

A Morphosyntactic Analysis of Some Transitive And Intransitive Mahale Verbs

Towhid Bin Muzaffar*, Haroonuzzaman
Department of English
Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB)
16 Aftabuddin Ahmed Road
Bashundhara R.A., Dhaka, Bangladesh
*Corresponding Author: towhid@iub.edu.bd

Abstract

As the powerful languages of the world are continuously pushing the powerless languages to the fringe, the peripheral languages are always on the brink of extinction. That is why, the key purpose of this IUB-funded longitudinal project is to document an endangered language, Mahale, spoken by an indigenous community in Northern Bangladesh by describing its grammar for its revitalization. The subjects of our study are the Mahale people who live in two villages in Northern Bangladesh. The data was collected through focused group discussions and interviews of native speakers of the Mahale language in these two villages. The onomasiological elicitations collected through intensive interviews of Mahale people have been analyzed and compared to describe the various grammatical systems - nominal, pronominal, adjectival, adverbial and verbal. This study adopts a descriptive approach to analyze Mahale morphosyntax. As the major area of this study is the verbal and nominal systems, the current paper looks at the use of Mahale morphemes in various syntactic constructions. Some transitive and intransitive verbs have been used to determine whether Mahale is an ergative, accusative or neutral language in this paper.

Keywords: endangered language, preservation, linguistics, morphology, syntax

Introduction

In this study, we looked at several transitive and intransitive verbs. We reviewed the nominal morphology and described it. We also determined the morphological markings on the verbs. We have compared these to find out whether the alignment is ergative, accusative or neutral. In particular, we have presented data from the present continuous tense and the simple past tense. We have also compared animate and inanimate objects in the transitive sentences in both tenses.

For a detailed description of the script used in this paper, please refer to Muzaffar et. al. (2018).

There are several dialects of the Mahale language. Our paper is based on the dialect spoken in Belpukur and Pachandar, two villages in Rajshahi, Bangladesh (project site). For a detailed discussion of the project sites, please refer to Muzaffar et. al. (2018).

Objectives

The primary objective of this paper is to document the Mahale language. In particular, we plan to document a portion of its grammar.

As this documentation is a part of the overall preservation of the language, it is essential for the revitalization of this endangered language.

Research Questions

The three basic types of questions that research projects can address are descriptive, rational and casual. Our research question aims to describe the morphological and syntactic patterning of the transitive and intransitive sentences in the Mahale language; in particular, we look at the nominal morphology and the syntactic patterning in terms of the verbal morphology and agreement. We review the data obtained through elicitations. By analyzing the data, we seek to answer the following questions:

1. Is the nominal morphology in Mahale nominative-accusative or absolutive-ergative?
2. Is the syntactic pattern in Mahale nominative-accusative or absolutive-ergative?

Theory

This paper is based on a functionalist approach. This means we view language as a means of communication in which each word, phrase or sentence has a particular function to perform. Thus, in our view, each morpheme in a word has a particular function. In this paper, we attempt to identify nominal and verbal morphemes and their syntactic roles from the data of the Mahale language.

Methodology

The data was collected for this study from the subjects, Mahale residents, in Belpukur and Pachandar in Rajshahi, Bangladesh. Alongside focused group discussions, interviews of speakers of Mahale were used. The interviews were conducted during our field trips to the villages in Rajshahi, Bangladesh in 2017 and 2018. Using an onomasiological approach, verbal paradigms were obtained from some selected subjects from the villages. This method of elicitation is particularly helpful in collecting structured sets of language samples quickly. It allows for obtaining context-free samples and determining patterns (Nakayama 8).

The structured data was obtained by providing sentences to the native speakers. The subjects then gave the equivalent sentences in Mahale. These were transcribed and incorporated in the tables that are included in this paper in the Discussion section.

Literature Review

Mahale is a spoken language; it has not been documented. The grammar of the language, spoken in our project sites has not been written. Our study intends to fill this void. It is one of the first steps in describing the grammar of this language.

According to Ethnologue (Lewis 2009), Mahali (an alternate spelling) is a language spoken in India and Bangladesh. The total number of speakers is on the decline. The details have been indicated in (Muzaffar, et. al. 2018)

Therefore, the researchers felt the need for the documentation of the language for its revitalization. With a view to revive the language, the basic verbal system of this language has been described (Muzaffar et. al. 2018).

Similar analytical works on verbal morphology of endangered languages include Neukom (1998). This paper is on Santali and it provides valuable information on argument markers. There are two papers (Van Driem 1995 and Nyinondi and Mohamed 2016) which are on endangered languages with a similar type of analysis. Thus, as pointed out earlier, this study aims to document and describe Mahale in an attempt to revitalize it and ensure its preservation for future generations.

Findings

The answers to the research questions are given below:

1. Is the nominal morphology in Mahale nominative-accusative or absolutive-ergative? Mahale shows a nominative-accusative pattern in the nominal morphology in the present continuous and simple past paradigms.
2. Is the syntactic pattern in Mahale nominative-accusative or absolutive-ergative? Mahale shows an absolutive-ergative pattern in the agreement pattern in the verbal morphology in the present continuous and simple past paradigms.

Discussion

Morphology is one of the five components of the grammar of a language. Morphology is the study of words and their structures (O’Grady 4). The smallest component of word structure is the morpheme. It contains information about meaning and function. Throughout the paper, the core vocabulary has been used (see Appendix). In all cases, the English gloss is provided. In a nominative-accusative grammar S and A are grouped together, where S is the subject of an intransitive verb and A is the subject or agent of a transitive verb. Absolutive-ergative type languages group S and O together, where O is the object or patient of a transitive verb (Dixon 6). This may be summarized as follows:

Nominative-accusative type language

Transitive sentence	Agent		Object
Intransitive sentence		Subject	

Absolutive-ergative type language

Transitive sentence	Agent		Object
Intransitive sentence		Subject	

Many languages have some accusative and some ergative characteristics (Dixon 6). Thus, in some languages, S and A are grouped together in certain situations and S and O are grouped together in other situations. The objective of this paper is to analyse some transitive and intransitive Mahali sentences and see what patterns emerge in terms of the nominal morphological markings.

Let us first consider the present continuous tense of the transitive verb *goꝛo* “to help” and the intransitive verb *landa* “to laugh” and compare a transitive sentence and an intransitive sentence.

1. SubasLimonlić goꝛoaikane.
Subas Limon-acc is helping
Subas is helping Limon.
2. Milonlandaide
Milon is laughing.

Here, A (Subas) and S (Milon) in 1. and 2., respectively, are unmarked while O (Limon) in 1. is marked by the morpheme, “lić”. This pattern is repeated in the simple past tense of these verbs.

3. BokulSumilić goꝛolidiye
Bokul Sumi-acc helped
Bokul helped Sumi.

4. Subaslandalide
Subas laughed.

Thus, a comparison of the nominal morphology of several transitive and intransitive sentences of the present continuous and simple past tenses shows a nominative-accusative pattern. The examples illustrate that S and A are unmarked while O is marked by the accusative suffix “lić”.

This pattern, however, does not occur if O is inanimate, example:

5. Unibolthayaide
He ball is kicking
He is kicking the ball.
6. Sopnabolthayailide
Sopna ball kicked
Sopna kicked the ball.

When we consider the same verb with an animate object, we find the accusative suffix again.

7. Rumi Antonlić thayaidiye
Rumi Anton-acc is kicking
Rumi is kicking Anton.
8. SopnaAntonlić thayailidiye
Sopna Anton-acc kicked
Sopna kicked Anton.

Thus, we can say that Mahale shows a nominative-accusative pattern in the present continuous and simple past tenses when O is animate. For further examples, please see tables 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Syntax

The nominative-accusative and absolutive-ergative patterns shown above also apply to syntactic structures. These syntactic patterns are evident in the various languages of the world. Thus, syntactic structures may group S and A in nominative-accusative languages and S and O in absolutive-ergative languages. This grouping may be in a variety of forms describing each of which is beyond the scope of this paper. Here, we will only look at and compare the verbal morphology and see how S, A and O are grouped in terms of agreement in the present continuous and simple past tenses.

Let us first consider the present continuous tense of the transitive verb *jom* “to eat” and the intransitive verb *rak* “to cry” and compare a transitive sentence and an intransitive sentence.

9. Uniuljomde
He mango is eating
He is eating mango.
10. Paul rakde
Paul is crying.

Here, the present continuous tense marker, the “d” verbal suffix is the same in both the transitive and intransitive sentence. This pattern is repeated in the simple past tense of these verbs.

11. Uniuljomlide
He mango ate
He ate mango.

12. Paul raklide
Paul cried.

In both these sentences, the simple past tense marker, the “lid” suffix is the same. In examples 9.and 10., O is inanimate. Let us now consider a transitive sentence with an animate object.

13. Taruṣṭak maṣarlic jomekane
The tiger deer-acc is eating
The tiger is eating the deer.
14. Taruṣṭak maṣarlic jomlidiye
The Tiger deer-acc ate
The tiger ate the deer.

Here, the verbal suffixes are different. The present continuous tense is marked by “ekan”. The simple past tense is marked by “lidiy”. This indicates that when O is animate, the verbal morphology changes to agree with O. Thus, the syntactic pattern in terms of the agreement of the verbal morphology can be stated as follows: in an intransitive sentence, the verbal morphology agrees with S and in a transitive sentence, the verbal morphology agrees with the object. In the present continuous paradigm, when O is inanimate, the verbal suffix is “d” and this is identical to the verbal suffix in an intransitive sentence, similarly, in the simple past paradigm, when O is inanimate, the verbal suffix is “lid” and this is identical to the verbal suffix in an intransitive sentence. The verbal morphology changes to agree with the animate object. Thus, when O is animate, the present continuous verbal suffix is “ekan” and the simple past suffix is “lidiy”. This is indicative of an absolutive-ergative pattern. For further examples, please see tables 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Table 1

Transitive Verbs Animate Patient (Present Continuous Tense)

Sl	Mahale	English
1.	Rumi Antonlic ṭḥayaidiye	Rumi is kicking Anton.
2.	Bokulceṣṭelic tutiediye	Bokul is shooting the bird with an arrow.
3.	SoponToponlic aguidiye	Sopon is bringing Topon.
4.	SoponRumilic ṣaraodiye	Sopon is shaking Rumi.
5.	Taruṣṭak maṣarlic jomekane	The tiger is eating the deer.
6.	Santosh Sumilic nelekane	Santosh is seeing Sumi.
7.	SitaBokullic gerekane	(A) dog is biting Bokul.
8.	Rumi hakolic gedekane	Rumi is cutting the fish.
9.	SoponPaullilic dalekane	Sopon is beating Paul.
10.	SubasLimonlic goṣoaikane	Subas is helping Limon.

Table 2

Transitive Verbs; Animate Patient (Past Tense)

Sl	Mahale	English
1.	SopnaAntonlic ṭḥayailidiye	Sopna kicked Anton.
2.	Bokulceṣṭelic tutilidiye	Bokul shot the bird with an arrow.
3.	SoponToponlic agulidiye	Sopon brought Topon.
4.	SoponRumilic ṣaralidiye	Sopon shook Rumi.
5.	Taruṣṭak maṣarlic jomlidiye	The tiger ate the deer.

Sl	Mahale	English
6.	Santosh Bokulliç ñellidiye	Santosh saw Bokul.
7.	SitaBokulliç gerlidiye	(A) dog bit Bokul.
8.	Rumi hakoliç geflidiye	Rumi cut the fish.
9.	Robin Santoshliç dallidiye	Robin beat Santosh.
10.	BokulSumiliç gorolidiye	Bokul helped Sumi.

Table 3

Transitive Verbs; Inanimate Patient (Present Continuous Tense)

Sl	Mahale	English
1.	Unibolthayaide	He is kicking the ball.
2.	Bokul dare tutiede	Bokul is shooting an arrow at the tree.
3.	Soponulaguide	Sopon is bringing the mango.
4.	Sopon dare řaraode	Sopon is shaking the tree.
5.	Uniuljomde	He is eating mango.
6.	Santosh ulñelde	Santosh is seeing the mango.
7.	Sitatak bolgerde	The dog is biting the ball.
8.	Rumi dare geide	Rumi is cutting the tree.
9.	Rumi sakamjokde	Rumi is sweeping the leaves.
10.	Rumi hatak benaode	Rumi is making a winnowing tray.

Table 4

Transitive Verbs; Inanimate Patient (Past Tense)

Sl	Mahale	English
1.	Sopnabolthayailide	Sopna kicked the ball.
2.	Bokul dare tutilide	Bokul shoot an arrow at the tree.
3.	Soponulagulide	Sopon brought the mango.
4.	Sopon dare řaraolide	Sopon shook the tree.
5.	Uniuljomlide	He ate mango.
6.	Santosh ulñellide	Santosh is seeing the mango.
7.	Sitatak bolgerlide	The dog bit the ball.
8.	Rumi dare getlide	Rumi cut the tree.
9.	Rumi sakamjoklide	Rumi swept the leaves.
10.	Rumi hatak benaolide	Rumi made the winnowing tray.

Table 5

Intransitive Verbs; Animate Subject (Present Continuous Tense)

Sl	Mahale	English
1.	Milonlandaide	Milon is laughing.
2.	Paul rakde	Paul is crying.
3.	Paul țaramde	Paul is walking.
4.	Bokuljapitde	Bokul is sleeping.
5.	Paul aachimde	Paul is sneezing.
6.	Paul khukhde	Paul is coughing.
7.	Soponkikyokde / Soponkikyokkane	Sopon is shouting.
8.	Paul nirokkane	Paul is running.
9.	Paul calakkane	Paul is leaving/going.
10.	Soponhajukkane	Sopon is arriving/coming.
11.	Santosh đurupakane	Santosh is sitting.

Table 6

Intransitive Verbs; Animate Subject (Past)

Sl	Mahale	English
1.	Subaslandalide	Subas laughed.
2.	Paul raklide	Paul cried.
3.	Rumi tarmlide	Rumi walked.
4.	Robijapitlide	Robi slept.
5.	Rumaqchimlide	Ruma sneezed.
6.	Roni khuklide	Roni coughed.
7.	Robin kikyoulide	Robin shouted.
8.	Bokulhirline	Bokul ran.
9.	Subascalaoiline	Subas left/went.
10.	Robin hecline	Robin arrived/came.
11.	Sumi durupline	Sumi sat.

Limitations

Ethnologue indicates that Mahali is a possible dialect of Santali with a lexical similarity of 68% to 93%. There is 69% to 87% similarity between varieties of Mahali. It asserts that there is a lexical similarity with yet another language called Mundari (53% to 59%).

However, the limited number of words cited in this paper to analyse the morphology does not permit us to make a full statement at this time regarding the status of Mahale with respect to Santali or Mundari. It has not been fully determined whether Mahale is a dialect or a distinct language. A comparative study will have to be done in the future once more data and analysis are available.

Recommendations

Future research can focus on the validity of the claims regarding the morphology and syntax that have been made available in this paper. This can be done by obtaining more data from the field. Also, the collected data may be independently verified by other researchers. Thus, this will lead to a better description of the nominal and verbal morphology and syntax of the language. The more complete the description is, the more accurate the documentation will be. This will entail a better and more robust process for the preservation of the language, which will ensure more concrete steps towards the revitalization of the language.

Conclusion

Mahale is in danger of extinction. This study has described a part of the grammar of Mahale and has documented a part of the language. This is essential both for revitalization of the language and preservation of the language for future generations. Once a language is written down, it is easier for the community to pass it on to the next generation. Thus, intergenerational language transmission is ensured. This is another criterion for the revitalization of an endangered language. Thus, with further documentation along with help from the Mahale community and the government, we hope to facilitate the revitalization of Mahale.

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Appendix 1

Mahale wordlist: alphabetical list of Mahale words used in this paper

Mahale Word	Grammatical Category	English meaning	Example
achim	intrans. verb	sneeze	Paul achimde (Paul is sneezing)
ale / aledo	pronoun	we	Ale dakajomlidale (We ate rice)
am	pronoun	you, sg.	Am dakajomam (You eat rice)
ape	pronoun	you, pl.	Ape dakajompe (You (pl) will eat rice)
bili	noun	egg	Suma biliutuide (Suma is cooking egg curry)
calák	verb	to go	Iń calakiń (I go)
daka	noun	rice	Ińdodakajomiń (I eat rice)
dal	verb	to beat	Sopon Paul lić dalekane (Sopon is beating Paul)
đurup	intrans. verb	to sit	Santosh đrupakane (Santosh is sitting)
ger	verb	to bite	RumaBokullić gerekane (Ruma is biting Bokul)
gořo	verb	to help	Subas Limon lić gořoaikane (Subas is

Mahale Word	Grammatical Category	English meaning	Example
			helping Limon)
ín / ínđo	pronoun	I	Ín calákkańń (I am going)
hájuk	intrans. verb	to arrive / to come	Soponhájukkane (Sopon is arriving / coming)
japít	intrans. verb	to sleep	Bokuljapítđe (Bokul is sleeping)
jil	noun	meat	Suma jilutuide (Suma is cooking meat curry)
jom	verb	to eat	Índodakajomiń (I eat rice)
khukh	intrans. verb	to cough	Paul khukhde (Paul is coughing)
kikyou	intrans. verb	to shout	Soponkikyoukkane (Sopon is shouting)
landa	verb	to laugh	Ín landaiń (I laugh)
mařař	noun	deer (not in common use any more)	Taruřtak mařařlić jomlidiye (The tiger ate the deer)
ńel	verb	to see	Santosh Sumi lić ńelekane (Santosh is seeing Sumi)
ńir	verb	to run	Índońirokiń (I run)
rać	verb	to cry	Ín raklidiń (I cried)
sita/seta	noun	dog	SitaBokullić gerekane ((A) dog is biting Bokul)
taruř	noun	tiger	Taruřtak mařařlić jomlidiye (The tiger ate the deer)
tařam	verb	to walk	Paul tařamde (Paul is walking)
thaya	verb	to kick	Rumi Anton lić thayaidiye (Rumi is kicking Anton)
tuti	verb	to shoot an arrow	Bokulceřelić tutilidiye (Bokul shot the bird with an arrow)
ul	noun	mango	Sopnauljomde (Sopna is eating mango)
uni / unido	pronoun	he / she	Unidodakajome (He / She eats rice)
uńku / uńkodo	pronoun	they	Uńku / Uńkododakajomaku (They eat rice)
utu	noun	curry	Suma utuide (Suma is cooking curry)