Case and Tone Systems in Tenyidie

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Abstract

This paper examines the interaction of Tone and case system in Tenyidie, a Tibeto-Burman language, using the description based on Dixon, 1994. A hierarchy of Case System in Tenyidie is set up by incorporating tones and Suffixes for differentiation of cases.

Key Words: Case System, Tone, Nominative Case, Ergative Case, Absolutive Case, Semantics, Syntax

Introduction

Tenyidie is a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in Nagaland in the North-East of India. It is a tonal language and tone plays a major role in determining the case forms of the language.

This paper examines Tone as it operates on firstly the case system and secondly on a set of monotransitive verbs in the language. The description of the case system in Tenyidie is based on Dixon, 1994. Using Dixon's Nominal Hierarchy as a model, a hierarchy of Case System in Tenyidie is set up by incorporating tones and suffixes to differentiate cases. Though traditional case labels like nominative, accusative, have been used to describe the case forms, it would however be good to first draw one's attention to the fact, as found in the literature, that languages can be divided into two types as far as case marking is concerned. The two types are:

1. Languages which have a semantically based marking, and,
2. Languages which have a syntactically based marking.

Under semantically based marking we have languages where the grammatical marking directly reflects the meaning of a particular sentence in an instance of use (eg. whether the action is purposeful or accidental), while under syntactically based marking we have those languages where grammatical marking relates to the prototypical meaning of the verb used (eg. the subject of 'hit' will always be marked in the same way, irrespective of whether the hitting was done accidently or on purpose).

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Case labels such as ergative, absolutive, nominative, accusative are only applicable to languages with syntactically based marking (Dixon 23). Against this backdrop the following discussion demonstrates that Tenyidie follows both semantic based marking, to some extent, and syntactic based marking where the interplay with tones occurs.

Tenyidie: A Semantic Based Case-Marking Language

In Tenyidie some core NPs can be marked by the suffix $-e^{1}$ or else left unmarked. There are some intransitive verbs like *na* 'laugh', *rəkhu* 'cough', *və* 'go', *vər* 'come', *ni mə par* 'get mad', which can take either $- e$ or zero marking on their S^{2} NP depending on the deliberateness of the act. Some other intransitive verbs on the other hand allow only zero marking (these include *sie* 'die', *memie* 'grow', *tha* 'stand', *ze* 'sleep'). Among transitive verbs some can never have $-e$ on their A NP (e.g. *dislike*, *like*). This is when the A NP is a 1/2 singular personal pronoun. If the A NP is a third person it is mostly the case that the occurrence of $-e$ is obligatory. This phenomenon can be referred to the Nominal Hierarchy which will be discussed in section 3.

The other transitive verbs may alternate $-e$ and zero marking (e.g. *hit*, *kill*, *eat*, *cook*, *give*).

There is a semantic basis to these alternate markings of A and S; the $-e$ suffix indicates that the actor is acting deliberately, or in control of the situation, or for some reason fulfilling some obligation, or emphasizing her/his role in the action.

Examples (1) and (2) illustrate a transitive verb being used in different ways. In sentence (1) we find the occurrence of the suffix $-e$ which gives the interpretation of deliberateness, volitionality or emphasis. In contrast, sentence (2) illustrates the absence of $-e$ and the interpretation of (1) is lost.

1. a - e   puo   sibɔ   wi-wa-te
   I - emph/vol her/his tree   cut-compl-prs perf
   'I have cut her/his tree.'(volitional/emphasizing role of the speaker)
2. a - Ø   puo   sibɔ   wi-wa-te
   I   her/his tree   cut-compl-prs perf
   'I have cut her/his tree.'

In sentences (3) and (4) the presence and absence of $-e$ clearly distinguishes sentence "Tsibu beat" where 'Tsibu' is the agent and "(Someone) beat Tsibu" where 'Tsibu' is the patient.

3. tsibu - e   və-ʃə
   Tsibu-agt   beat-asp
   'Tsibu beat.'

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[2] In Dixon's terminology, S is the subject of an intransitive verb and A is the subject of a transitive verb.

4. tsibu - Ø və-ʃə
   Tsibu   beat-asp
   '(Someone) beat Tsibu.'

Tenyidie: A Syntactic Based Case-Marking Language
As mentioned in section 2 there are some monotransitive verbs in Tenyidie that can never have the *-e* marking on their A NP (e.g. *dislike, like*). This is true only when the A NP is a 1/2 singular personal pronoun. The converse is, where the A NP (first and second singular personal pronouns) takes zero marking the *-e* marking is obligatory with the other A NPs. Sentences (5) – (8) illustrate this point. In sentences (5) and (6) we have the 1ˢᵗ and 2ⁿᵈ singular personal pronouns as the A NPs and we find that the occurrence of the suffix *-e* makes the sentence unacceptable, whereas in sentences (7) and (8) the A NP is in the third person and the occurrence of *-e* is obligatory.

5a. á − Ø   pùo   ŋu   a   ni-ya   mɔ
    I   him/her   see   1sg   happy-asp neg
    'I dislike him/her.'

 b. * á − e   pùo   ŋù a ni-ya   mɔ
6a. nɔ́ − Ø   pùo   ŋù   n   ni-ya   mɔ
    you   him/her   see   2sg   happy-asp neg
    'You dislike him/her.'

 b. * nɔ́ - e   pùo   ŋù n   ni-ya   mɔ
7a. pùo -e   pùo   ŋù   pùo ni-ya   mɔ
    she/he   him/her   see   3sg   happy-asp neg
    'She/He dislikes him/her.'

7b. *pùo - Ø   pùo   ŋù pùo ni-ya   mɔ
8a. bunɔ - e   pùo   ŋù   pùo ni-ya   mɔ
    Buno   him/her   see   3sg   happy-asp neg
    'Buno dislikes him/her.'

 b. * buno - Ø   pùo   ŋù pùo ni-ya   mɔ

Dixon (1994:35) mentions that a language can have both syntactically and semantically based marking, and that it is possible "for a language to effectively combine the two possibilities." In view of the *-e* marking on A NPs which are proper nouns including the third person pronoun, and zero marking on A NPs which are pronouns on the one hand, and the pronouns inflecting for the accusative case on the other hand, one is drawn to the split conditioned by the referents of core NPs that if pronouns and nouns have different systems of case inflection, then the pronoun system will be accusative, and the noun system ergative and never the other way round (Dixon 84).

Following this, the Nominal Hierarchy sets up a hierarchy in terms of which accusative/ergative splits are motivated. This relates to the fact that certain kinds of NPs are very likely to be the controller of an event, others less likely, others most unlikely.

1ˢᵗ person Pronouns Animate.	2ⁿᵈ person pronouns	Demonstratives Proper 3ʳᵈ person	nouns	Common nouns Human,
	Inanimate	pronouns		

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more likely to be in A than in O function

Table 1: The Nominal Hierarchy (Dixon 85)

According to Dixon, "those participants at the left-hand end of the hierarchy are most likely to be agents, to be in A function, and those at the right-hand end are most likely to be patients, to be in O function". The whole proposal is based on economy and that it is more "natural and economical to 'mark' a participant when it is in an unaccustomed role". That is, it would be expected of a case-marking language "to provide morphological marking of an NP from the right-hand side of the hierarchy when it is in A function, and of an NP from the left-most end when in O function (as an alternative to providing ergative marking for all A NPs)" (Dixon 85). Basing on this principle one can say that Tenyidie follows a syntactic based case-marking system and within which it exhibits a split ergative system based on person and number[3]. Table 2 below presents the case forms in Tenyidie indicated by tone and the -e marking.

Case Proper Noun	First Person	Second Person	Third Person
nom	á	nɔ́	
erg Kevi-e			pùo-e
acc Kevi	à	ǹ	pùo

Table 2: Case Forms in Tenyidie

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[3] This principle is, however, not applicable in totality.

Following the case forms given in Table 2 in addition to examples (5)-(8), we can set up a case system for Tenyidie as given below:

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A	Ø	Ø	-e	-e	-nie
S	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
O	low tone	n̄	low tone	Ø	Ø
	1st person	2nd person	3rd person	Other	NPs
	Interrogatives.				
	[Singular Personal Pronouns]			[+ Animate]	

Table 3: The Case System in Tenyidie

An ergative case is used with NPs on the right hand end, up to some point in the middle of the hierarchy, and an accusative case from that point on up to the extreme left of the hierarchy.

Here we have the accusative being realized as low tone[4] in the first and third person singular pronouns, and *n̄* in the second person, while the nominative is unmarked[5] – Ø. For the right most columns we have the ergative – *e* (for third person singular pronoun + other animate NPs) and *–nie* (for interrogatives) opposed to absolutive – Ø. Note that there is an overlapping on the third person singular pronoun, where the A is marked for ergative and the O is marked for the accusative.

Monotransitive Verbs in Tenyidie (V_A and V_O verbs)

This section gives an analysis of tone as it operates on monotransitive verbs in Tenyidie. A very brief description of the V_A and V_O verbs is as follows: V_A verbs carry a high tone and do not permit object pro-drop. V_O verbs on the other hand carry a low tone and do not permit object pro-drop.

The examples in (9) – (12) illustrate this:

V_O Verbs

9a. á   n̄   ŋù (V_O)
    I nom   you saw
    'I saw you.'

  b. *á   Ø   ŋù
    I nom   saw

10a. puo-e   à   ŋ̀ù (V_O)

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[4] Nilotic languages also have a case system marked by tone in which the accusative is the unmarked term (Anderson 1988 cited in Dixon 1994:65, 188).

[5] The high tone which marks the A/S NP in 1/2 person is being taken as unmarked.

he/she-erg you saw

'He/She saw you.'

b. *puo-e   Ø   ŋù

he/she-erg   saw

V_A Verbs

11a. á   tsibu   ŋú (V_A)

I nom   Tsibu   saw

'I saw Tsibu.'

b. á   Ø   ŋú

I nom   saw

'I saw.'

12a. nɔ́   tsibu   ŋú (V_A)

you   Tsibu   saw

'You saw Tsibu.'

b. nɔ́   Ø   ŋú (V_A)

you   saw

'You saw.'

The high tone that marks the A/S NP (á , nɔ́) also marks the verb i.e. the V_A verb. This is illustrated in sentences (11) and (12). In sentences (9) and (10), the low tone that marks the O NP (à, ǹ) also marks the verb, i.e. the V_O verb.

If we compare sentences (11a) and (11b) we find that the occurrence of the O NP with the V_A verbs is optional. In contrast, sentences (9) and (10) illustrate that the occurrence of the O NP with the V_O verbs is, however, obligatory and cannot be dropped.

On the basis that Tenyidie permits *pro* in the object position one can say then that V_A verbs are pro-drop verbs and V_O verbs are non pro-drop verbs.

Though the third person singular pronoun is homophonous for A/S NP position and O NP position, it is interesting to note that this V_A versus V_O tone distinction is retained in the third person singular pronoun as illustrated in sentences (13a) and (13b). This distinction is however lost with other O NPs including interrogatives as shown in sentences (14a, b) and (15a, b).

13a. pùo-e   ŋú

she/he-erg saw

'She/He saw.'

b. pùo-e   pùo   ŋù

she/he-erg   him/her   saw

'She/He saw him/her.'

14a. tsibu - e   ŋú

Tsibu-erg saw

'Tsibu saw.'

b. á   tsibu   ŋú

I   Tsibu   saw

'I saw Tsibu.'

15a. supuo-nie   ŋú   ga

who-erg   saw wh q mkr

'Who saw?'
b. nɔ́   supuo   ŋú   ga
   you whom   saw   wh q mkr
   'Whom did you see?'

Similar to the case system given in Table 3, Table 4 sets up a tone system for Tenyidie.

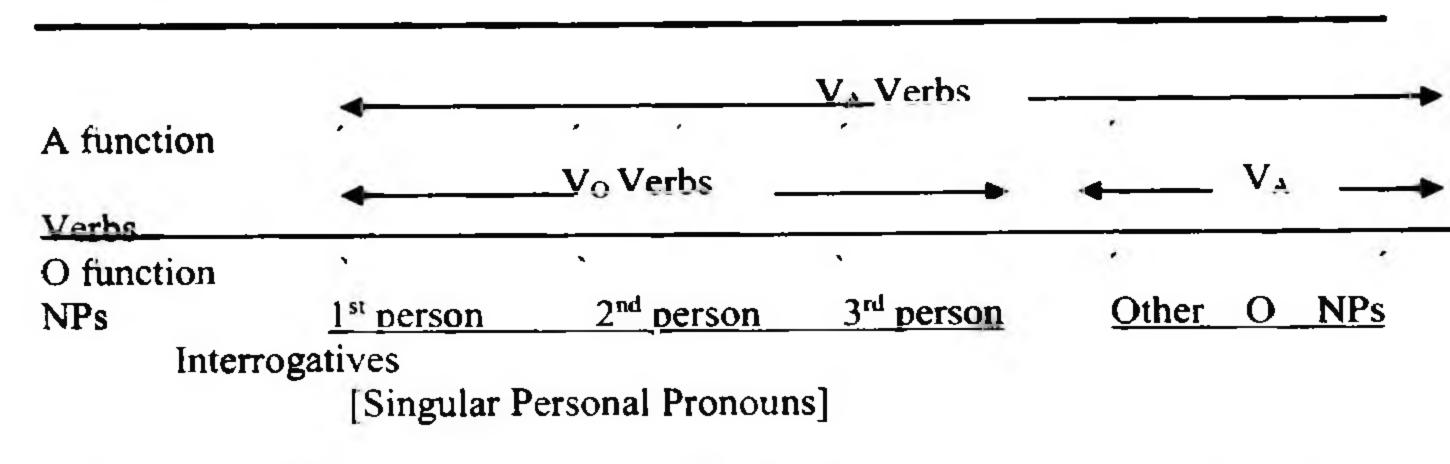| A function			V_A Verbs			
		V_O Verbs			V_A	
O function NPs	`	`	`	´		´
	1st person	2nd person	3rd person	Other O NPs		
Interrogatives						
[Singular Personal Pronouns]						

Table 4: Tone System in Tenyidie with Reference to the Verb in Relation to NPs

In Table 4, the tonal markings indicate the tones on the verb, in relation to the NPs in A function and O function.

With reference to the Nominal Hierarchy, and the Case System, the singular personal pronouns, in Tenyidie, are more likely to be A function. So, when they are in an unaccustomed O function they are marked with the low tone and the verb that occurs with them (in this case the V_O verbs) also carries the same tone. In other words there is agreement between the V_O verbs and their O NPs through tone. On the other hand, the NPs at the right end of the column are more likely to be O function and therefore retain their original tone when they are in an accustomed role. The verbs that occur with them (in this case the V_A verbs), too carry the unmarked high tone. The verbs in the rightward columns are more likely to be in O function.
Note that the V_A verbs have uniformity of tone in relation to all the NPs in A function. This indicates that when an NP is in A function, that NP carries its original tone, even if it is in an unaccustomed role. Due to this it can be said that the V_A verb agrees with the NP that is in A function. As mentioned earlier the V_O form of the verb does not occur by itself with the A NP.
Thus, A is cross-referenced on V_A, and O is cross-referenced on the V_O verb. The set of verbs that pattern in this way are monosyllabic and monotransitive (e.g. ŋu 'see', va 'beat', khrie 'love', bie 'touch', thu 'collide', ze 'pierce') and those that permit an animate O NP.

Conclusion

With reference to the Nominal Hierarchy this paper establishes firstly the Case System in Tenyidie, and secondly a Tone System of the language in relation to the verb and its O NPs.

The paper further illustrates that the language follows a dual system of case marking, and within the syntactic based marking system the language exhibits split ergativity based on person and number. It is pertinent to point out that in the speech of the younger generation the –e marking is either totally dropped or used at all instances irrespective of person or number. The irregular nature of the e-marking is indicative of a case system in transition; and that the language is undergoing change, moving either from an accusative to an ergative system or from an ergative to an accusative system. This is a matter for further study.

Reference

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Abbreviations

agt	agent
asp	aspect
compl	completive
emph	emphasis
erg	ergative
mkr	marker
neg	negative
nom	nominative
sg	singular
vol	volitional
wh q	wh question
1	1st person
2	2nd person
3	3rd person

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