

Universals of INFL: Challenges from Maybrat

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Ritter & Wiltschko (2009) and Ritter & Wiltschko (2014) argue on the basis of data from English, Halkomelem and Blackfoot for a Parametric Substantiation Hypothesis:

- (1) *Parametric Substantiation Hypothesis*
 - a. Universal Grammar makes available a set of hierarchically organized functional categories: the universal spine.
 - b. Languages vary in the substantive content associated with functional categories.

While the hypothesis covers all functional categories, Ritter and Wiltschko (RW) are concerned with Infl (commonly and perhaps misleadingly labelled T(ense)), which they claim performs a universal anchoring function (as per Enç, 1987) but with language-specific content. For example, English Infl is realised as a head bearing temporal content, so that a clause relates an utterance time to an event time, while Halkomelem is argued to have no obligatory temporal morphology (null or otherwise), instead realising Infl with locative content that relates an utterance and an event spatially. The same observations are made of Blackfoot with person content, suggesting that Infl must be substantiated by deictic content generally.

Importantly, RW note that if Infl is universal independent of the content with which it may associate, then the meaning of its content is inadequate to identify membership of Infl; it is necessary to use formal diagnostics. The criteria they use to establish categorial identity are:

- (2)
 - a. uniqueness (i.e. one instantiation per clause)
 - b. possibility for lack of substantive semantic content
 - c. movement to Comp
 - d. possibility for lack of phonetic content
 - e. obligatoriness

Most of these help establish that some morpheme is a functional head rather than a modifier, though the relationship with Comp and the anchoring role serve particularly to identify that head with Infl. It is one of the striking successes of their argument that the deictic content of each language behaves uniformly in similar syntactic environments, and their complementarity suggests that they substantiate a single functional category. However, in this contribution, I would like to consider some potential challenges to that conclusion posed by the Maybrat language.

Maybrat is a language of Indonesia with approximately 22,000 speakers, documented by Dol (2007). It is especially useful for linguists interested in the universal functional properties of languages, as it has basic SVO word order (obviating the complications that arise with analyses of languages with basic OV order) and it has comparatively little functional material. Morphologically, it is tenseless, with disambiguation mediated by temporal adverbs and intonation contours. It also has no obligatory locative morphology, though person agreement in the form of verbal prefixes *is* obligatory (note that the richness of this agreement makes subject nominals optional, as in familiar pro-drop languages). Thus, the barest possible clause looks like (3):

- (3) t-sam
1sg-scared
'I'm scared' (Dol, 2007:142)

If we propose that Infl is universally present and substantiated by deictic content, then in Maybrat the only candidate for the head of Infl is its person prefixes. However, this is problematic, as they fail most of the stated diagnostics. While person agreement *is* unique for every clause, there are no contexts in which it does not carry person meaning, as we should expect. This is unlike Halkomelem locative auxiliaries, for example, where their use in question formation is without locative meaning. Moreover, while Infl should permit null exponence, this is only superficially possible in Maybrat, where null prefixation only arises after deletion in a specified phonological context (where the second syllable of a bi-syllabic verb stem is consonant initial). According to RW’s analysis, we also ought to find an absence of person prefixes in imperatives and non-finites, but this is not the case either:

- (4) n-ait
2-eat
‘Eat!’ (Dol, 2007, 184)
- (5) y-awe y-ame kak
3m-say 3m-stab cuscus
‘He wants to stab a cuscus.’ (Dol, 2007, 186)

Bearing these discrepancies in mind, we might propose that the diagnostics need not be met absolutely strictly, though there is a simpler, more serious challenge to the analysis of Maybrat, which is that its person agreement does not fulfil the anchoring role that Infl is supposed to abstractly embody: there are no patterns of person agreement that relate utterance and event participation.

It seems we might be led to conclude that Infl is universally available, but not universally substantiated in all languages (and therefore not in Maybrat), yet this is not obviously true either. On the basis of well-established diagnostics of verb position in relation to aspectual adverbs, I will demonstrate that Maybrat verbs must move to some position outside the verb phrase, which is traditionally identified as either Infl itself, or Comp via Infl. Moreover, the patterning of Maybrat’s null subjects suggests a central role for Infl by comparison with similar European languages. It is at least certain that we cannot propose a single functional category, Infl, to cover all these roles of deictic anchoring, verb placement and subject licensing. I will therefore describe how the derivational relationship between Maybrat person agreement and verb movement might shed new light on the RW hypothesis, in particular arguing that they correctly identify an anchoring function open to varied deictic substantiation, but that this is not so directly associated with Infl.

References

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