

ON A CERTAIN SYNTACTIC CONSTRUCTION IN ORIYA

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This paper is about a certain syntactic construction in Oriya, a so-called verb-final language, and it is perhaps the only verb-medial construction that the language has that does not have a verb-final counterpart. It is this property of the construction that makes it worthy of attention, which it hasn't received. The paper tries to show that it is a "frozen" construction, both from the point of view of its grammar and its use, and argues that it is best not treated as a topicalized structure. Viewing it from a historical perspective, the paper maintains that it is a residual construction – a residue of some syntactic change. The paper concludes with some discussion on the notion of an individual language, Oriya, in the familiar sense of the term, situating the discussion in contemporary thinking in mainstream generative linguistics regarding language variation.

An example of the construction under reference is the following:

(1) ie heuchanti / hele raama baabu

he (deictic) ---cop-pr-prog-honf / cop-pst-honf ---Ram-honf

(This is Ram Babu.)

This construction is typically used when one is introducing, rather presenting someone to someone else or a group of persons and it is used in speech and writing in the so-called

Standard Oriya. Not only that (1) has no verb-final counterpart, it does not also have a verb-initial counterpart. One might observe that not having a verb-initial counterpart doesn't really amount to much, since even stylistically marked declarative constructions in Oriya hardly ever allow the verb to occur as the initial entity. In sum, the order of constituents in (1) is frozen. However Oriya does have a construction, (2), that appears to be a counterpart of (1), in the sense that it can be used in place of (1). In comparison with (1), this construction doesn't contain a verb, and lacking the element of dramatic flourish that is associated with (1), it is a rather colourless and routine introduction:

(2) ie raama baabu

(1) must be distinguished from the similar-looking (3), which is given below, but first a passing remark about the tense form in (1). Notice that in the former option *heuchanti*, the verb is in its present continuous form. If it were in its simple present form, the sentence would have been ungrammatical in contemporary Oriya and would not, besides, have the intended sense and use. In the latter option the verb is in the simple past form, but it does not have the past time interpretation. The past time interpretation can indeed be assigned to (1), but then it would not have the use that it has. Treating the question of tense-time “mismatch” (of the kind under reference here) as outside the scope of the present paper, we turn to (3) now:

(3) ie hebe raama

he (deictic)---cop-fut-honf.---Ram

(He will be (= will play the role of) Ram.)

Unlike (1), this sentence is not used to present or introduce someone. It merely informs that some specific person would play the role of Ram in the play or the film. The verb is roughly of the “become” type, and this construction has indeed a verb-final counterpart and both (3) and its verb-final counterpart, occur in speech and writing. The former is a somewhat colourful variant of the latter. It may be noted that the verb in (3) is in simple future; but it could be in simple present too, in which case the sentence would have the

following interpretation: the specific person ordinarily plays the role of Ram. However, if the verb were in the simple past or the present continuous form, it would have had the interpretation non-distinct from that of (1). The sentence (4) is similar to (3) in the relevant respects:

- (4) eitaa helaa / heba tora
this (deictic)-non-honf---cop-pst-non-honf/cop-fut-non-honf---you-poss
(This (say, a toy) is / will be yours.)

The past tense here has the future time interpretation. The sentence has a verb-final counterpart and the relation between them is reminiscent of the same between (3) and its verb-final counterpart. It is worth noting that if the verb in (4) were substituted by its present continuous form (this is perhaps the only possible substitution of the verb-form that would yield a grammatical construction), the construction would not have a verb-final counterpart in Standard Oriya, although it would have one in some dialects.

Consider now (5):

- (5) yaanka naa helaa raamacandra muduli
he-poss-honf---name---cop-pst---Ramachandra---Muduli
(His name is Ramachandra Muduli.)

(5) can be used in more than one context. Like (1), it can be used to present someone, but unlike (1), it can be used to state a fact, namely that a certain individual bears a certain name. In the appropriate context, it yields a performative reading: the appropriate authority gives someone a certain name by uttering the sentence. As a “presentational” sentence, it has the same features as (1), already mentioned. As a non-presentational sentence, that is, in other interpretations, it has a verb-final counterpart in each case. As for the interpretation of the tense of the sentence, the past tense could yield the present, the past and the future time readings in appropriate contexts. In sum, one observes that

although there are constructions that bear formal similarities with (1), those indeed have uses different from the same of (1).

Now why does the language have just one SVC(omplement) - (call it SVO, deliberately ignoring the difference) - construction that has no verb-final counterpart? One is not treating as interesting the fact that there is a verb-medial construction in what is known as a verb-final language; there indeed are verb-medial constructions in this language. As mentioned earlier, it is the lack of the verb-final counterpart that makes the construction special. In verb-medial constructions in Oriya the post-verbal constituent is the topicalized constituent. In (6) and (7) below, the post-verbal NP is topicalized, and each has a verb-final counterpart.

(6) se dekhile eka adbhuta drushya
he---see-pst-honf---one---strange---spectacle
(He witnessed a strange spectacle.)

(7) ucca swarare mantra paatha karuthile jane brahmacaari
loud---voice-in---mantra---recitation---do-pst-prog-honf---one ---brahmachari
(A young sage was reciting mantras in a loud voice.)

Isn't (1) then an instance of topicalization? It would certainly appear reasonable to regard it as such, but it may be noted again that that unlike (6) and (7), (1) does not have a verb final, non-topicalized counterpart. One other difference between (6) and (7) on the one hand and (1) on the other, is that in the latter, the verb is a copula, whereas in the former instances, it is not so. It is well known that in contemporary Oriya, copula does not surface if the tense is "present", and the construction is stylistically unmarked. Thus (8) is not possible but its semantically equivalent (9) is:

*(8) dilli bhaaratara raajadhaani---ate/heuchi
Delhi---India-poss---capital---cop-pr/cop-pr-prog

(Delhi is the capital. of India.)

(9) dilli ate/heuchi bhaaratara raajadhaani

About (9), the sentence is better with *heuchi* than with *ate*. With the former, the sentence has the following interpretation: Delhi is not an ordinary metropolis of India; it is its very capital! It is easy to think of a context in which this version of (9) would be a natural statement or a response. With *ate* the sentence is a good deal more marked: it could occur only in a highly dramatic context, would have to be spoken in an elevated tone, and with a flourish. This might suggest that for (1) not to have a verb-final counterpart is only a consequence of the non-surfacing of the copular verb in the present tense (or with present time interpretation) when the sentence is not stylistically marked.

Thus it might appear that (1) is indeed a topicalized construction. Ignoring the details, one could posit a Tense feature F that obligatorily topicalizes a specific constituent, that is, moves a specific constituent to the post verbal position, which is the topic position in Oriya, when the verb is copular and the tense has a particular realization (present, etc.). This, then, is essentially the grammar of the construction (1). However, this is a poor solution of the problem because in the lack of any independent support for F, it is a mere technical solution that reveals no interesting property of the language. Apart from this, it is not clear that the post-verbal NP in (1) has an interpretation usually associated with the topicalized NPs. A presentational construction is not one in which an NP is highlighted, in any sense, etc.

Turning to the use of (1), we have already noted how it is used in the language. The language faculty generates forms, only some of which are, or can be, ordinarily put to use. The fact that (1) does not have a non-topicalized, verb final counterpart, etc., and is the only such instance in the language, can be viewed as a matter that pertains to the domain of the use of constructions that the language faculty outputs. Now, what can be said about the problem and in what form, noting that there is as yet no theory of language use, because of which one can hardly offer an “explanation”? In the generative linguistic literature itself, starting with *Aspects*, there are numerous insightful remarks,

observations, hints, etc. that are revealing about language use, but they do not add up to a theory of language use. Descarte's problem is yet to be insightfully addressed to; the architecture of language faculty articulated in Chomsky (1995) and since, might be the first step in this direction.

Such idiosyncratic constructions could perhaps be approached from other perspectives, including the historical. Adopting the historical perspective, one might examine whether such a construction is not a residue of syntactic change. Looking at Oriya diachronically, one would notice that some constructions have disappeared from Oriya and some have arisen, partly as a consequence of language contact, etc., and partly on account of language internal (structural) reasons – nothing unusual. To give one instance of a construction that has disappeared, one could cite the copular construction when the tense is simple present. This construction occurred in Oriya as recently as the early twentieth century, at least in writing. To cite an instance of one that has arisen: an indirect speech construction reminiscent of the English indirect speech construction has arisen in the language on account of its contact with English. However, some constructions do not disappear altogether; only their use becomes severely restricted. This is the residue case. And (1) is perhaps best seen as a residue.

K.B.Tripathy (1962) observes that the Oriya of the inscriptions dating back to the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century contained both SOV and SVO constructions. Obviously then at that time the latter construction was not an instance of topicalization. It is as though the language has come to treat the verb-medial construction as “marked” in course of time, the construction being a result of topicalization. Tripathy is of the opinion that the loss of flexibility in the order of constituents in the language is due to the influence of English – an opinion we do not share with him, but we would leave it without comments here. The non-topicalized verb-medial construction seems to have been lost to the language. Just one instantiation of it remains – (1).

Concerning syntactic change, it is well known that there is no convincing explanation of change at this level in functional, such as need-based, etc. terms. It is a different matter

that such “non-structural” accounts have been offered in this regard. Consider the following observation of Jespersen.. He observed that the passive construction with the indirect NP as subject (“John was given a book”) arose in the language as a result of a certain change in the world-view in the post-Renaissance period, which assigned pre-eminence to man in the scheme of the universe. The subject position, being the pre-eminent position in the sentence, had to accommodate the indirect object in the passive construction. Till then only the direct object of the corresponding active could become the subject of the passive construction. As far as the grammar of contemporary Oriya is concerned, the direct object alone can become the subject of the corresponding passive sentence. But there is just one construction that allows the indirect object of the active sentence to become the subject of the corresponding passive, just in case the indirect object has a specific feature, call it *d*, which is assigned the interpretation of the “divine” in some sense in the interpretive component (for details, see Patnaik 2000). Its use is quite restricted; it is to be encountered today only in the so-called “Temple” variety of the language. In other words the one exception to the norm of the Oriya passive construction reflects the belief system of the speakers of this language. This observation is in the spirit of Jespersen.

The construction under discussion here, the “frozen” SVC construction, is comparable to the construction mentioned above. It is the only instance of SVC construction in the language with properties mentioned earlier. It is used for a particular communicative purpose, and its use seems to be restricted to just that. It is as though the language “needs” a construction which most economically and elegantly performs a certain communicative function, and retains (1) which answers this need.

All these cultural and functional flavours to an account of syntactic residue might look strange and totally unconvincing to someone committed to explaining syntactic change in purely syntactic terms. But the above can be formulated differently. The language faculty generates expressions in the familiar way and the language uses some of these. An account of this and related questions is part of the theory of language use, and part of the theory of language use would be concerned with the way syntactic constructions of a

language relate to the relevant culture. A syntactic construction, then, does not arise in the language because of some social or cultural prerogative; it is pre-existent in some sense, being an output of the language faculty, and a certain language merely puts it to use in a certain way; in other words, it receives a functional or a culture-related interpretation. Viewed thus, “rule loss” in the grammar of a language would amount to a set of constructions not used by that language any more, and a residual construction simply is one of a set that still is put to use when the rest of the set are no more used. The residual construction is used in a restricted domain, or for a specific purpose. This approach might at least provide a way of answering the question as to why the residue, which adds cost to a grammar, is “tolerated” and how the language accommodates it. This paper is not concerned with answering the related question of why the language does not put to use the rest of the constructions of the set.

We close the discussion by making some observations on the notion of an individual language based on the current ideas on language variation. Current thinking on language variation relates variation to the lexicon, more specifically, to the uninterpretable formal features of lexical items or the formal features of functional categories (Chomsky 1995, 6). But one wonders whether this conception of language can take care of such accidental features of a language such as a residual construction or a borrowed construction that is still rather unstable in the sense that it is still on the periphery of acceptability. Relating these accidental forms to lexical features elegantly seems difficult, as is clearly the case with (1), and if this view of accidental forms is correct, then language differences might go beyond the possibilities of the lexicon. A language, say, Oriya, then is the result of parametric variation and accidental forms both.

It might make great sense from the naturalistic perspective on the study of language that “what is Oriya?” is an uninteresting, or even meaningless question, exactly as political borders between states are meaningless from the point of view of earth sciences. But then should one feel inclined to situate what might be a “folk science” concept (in this case, “Oriya”) in a scientific conception of a certain aspect of reality (say, within the “biolinguistics” approach), and consider this attempt worthwhile, then the question about

Oriya being a particular language may not be a futile one, and an answer to it might be of the form outlined above. In any case, Oriya, as it is commonly understood, may not be of interest for a theory of language faculty, being an epiphenomenon from this point of view, but as far as use of the output of the language faculty is concerned, it may indeed have a certain kind of reality and it is certainly not without interest for an intellectual enquiry.

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