Mismatches between syntax and semantics in Mangarrayi complex verbs

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Complex predicates and complex
verbal constructions masterclass

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Background

► Much of the complex predicate literature takes up the issue of classifying particular construction types as 'complex predicates' (e.g., Alsina et al., 1997; Amberber et al., 2010; Rosen, 1990)

► Works on individual languages often explore internal criteria for categorising construction types this way (Amberber, 2010; Bowern, 2004; Krauße, 2021; Schultze-Berndt, 2000; Wilson, 1999)

► What about differentiating between the tokens of one construction type? Are all instantiations of a construction type equally good candidates for 'complex predicate'?

► We will think about these how these questions relate to the coverb construction in Mangarrayi: a syntactically but not semantically homogenous category

► Unlike Wagiman, the complex verb system in Mangarrayi is not predominantly transparent

Things to think about

Ask yourself:

- What criteria for 'complex predicate' might be suitable in Mangarrayi?

- Is 'complex predicate' the most useful characterisation of Mangarrayi complex verbs?

Syntactic overview of Mangarrayi verbs

Compositional constructions

Non-compositional constructions

Proposals and remaining problems

SYNTACTIC OVERVIEW OF MANGARRAYI VERBS

Mangarrayi

▶ Non-Pama-Nyungan, formerly spoken in the Roper River region (Merlan, 1982)

▶ 'Prefixing' type: obligatory agreement prefixes and TAM suffixes on verbs, noun class/case prefixes and suffixes, and complex (two part) verb lexemes

▶ Mangarrayi has three kinds of monoclausal complex verbs: simple, compound, and phrasal

▶ Phrasal verbs will be our focus, as they have the most varied behaviour

Simple verbs

▶ Simple verbs involve a monomorphemic verb stem, sandwiched in between an agreement prefix and a TAM suffix

(1) ŋan-**ka**-ŋiɲ
    3SG>1SG-take-PP
    'He took me.' (Merlan, 1982, p. 26)

(2) ŋawujan-**ma**-ɲ
    1SG>3PL-say-PP
    'I told them.' (Merlan, 1982, p. 65)

▶ There are 36 monomorphemic verb roots, with meanings typical for similarly sized inventories, e.g., /pu/ 'hit', /mi/ 'get', /ka/ 'take', /cajki/ 'stand', etc. (see also Bowern, 2014; Schultze-Berndt, 2000)

Compound verbs

▶ There is a large but unproductive class of compounds (N = 336), in which the verb stem is a compound consisting of non-finite coverb and finite verb root

(3) ɲawujan-**caŋ+wu**-ni   ŋuku
    2SG>3PL-supply+HIT-PC   water
    'You supplied them with water.' (Merlan, 1982, p. 65)

(4) ŋijan-**kalic+ma**-ɲ
    3SG>1PL.EX-report+SAY-PP
    'He reported to us.' (Merlan, 1982, p. 68)

Phrasal verbs

▶ Phrasal verbs are the largest class of verb lexemes (N = 763); coverb and finite verb are separate syntactic words

▶ 25 of the 36 monomorphemic finite verbs can be used

▶ There are 614 unique coverbs

(5) **paɹik**   ca-**na**-n
    dry.out   3.PR-BURN-PR
    'It's drying out.' (Merlan, n.d.)

(6) **taʔma**   wur-**ka**-ŋiɲ
    lift.up   3DU-TAKE-PP
    'They lifted it up.' (Merlan, n.d.)

COMPOSITIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Syntactic transparency

► The phrasal verb construction consists of two independent syntactic words

► Clitics (a) and modifiers (b) can intervene, and constituents can be reversed (c)

(7) a. [wolor]**=ca**   [ka-ŋa-ma]
       be.hungry=EMPH   PR-1SG-DO.PR

      'I'm *hungry*!' (Merlan, 1982, p. 47, emphasis in original)

   b. [caŋ?~caŋ?] **majawa** [ka-ŋi-ma]
       RED~die   now   PR-12DU-DO.PR

      'Now you and I die.' (Merlan, 1996, p. 17)

   c. [**wur-jiɲi-wa**]   [**katcaɭ**]
       3DU-GO.PC-NAR   go.across

      'The two (girls) went across.' (Merlan, 1996, p. 6)

Productivity

▶ Phrasal verbs are the only open / productive verb structure
▶ All English and Kriol loans are adopted into this structure (not as compounds or directly inflecting verbs)

(8) a. **ʈɹʌŋk** wuɭa-ma
    drunk 3PL-DO.PR
    'They're drunk.' (adapted from Merlan, 1982, p. 129)

   b. **klinim?** ŋa-ma-ɹi-wa patɹum
    clean 1SG>3SG-DO-PC-FOC bathroom
    'I cleaned the bathroom.' (Merlan, 1996, p. 65)

Semantically compositional constructions

▶ Out of 763 phrasal verb lexemes, 545 are potentially compositional structures (the rest involve the 'do' finite verb – stay tuned)

▶ 335/545 (~61%) can be analysed as being semantically compositional (coverb and verb have similar meanings)

(9) **ŋoɲcoṯ** wuran-**pu**-ni-wa
    whack 3SG>3DU-HIT-PC-NAR
    'She whacked the two of them.' (Merlan, n.d.)

(10) **puɭ** ɲa-**waɻ**-ak cip-nawu
     throw.on.ground 2SG>3SG-THROW-PP seed-3SG.POSS
     'You threw the seeds on the ground.' (Merlan, n.d.)

(11) **jarp** wur-**ja**-c
     go.separate.ways 3DU-GO-PP
     'Those two split up.' (Merlan, n.d.)

Causatives

▶ One of the main uses of complex verb systems is to alter the transitivity or aktionsart of a given construction (see e.g., Baker & Harvey, 2010; Merlan, 1983; Schultze-Berndt, 2000; Wilson, 1999)

▶ Often, the choice of finite verb conditions these syntactic alternations

(12) Causative alternations with /paɹik/ 'dry out'

a. Intransitive

ca-**na**-n
3.PR-burn-PR
'It is burning.'

b. Transitive

ŋa-**waɹ**-ak
1SG>3SG-throw-PP
'I threw it.'

c. Intransitive

paɹik ca-**na**-n
dry.out 3.PR-BURN-PR
'It is drying out.' (Merlan, n.d.)

d. Causative

paɹik ŋa-**waɹ**-ak
dry.out 1SG>3SG-THROW-PP
'I dried it out.' (Merlan, n.d.)

Causatives continued

▶ Some other examples of /waɻ/ 'throw' as a causativiser

(13) a. ŋoʈ ni-
       heap.up SIT-
       'be in a heap/pile'

   b. ŋoʈ waɻ-
       heap.up THROW-
       'heap up, make a pile'

(14) a. loloc jak-
       go.inside GO-
       'go inside'

   b. loloc waɻ-
       go.inside THROW-
       'put inside, insert'

(15) a. ŋereŋ ma-
       cry DO/SAY-
       'cry'

   b. ŋereŋ waɻ-
       cry THROW-
       'make someone cry'

(16) a. mututu ni-
       kneel SIT-
       'kneel'

   b. mututu waɻ-
       kneel THROW-
       'make someone kneel'

Alternative causativisers

▶ But… causativisation is not entirely predictable

▶ Some pairs use other causative finite verbs, like /ka/ 'take' or /cut+ma/ 'cause'

(17) Unpredictable causativisation

a. Intransitive

maŋkaljaɻ ka-ŋa-**jak**
be.ashamed PR-1SG-GO.PR

'I am ashamed.' (Merlan, n.d.)

b. Causative

maŋkaljaɻ ŋanpa-**ka**-ni
be.ashamed 3PL>1SG-TAKE-PC

'They would shame me.' (ibid.)

c. Intransitive

paʟʔ wut-**ni**-wa
sit.down 3DU-SIT.PR-NAR

'They sit down.' (Merlan, 1996, p. 5)

d. Causative

paʟʔ wuʟa-**cut+ma**-ɻi-wa
sit.down 3PL>3SG-CAUSE+DO-PC-NAR

'They set it down.' (Merlan, 1996, p. 70)

Is that all?

▶ Apart from those 335 compositional lexemes (including the 39 intransitive-causative pairs), there are no other compositional phrasal verbs

▶ Compositional constructions make up about 43% of all phrasal verbs

▶ The rest are non-compositional in one way or another

NON-COMPOSITIONAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Lexicalised pairings

▶ 428 (~56%) of phrasal verbs are not straightforwardly compositional

▶ There are two relevant kinds of non-compositionality; the first is lexicalised, where the coverb and finite verb have no sensible semantic or syntactic relation

(18) **mir?** ka-ŋanpa-**na**-n
know PR-3PL>1SG-BURN-PR
'They know me.' (Merlan, n.d.)

(19) ŋaḻa-la-wura **caḻuk** wuran-**jac**
mother-DU-3DU.POSS forget 3SG>3PL-GO.PP
'Their mother forgot them.' (Merlan, n.d.)

More lexicalised pairings

▶ There are about 210 such lexemes, and they are fairly easy to find

(20) **jalja?** ŋan-**wa**-p
be.suspicious 3SG>1SG-VISIT-PP
'She was suspicious of me.' (Merlan, n.d.)

(21) **cimi** ŋawujan-**pu**-ni
think.about 1SG>3PL-HIT-PC
'I thought about them.' (Merlan, 1982, p. 62)

(22) na-piwa **kal?ma** Ø-**ni**-ɲ
M.NOM-boy climb 3SG-SIT-PP
'The boy climbed up.' (Merlan, 1982, p. 26)

▶ There are some cases where alternating the finite verb leads to unpredictable differences in meaning

(23) a. **wul** ka-ŋaḻa-wujan-**wu**-n
　　　? PR-1EX.PL-3PL-GIVE-PR
　　　'We frighten them.'

　　 b. **wul** wuran-**pu**-ni-wa
　　　? 3SG>3DU-HIT-PC-NAR
　　　'She hid it from those two.'

Auxiliary-like constructions

▶ The other type of non-compositional construction is one where the the finite verb is /ma/ 'say/do'

▶ There 154 phrasal verb lexemes of this type (~20% of all)

▶ Like 'auxiliary' constructions (e.g., Anderson, 2006) because the finite verb is completely bleached, has purely grammatical function

(24) Intransitive, stative

    … **wolor**   ka-ŋa-**ma**
      be.hungry   PR-1SG-DO.PR

   'I'm hungry.' (Merlan, 1982, p. 35)

(25) Transitive, dynamic

    wuɻaj   **to?**   a-ŋajan-**ma**
    maybe   shoot   IRR-3SG>1PL.IN-DO.PR

   'They might shoot us.' (Merlan, n.d.)

▶ On its own, /ma/ can be intransitive or transitive so we cannot say that it contributes argument structure

▶ Most non-stative predicates involve 'doing', so we cannot say that it contributes event structure

▶ The use of /ma/ with states, which involve no 'doing', suggests that it contributes nothing

► Arguably, only the coverb contributes predicate structure and therefore these constructions are not compositional

► The /ma/ verb is there simply to satisfy syntactic conditions: a finite verb is obligatory in the clause, but the class of finite verbs is closed

► That is, /ma/ is like a 'dummy' or 'expletive' verb that hosts all the required morphology but is otherwise meaningless

► Like expletive subjects in English, where an overt NP is required to satisfy syntactic minima: [[It]$_{NP}$ [rained]$_{VP}$]$_S$ but not *[[Rained]$_{VP}$]$_S$

Productivity revisited

▶ So, /ma/ phrasal verbs are probably not good candidates for 'complex predicate' because the finite element does no predicating!!

▶ Let's think about the implications of this fact in the context of their productivity

▶ If this were the only productive class of phrasal verbs, would it be practical to describe Mangarrayi as having complex predicates?

Loan productivity

▶ Loaned verb lexemes are always borrowed as coverbs with the /ma/ finite verb

(26) **ciʈiŋʔ** ŋin-ma-ɲ
    cheat   3SG>1DU.IN-DO-PP
    'They cheated us.' (Merlan, n.d.)

(27) **tɹʌŋk**   wuɭa-ma
    be.drunk 3PL-DO.PR
    'They're drunk.' (adapted from Merlan, 1982, p. 129)

▶ Contrast this with some other Australian languages with productive phrasal verb systems, where loans combine with a semantically compatible finite verb (e.g., Marra: Baker & Harvey, 2010; Jaminjung: Schultze-Berndt, 2000; Bardi: Bowern, 2004)

Productivity more broadly

- ► The largest class of phrasal verbs is /ma/, which occupies about 20% of the (phrasal verb) lexicon
- ► Out of all the other phrasal verbs, about 40% are lexicalised
- ► It's probable that only the /ma/ class is open
- ► So, the only productive complex verb structure is one that doesn't intuitively fit the notion of 'complex predicate'

PROPOSALS AND REMAINING PROBLEMS

Criteria for 'complex predicate' in Mangarrayi

- ▶ What can we say about Mangarrayi complex verbs?
- ▶ If we rely on purely syntactic criteria for COMPLEX PREDICATE, then all phrasal verbs are complex predicates because they are monoclausal constructions with two verb-y elements (see also Haspelmath, 2024)
- ▶ If we introduce semantic criteria, we can be more restrictive: only compositional complex verbs are complex predicates, since both parts of the construction jointly contribute to the predicational meaning

A cost/benefit evaluation

▶ Both options have issues…

▶ Establishing a category of 'complex predicate' with purely syntactic criteria eliminates the distinction between compositional and auxiliary constructions, even though they demand different semantic generalisations

▶ Building in semantic criteria isolates compositional constructions, however these are a quantitative minority of the lexicon and don't appear to be productive

▶ So, is 'complex predicate' a motivated – or useful – category in Mangarrayi? Is this concept necessary to describe languages like this?

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