Patient / goal marking in Helong

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Helong is an Austronesian language spoken in the vicinity of Kupang in West Timor. There are three major dialects of Helong: Heong Funai, spoken in the region of the capital of East Nusa Tenggar Province in Kupang; Helong Bolok which is spoken in the vicinity of Kupang's port area also named Bolok; and Helong Pulau which is spoken on Semau isand just off the coast from Kupang. Helong was the language of the former raja of Kupang, but today, with the spread of Kupang Malay in Kupang city, Helong is highly endangered in Kupang itself. The Bolok dialect, spoken in an area where other local languages such as Uab Meto and Rotinese are also spoken is severely threatened but not quite as endangered as Helong Funai. However, on Semau island the use of Helong is still quite active and the language is vibrant. Like many other languages from the Timor region, Helong exhibits highly productive metathesis.

Quite a few languages from eastern Indonesia have some sort of 'split S' marking on intransitive verbs whereby (roughly speaking) intransitive verbs having a more agentive argument are marked differently from verbs having more patient-like arguments. There has been debate in the literature about whether the split-S characteristics of such languages should be seen as constituting some sort of areal feature in eastern Indonesia (see, eg. Klamer, 2008 and Donohue, 2004). In spite of this debate, there is little doubt that eastern Indonesia has more than an average number of such languages. While I am unaware of other reports of split S marking in the Austronesian languages of Timor, Helong does have a limited number of intransitive verbs with undergoer subjects that obligatorily take suffixes which index the undergoer subject.

(1) *auk*   *leang*[1]
     aku   lea-ng
     1sg   fall-1sg
     'I fell.'

(2) *oen*   *mates*
     one   mate-s
     3pl   die-3pl

Contrast the above examples with the following example which has no suffixation of the sole argument:

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[1] The examples provided here all have three lines for interlinear glosses. The top line shows a phonemic representation of the utterance. The second line shows al of the underlying morphemes found in the top line, with prefixes/suffixes and roots separated by hyphens as well as the underlying unmetathesized form of any words that are metathesized as output.

(3) *auk   mali*
     aku   mali
     'I smiled.'

The number of verbs that receive such marking is rather limited, and the total is as yet unknown by the author. In addition to the small set of verbs which take undergoer suffixes, there is also a small set of what Balle (2007) calls 'intradirective' verbs which take suffixes that index their locative goals rather than their sole undergoer arguments.

(4) *oen   lakos   umas*
     one   lako-s uma-s
     3pl   go-3pl house-3pl
     'They go to their houses.'

Interestingly, suffixes indexing goals do not agree strictly with the number and person of the goal itself, but rather of its possessor:

(5) *auk   maam mi   uma   lua*
     aku   maa-m mi   uma   lua
     1sg   come-2pl   2pl   house REM
     'I came to your (pl) house.'

While the rules for metathesis in Helong are not yet fully understood, it is clear that metathesis and undergoer suffixation interact in interesting ways and may provide a clue as to why undergoer suffixation only applies to some intransitives and to intradirectives. Contrast (6) below which contains a metathesized form of *lako* 'go' and which does not take goal suffixation.

(6) *oen   laok   umas   le*
     one   lako   uma-s   le
     3pl   go-3pl house-3pl   IRR
     'They just left for their houses.'

Why metathesis is triggered in this example with the following irrealis marker is not yet clear to me, but it is clear that when metathesis occurs verb suffixation is blocked. Interestingly, whenever a transitive verb is followed by an object, the verbs are obligatorily metathesized, and thus one can expect that no undergoer suffixation can take place.

The Helong pattern of undergoer encoding on verbs looks somewhat strange from a synchronic perspective since what might be seen as the prototypical undergoers (i.e. the affected entities found with transitive verbs) are not encoded while less prototypical undergoers (goals of directional verbs and the single argument undergoers of some intransitives) are marked overtly. However, it may well be that what remains in Helong is fragment of a formerly more clear system of split S marking where all undergoers were encoded by suffixes. The most prototypical ones however, are no longer marked because they surface in constructions where suffixation is always blocked by metathesis.

References

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