SENTENTIAL NOMINALIZATION AND RECURSION IN PIRAHÃ

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I. Everett (2005, 2009) claims that Pirahã, a language spoken in the Amazon region of Brazil, is non-recursive. With respect to the availability of recursion within the nominal domain, Everett claims that only one level of embedding is possible within possessive noun phrases:

(1) xipoógi hoáoií   hi   xaagá   (2)   [kó'oí hoagí] kai   gáihií 'íga
    xipoógi shotgun 3Psg be   *Ko'oí son   daughter that true*
    This is Xipoógi shotgun   'That is Kó'oí's son's daughter'

II. In this presentation, we will present new data showing that multiple levels of recursion is indeed available within possessive noun phrases in Pirahã. As (3) and (4) show recursive possessors are possible.

(3)   agoa Iapohen motohoi   (4) niupai hi   igato huakue kopae
       canoe Iapohen motor   *dog   3PSg tail   long   back*
       'Iapohen's canoe's motor'   'The long tail of my black dog'

Interestingly, however, it interacts with word order. In (4) and (5), the order Possessor>Noun is inverted in the second level of embedding, as the possessor appears post-nominally. We argue that this is to be related to the semantic distinction between inalienable and alienable possessive relations. In (3)-(4), the semantic relation between the possessor and the noun is inalienable in the level of embedded (*motor boat*, *dog tail*), but alienable in the second level (*canoe Iapohen*, *dog my*).

III. Everett also presents the so-called *gai-sai* constructions (5) as evidence for the lack of recursion within the sentential domain.

(5) Maria hi   gaisai   massi   ti
    Maria 3Psg say-NOMINALIZER   beautiful I
    ' Maria said I am beautiful'

According to Everett's analysis, -*sai* is a nominalizer morpheme. Hence, in (5) the matrix verb is nominalized in order to avoid a recursive structure in which one sentence in embedded inside the other. Assuming –*sai* to be a nominalizer, as it functions as a nominalizer elsewhere (6), we suggest that (5) is another instance of possessive noun phrases. Hence, (5) means (7). This is the only syntactic context in which the pronoun *hi* appear. This pronoun is also available in possessive constructions, as shown in (1). As we will also show these constructions present the same order restrictions notice above for possessive nouns phrases. Hence, these are cases in which a verb is nominalized and the whole construction is understood as a possessive noun phrase, which, as we will show, contains and embedded sentence as the complement of the verb. In Pirahã there is overt copular verb 'to be', but as we will suggest, (5)-(7) might involve a covert one.

(6) xiohói xiboít-i-sai
    wind cutter-NOMINALIZER
    'Propeller'
(7) Maria's saying was I am beautiful

Keywords: nominalization; Pirahã; recursion; possessive constructions

References

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