N egation and G rammatical Functions in Skou

MARK DONOHUE
National University of Singapore
mark@donohue.cc

1. The Skou language

Skou is known from the work of Cowan (1952), Voorhoeve (1971), and Donohue (1999, 2000). Skou is related to other languages in the Skou family of which it is the westernmost member (Donohue 2002); more distant relations can be established with other members of the Macro-Skou family. It displays many features typical of a language of New Guinea: S/A P V word order, some agreement on the verb, frequent use of verb serialisation, switch-reference mechanisms, and optional ergative case marking.

There are 700 speakers of the language, living almost exclusively in three villages sited along the north coast of New Guinea east of Jayapura, Skou Yambe, Skou Mabo and Skou Sai. There are also about 100 second-language speakers in Wutung, the nearest village in Papua New Guinea. Although the name *Te Máwo pílang nè ne* is used by speakers to refer to their own language, the name Skou is acceptable, and recognised as the 'official' way to refer to their language.[1]

2. Negation in Skou

Negation in Skou does not involve special verb inflections, as is the case in various other languages of New Guinea. Indeed, marking a sentence as negative precludes the use of certain aspectual options (it is impossible, for instance, for negation to occur with the continuative / non-completive aspect that is marked by serialisation with the verbs *i* 'be' and *li* 'do'.). Negation is marked by a particle *ka* that follows the predicate, regardless of the lexical category of predicate, as seen in (1) and (2):[2]

Nominal predicate

(1) a. *Pe=ing a è-ne-nì=ne.*
3SG.F=the wife-1SG.DAT-1SG.GEN=1SG.DAT
'She's my wife.'

[1] Examples are presented in orthography: nasalisation is indicated by *-ng*, /ʉ/ and /ø/ are written with the digraphs *ue* and *oe*, high pitch is shown with ´, falling pitch with `, and low pitch is unmarked. The representation of the other vowels and the consonants follows IPA conventions, except that *y* represents [j ~ ʑ ~dz ~ dʒ], and *j* represents [gʲ ~ ɟ ~ dʒ].

[2] The following abbreviations have been used. 1, 2, 3: first, second and third person; SG, DU, PL: singular, dual and plural number; DAT: dative; ERG: ergative; F: feminine; GEN: genitive; NF non-feminine. The other abbreviations used are: APPL: applicative; INSTR: instrumental; NEG: negative; RED: reduplication; SUBJ: subject.

b. *Pe=ing a* *è-ne-nì=ne* ***ka***.
3SG.F=the wife-1SG.DAT-1SG.GEN=1SG.DATNEG
'She's not my wife.'

Verbal predicate

(2) a. *Féung* *nì=re-re.*
tomorrow 1SG=go-RED
'I'll go tomorrow.'

b. *Féung* *nì=re-re* ***ka***.
tomorrow 1SG=go-RED NEG
'I won't go tomorrow.'

The same pattern is found with bivalent predicates:

Bivalent verbal predicate

(3) a. *Ke=ing a* *kóe* *ke=k-ang.*
3SG.NF=the sago.cake 3SG.NF=3SG.NF-eat
'He ate the sago pancake.'

b. *Ke=ing a* *kóe* *ke=k-ang* ***ka***.
3SG.NF=the sago.cake 3SG.NF=3SG.NF-eat NEG
'He didn't eat the sago pancake.'

Complications arise when we consider a predicate with an optional oblique phrase. The normal position for an oblique is following the verb; when negated, however, the oblique appears pre-verbally:

(4) a. *Nì=re* ***Tangwáto***.
1SG=go Tangwato
'I went to Tanjung Tangwato.'

b. ***Tangwáto*** *nì=re* ***ka***.
Tangwato 1SG=go NEG
'I didn't go to Tanjung Tangwato.'

Two questions arise here, namely the nature of the post-verbal position, which appears to provoke competition between different sentential elements which may not all be found post-verbally, and also the status of the goal in sentences such as (4)b: obliques (other than instruments, which are overtly case marked) are not in normal circumstances coded pre-verbally, and the only bare pre-verbal NPs that are normally found are subjects and objects. Do these pre-verbal goals behave as objects, or obliques? Note that the phenomenon described here, oblique arguments appearing preverbally in negative clauses, applies to all (normally) post-verbal obliques. While most sentences here show locations and directional goals, recipients behave identically.

3. Testing functional status

There are tests that can be used to separate oblique arguments from core ones, and, within the core, subjects from non-subjects (objects) and absolutive from ergative. These tests are:

- only bivalent clauses allow optional ergative proclitics on nominal subjects
- only core arguments may appear raised in complements

- only absolutive core arguments may launch floated quantifiers

We shall examine the first two of these tests in order to determine the status of the goal or location in a negated sentence. The third test, involving floated quantifiers, is not useful in negative sentences as negated sentences do not permit floated quantifiers, a point that we shall return to in section 5.

3.1 Ergative case

The possibility of ergative case marking appearing on the subject of a bivalent clause is shown in (5):

Bivalent clause:

(5) *Ke=bahúe-nì=ne* *pá* *ke=li* *fue a.*
3SG.NF=elder.sibling-1SG.GEN=1SG.DAT house 3SG.NF=do there
'My elder brother built a house over there.'

optional ergative

(6) *Ke bahúe nì ne* ***ke*** *pá ke li fue a.*
3SG.NF.ERG

Monovalent clause: no ergative possible

(7) *Ke=bahúe-nì=ne* *ke=moeng* *pá* *fue a.*
3SG.NF=elder.sibling-1SG.GEN=1SG.DAT 3SG.NF=sit house there
'My elder brother was in that house over there.'

(8) * *Ke bahúe nì ne* ***ke*** *ke moeng pá fue a.*
3SG.NF.ERG

When a monovalent clause with a location NP is negated, however, the ergative is possible:

(9) *Ke=bahúe-nì=ne* *pá* *ke=moeng* ***ka***.
3SG.NF=elder.sibling-1SG.GEN=1SG.DAT house 3SG.NF=sit NEG
'My elder brother wasn't in that house.'

(10) *Ke bahúe nì ne* ***ke*** *pá ke moeng* ***ka***.
3SG.NF.ERG

- Note that the ergative is allowed in negative sentences only if there is a location or goal that has been fronted. It is not a general property of negative sentences that they allow the ergative case to appear on subjects, as can be seen by comparing the following pair:

(11) *Ke=bahúe-nì=ne* *ke=i* ***ka***.
3SG.NF=elder.sibling-1SG.GEN=1SG.DAT 3SG.NF=stand NEG
'My elder brother wasn't standing.'

(12) * *Ke bahúe nì ne* ***ke*** *ke i* ***ka***.
3SG.NF.ERG

Even a sentence that corresponds to a positive sentence with an oblique may not appear with ergative case marking unless the oblique is present:

(13) * *Ke bahúe nì ne **ke** ke moeng **ka**.*
3SG.NF.ERG

This matches the infelicity of ergative marking on two place verbs when there is no overt object; compare (5) above with the following:

(14) *Ke=bahúe-nì=ne* (#/* *ke*) *ke=li* *fue a.*
3SG.NF=elder.sibling-1SG.GEN=1SG.DAT 3SG.NF.ERG 3SG.NF=do there
'My elder brother did something over there.'

3.2 Raising

Another test for the core or non-core status of an argument involves its behaviour in a raising construction. Consider the following alternative codings of the same sentence:

(15) *Ke=barí* *ke=fue* [*mè=poe*].
3SG.NF=headman 3SG.NF=see 2SG=come
'The headman saw you arrive.'

(16) *Ke=barí* ***mè*** *ke=fue* [*mè=poe*].
3SG.NF=headman 2SG 3SG.NF=see 2SG=come
'The headman saw you arrive.'

With bivalent clauses not only the subject, but also the object may be raised:

(17) *Ke=barí* *ke=fue* [*móe* *mè=pé*].
3SG.NF=headman 3SG.NF=see fish 2SG=catch
'The headman saw you catch the fish.'

(18) *Ke=barí* ***mè*** *ke=fue* [*móe* *mè=pé*].
3SG.NF=headman 2SG 3SG.NF=see fish 2SG=catch
'The headman saw you catch the fish.'

(19) *Ke=barí* ***móe*** *ke=fue* [*mè=pé*].
3SG.NF=headman fish 3SG.NF=see 2SG=catch
'The headman saw you catch the fish.'

It is not possible for an oblique to be raised, however:

(20) *Ke=barí* *ke=fue* [*mè=poe* *pá*].
3SG.NF=headman 3SG.NF=see 2SG=come house
'The headman saw you arrive at the house.'

(21) * *ke barí **pá** ke fue mè poe*

(22) *Ke=barí* *ke=fue* [*móe* *mè=pé* *pa-long*].
3SG.NF=headman 3SG.NF=see fish 2SG=catch river-mouth
'The headman saw you catch the fish at the river-mouth.'

(23) * *ke barí **palong** ke fue móe mè pé*

When a clause is negated, however, it is possible for the oblique to be raised:

(24) *Ke=barí* *ke=lúe* [*pá* *mè=poe* ***ka***].
3SG.NF=headman 3SG.NF=know house 2SG=come NEG
'The headman knows that you didn't arrive at the house.'

(25) *Ke barí **pá** ke lúe mè poe **ka**.*

(26) *Ke=barí* *ke=lúe* [*pa-long* *móe* *mè=pé* ***ka***].
3SG.NF=headman 3SG.NF=know river-mouth fish 2SG=catch NEG
'The headman knows you caught the fish at the river-mouth.'

(27) *Ke barí **palong** ke lúe móe mè pé **ka**.*

The data from eligibility for raising in complements (illustrated here with data from verbs of perception, but also true for complements of verbal manipulation) also indicates that the preverbal goal or location is treated in the same way as an object.

These two tests indicate that the negated clause with a goal or location is bivalent, and that a pre-verbal oblique is treated as a core argument not just in terms of its position in the clause, but also in terms of its syntactic behaviour.

4. Summary / Recapitulation

We have found evidence for the following facts regarding negation in Skou:

- Skou is an S/A P V OBL language;
- negation follows the predicate in a clause;
- an oblique, which normally follows the predicate, is found pre-verbally when the clause is negated;
- a pre-verbal oblique in such a negative clause behaves syntactically as if it were an object (more exactly, as if it were a non-subject core argument). The clause appears to be bivalent.

With respect to judging this data, we need to note that:

- it is not the case that all pre-verbal nominals behave as either subject or object.[3]
- it is typologically highly marked for a negative sentence to exhibit more transitive features than a positive one

Firstly, as already mentioned in passing, instrumental NPs may appear preverbally; these nominals are marked overtly with the case marker *=pa*, and do not show properties of either subjects or objects in terms of the constructions examined here (or other constructions that identify subject and object).

[3] It is also true, but not pursued here in detail, that not all post-verbal nominals are obliques; some predicates such as *lóngmo li* 'be jealous of' and *ké léng* 'give' take objects that must appear post-verbally, and yet behave as objects in terms of morphosyntax; furthermore, some low-transitivity verbs such as *fue* 'see, look at' allow their object to be coded either preverbally or postverbally.

(28) *Ke=bà ing a ke rítóe rangwaue=pa*
3SG.NF=personthe 3SG.NF tree axe=INSTR
ke=lé i li.
3SG.NF=fell be do
'The man is chopping down a tree with an axe.'

The presence of such a nominal in an monovalent clause does not license the use of the ergative case:

(29) *Pe=ra=wò tang-ké=ke=pa pe=te*
3SG.F=just=self transport-3SG.NF.GEN=3SG.NF.DAT=INSTR 3SG.F=3SG.F.go
Nofé.
Jayapura
'She alone, by herself, went to Jayapura in his car.'

(30) * *Pe ra wò pe tang ké ke pa pe te Nofé.*
3SG.F.ERG

The instrumentals are also not eligible for raising:

(31) * *Tang ké ke (pa) nì=lúe pe ra wò pe te Nofé*
1SG=know

Secondly, any nominal may appear preverbally, indeed pre-clausally, if it is the topic of the sentence, as illustrated in the position of the goal in the example.

(32) *Tangwáto báng fue,te=y-á hi t-o.*
Tangwato beach that3PL=3PL-walk westwards 3PL-seawards
'The beach at Tangwato is where they went to.'

Again, these topics do not behave as core arguments; they are privileged in terms of reference in clause-chaining, but do not license the appearance of an ergative case nor are they eligible for raising. As mentioned, this is not the same pre-verbal position as is found with goals or locations in negative sentences: negated goals or locatives may appear following the subject, whereas this is not possible for a topicalised nominal:

(33) * *Te Tangwáto báng fue te=y-á hi t-o.*
3PLTangwato beach that3PL=3PL-walk westwards 3PL-seawards

We can only conclude that the relative position of a nominal in the phrase structure does seem to bear some importance for the purposes of grammatical function assignment. How can we model this?

5. In lieu of a conclusion: towards an account of the data

We can advance two preliminary hypotheses concerning the changing functions that we have seen in the preceding sections:

1. Objects are found when the particle *ka* appears because the 'negative' morpheme is in fact an applicative; creating an object is its primary function, and the negation is secondary;

OR

2. The grammatical function 'object' is assigned by a structural position, and this is the position in which goals and locations are found when they appear in negated clauses.

The first of these hypotheses has some merit: in common with applicatives, when the morpheme *ka* is added to a clause the clause appears with one extra object. This argument is not tenable, however. It is possible, for a monovalent or bivalent clause to appear with *ka* and to acquire no new arguments, if there is no location or goal specified as an oblique in the clause. Clearly the use of *ka* does not imply the automatic addition of an extra argument to the clause.

Another argument against the analysis of *ka* as an applicative is the existence of another applicative in Skou, which do not occur with 'new' preverbal objects. When the applicative *-na* is added to manner-of-motion predicates, the clause may take a goal; otherwise, the clause must either appear without a goal, or must be serialised with a simple motion verb. For instance, the only way to add a direction to the clause *Bàng ne=n-á.* 'Yesterday we walked.' is with the addition of a motion verb, or with the applicative; the verb *há* 'walk' cannot support a goal:[4]

(34) *Bàng* *ne=n-á* *ne* *báng.*
yesterday 1PL=1PL-walk 1PL.go beach
'Yesterday we walked to the beach.'

(35) *Bàng* *ne=n-á-na* *báng.*
yesterday 1PL=1PL-walk-APPL beach
'Yesterday we walked.'

(36) * *Bàng* *ne=n-á* *báng.*
yesterday 1PL=1PL-walk beach
'Yesterday we walked to the beach.'

Note that the applicative, when present, marks the applicative object as a post-verbal argument, expected for the object of a low-transitive predicate (see footnote 3). This is another argument against the negative morpheme being analysed as having applicative functions (it would also have to be reanalysed as a post-verbal clitic).

The suggestion that the putative 'applicative' licences a predicate to support two objects also runs counter to the evidence that there are no trivalent verbs in Skou. Translations of English or Indonesian trivalent predicates are coded with serial verb constructions in Skou, each predicate introducing a new object. Examine, for instance, the phrasal expression of 'give' in Skou. This predicate involves two bivalent verbs, *wé* 'get' and *leng* 'give', each of which subcategorises for just two arguments.

---

[4] They may, however, support a location. This sentence is grammatical with the reading 'Yesterday we walked (around) on the beach.' Note that the locative is placed in a different position to the goal, appearing following an auxiliary, if present, and not preceding it. Compare the corresponding continuous clauses, where only the post-auxiliary oblique is grammatical:

(i) * *Ne=n-á* *báng* *ne* *ti*
1PL=1PL-walk beach 1PL.be 1PL.do
'We are walking to the beach.'

(ii) *Ne=n-á* *ne* *ti* *báng.*
1PL=1PL-walk 1PL.be 1PL.do beach
'We are walking on the beach.'

'Trivalent' predicate expressed by verb serialisation

(37) *Rópu ke=wé leng nì.*
book 3SG.NF=get.F give 1SG
'He gave me a book.'

Despite this, we find that when a bivalent predicate with an oblique in the clause is negated, there are two nominals that both display clause-level object properties, namely the ability to exhibit raising. The first two example sentences below show the alternative word orders for the clause, showing either *pá* or *kóe* occurring adjacent to the verb.

Negated bivalent predicate with oblique

(38) a. *Ke=ing a kóe pá ke=k-ang* ***ka***.
3SG.NF=the sago.cake house 3SG.NF=3SG.NF-eat NEG
'He didn't eat the sago pancake in the house.'

b. *Ke=ing a pá kóe ke=k-ang* ***ka***.
3SG.NF=the house sago.cake 3SG.NF=3SG.NF-eat NEG

In the following two sentences we can see that either the base object *kóe* or the displaced oblique *pá* may appear as the object of the verb *pe=fu* 'She saw', showing that both of them display this property that is typical of core arguments, but not of obliques.

(39) a. *Kóe pe=fu pá ke=k-ang* ***ka***.
sago.cake 3SG.F=see.F house 3SG.NF=3SG.NF-eat NEG
'She saw that he didn't eat the sago pancake in the house.'

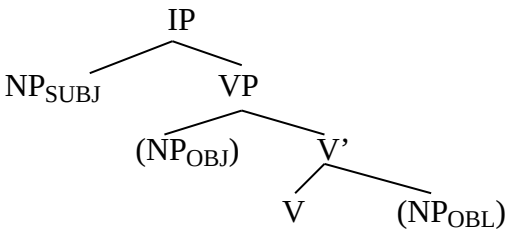
b. *Pá pe=fu kóe ke=k-ang* ***ka***.
house 3SG.F=see.F sago.cake 3SG.NF=3SG.NF-eat NEG
'She saw that he didn't eat the sago pancake in the house.'

This suggests that the sentences in (39) are trivalent. The complete dearth of lexically trivalent predicates in Skou creates problems for an analysis that assumes that the object status is created directly by the position of the displaced oblique in the sentence, since we need to allow the predicate to license two object positions, whereas this is not attested elsewhere in the language.

The movement analysis of Chomskyan theories offers a simple account of the data. We assume that the structure of a bivalent clause can be represented in an X'-theory phrase structure model with something like the following diagram (I have applied a certain degree of 'pruning' of the trees, following the example of Bresnan (2001), for the sake of clarity, and assumed that obliques appear in a post-verbal, but still VP-internal, position):

Sentence with optional obliques

(40)

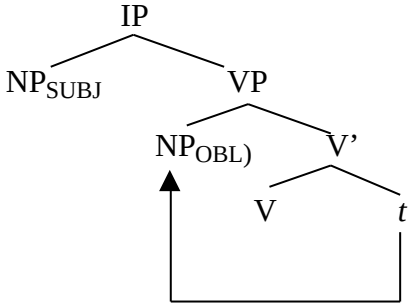


Given this, we can model the kind of sentence seen in (4b) with the tree seen in (41), showing that the goal or location can be reassigned to a position that is otherwise

associated with the object of a clause, when the negative morpheme appears in the post-verbal position.

Apparent movement of oblique arguments to the object position

(41)



It is not problematic to suppose that the motivation for the displacement of the oblique nominal to a preverbal position is initiated by the appearance of the negative morpheme postverbally; there is clearly competition for that position, competition which the oblique nominal loses. Since this postverbal position is the position in which overtly expressed nominals normally appear, it is not unreasonable to suppose that this is a position for marking sentential focus (though not pragmatic focus). Since negation has a greater scope than that of an oblique, it over-rides the condition on post-verbal obliques. Other support for this hypothesis is the fact that floated quantifiers, which also appear in the same position post verbal position, preceding an auxiliary, are also barred form appearing in the same sentence as a negative morpheme, or an oblique. This implies that there is a very tightly constrained phrase structure, which is indeed the case in Skou, and is a feature of other, both related and unrelated, languages of the North-central New Guinea region. One aspect of this tight phrase structure is that there is a position that may be filled by at most one word, and that this position is fully occupied by the negative morpheme, which takes precedence over the other classes of lexical items that can potentially occupy this position. The question that remains is that of the reason behind the assumption of object status by the displaced nominal, and a structural model of the grammar would attribute that to an automatic assignment based on the configuration of the nominal in the phrase structure. Some of the problems that are associated with this view, including the lack of trivalent predicates in the language, have been presented earlier in this section.

Accepting this account assumes that we believe in the mechanics of a movement-based theory of grammar. Now, given this model in a movement-based theory, we can interpret it in terms of a non-movement based theory by assuming that there are two separate components behind the alternation in position and treatment of the negative that we have observed. The first is the competition between the negative morpheme and the obliques, both of which vie for the post-verbal position, with the locative or goal arguments being displaced in favour of the negative morpheme. So far the two models do not show major differences.

The second alternation, the apparent change in grammatical function status, is more challenging. One immediate solution presents itself, assuming that the putative post-verbal obliques are in fact objects, but with low affectedness (as described in footnote 3), and that they are being displaced positionally, but not functionally. This can be shown not to be true: from a sentence like (37) it is possible to show the goal with raising, as in (42):

(42) *Nì* *pe=fu* *rópu* *ke=wé* *leng.*
1SG 3SG.F=see.F book 3SG.NF=get give
'She saw him give me a book.'

This has been shown not to be possible with the goals of motion verbs, which, together with the data on optional ergative marking, clearly indicates a difference in lexically-encoded valency.

The only alternative is that there is a pre-verbal position inside the VP, and that this position is also pragmatically marked, and so acts as an alternative location for coding these pragmatically marked elements of a sentence. This possibility remains to be investigated in detail.

References

BRESNAN, JOAN. 2001. *Lexical functional syntax*. Oxford: Blackwells.

COWAN, H.K.J. 1952. Een toon-taal in Nederlandsch Nieuw Guinea. *Tijdschrift Nieuw Guinea* 13: 55-60.

DONOHUE, MARK. 1999. *A most agreeable language*. Paper presented to the Australian Linguistics Society. Perth, Western Australia, 30th September 1999.

2000. Pronouns and gender: exploring nominal classification systems in northern New Guinea. *Oceanic Linguistics* 39 (2): 1-11.

2002. Which sounds change: descent and borrowing in the Skou family. *Oceanic Linguistics* 41 (1): 157-207.

VOORHOEVE, C.L. 1971. Miscellaneous notes on languages in West Irian. *Papers in New Guinea linguistics* No. 14: 47-114. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics A-28.