

# Negation and Grammatical functions in Skou

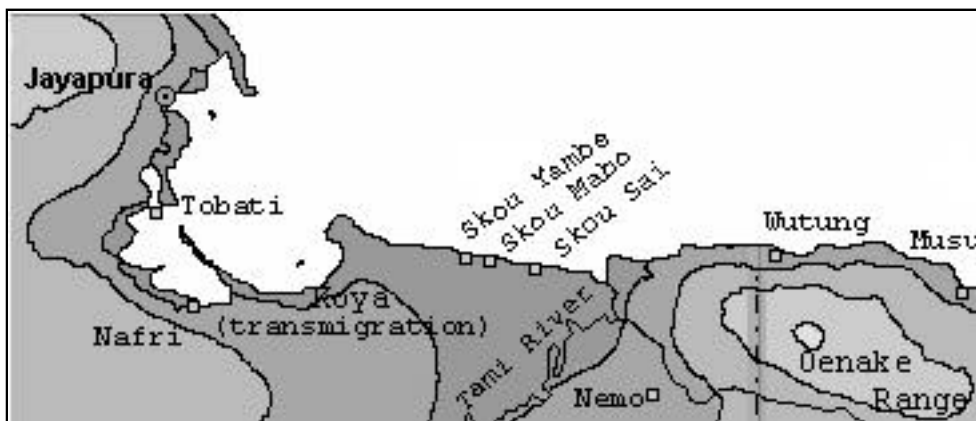
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## 1. The Skou language

Skou is known from the work of Cowan (1952a, 1952b, 1957), Galis (1955), Voorhoeve (1971, 1975 and elsewhere), Silzer and Clouse (1991), and Donohue (1999, 2000, 2002). It has been referred to as Sko, Skou, Səkou, and Tumawo, and is referred to locally as *Te Máwo pílang nè ne* ('Our, the Mabu people's, language'). Skou is related to other languages in the Skou family of which it is the westernmost member.<sup>1</sup> It has many features typical of a language of New Guinea: SOV word order, some agreement on the verb, reasonably frequent use of verb serialisation, switch-reference mechanisms, and optional case marking.

This is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. The Skou villages and other features west of the Tami River



There are 700 speakers of the language, almost exclusively in these three villages. 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. I shall refer to the language as Skou, following recent linguistic references to the language and speaker preference.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> More distant relations can be established with other members of the Macro-Skou family (including, but not confined to, Krisa (I'saka), Rawo, Puari, and Warapu (= Barupu)), albeit in a substantially different arrangement to Laycock's (1973, 1975) family tree. These more distantly related languages have morphological structures significantly different to those exemplified in Skou and the other languages discussed in section 4.3.

<sup>2</sup> Skou has a fairly simple segmental phonology, with 13 consonants and 7 vowels, arranged in (C)V syllables. Nasalisation is contrastive on vowels, and five pitch melodies are present on words. Examples are presented in orthography: nasalisation is indicated by *-ng*, /*ɲ*/ and /*ɳ*/ are written with the digraphs *ue* and *oe*, high pitch is shown with *´* and falling pitch with *`*. The representation of the other vowels and the consonants follows IPA conventions, except that *y* represents [j ~ ɟ ~ dz ~ dʒ] (in a cline from younger to older speakers), and *j* represents [ɟ<sup>h</sup> ~ ɟ] for older speakers, and [dʒ] for younger ones.

## 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.<sup>3</sup> Negation is marked by a particle *ka* that follows the predicate, regardless of the lexical category of predicate, as seen in (1) and (2):<sup>4</sup>

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.'
- b. *Pe=ing a è-ne-nì=ne ka.*  
3SG.F=the wife-1SG.DAT-1SG.GEN=1SG.DAT NEG  
'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 transitive predicates:

Transitive 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.'

A complication arises when we consider a predicate that contains an 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.'

<sup>3</sup> Specifically, it is impossible for negation to occur with the continuative / non-completive aspect that is marked by serialisation with the verbs *i* 'be' and *li* 'do'.

<sup>4</sup> The following abbreviations have been used in glosses of sentences and elsewhere. Portmanteau agreement markers use the following abbreviations: 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.





(21) \* *Ke barí pá ke fue m̀è poe*

(22) *Ke=barí ke=fue [ móe m̀è=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 m̀è pé*

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

(24) *Ke=barí ke=lúe [ pá m̀è=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 m̀è poe ka.*

(26) *Ke=barí ke=lúe [ pa-long móe m̀è=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 m̀è 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 transitive, 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 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 transitive.

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.<sup>6</sup>
- it is typologically highly marked for a negative sentence to exhibit more transitive features than a positive one

<sup>6</sup> It is also true, but not pursued here in details, that not all post-verbal nominals are obliques; some predicates such as ‘be jealous of’ and ‘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.



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 appears to have some merit: in common with applicatives, we can see, when the morpheme *ka* is added to a clause the clause appears with one extra object. This argument is not tenable, however. It is quite possible, as we have seen, for a base intransitive clause to appear with *ka* and to acquire no new arguments. Similarly a transitive clause may appear with *ka* and acquire no second object, if there is no location or goal specified as part of 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 that there are independently attested applicatives in Skou, and they do not create preverbal objects in the fashion that the negated clauses display. When the applicative *-na* is added to manner-of-motion predicates, the clause may take a goal; otherwise, the clause must appear without a goal, or the manner-of-motion verb must be serialised with a simple motion verb. For instance, the only way to add a direction to the clause

- (34) *Bàng ne=n-á.*  
yesterday 1PL=1PL-walk  
‘Yesterday we walked.’

is with the addition of a motion verb, or with the applicative; the verb *há* ‘walk’ (and the other manner-of-motion verbs) cannot support a goal:

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

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

- (37) \* *Bàng ne=n-á báng.*  
yesterday 1PL=1PL-walk beach  
‘Yesterday we walked to the beach.’<sup>7</sup>

Note that the applicative, when present, marks the applicative object as a post-verbal argument, in keeping with its status as the object of a low-transitive predicate (see footnote 4).

<sup>7</sup> 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* (ii) *Ne=n-á ne ti báng.*  
1PL=1PL-walk beach 1PL.be 1PL.do 1PL=1PL-walk 1PL.be 1PL.do beach  
‘We are walking to the beach.’ ‘We are walking on the beach.’

This is an argument against the interpretation of the negative morpheme as having an applicative function (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 runs counter to the evidence that there are no ditransitive verbs in Skou. Predicates that are traditionally thought of as ditransitive 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 transitive verbs, *wé* ‘get’ and *leng* ‘give’, each of which subcategorises for just two arguments.

‘Ditransitive’ predicate expressed by verb serialisation

- (38) *Rópu ke=wé leng nì.*  
 book 3SG.NF=get.F give 1SG  
 ‘He gave me a book.’

Despite this, we find that when a transitive 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 transitive predicate with oblique

- (39) 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.

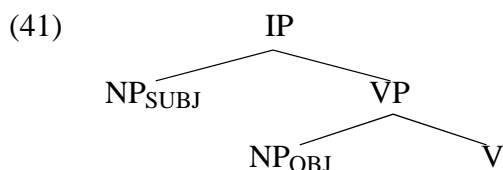
- (40) a. *Kóe pe=fu pá ke=k-ang ka.*  
 sago.cake 3SG.F=see.F house 3SG.NF=3SG.NF-eat NEG  
 ‘She saw that he didn’t eat the sago pancake in the house.’
- b. *Pá pe=fu kóe ke=k-ang ka.*  
 house 3SG.F=see.F sago.cake 3SG.NF=3SG.NF-eat NEG  
 ‘She saw that he didn’t eat the sago pancake in the house.’

This suggests that the sentences in (39) are ditransitive. The complete dearth of root-ditransitive 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 show two positions for objects, whereas this is not attested elsewhere in the language.

The movement analysis of Chomskyan theory offers a simple account of the data that Skou presents to us. We assume that the structure of a transitive clause can be represented in an X’-theory phrase structure model with something like the following diagram:<sup>8</sup>

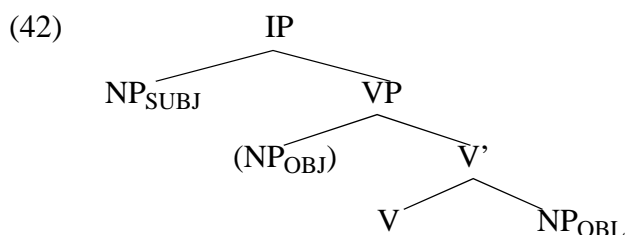
<sup>8</sup> I have applied a certain degree of ‘pruning’ of the trees, following the example of Bresnan (2001), for the sake of clarity.

Transitive sentence, annotated



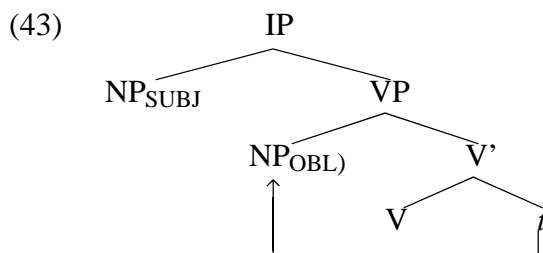
and that obliques appear in a post-verbal, but yet VP-internal, position:

(In)transitive sentence with oblique



then we can model the kind of sentence seen in (4) 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



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. 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 from 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, involving the lack of ditransitive predicates in the language, have been presented earlier in this section.

Now, given this model in a movement-based theory, we can interpret it in terms of a lexicalist grammar by assuming that there are two separate components. 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. So far the two models do not show major differences.

The 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 4), and that they are being displaced positionally, but not functionally. This can be shown not to be true: from a sentence like (38) it is possible to show the goal with raising, as in (99):

- (44) *Ni 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 valency.

It might well be that the lexicalist interpretation of this data is there, waiting to be teased out of the movement ‘metaphor’. But I haven’t spotted it yet.

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