Jens Fleischhauer & Claudius Patrick Kihara (eds.), *African languages from a Role and Reference Grammar perspective: Studies on the syntax-semantics-pragmatics interface*

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Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/lla/13342
DOI: 10.4000/123pv
ISSN: 2822-7468

Publisher
Llacan UMR 8135 CNRS/Inalco

Electronic reference
Mahamane L. Abdoulaye, “Jens Fleischhauer & Claudius Patrick Kihara (eds.), African languages from a Role and Reference Grammar perspective: Studies on the syntax-semantics-pragmatics interface”, *Linguistique et langues africaines* [Online], 10(1) | 2024, Online since 30 June 2024, connection on 27 July 2024. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/lla/13342 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/123pv

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The Role and Reference Grammar community of researchers recently welcomed a book dedicated to area studies. The purpose of the book is to show how various aspects of the morphosyntax of African languages can be accounted for using the Role and Reference Grammar framework (usually abbreviated as RRG). RRG is a structuralist-functionalist theory that takes language structure to be, by and large, motivated by semantic and pragmatic factors. The book, which can be downloaded free from the De Gruyter website, assembles six main contributions, besides an introductory chapter by the two editors. The book also has a subject and a language index.

In their introductory chapter (“African languages from a Role and Reference Grammar perspective: An introduction”, pp. 1-24), the editors give the justification for the book, the basic assumptions of the theory, its evolution, and the contribution of African languages to its development. According to them, RRG, at its inception, took a typologically-informed approach that caters to the diversity of the world’s languages. Taking as benchmarks three key RRG works (Foley & Van Valin 1984; Van Valin & LaPolla 1997; Van Valin 2005), the authors show that African languages represent between 7.4% and 14.6% of the languages cited in the indices of the three books. Considering the fact that African languages represent about 30% of the world languages, the authors conclude that they are underrepresented in the language data used by the theory. For the editors, this situation provides a motivation for a volume dedicated to RRG and African languages, to extend the coverage of the theory, but also have a better understanding of the structure of African languages. The six main contributions are written by specialists of African languages, some of whom were initially trained in the theory, while others – as far as I can tell – came to embrace it. In the remainder of this review, I will present the main contributions, highlighting their main issues and the subsystems of RRG they are using. For the sake of the general reader, the review will avoid technical details as much as possible.

The first contribution, “A functional typology of Igbo multi-verb constructions” (pp. 25-49) by Maduabuchi Sennen Agbo, explores the Igbo (Igbo; Nigeria) multi-verb construction, which he defines as “a combination of two or more verbs to form a single predicate” (p. 25). The author draws his data from the extensive literature on the topic. First, he considers the Igbo constructions elsewhere referred to as “verb compounds” and shows that they are, in fact, biclausal. He then considers the constructions elsewhere referred to as serial verbs constructions (SVCs) and characterizes the sub-types of all Igbo multi-verb constructions using the RRG structural concepts and its system of verb classification based on their Aktionsart. He shows that the verbs in the constructions usually referred to as SVCs in Igbo can be independently negated or specified for mood and, in some cases, the verbs cannot be used alone independently (p. 42f.). Hence, these constructions are not real SVCs. The author simply assimilates them to typical combined clauses (with explicit coordination or subordination linkers, p. 44) and appears to conclude that Igbo has no true SVCs, as defined and described for other languages.

In the second contribution, “The syntax-semantics interface of serial verb constructions in Kwa languages” (pp. 51-76), Anna Riccio first underlines the fact that SVCs are still difficult to apprehend and that the prototypical features cited recurrently in the relevant literature do not allow their identification as a distinctive, crosslinguistically valid type of constructions. The author then focuses on SVCs in the Kwa languages (notably Kaakye, Efutu, Sekpelé, Tuwuli) and describes the many sub-types of SVCs, with the aim of accounting for them in the RRG framework. As a reminder, RRG has a hierarchical system for representing sentences, the Layered Structure of the Clause, with the
following nodes (or juncture levels): SENTENCE > CLAUSE > CORE (predicate and arguments) > NUCLEUS (predicate or combination thereof). Each node is under the scope of particular operators (for example tense applies to CLAUSE, negation to CORE, and aspect to NUCLEUS). Each of the main nodes (CLAUSE, CORE, and NUCLEUS) can combine with a similar node using three types of relations (or nexus types): coordination, subordination, and cosubordination (where the linked items are in a co-dependence relation), and each type of relation can be checked by looking at the shared (or non-shared) operators. Also, in RRG, clause structure is motivated by semantics (and by pragmatics, as we will see later), so any sentence representation must include the verb’s semantics, using a system of lexical decomposition (“logical structure” of verbs) based on Vendler’s (1967) Aktionsart-based classification of verbs (state verbs, activity verbs, active accomplishment verbs, achievements verbs, accomplishment verbs, and semelfactive verbs). The author uses these resources to characterize the various types of SVCs as involving CORE or NUCLEUS cosubordination (pp. 63-65). She also accounts for the semantics of the SVCs by combining the semantics (in terms of logical structures) of the underlying verbs.

As alluded to above, RRG takes pragmatics seriously and a full representation of a sentence also includes its information structure representation in terms of assertion and presupposition domains and in terms of broad (sentence or predicate) focus and narrow (constituent) focus. In the third contribution “Postverbal qualifiers and constraints on contrastive focus” (pp. 77-99), Ronald Schaefer and Francis Egbokhare investigate the effects of post-verbal particles on the expression of arguments focus in Emai (Edoid; Nigeria). The authors contrast two sets of post-verbal markers. The first set, an applicative and two locative markers, augment the valency of the verb and allow the focus-fronting of all verbal arguments. The particles and their arguments can be followed by particles marking phasal (‘already’), quantitative (‘too much’, ‘enough’) and directional meaning. When these markers are added to a sentence, no constituent focus is allowed. Taking into account complex features of Emai morphosyntax, the authors consider that these particles combine with verbs in a CORE cosubordination, under their own NUCLEUS node (p. 97). Nonetheless, they also claim that the aspectual semantics of the particles has scope over the CORE node and its arguments, and this is the reason why the arguments cannot be expressed outside the CORE as focus-fronted constituents.

In the fourth contribution, “A case for the antipassive in Babungo” (pp. 101-130), Ciara Anderson studies the multi-functional suffix -sə in Babungo (Bantoid; Cameroon) that marks antipassive (detransitivization) and causative (transitivization). The author connects the two functions by showing that in various typological studies, the causativization may first require a detransitivization, so that causativization in many languages is restricted to intransitive or detransitivized verbs only. She uses this general insight to claim that in Babungo “semi-transitive” constructions, built on intransitive motion verbs, can then again be detransitivized when they are causativized. Indeed, according to her, in Babungo, motion verbs such as the verbs for ‘go’, ‘climb’, and ‘arrive’, require an obligatory adjacent locative complement (sometimes with the locative preposition dropped) and are hence inherently transitive (p. 108). Using the RRG clause structure representation, the author claims that in the semi-transitive constructions, the inherently transitive motion verb and the locative preposition form a complex predicate that takes the locative noun as the direct object. It is this complex predicate that is again detransitivized when the causative suffix -se is added to the motion verb and the locative prepositional phrase becomes separable from the verb, the locative noun no longer being a direct object.

In the fifth contribution, “The morphosyntax of the Gĩkũyũ complex reference phrase” (pp. 131-162), Claudius Patrick Kihara takes advantage of the fact that in RRG, the hierarchical clause structure representation (the Layered Structure of the Clause, LSC), is taken as model for the representation of the internal structure of the noun phrase, which has the following Layered Structure of the Referential Phrase (LSRP; where “referential phrase” is what is elsewhere known as the NP): RP > CORE > NUCLEUS. The last node contains the noun, a pronoun, or any element that functions as the head of the phrase. In both LSC and LSRP, modifiers and operators can apply to the nodes, and the nodes can similarly enter into coordination, subordination, and cosubordination relations. The RP/NP modifiers
can be demonstratives, adjectives, nouns, prepositional phrases, and relative clauses. The RP/NP operators, modifying various nodes, include definiteness, deixis, grammatical number, quantification, negation, aspect (mass/count and classifiers), etc. According to Kihara, in Gĩkũyũ (Bantu; Kenya) the NP has an unmarked word order (noun, demonstrative, quantifier, adjective) and many marked orders. The author meticulously studies the possible position of all modifiers and the pragmatic consequences of the various arrangements. Just as is the case with clause structure, scopal properties of operators are used to test the various nodes combinations in the complex NP.

In the sixth and last contribution, “Argument doubling and right-dislocation – An RRG analysis of head-marking in isiZulu” (pp. 163-191), Jens Fleischhauer revisits the issue of the proper analysis of head-marking languages. His overall objective is to arrive at a motivated representation of the following constituents in simple sentences: (i) topicalized constituents, (ii) wh-words, (iii) specified subject and object NPs, and (iv) their co-indexed verb-bound pronouns (as an illustration, cf. as for yesterday, where the police they-expect-him the thief?). In fully head-marking languages, specified subject and object NPs are also coded on the verb by pronouns (or class markers). Hence the question arises what the true syntactic arguments of the clause are: the specified NPs or the bound pronouns? For isiZulu (Bantu; South Africa), a head-marking language, the author adopts the classical treatment of these languages in RRG, which takes the bound pronouns as the true arguments, fulfilling the semantic roles of Actor and Undergoer, while the specified NPs only have a referential function. The author shows that in isiZulu, it is the bound pronouns that are targeted by syntactic operations (such as control), as would be the full NP arguments in dependent-marking languages. Using the RRG system of clause representation, the author also argues that the specified NPs should have a specific position inside the CLAUSE node and cannot be assimilated to topicalized constituents which, in RRG, are represented outside the CLAUSE node (pp. 172f.).

RRG has evolved since its inception but at a moderate pace and in a coherent fashion with adjustments and increments, and essentially avoiding wholesale reassessments. This is testament to its capacity to handle the diverse languages to which it has been applied through the decades. So, it is unsurprising that all six contributions took advantage of the various facets of the framework to account for their data and most of them seem to have reached their objectives. The only small concern I have relates to the claim by Anderson that motion verbs like gə ’go’ in Babungo can appear in semi-transitive constructions. The claim could have been made clearer had the author consulted the numerous works on the marking of locative expressions (Creissels & Mounole 2011; Michaelis 2017; Stolz et al. 2014; etc.), where it is shown that many languages reduce their locative marking in some contexts (cf. English John went home/into the library). Similarly, the author could have discussed the cases where locative arguments seem indeed so affected that they tend to behave like direct objects (see the “projected adherence” example in Emai in the contribution by Schaefer & Egbokhare, p. 78; also see English Bill broke into the house/the house was broken into by Bill, etc.), unless, of course, if Babungo does not allow similar processes. On the formal side, most of the chapters in the book are clearly written, although the contribution by Agbo on Igbo is challenging to read, maybe due to the complexity of the paper but also due to some obvious editing issues. I believe that this book is very interesting for the community of researchers in RRG but also for the general reader given the insights the theory provides into the structure of the world’s languages.

References


