

Information Structure in Tinrin & Neku: topicalization, impersonal constructions, & passive

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Abstract

This paper discusses the information structures of Tinrin and Neku, with reference to the topic-shift constructions and the formation of passive structures by the use of impersonal pronouns (defocused agents). Another agentless passive construction is also discussed for Tinrin, which exhibits with other constructions a continuum along the active-passive axis.

In both languages, the basic word order of sentence is: V-(O)-S(=A). Their clauses can be: (a) non-verbal: NP- (NP) and (b) verbal: VP- (NP). The verb is preceded by a proclitic subject pronoun, which agrees in person and number with the nominal subject that optionally follows the predicate. The head of VP may be preceded or followed by a number of tense-aspect markers and verbal modifiers. Although the normal situation is for the predicate to begin a clause, the first slot of a clause can be filled by any NP (subject, object or oblique argument), or adverbial phrase. These fronted elements normally function as topics, highlighting what is under discussion, either previously mentioned or assumed in the discourse. The topic in Tinrin is thus expressed in a topic-shift construction and is not marked by any specific topic marker. In the following sentence, for example, the topicalised subject NP, *truuo*, is placed sentence initially: *Truuo rru=ta pù* (man.dl, 3dl, hit, flying_fox) 'Two men, they hit (killed) flying foxes.'

Tinrin and Neku have unique constructions in which the object NP is topicalised, and the subject pronoun slot is occupied by an impersonal pronoun even when the postposed subject (agent of the action) is expressed explicitly. Tinrin has another construction using *-nrî* that applies only to a closed set of verbs, and never occurs with the underlying agent, i.e. the agent is totally suppressed; together with constructions where both the impersonal pronoun and *-nrî* are present, they form a continuum from active to passive meanings. On the other hand, Neku does not have this agentless passive but constructions with the impersonal pronoun, whose structure is again different from that of Tinrin, as it shares a similarity with a participial relative clause.

The variety of constructions in these two New Caledonian languages discussed in this paper show various devices employed to shift or impose topic status on a NP, as well as to defocus an agent NP, creating a range of constructions lined up along the axis of active and passive perspectives.