Animacy as a prominence-lending feature in Lakurumau

Lidia Federica Mazzitelli

Universität zu Köln/Australian National University

Following Himmelmann & Primus (2015), I define prominence as a relational property, which singles out one element from a set of elements of equal type and structure. Prominent elements are structural attractors, that is, they may license more operations than their competitors. Linguistic elements may be intrinsically prone to be prominent, because of their referential, semantic or grammatical properties, such as animacy, agentivity and subjecthood, which Heusinger & Schumacher (2019) label as "prominence-lending features". In my poster, I examine the role of animacy as a prominence-lending feature in the morphosyntax and discourse in Lakurumau, a Western Oceanic language spoken in Papua New Guinea. All data come from a 19-hours corpus of Lakurumau natural speech (Mazzitelli 2017), as well as from my fieldwork notes.

Discussing phenomena such as plural marking, verbal agreement, encoding of alienable possessors and object incorporation, I show, that Lakurumau human and animate referents behave as structural attractors, being able to license more morphological and syntactic operations than their inanimate counterparts. In their turn, human referents license more operations than non-human animate referents.

In discourse, human referents are much more likely to be encoded in the prominent role of actors than animate and inanimate ones (in fact, a universal tendency; Haig & Schnell 2016), while inanimate objects in anaphora are routinely encoded as zero, while animate referents usually receive an overt pronominal encoding (4). In line with what observed by Du Bois (1987), Haig & Schnell (2016) and Schnell et al. (2021), Lakurumau displays is a tendency to introduce new referents in discourse along a scale O > S > A. When we factor in animacy, however, we can see that human referents, actually, are equally likely to be introduced in discourse as A, S and O: their prominent status and their preference for the A role are strong enough to overcome the tendency of new referents of being coded as non-A.

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