

Meryam Mir and so conclude that a distinct feature set is required for verbal number. I propose a first-pass verbal number feature set which can generate some, but not all of the observed patterns. Further data collection is required on the relationship between verbal number and aspect, and the frequent co-variation of verbal number with argument number.

The thesis is available on-line at <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~kell13195/mphilthesis.pdf>.

References

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