

The marker *-e* in Sylheti: pragmatic, agentive and instrumental uses

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This talk will give a descriptive account of the marker *-e* in Sylheti (ISO 639-3 syl), a language on the Eastern branch of Indo-Aryan languages, spoken in northeast Bangladesh and south Assam, India, as well as in diaspora communities with a significant number of speakers in London.

Our documentation efforts of Sylheti as spoken in London's diaspora community (working with speakers from the Moulvibazar area in the Sylhet district of Bangladesh) show that case-marking patterns differ significantly from Bengali, a 'dialect' of which Sylheti is often considered, with the marker *-e* showing two distinct functions: as an 'optional' agentive marker, illustrated with *beta* 'man' in (1), and as an instrumental marker, an example of which is shown with *samos* 'spoon' in (2). The marker *-e* does not manifest with pronouns.

The distribution of the agentive *-e* follows a split-intransitive system (also referred to as active-stative, agent-patient, unergative-unaccusative) attaching optionally to agents of transitive verbs (as in (1)-(2)), as well as to agents of intransitive verbs which denote physical activities or body-related functions where the agent is the 'performer' (e.g. laugh, cry, run, tremble, dance, sneeze). The marker is, however, ungrammatical with intransitive verbs which denote events which do not involve a prototypical agent (e.g. fall, die, grow, sink, bloom, come). This is illustrated with the optional realisation of *-e* on the agent of the verb *nas-* 'dance' in (3) and the ungrammaticality of *-e* on the single argument of the verb *a-* 'come' in (4).

What differentiates Sylheti from other split-intransitive systems identified cross-linguistically is that the agentive *-e* is 'optional' according to native speakers' intuitions. In fact, pragmatic factors are at play bringing Sylheti closer to what we know about Tibeto-Burman systems (see LaPolla 1995 and Coupe 2011 for pragmatically motivated case marking). In examples (5) and (6) the referent of an agent marked with *-e* is contrasted to the referent of an agent in previous discourse; in (7) we see a contrast on the activity performed by the agent.

The instrumental *-e* also surfaces on natural forces as the cause of an event in an intransitive compound verb construction with the light verb *za-* 'go' (see Butt (2010) on light verbs). This construction does not permit the realisation of an agent. This is illustrated in (8) and (9) where *batash* 'wind' marked with *-e* can surface as the reason for the breaking of the house but the realisation of a proper name *faruk* leads to ungrammaticality, whether marked or unmarked with *-e*. In a compound verb construction with the transitive light verb *la-* 'take', however, both an animate and a natural force NP marked with *-e* are allowed, as indicated in (10) and (11).

This talk will present in detail our findings with respect to the distribution of the marker *-e* in Sylheti and will draw comparisons with other Indo-Aryan languages. Sylheti belongs to the Eastern subgroup but shows similarities with the Western subgroup with respect to marking agentive subjects. However, unlike the Western subgroup, aspect does not seem to play a role in Sylheti; instead, the realisation of *-e* is largely 'optional' and perhaps pragmatically motivated as argued for in Tibeto-Burman languages.

- (1) *beṭa(-e)* *laṭi* *dia* *kutta-ṭa-re* *mar-s-e*
 man(-A) stick with dog-CLF-NA hit-PFV-3
 'The man hit the dog with the stick.'
- (2) *faruk(-e)* *samos-e* *bat* *xa-e*
 Faruk(-A) spoon-INSTR rice eat-3
 'Faruk eats rice with a spoon.'
- (3) *iṣrak(-e)* *nas-e*
 Iṣrak(-A) dance-3
 'Iṣrak dances.'
- (4) *faruk(*-e)* *a-i-s-e*
 Faruk(-A) come-CONJ-PFV-3
 'Faruk came.'
- (5) *iṣrak* *kita* *xa-i-s-e* *ismail-e* *kita* *xa-i-s-e*
 Iṣhak what eat-CONJ-PFV-3 Ismail-A what eat-CONJ-PFV-3
 'What did Iṣhak eat, what did Ismail eat?'
- (6) *riana* *mat-e-r* *moriam-e* *lex-e-r* *ami* *bo-i* *tax-s-i*
 Riana talk-3-IPFV Moriam-A write-3-IPFV 1sg sit-CONJ stay-PFV-1
 'Riana is talking. Mariam is writing. I've stayed seated.'
- (7) *fua* *xand-ṭf-e* *oxon* *fua-e* *guma-r*
 boy cry-PFV-3 now boy-A sleep-IPFV
 'The boy has cried. Now the boy is sleeping.'
- (8) (*batash-e*) *gor* *baṅg-i* *ge-s-e*
 (wind-INS) house break-CONJ go-PFV-3
 'The house broke (by the wind).'
- (9) **faruk(-e)* *gor* *baṅg-i* *ge-s-e*
 Faruk(-A) house break-CONJ go-PFV-3
 'Faruk broke the house.'
- (10) *batash-e* *gor* *baṅg-i* *la-i-s-e*
 wind-INS house break-CONJ take-CONJ-PFV-3
 'The wind broke the house.'
- (11) *faruk(-e)* *gor* *baṅg-i* *la-i-s-e*
 Faruk(-A) house break-CONJ take-CONJ-PFV-3
 'Faruk broke the house.'

References

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