

## A Proposed Link Between Different Subject Marking and Backgrounding: Evidence from Sa

This paper discusses a proposed link between the concepts of backgrounding and different subject marking, an idea that arises from new data from Sa [pup] (Madang < TNG) (Pawley & Hammarström 2018). Sa is a previously undescribed language of Papua New Guinea for which I collected a preliminary corpus in the summer of 2022. Like many Papuan languages, Sa exhibits clause chaining and switch-reference marking. Clause chaining involves the co-subordination (Foley & Van Valin 1984) of one or more minimally marked clauses to one final clause that bears the full inflectional morphology of the chain. Within a clause chain, switch-reference marking indexes the identity or non-identity of a given clause's subject with that of the following clause (Van Gijn 2016). While Sa same subject (SS) marking is straightforward, different subject (DS) has two separate forms: *-nde*, which marks DS in the foreground of a narrative, and *-ndna*, which marks DS in the background.

Here I define 'foreground' as events that move the Main Event Line (MEL) of a narrative forward, and 'background' as events peripheral to the MEL, including scene-setting, elaboration, flashbacks, and the like (Labov and Waletzky 1967, Hopper 1979).

The existence of a relationship between SR and the MEL is not entirely novel. A frequent observation is that backgrounded clauses are likely to be 'skipped' by the SR system, either going unmarked or receiving whatever SR marking the most recent foreground clause took (Reesink 2014, van Gijn 2016). However, this influence of foreground/background on SR is essentially one between the MEL and SR as a whole; if an event is construed as part of the background, then reference-tracking is simply overwritten.

The Sa system differs in that the morphologically marked foreground/background distinction is made specifically within the context of DS clauses. That is, the subject-tracking function remains intact regardless of the clause's relationship to the MEL, but, specifically within DS marking, there is an additional, morphologically marked distinction between foreground and background.

Examples (1) and (2) illustrate this distinction. In (1), a knife (introduced in the previous sentence) breaks the head of a possum, killing it. As the narrative in question is about hunting possums, both events are highly salient and move the MEL forward, and the DS verb is marked with *-nde*. In (2), the speaker starts with the event that moves the narrative forward: the killing of a baby. When she goes back to elaborate on this action, detailing how it occurred, she uses *-ndna* for DS marking. Crucially, the subject is still changing between each clause; the SR system is not ignoring subject tracking in favor of foreground/background distinction. Rather, it marks this distinction specifically within the context of DS.

This paper aims to accomplish three goals: first, it simply characterizes the system in Sa. Second, it situates the Sa data within a wider typological framework of the relationship between foregrounding/backgrounding and SR. Finally, it attempts to answer the new question raised by the Sa data: why is the foreground/background distinction manifest specifically in DS marking?

What overlap exists between the semantics of DS and background that led to grammaticalization and subsequent preservation of this distinction?

Examples:

1. *kindili mbog-nde hiou si go kuma-e kawo-ndu*  
head break-DS.F possum one TOP die-SS come.down-SG.FPST  
“[the knife] broke the possum's head and he died and fell down.”

2. *Gilnandi tile-ndu wula minjegi ni-ndu*  
Gilnandi stand-SG.FPST child small kill-SG.FPST  
“Gilnandi got up and killed the child”

*Hai si imba punu-ndna ia no gama tuma-ndna kuma-ndu*  
stone cook finish give.to.3SG-DS.B eat 3SG lung cook-DS.B die-SG.FPST  
“She cooked a stone and fed it to him and his lungs cooked and he died.”

Abbreviations:

DS.F Different Subject, Foreground

DS.B Different Subject, Background

TOP Topic

SS Same subject

SG Singular

FPST Far Past

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