

# Correlates of Nonconfigurationality

Claire Bovern

Rice University, Dept. of Linguistics — [bowern@rice.edu](mailto:bowern@rice.edu)

NELS, UMass Amherst, October 28th 2005

## §1. Some questions I address (in more or less detail):

- There is a cluster of properties shared by many nonconfigurational, polysynthetic languages. What is responsible for this clustering?
- Why doesn't Bardi fit?
- Can Bardi be included?

## §2. Outline

- The punchline
- Background to the problem
- The problem itself
- The solution

## §3. The punchline

- Many incidental correlations in non-configurational languages **aren't** due to the nonconfigurationality *per se*.
- They're due to the semantics of argument exponence on the verb.
- Specifically, they're due to the obligatory referential (and usually definite) reading that such exponence takes.

## §4. Tests for radical nonconfigurationality include:

- free argument omission
- extensive discontinuous constituency
- no/limited subject/object asymmetries (e.g. no evidence for VP)
- absence of binding effects
- no weak cross-over

(Baker 1996, 2000, Hale 1983, Jelinek 1984, Speas 1990)

## §5. Prominent analysis: Pronominal Argument Hypothesis:

- Metcalfe (1975), Hale (1983), Jelinek (1984), Austin and Bresnan (1996), Baker (1996, 2000), etc
- Markers on the verb themselves saturate theta roles, and behave somewhat like pronouns; free arguments, when they appear, are anaphoric adjuncts.
- "Inherently pronominal" implies always referential, as does "anaphoric".

## §6. Incidental corollaries of the P.A.H.: (due primary, to my knowledge, to Mark Baker)

- no non-finite verbal forms
- no referentially defective nouns
- (A tendency to avoid indefinites)
  - obligatory WH-fronting
  - no simple anaphors
  - no non-anaphoric agreement
- a weak (or non-existent) distinction between nouns and adjectives

- no quirky case marking
- §7. Problematic cases: The corollaries of the P.A.H. apply to many languages, from Bininj Gun-Wok to Mohawk. However, there are exceptions:
- Rembarrnga – has infinitives (Nordlinger and Saulwick 2001)
  - Ngalakgan – non-anaphoric agreement (Baker 2002)
  - Bardi – problematic in almost every respect! (Bowern 2004)
- §8. Bardi has all the core properties of non-configurationality . . .
- free argument omission (basic Greenbergian Word Order is V)
  - absence of testable subj/obj asymmetries (no weak crossover, no binding effects, etc)
  - discontinuous constituency (although less than Warlpiri)
- §9. but none of the ancillary correlations of the P.A.H.:
- nonfinite verb forms
  - referentially defective nouns; nonreferential and indefinite agreement
  - non-obligatory WH-fronting (and multiple WH)
  - Noun/Adj distinction
  - non-anaphoric agreement
  - quirky case marking
- §10. Multiple WH
- a. *Anggi anggabanim inarligal?*  
what who-ERG 3-TR-eat-REC.PST  
‘Who ate what?’
  - b. *Anggi inarligal anggabanim*
- §11. Nonfinite forms (show obj but not subj agreement)
- Irrol-ong i-ng-oorroo-moonoo-ngoo=jin=irr arranga m-onji-n*  
spear-INST 3-PST-AUG-throw-APPL<sub>2</sub>=3MIN.IO=3AUG.DO without INFIN-spear-cont.  
‘They ‘threw’ spears at him without hitting him.’ (Metcalf 1975:103)
- §12. Referentially defective nouns and agreement mismatch
- Boonyjanim inarligaljirrirr aarli.*  
all-ERG 3SG-TRANS-eat-REC.PST=3AUG.IO=3AUG.DO fish  
“Everyone<sub>i</sub> ate their<sub>i</sub> fish (pl).”
- §13. Previous treatments:
- Baker (2000): They’re referential.
  - Mithun (2003): They’re referential and definite, at least in Yup’ik and Navajo.
  - Evans (1999): They lack definiteness and referentiality features altogether. They aren’t the same thing as pronouns.
- §14. This talk: All of the above. Sketch of the argument:
- Languages vary to the extent to which pronouns are licit with non-referential/indefinite/generic readings
    - English *it*: ok as expletive;

- generic/impersonal readings of *you*: “to make rotten bananas taste good you’ve got to put them in the freezer”;
- donkey sentences,
- “lazy” anaphor – “I set up superduper spam filtering for ling407 but they aren’t working (obviously)”
- French *il* vs *on*

- §15.
- Suppose that nonconfigurational languages also exhibit this kind of variability, but with a different distribution.
  - Situations vary in which pronouns can receive non-referential (etc) readings (lang-specific lexical differences, coding differences);
  - Therefore, the rareness of these readings in English is not a strong argument against my view for nonconfig. languages.
  - We also know that within the same language, agreement markers can behave differently (Zulu, Chichewa etc subj vs. obj markers)

§16. Typology of referential polysynthesis:

Navajo and Yup’ik:	strongly dispreferred or ungrammatical
Mohawk and Warlpiri:	licit in explicit contexts (always definite when no free nominal; variable when accompanied by a nominal)
Bininj Gun-wok:	licit in more contexts (e.g. licit when non-anaphoric too)
Bardi:	licit everywhere.

§17. Conclusions 1: What this doesn’t solve

- Bardi’s argument/adjunct distinction in free nominals
- quirky case marking
- Infinitives (valency reduction)

§18. Conclusions 2: What this solves

- The correlations noted by Baker are due to the semantics of the agreement markers in Mohawk, etc, not to nonconfigurationality.
- Bardi looks different from the other nonconfig languages because of its ability to license non-ref readings of verbal argument exponence.
- explains many of the issues regarding differing behavior of other radically non-config languages too.

## References

- Austin, Peter and Joan Bresnan (1996). Non-configurationality in Australian languages. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 14: 215–268.
- Baker, Brett (2002). How referential is agreement? In Nicholas Evans and H-J Sasse (eds.), *Problems of Polysynthesis*.
- Baker, Mark (1996). *The polysynthesis parameter*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baker, Mark (2000). The natures of nonconfigurationality. In Mark Baltin and Chris Collins (eds.), *Handbook of contemporary syntactic theory*, Blackwell handbooks in linguistics, Blackwells, pp. 407–438.
- Baker, Mark (2003). *Lexical categories: Nouns, verbs, and adjectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bowern, Claire (2004). *Historical Change in Complex Predication: Bardi Verb Morphology in Historical Perspective*. PhD dissertation, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Evans, Nicholas (1999). Argument affixes in polysynthetic languages. *STUF* 52: 255–281.
- Hale, Kenneth L. (1983). Warlpiri and the grammar of non-configurational languages. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 1: 5–59.
- Jelinek, Eloise (1984). Empty categories, case and configurationality. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 2: 39–76.
- Metcalfe, Christopher Douglas (1975). *Bardi verb morphology*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics B30.

- Mithun, Marianne (2003). Pronouns and agreement: the information status of pronominal affixes. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 101:2: 235–278.
- Nordlinger, Rachel and Adam Saulwick (2001). Infinitives in polysynthesis: the case of rembarrnga. In Nicholas Evans and HJ Sase (eds.), *Problems of Polysynthesis*, pp. 185–201.
- Speas, Margaret (1990). *Phrase structure in natural language*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.