

Ambiguous word and morpheme boundaries in Dalkalaen

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Glossary

1	first person	EX	exclusive
2	second person	NI	non-inclusive (?)
3	third person	PC	paucal
DU	dual	PL	plural
EP	epenthetic element		

Dalkalaen is an endangered Oceanic language spoken by ca. 1000 inhabitants of the island of Ambrym, Vanuatu, for which so far no grammar has been published. It has several grammatical areas with ambiguous word and morpheme boundaries, both in terms of the number of morphemes into which to split a surface word form (e.g. how many morphemes are its pronouns made up of?), and the number of morphemes which to lump into a word unit (e.g. are the grammatical markers in its verb complex affixes or separate words?). In this abstract, I will present the example of Dalkalaen's personal pronouns.

Dalkalaen has a rich system of person-number marking, with four persons and four numbers, as well as some degree of lexical conditioning. This marking is done by way of a set of endings which occur in various grammatical areas of the language, e.g. the formation of personal pronouns.

Most of these endings can be broken down into several morphemes, so that a maximally splitting morphological analysis of the set of personal pronouns could look like in Table 1.

	Singular	Dual	Paucal	Plural
1in		e-n-ta-ro	e-n-jul	e-r
	ni	EP-1- ??? -DU	EP-1-PC	EP-1:PL
1ex	1	g-e-n-am-ro	g-e-n-em-jul	g-e-n-em-∅
		NI? -EP-1-EX-DU	NI? -EP-1-EX-PC	NI? -EP-1-EX-PL
2	neg	g-a-m-ro	g-a-m-jul	g-a-m-i
	2	NI? -EP-2-DU	NI? -EP-2-PC	NI? -EP-2-PL
3	ngay	nga-ro	nye-ril	nye-∅
	3	3-DU	3-PC	3-PL

Table 1: Morphological make-up of Dalkalaen personal pronouns

However, this analysis meets some challenges, such as:

- interpreting the function of certain affixes, marked in pink in the table
- irregularities which are hard to interpret in a highly syntagmatic analysis
- inconsistencies with other person-number paradigms of the language (e.g. possessive pronouns)

Because of that, there is also a case to be made for a more paradigmatic analysis which interprets the pronouns as fixed forms with less individual morphemes.

My talk will present several areas of Dalkalaen grammar with ambiguous word and morpheme boundaries and investigate benefits of an analysis of them inspired by different morphological theories such as Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz, 1994) and Word and Paradigm Morphology (Blevins, 2016).

Depending on whether an analysis of Dalkalaen morphology assumes many or few affixes, Dalkalaen may be analyzed as largely synthetic, largely isolating, or a mixture of the two. I will show how these theoretical problems call into question the traditional categories of morphological typology (cf. Haspelmath 2009, Haspelmath 2011).

References

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