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, Skou, and Tumawo, and is referred to locally as Te Máwo pîlang 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.\(^1\) 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.

\textit{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 pîlang 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.\(^2\)

\(^1\) More distant relations can be established with other members of the Macro-Skou family (including, but not confined to, Krisa (Tsaka), 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.

\(^2\) 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, ü/ and ö/ 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 ~ ɔ ~ dz ~ ʤ] (in a cline from younger to older speakers), and j represents [ʒ ~ ʒ] for older speakers, and [ʤ] 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.  

Negation is marked by a particle *ka* that follows the predicate, regardless of the lexical category of predicate, as seen in (1) and (2):  

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.’

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3 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’.

4 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.
Since obliques (other than instruments, which are case marked) are not in normal circumstances coded pre-verbally, we must question the status of the goal in sentences such as (4)b: the only bare pre-verbal NPs that are normally found are objects. Do these pre-verbal goals behave as objects, or obliques?5

3. Testing functional status

There are tests that can be used to separate oblique arguments from core ones, and, within the core, subjects from non-subjects (objects) and absolutive from ergative. These tests are:

- only transitive clauses allow optional ergative proclitics on nominal subjects
- only core arguments may appear raised in complements
- only absolutive core arguments may launch floated quantifiers

We shall examine the first two of these tests in order to determine the status of the goal or location in a negated sentence. The third test, involving floated quantifiers, is not useful in negative sentences as negation prohibits floated quantifiers, a point that we shall return to in section 5.

3.1 ERGATIVE CASE

The possibility of ergative case marking appearing on the subject of a transitive clause is shown in (5):

Transitive clause:

(5) Ke=bahúe-ni=ne pá ke=li fue a.
3SG.NF=elder.sibling-1SG GEN=1SG.DAT house 3SG.NF=do there
'My elder brother built a house over there.'

optional ergative

(6) Ke bahúe ni ne ke pá ke li fue a.
3SG.NF.ERG

Intransitive clause: no ergative possible

(7) Ke=bahúe-ni=ne ke=moeng pá fue a.
3SG.NF=elder.sibling-1SG GEN=1SG.DAT 3SG.NF=sit house there
'My elder brother was in that house over there.'

(8) * Ke bahúe ni ne ke ke moeng pá fue a.
3SG.NF.ERG

When an intransitive clause is negated, however, the ergative is possible:

(9) Ke=bahúe-ni=ne pá ke=moeng ka.
3SG.NF=elder.sibling-1SG GEN=1SG.DAT house 3SG.NF=sit NEG
'My elder brother wasn’t in that house.'

(10) Ke bahúe ni ne ke pá ke moeng ka.
3SG.NF.ERG

5 The phenomenon described here, oblique arguments appearing preverbally in negative clauses, applies to all (normally) post-verbal obliques. While most sentences here show locations and directional goals, recipients behave identically.

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• Note that the ergative is allowed in negative sentences only if there is a location or goal that has been fronted. It is not a general property of negative sentences that they allow the ergative case to appear on subjects, as can be seen by comparing the following pair:

\[(11) \quad Ke=bahúe-nì=ne \quad ke=i \quad ka. \]
\[3SG.NF=elder.sibling-1SG.GEN=1SG.DAT \quad 3SG.NF=stand \ \text{NEG} \]

‘My elder brother wasn’t standing.’

\[(12) \quad * \ Ke \ bahúe \ ni \ ne \ ke \ i \ ka. \]
\[3SG.NF.ERG \]

Even a sentence that corresponds to a positive sentence with an oblique may not appear with ergative case marking unless the oblique is present:

\[(13) \quad * \ Ke \ bahúe \ ni \ ne \ ke \ moeng \ ka. \]
\[3SG.NF.ERG \]

This matches the infelicity of ergative marking on two place verbs when there is no overt object; compare (5) above with the following:

\[(14) \quad Ke=bahúe-nì=ne \quad (#/* ke) \quad ke=li \quad fue \ a. \]
\[3SG.NF=elder.sibling-1SG.GEN=1SG.DAT \quad 3SG.NF.ERG \quad 3SG.NF=do \ \text{there} \]

‘My elder brother did something over there.’

### 3.2 RAISING

Another test for core status involves raising. Consider the following alternative codings of the same sentence:

\[(15) \quad Ke=barí \quad ke=fue \quad [\ mè=poe]. \]
\[3SG.NF=headman \quad 3SG.NF=see \quad 2SG=come \]

‘The headman saw you arrive.’

\[(16) \quad Ke=barí \quad mè \quad ke=fue \quad [\ mè=poe]. \]
\[3SG.NF=headman \quad 2SG \quad 3SG.NF=see \quad 2SG=come \]

‘The headman saw you arrive.’

With transitive clauses not only the subject, but also the object may be raised:

\[(17) \quad Ke=barí \quad ke=fue \quad [\ mòe \ mè=pé]. \]
\[3SG.NF=headman \quad 3SG.NF=see \quad \text{fish} \quad 2SG=catch \]

‘The headman saw you catch the fish.’

\[(18) \quad Ke=barí \quad mè \quad ke=fue \quad [\ mòe \ mè=pé]. \]
\[3SG.NF=headman \quad 2SG \quad 3SG.NF=see \quad \text{fish} \quad 2SG=catch \]

‘The headman saw you catch the fish.’

\[(19) \quad Ke=barí \quad mòe \quad ke=fue \quad [\ mè=pé]. \]
\[3SG.NF=headman \quad \text{fish} \quad 3SG.NF=see \quad 2SG=catch \]

‘The headman saw you catch the fish.’

It is not possible for an oblique to be raised, however:

\[(20) \quad Ke=barí \quad ke=fue \quad [\ mè=poe \ pà]. \]
\[3SG.NF=headman \quad 3SG.NF=see \quad 2SG=come \quad \text{house} \]

‘The headman saw you arrive at the house.’
(21) * Ke barí pá ke fue mè poe

(22) Ke=barí ke=fue [ móe mè=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 mè pé

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

(24) Ke=barí ke=lúe [ pá mè=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 móe mè pé ka.

(26) Ke=barí ke=lúe [ pa-long móe mè=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 mè 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.\(^6\)
- it is typologically highly marked for a negative sentence to exhibit more transitive features than a positive one

\(^6\) 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.
Firstly, as already mentioned in passing, instrumental NPs may appear preverbally; these nominals are marked overtly with the case marker =pa, and do not show properties of either subjects or objects in terms of the constructions examined here (or other constructions that identify subject and object).

(28)  
Ke=bà  
3SG.NF=person  
ing a  
the  
ke=rítôe  
3SG.NF tree  
rangwaue=pa  
axe=INSTR  
ke=lé  
3SG.NF=fell  
i  
be  
li.  

‘The man is chopping down a tree with an axe.’

The presence of such a nominal in an intransitive clause does not license the use of the ergative case:

(29)  
Pe=ra=wò  
3SG.F=just=self  
tang-ké=ke=pa  
transport-3SG.NF GEN=3SG.NF DAT=INSTR  
pe=te  
3SG.F=3SG.F go  
Nofé.  
Jayapura  
‘She alone, by herself, went to Jayapura in his car.’

The instrumentals are also not eligible for raising:

(30)  
* Pe ra wò pe  
3SG.F.ERG  
tang ké ke pa pe te Nofé.

Secondly, any nominal may appear preverbally, indeed pre-clausally, if it is the topic of the sentence, as illustrated in the position of the goal in the example.

(32)  
Tangwáto báng fue,  
Tangwato beach that  
3PL=3PL-walk westwards 3PL-seawards  
te=y-á  
hi  
t-o.  

‘The beach at Tangwato is where they went to.’

Again, these topics do not behave as core arguments; they are privileged in terms of coordinate reference, but do not license the appearance of an ergative case nor are they eligible for raising. As mentioned, this is not the same pre-verbal position as is found with goals or locatives in negative sentences: these goals or locatives may appear following the subject, whereas this is not possible for a topicalised nominal:

(33)  
* Te  
3PL  
Tangwáto báng fue  
Tangwato beach that  
3PL=3PL-walk westwards 3PL-seawards  
te=y-á  
hi  
t-o.

We can only conclude that the relative position of a nominal in the phrase structure does seem to bear some importance for the purposes of grammatical function assignment. How can we model this?

5. In liew of a conclusion: towards an account of the data

We can advance two preliminary hypotheses concerning the changing functions that we have seen in the preceding sections:
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.’

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).

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

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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:8

8 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

\[(41)\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
{\text{IP}} \\
{\text{NP}_{\text{SUBJ}}} & {\text{VP}} \\
 & {\text{NP}_{\text{OBJ}}} & {\text{V}}
\end{array}
\]

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

(In)transitive sentence with oblique

\[(42)\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
{\text{IP}} \\
{\text{NP}_{\text{SUBJ}}} & {\text{VP}} \\
 & {\text{NP}_{\text{OBJ}}} & {\text{V}'} \\
 & {\text{V}} & {\text{NP}_{\text{OBL}}}
\end{array}
\]

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

\[(43)\]

\[
\begin{array}{c}
{\text{IP}} \\
{\text{NP}_{\text{SUBJ}}} & {\text{VP}} \\
 & {\text{NP}_{\text{OBL}}} & {\text{V}'} \\
 & {\text{V}} & {\text{NP}_{\text{OBL}}}
\end{array}
\]

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 form 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-
verbatim 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):

\[(44) \text{Nì } pe=fu \text{ rópu } ke=wé \text{ leng.} \]
\[1\text{SG 3SG.F=see.F book 3SG.NF=get give} \]
\[\text{‘She saw him give me a book.’} \]

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.

References