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THE SYNTAX OF APPLICATIVES IN CHICHEWA:
PROBLEMS FOR A THETA THEORETIC ASYMMETRY*

A recent paper by Baker (1988b) claims that certain asymmetries in the syntax of applicatives in Chichewa derive from an asymmetry in the assignment of the beneficiary and instrumental theta-roles. In this paper we adduce three types of evidence against this theta theoretic asymmetry. First, the facts of Wh-movement, which he presents as evidence for this asymmetry, on closer inspection, are shown not to follow from it. Second, we demonstrate that his claim that beneficiary applicatives cannot be formed from intransitive verbs is incorrect. And, third, we present the facts of locative applicatives, which behave in a manner opposite to what would be expected given the conception of Theta Theory assumed by Baker (1988b).

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we argue against a particular conception of Theta Theory presented in Baker (1988b). In order to account for syntactic differences between beneficiaries and instrumentals in the Chichewa applicative construction, Baker (1988b) proposes an asymmetry in the assignment of these two thematic (θ-) roles. Although both types of arguments are superficially NPs, Baker's hypothesis is that instrumentals, like patients and themes, are assigned their θ-roles as NP sisters of the verb, while beneficiaries are theta-marked in a PP complement to the verb.

After summarizing Baker's analysis in Section 1, we discuss three kinds of problems with his account. In Section 2, we show that although there is an asymmetry between beneficiaries and instrumentals with respect to extraction, the proposed theta theoretic analysis fails to account for a wider range of facts than those considered by Baker. In Section 3, we disprove Baker's claim that there is a difference between transitive and intransitive verbs in the formation of applicatives and that beneficiary applicatives cannot be formed out of intransitive verbs. In Section 4, we show that the facts about locative applicatives turn out to be inconsistent with Baker's conception of Theta Theory.1

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1 An alternative analysis which overcomes these problems has been worked out in Alsina and Mchombo (1989), within a lexical approach.

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1. Baker's Approach

Baker (1988b) observes that objects in Chichewa behave differently in important ways depending on whether the verb is a beneficiary or an instrumental applicative. He proposes to make such differences follow from different D-structure representations of the two types of arguments. The various principles of Government-Binding (GB) theory, in which the analysis is presented, ensure that the observed asymmetries are a consequence of the differences proposed, differences which, however, are not directly observable.

The basic elements of Baker's analysis of applicatives are theta theory and case theory.

1.1. Theta Theory

Baker assumes that beneficiary and instrumental phrases are arguments of the verb whose D-structure representations differ in that a beneficiary is the NP complement of a preposition, from which it receives its θ-role, while an instrumental is an NP sister of the verb, and so depends only on the verb for its θ-role. This is illustrated in (1). The presence of instrumental prepositions in nonapplicative constructions at S-structure, is attributed to the requirements of Case Theory.

(1) a. Beneficiary b. Instrumental

As (1a) shows, beneficiaries are assigned their θ-role indirectly, since the verb θ-marks the PP and not the NP itself; in (1b) we see that the instrumental is θ-marked directly by the verb.

1.2. Case Theory

One of the assumptions in GB is that NPs must receive abstract Case in order for the structure to be well-formed. There are two types of Case that NPs may receive: structural and inherent. Baker assumes that all