

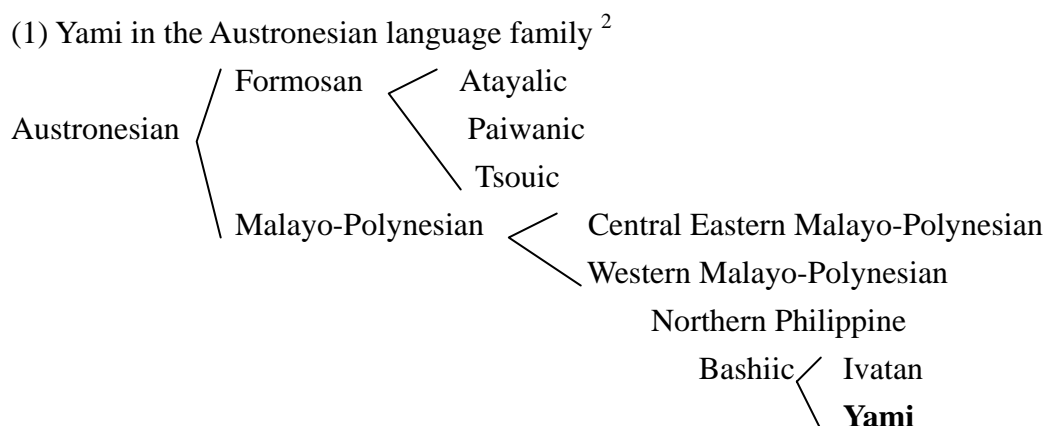
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Yami is an aboriginal language spoken on Orchid Island (Lanyu), a small island located ninety-one kilometers in the southeast of Taiwan.¹ There are about three thousand and eight hundred Yami people; however, only part of them can speak the Yami language. This language is considered by researchers as a member of the Batanic languages (also called the Bashiic languages) (Li 1997, Rau and Tung to appear), which is a language group distributed in the northern Philippine islands. The Batanic languages, together with other aboriginal languages in Taiwan, belong to a large language family called Austronesian. The relation of Yami and other Austronesian languages is shown in (1).

¹ Now more and more Yami people use the name ‘Tao’ to call themselves. However, this thesis still uses the name Yami as it is the most widely used term in the literature.



The Austronesian family is generally divided into two major sub-groups. The first group consists of Formosan languages spoken by the aboriginal tribes on Taiwan; the other group is formed by Malayo-Polynesian languages, which include all the Austronesian languages outside of Taiwan. Malayo-Polynesian languages can be further divided into the Central-eastern group and the Western group. Central-eastern Malayo-Polynesian languages are spoken on the Pacific islands, and the Western Malayo-Polynesian languages include languages spoken in the Southeast Asia and the Philippine islands. The Batanic language group, to which Yami belongs, is a sub-group within the Western Malayo-Polynesian branch.

A distinctive feature of many of the Western Malayo-Polynesian languages (also known as the Western Austronesian languages), Yami included, is a verb-participant agreement device, often referred to as a "focus" or "topic" device (Schachter and

² This table is adopted from ethnologue.com.

Otanes 1972, Schachter 1976, Kroeger 1993, Tung and Rau 2000). More specifically, a verb in such languages is marked by a focus marker, which selects one of the verb's participating argument roles as "focus-marked"; such a marked NP is also assigned a nominative case by a case marker. Various "focus constructions" are named according to the argument role that the focus marked NP bears in relation to the verb. For example, in the event that the focus marked NP bears the agent role, the sentence is said to be of the "agent focus" construction.

However, the terminology used by previous Philippine and Formosan linguists is not always straightforward and may indeed be confusing at times. This is primarily because the terms "focus" and "topic" seem to have a unique application in these Austronesian languages and thus do not imply the same discourse functions as they are commonly used in the literature of general linguistics. Therefore, the nature of this so-called "focus"-marking system needs to be further clarified. A small number of scholars have proposed that this device is in fact a kind of voice system (Shibatani 1988, Chang 1997, Sells 1998). According to Chang (1997), the fact that the so-called "focus-marked" nominal must be in thematic agreement with the verb indicates it is different from "focus" in its normal discursal sense. Rather, this thematic agreement device behaves more like a subject-verb agreement device and thus should be recognized as such (p.47). In this thesis, we will support this view by providing

further evidence from Yami and argue that the NP selected by the so called “focus marker” is indeed the subject of the verb. Therefore, we will not use terms such as “agent focus” or “agent topic” and instead will use “agent voice”.

The core of the thesis, however, explores the more important issue of “linking” and seeks a principled account for the syntactic assignment of argument roles to grammatical functions. In previous accounts, whether based on transformational theories or lexicalist theories, linking is always sensitive to the thematic hierarchy. Take subject linking for example, canonically the argument role in the predicator’s thematic structure that is highest in the thematic hierarchy surfaces as the subject. In other words, only in cases where a higher role does not exist can a lower role surface as subject. However, in Yami, the choice of subject is decided by voice markers, as mentioned. Therefore, even when higher roles (patients for example) are present, lower roles (locations for example) can still be the subject. Therefore, linking theories based on thematic hierarchy only would have problems with Yami.

Moreover, some scholars observed that many western Austronesian languages are in fact syntactically ergative (Li 1997, Gault 1997, Starosta 2002, Reid and Liao 2004). This means that the basic transitive sentences in these languages would choose the patient role as subject. Thus, syntactically, the patient role in a transitive sentence links to the same grammatical function as the single argument in an intransitive

sentence, i.e., the subject. However, previous accounts of argument-function linking do not explain such ergative linkings. Being closely related to Western Austronesian languages, Yami indeed may share some ergative characteristics in argument-function linking.

These two factors (voice system and syntactic ergativity) certainly complicate this issue and make the argument-function linking problem in Yami qualitatively different from the more familiar (accusative) languages such as English and Chinese. However, linking in Yami is never arbitrary. Once the subject is decided, other argument roles line up and map to grammatical functions according to a predictable pattern. In this thesis, we aim to explore how the subject is decided and how then the rest of the argument roles receive syntactic assignment.

1.2 Motivation of the thesis

The choice of Yami is first motivated by my personal experience of attending a summer camp on Lanyu, a.k.a the Orchid Island, every summer during my undergraduate years. The contact with the Yami people and their language has brought on great culture shock and has equally raised great interest for further exploration.

During the second year in graduate school, a Yami informant was employed in the fieldwork course I was taking. I learned some of the basics of Yami vocabulary and its grammar. The discussions in this class explored the interesting differences

between Yami and the languages that were more familiar to the students. The special voice system and its importance in argument-function linking in Yami were especially interesting to me. The variety of sentence types due to the voice system and its difference to well-studied languages make Yami a challenge to existing grammatical theories of linking.

In the course of syntax, I was exposed to the concept of optimality and its possible application in syntactic accounts. The greatest advantage of the Optimality Theory is its flexibility in accounting for typological differences among different languages. This motivates me to explore the possibility of applying the concept of Optimality in accounting for the problem of argument-function linking in Yami.

1.3 Purpose of the thesis

Since argument-function linking pattern in Yami constitutes problems for existing conventional grammatical theories, this thesis aims to find a framework that can provide correct description for argument-function linking pattern of Yami. The general grammatical theory assumed here is Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG). We thus seek a revised sub-theory within LFG to account for linking in Yami. In order to achieve this, several things should be made clear, aside from the linguistic background just mentioned.

First of all, the particular grammatical function that each nominal links to in a

Yami sentence should be made clear. In Yami, each NP is marked by a case marker. Previously these case markers have been given different names; however, few works on Yami make clear the specific grammatical functions these case markers encode. It is therefore important to have some syntactic tests to identify the grammatical functions in argument-function linking, which then serves as the basis for our account.

Secondly, it is important to make clear the major sentence types in Yami. Because of the voice constructions, sentence types may be complicated. A sentence may have several different forms with the same verb but in different voice constructions. And each different voice construction has its own argument-function linking pattern. Therefore, we have to make clear these different linking patterns. It is also important to make clear which construction is the basic and unmarked form.

Thirdly, the data should be tested against the existing linking theories. If the theories fail to account for the data, we should pinpoint the problem areas and avoid the pitfalls in the framework we attempt to develop.

Finally, the linking pattern of Yami can be compared with those in other languages to reveal the typological implications. This may help us understand the universality of argument-function linking.

1.4 Data collection and methodology

Most of the Yami data in this thesis were collected in the fieldwork course taught

by Professor Hsun-huei Chang in 2004. The Yami informant was Ma-nyu Tung, a 47 year old female and native speaker of Yami. She is from the village Jiratay on Lanyu. Miss Tung has helped other scholars study the Yami language for many years and has co-authored several books with these scholars, e.g., Tung and Rau (2000), Rau and Tung (to appear). She has received some linguistic training and speaks good Mandarin.

Although our informant has received linguistic training, we did not rely on her judgments about the grammar of Yami. For example, we did not ask her about the specific grammatical function of each argument role. While collecting data, we simply made grammaticality test to get grammatical or ungrammatical sentences. All the explanation about grammar was done by the author after the sentences had been collected.

Besides the informant, data sources also include Professor Chang's book of Yami reference grammar, Chang (2000), the Tao dictionary of Rau and Tung (to appear), and the Yami New Testament (1994). However, note that the account proposed in this thesis is not based on any of the above-mentioned works. We only cite examples from those works.

1.5 Organization of this thesis

This thesis is organized as follows: Chapter 2 is a description of

argument-function linking pattern in Yami. We first describe the voice system of Yami; we then introduce the case markings in Yami and establish the grammatical functions of the various case markers. We will also provide a summary of the different sentence types and their linking patterns. Chapter 3 examines several grammatical theories in relation to the Yami data on linking. Both transformation-based theories and lexicalist theories are examined. We will demonstrate how these theories fail to account for linking in Yami in any straightforward manner. Chapter 4 provides an optimality-theoretic account based on the lexical mapping theory of Lexical-Functional Grammar. This newly developed framework is applied not only to the Yami data but also to the relevant Mandarin and English data. It is claimed that this framework can accommodate all different languages. Chapter 5 concludes this thesis and provides some implications of the thesis.