

Translating Accompanitives in Papuan Tip Cluster Languages of PNG

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A unique feature of most of the Austronesian languages of the Papuan Tip Cluster of Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea is accompanitive pronouns, by which the speaker can succinctly indicate the person and number of people who accompany the person and number of another group of people. Most, but not all of them have an accompanitive prefix,¹ then all of them have a stem which carries the sense of “companion”, then a person possessive suffix, and a plural morpheme if there is more than one companion. A variant of this structure occurs when the person possession affix precedes the stem. I will illustrate the accompanitive pronouns with paradigms from Muyuw and Bunama.²

Person	Mu comp sg ³	Mu comp pl	Bu comp sg	Bu comp pl
1s	<i>so-gw</i>	<i>si-gwe-y</i>	<i>ma-hete-gu</i>	<i>ma-hete-gwa-o</i>
2s	<i>so-mw</i>	<i>so-mwe-y</i>	<i>ma-hete-u</i>	<i>ma-hete-mwa-o</i>
3s	<i>so-n</i>	<i>so-ne-y</i>	<i>ma-hete-na</i>	<i>ma-hete-na-o</i>
1pn	<i>so-d</i>	<i>so-da-yas</i>	<i>ma-hete-dai</i>	<i>ma-hete-dai-o</i>
1px	<i>si-mey</i>	<i>si-mey-as</i>	<i>ma-hete-mai</i>	<i>ma-hete-mai-yao</i>
2p	<i>si-miy</i>	<i>si-miy-as</i>	<i>ma-hete-mi</i>	<i>ma-hete-mi-yao</i>
3p	<i>si-siy</i>	<i>si-siy-as</i>	<i>ma-hete-di</i>	<i>ma-hete-di-yao</i>

If a verb follows, it takes exact person prefix of the combined group. For example, English uses a singular verb “goes” in “He goes with me.” In PTC languages, the verb would have the first person plural exclusive subject prefix. Thus in Muyuw:

- 1) *so-gw* *ka-n*
companion-1s.POS 1px-go
“My companion and I went.”
- 2) *si-gwe-y* *na-ka-w*
companion-1.POS-PL completed-1px-go.to.you
“My companions and I went to you.”

¹ In most PTC languages the accompanitive morpheme is usually *ma-*.

² A fuller treatment of PTC accompanitive pronouns can be found in Lithgow (1976:483-85).

³ Abbreviations

Mu	Muyuw	PL	plural	1pn	first person inclusive plural
Bu	Bunama	1s	first person singular	1px	first person exclusive plural
PTC	Papuan Tip Cluster	2s	second person singular	2p	second person plural
COMP	companion	3s	third person singular	3p	third person plural
POS	possessive				

Example (2), in two short words, conveys the information that more than one person went with the speaker to the hearer.

These accompanitive pronouns are very useful, but there are three problems associated with them. The first is that when accompanitive phrases are translated from English into PTC languages, translators tend to translate the English form literally. Thus in Bunama, the English phrase “They and I...” would tend to be translated as:

- 3) *taudi ma taugu*
they and I

While it is always possible to do a literal transference for the English words, it is not the natural way of expressing this kind of phrase. To convert such phrases to natural accompanitive phrases, one has to know how to use PTC accompanitive pronouns, and make the proper adjustments that are needed. Examples will be shown below.

The second problem is the need to use the verbal subject prefix which includes the total number and persons of the whole group. For a clause like “I sat with them” one has to say “I, they with me, we (excl) sat,” and for “he sat with them” one has to say “he, they with him, they sat.” In Bunama this is:

- 4) *tauna ma-hete-na-o si-miyatoi-ya*
3s with-COMP-3s-PL 3p-sat-completed
“He sat with them.”

The greatest difficulty however is where alternate forms seem to be possible. A speaker with a bias toward the English language usually chooses the wrong form. Example 3 could have also been expressed:

- 5) *taudi ma-hete-di si-miyatoi-ya*
3p with-COMP-3p 3p-sat-completed
“He sat with them.”

Example (4) seems to speak of people sitting with him. An English biased speaker would react this way because the *ma-* prefix means “with” and the third singular suffix *-na* means “him/his.” And based on the same reasoning, example (5) seems to say that someone sat with plural people, because of the *ma-* “with” and the *-di* “them/their”.

This is the kind of thought pattern that speakers with a bias toward the English language tend to follow when using PTC accompanitives. But this thought pattern violates the basic meaning of the constructions. If we look carefully at the structure of example (4), it actually says “he with-his-companion-s they-sat.” The second form says “they with-their-companion they-sat.” Thus *ma-hete-na-o* focuses not on “him” but on “his companions,” which is “them.” And *ma-hete-di* focuses not on “them” but on “their companion,” which is “him.”

To help people with a bias toward the English language, I suggest this mnemonic: First look at the possessive suffix, identify its person and number, and then deduce that the meaning is not “with that person or group” but “with the other person or group.”

The free pronouns at the beginning of examples (4) and (5) are optional. They can be omitted, and the accompanitive pronouns still mean a group of third singular (him/her/it) and third plural (them). The free pronouns could also be exchanged, using *taudi* in example (3) and *tauna* in example (5). Actually, both could be included in any order; thus:

- 6) a. *tauna taudi ma-hete-na-o si-miyatoi-ya*
 3s 3p with-COMP-3s-PL 3p-sat-completed
 “He sat with them.”
- b. *taudi tauna ma-hete-na-o si-miyatoi-ya*
 3p 3s with-COMP-3s-PL 3p-sat-completed
 “He sat with them.”

Variations in the focus can be brought about in these ways, but the basic meaning remains the same. The Bunama form *ma-hete-na-o* (as in example (4)) means “he (is) with them,” and the Bunama form *ma-hete-di* (as in example (5)) means “they (are) with him.”

Language acquisition and language usage are often biased by other languages which the speaker knows. People who are biased toward English often have difficulty understanding PTC accompanitive constructions properly. People who translate from English into PTC languages often inappropriately follow English syntax when translating accompanitive constructions. Both translators and language learners need to pay attention to the natural constructions of PTC languages in order to communicate effectively.

References

- Lithgow, David. 1976. Austronesian languages: Milne Bay and adjacent islands. In *Austronesian languages*, 441-523. Vol. 2 of *New Guinea area languages and language study*, ed. S. A. Wurm. Pacific Linguistics C-39. Canberra: Australian National University.

Presented 24 May 1991

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