

Roles of Articles in Agabag, a Dayic Language of North Borneo

Yohanes Radjaban

Sastra Inggris, Fakultas Humaniora, Pendidikan, dan Pariwisata, Universitas Teknologi Yogyakarta,
ry.radjaban@staff.uty.ac.id

Abstract

As an article simply plays a syntactic role in a language, it is often overlooked in a linguistic research on syntax (Farrell 2005). If it happens to Austronesian languages like Agabag, it will be a fatal mistake since an article has significant roles (Hudson 1978). The discussion of this paper is aimed at describing the roles of articles in Agabag. Generative-Transformational Approach is applied for the sake of descriptive and explanatory adequacies (Haegeman 1991). All processes of analyses are based on transformational principles, which involve theories of head-modifiers relations, which are also used to describe the structures and patterns of articles in Agabag. The analyses of this research result in some findings. Agabag language has articles which function as a determiner of an NP and become role assigners to the NP. The interpretation of the articles of Agabag is based on their function as a determiner as well as role-assigners to the NP. As a determiner, articles of Agabag are interpreted as 'this' and 'that'. As a role assigner each article is interpreted according to the role it assigns. If agreement between articles and NPs in most languages relies on gender and number, in Agabag it is based on the roles of NP (Radjaban 2013).

Keywords: articles, roles, Agabag, transformational

INTRODUCTION

When used in a discourse, noun phrases refer to the linguistic or situational context. The kind of reference a particular noun phrase has depends on its determinative element or its determiners. The most common and typical determiners are articles (Quirk 1985). General abstraction defines articles as a kind of adjective which is always used with and gives some information about a noun. In English and some other Romance languages, an article is commonly identified as a word that is used before a noun to show whether or not the noun refers to something specific or that typically functions in identifying definiteness or indefiniteness of reference. This restrictive definition seems to simplify the roles of articles. In Agabag, a Dayic language of Borneo Indonesia and in other Austronesian languages, articles are indeed peripheral yet have syntactically significant roles (Hudson 1978). This article is going to

explore the different role of articles in Agabag language. Based on transformational principles, data on articles of Agabag verify the typical syntactic role of the articles. Analyses to figure out the syntactic role of the articles start from exploring the common roles of articles of different languages and later present the transformational operations of the articles in Abagag language.

In Agabag, articles have unmarked distributions in that they occur in various constructions of different patterns.

- (1) a. *Kamanan-ku n-angubit da puntih.*
Uncle-1hGEN PASTbring ACCbanana
'My uncle brought **the** banana.'
- b. *Kamanan-ku n-angubit da puntih*
Uncle-1hGEN PASTbring ACCbanana
di ina-ku.
BENfor Mother-1hGEN
'My uncle brought **the** banana **for**
my mother.'

c. *Da puntih inubit*
 ACCbanana PASbrought
ni kamanan-ku
 DATby uncle-1hGEN
di inaku.
 BENfor Mother-1hGEN
 ‘The banana was brought by my uncle
 for my mother.’

d. *Da puntih nu ina-ku*
 ACCbanana GEN Mother-my
inubit ni kamananku.
 PASbrought DATby uncle-my
 ‘The banana of my mother was
 brought by my uncle.’

(2) a. *Yama-ku n-agalung*
 Father-1hGEN PAST-await
da pangeran da baloi adat.
 ACCprince LOC village hall
 ‘My father awaited the prince in the
 village hall.’

b. *Yama-ku bedayal*
 Father-1hGEN PAST-sail
da tingkayu.
 LOC the ocean
 ‘My father sailed to the ocean.’

The above distributions show that articles *da*, *di*, *ni*, *nu* in (1a-d) conjoin with a noun to form NPs and become the heads of NPs whereas article *da* in (2ab) conjoins with a noun to form a PP and becomes the head of PPs.

Data (1 and 2) show that Agabag language uses articles not only as determiners but also as an interface to link between syntax/ morphology and semantics. From data (1 and 2), it can be inferred that articles in Agabag at least function in (i) identifying definiteness, (ii) determining

thematic roles, and (iii) assigning cases to the NPs.

METHOD

This research applied transformational principles in which data were generated from the native speakers of Agabag Language in Mansalong and other 30 villages of Agabag Community in Nunukan Regency North Borneo.

The data collected were analyzed based on transformational operations and pragmatic analyses to see the roles of articles in Agabag language.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In Agabag, like in most languages that employ articles, every common noun, with some exceptions, is expressed with a certain definiteness. This definiteness is needed especially to form **given information** as a compulsory condition for a natural sentence that at least consists of **given** and **new information**¹.

(3) a. *Da ulun nakow da umo.*
 DETman PASTgo LOC the field
 ‘The man went to the field.’
 Given New

b. **Sang-ulun nakow da umo.*
 One-man PASTgo LOC the field
 *‘Someone went to the field.’

¹ Chafe (1976) defines that given information represents “that knowledge which the speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the addressee at the time of the utterance,” and new, “what the speaker assumes he is introducing into the addressee’s consciousness by what he says.”

New New

Article *da* in (3a) implies a definite reference of ‘the man’ that is supposed to be already in the consciousness of the speaker-hearer. Pragmatically, sentence (3a) is legitimate and therefore meaningful. Sentence (3b) on the other hand is pragmatically illegitimate since it consists of all new information. Sentence (3b) is structurally well-formed but pragmatically inappropriate. The absence of article *da* in (3b) makes the sentence fail to indicate the specified reference of the NP as information that is pragmatically compulsory to be already in the speaker-hearer’s consciousness. Eventhough sentence (3a) is structurally well-formed it does not have any context that enables people to have a chance to utter it.

A Transformational theory of syntax that is significantly related to the discussion on articles is thematic structures². As the bases of sentence structures, this theory proposes

² A verb like *kill* expresses an activity that involves two participants as its arguments: the active participant, the person who kills, and the passive participant, the person that is killed as is seen in *Maigret killed Poirot*. The two arguments—NPs *Maigret* and *Poirot* are intuitively felt to stand in different semantic relationships with the verb. The argument—NP *Maigret* in the subject position refers to the entity that is the AGENT of the activity of killing. The argument—NP *Poirot*, the direct object, expresses the PATIENT of the activity. The arguments of a verb are realized by noun phrases. The semantic relationships between verbs and their arguments are referred to in terms of **thematic roles** or **theta roles** for short. The verb **theta-marks** its arguments. Predicates in general have **a thematic structure**. The component of the grammar that regulates the assignment of thematic roles is called **theta theory** (Haegeman 1991).

that every overt NP in a sentence must be assigned to a thematic role and each thematic role is assigned to only one argument NP. Based on this thematic structures, a syntactic construction is then manipulated to express meanings. When this criterion is violated, the sentence becomes ill-formed and therefore the meanings are not appropriately delivered.

- (4) a. **Yama-ku nakow umo.*
 Father-1hGEN PAST-go the field.
 *‘My father went the field.’
- b. *Yama-ku nakow da umo.*
 Father-1hGEN PAST-go LOC the field.
 ‘My father went **to** the field.’

The verb *nakow* (‘went’) is an intransitive verb, therefore requires only one NP argument. The argument is realized to the NP subject *Yama-ku* and it is assigned the role AGENT. The remain NP *umo* in (4a) fails to be assigned any role, therefore sentence (4a) becomes ill-formed. In (4b), the article *da* occurs and provides a role to be assigned to the NP *umo*. Since the article semantically assigns the role LOCATIVE, article *da* in Agabag then is interpreted as preposition ‘to’. The presence of article *da* in (4b) does not only express the definiteness of NP *umo* but provides the role LOCATIVE to be assigned as well and makes the sentence well-formed. Article *da* in (4b) functions as a role assigner to the NP *umo*. From data (1b), article *di* provides the role BENEFACTIVE to be assigned to the NP *ina-ku*. The absence of article *di* as is seen in (5b) makes the sentence ill-formed.

- (5) a. *Kamanan-ku n-angubit da puntih*
 Uncle-1hGEN PASTbring ACC banana

di ina-ku.
 BENfor Mother-my
 'My uncle brought **the** banana **for** my mother.'

b. **Kamanan-ku n-angubit da puntih ina-ku.*
 Uncle-1hGEN PASTbring ACCbanana Mother-my
 *'My uncle brought **the** banana my mother.'

The absence of article *di* in (5b) causes the NP *ina-ku* stay without being assigned any role. This violates the theta criterion saying that any overt NP in a sentence must be assigned a theta role. The similar case also happens to article *ni* in (6b). The absence of article *ni* definitely causes the sentence ill-formed.

- (6) a. *Da puntih inubit ni kamanan-ku*
 ACCbanana PASbrought DATby uncle-my

di ina-ku.
 BENfor Mother-my

'**The** banana was brought **by** my uncle **for** my mother.'

- b. **Da puntih inubit kamanan-ku*
 ACCbanana PASbrought uncle-my
di inaku.
 BENfor Mother-my
 *'**The** banana was brought my uncle **for** my mother.'

From (6b), it can be seen that the role supposed to be assigned to the NP *kamanan-ku* ('my uncle') disappears when the article *ni* does not occur to assign the role AGENT to the NP *kamanan-ku* in the passive sentence.

Another related theory needs mentioning when talking about the role of articles in

Agabag is Case Filter theory³. Beside as role assigners, some articles in Agabag function as case indicators as well.

- (7) a. *Da pun nu ina-ku*
 ACC tree GEN Mother-my

gino in-alid ni kamananku.
 DET PAS sold DATby uncle-my
 '**The** tree **of** my mother was sold **by** my uncle.'

- b. *Pun nu ina-ku*
 NOMTree GENMother-my

gino tumuu da katanan.
 DET PREgrow LOC forest.
 The tree **of** my mother grows **in** the forest.

Article *da* in (7) indicates different cases. In (7a) article *da* in *da pun* ('the tree') indicates the case ACCUSATIVE, while the absence of article *da* in NP *pun* is assigned the role PATIENT and the case ACCUSATIVE. As an ACCUSATIVE case indicator, article *da* must not occur before NP *pun* in (7b) since the NP *pun* has NOMINATIVE case as the subject of the sentence.

From (7), it can be described that article *nu* dan *ni* indicate different cases of the NP.

³ **Case** is a grammatical category whose value reflects the grammatical function performed by a noun or pronoun in a phrase, clause, or sentence. In some languages, nouns, pronouns and their modifiers take different inflected forms depending on what case they are in. English has largely lost its case system, although case distinctions can still be seen with the personal pronouns: NOMINATIVE forms such as *I*, *he* and *we* are used in the role of subject ("I kicked the ball"), while ACCUSATIVE forms such as *me*, *him* and *us* are used in the role of object ("John kicked **me**"). A language may have a number of different cases (Latin and Russian each have at least six; Finnish has 15). Commonly encountered cases include NOMINATIVE, ACCUSATIVE, DATIVE and GENITIVE. Abstract case is a universal property, while the overt realization of abstract case by means of morphological case varies cross-linguistically (Haegeman 1997).

Article *nu* indicates the case GENETIVE. It shows that the NP on the left of the article is owned or the possession of the NP on the right of the article. Article *ni* as is seen in (7a) indicates the case DATIVE to the NP as its modifier. Besides, article *ni* assigns the role AGENT to the NP as its modifier. From (7a), it can be explained that article *ni* in *ni kamanan-ku* ('by my uncle') assigns the role AGENT and indicates the case DATIVE to the NP *kamanan-ku*.

SUMMARY

From the analyses above, it can be summarized that articles play significant roles in the syntax of Agabag. Beside as determiner, articles in Agabag assign thematic roles and indicate cases to the NPs. Article *da* conjoins with an NP as the head and determine the definiteness of the NP as its modifier. Besides, article *da* assigns the role PATIENT and indicates the case ACCUSATIVE. Article *ni* conjoins with an NP to be the head of the NP as its modifier. It assigns the role AGENT and indicates the case DATIVE to the NP. Article *di* conjoin with an NP to be the head of the NP as its modifier. It assigns the role BENEFACTIVE and indicates the case DATIVE to the NP as its modifier. Article *nu* conjoin with an NP to be the head of the NP as its modifier. It indicates the case GENETIVE to the NP as its modifier.

The following table summarizes the forms, patterns, and roles of articles in Agabag.

Table 1. Morphological forms, patterns, and roles of articles in Agabag.

Articles	Patterns	Syntactico-Semantic Interpretation		
		Cases	Roles Assigned	Mean ing
<i>da</i>	<i>da</i> + NP	ACCUSATIVE	PATIENT	'the', 'this', 'that'
		LOCATIVE	PATIENT	'to', 'in', 'on', 'at'
<i>di</i>	<i>di</i> + NP	DATIVE	BENEFACTIV E	'for'
<i>ni</i>	<i>ni</i> + NP	DATIVE	AGENT	'by'
<i>nu</i>	NP + <i>nu</i> + NP	GENETIVE	PATIENT - AGENT	'NP of NP'

The table above shows that articles in Agabag do not have agreement with sub-categories of NP in the forms of Gender and Number but with syntactic cases as well as semantic properties. Table 1 also describes that Agabag makes use of articles syntactically as well as semantically. Morphological cases in the forms of articles *da*, *di*, *ni*, *nu* are applied to be the interface to link between syntax or morphology and semantics. From the articles, native speakers of Agabag have the knowledge to identify the roles and cases of the NPs and based on this knowledge they draw appropriate interpretations of the NPs as the constituents of utterances. With the help of this comprehension, the native speakers of Agabag could identify 'who does what to who' in their communication using Agabag language.

REFERENCES

- Chafe, Wallace L. 1970, *Meaning and the Structure of Language*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Farrell, Patrick. 2005. *Grammatical Relation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haegeman, Liliane. 1991. *Introduction to Government and Binding Theory*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 123 Cowley Road.
- _____. 1997. *Elements of Grammar, Handbook in Generative Syntax*. The Netherland: Kluwer Academic Publisher, P. O. Box 17, 3300 AA Dordrecht.
- Hudson, Alfred B. 1978. Linguistic Relations among Bornean Peoples with Special Reference to Serawak: an Interim Report in Serawak. *Linguistics and Development Problem*. No 3, pp. 1-45. Williamsburg: Studies in Third World Societies.
- Radjaban, Johanes. 2013, *The Syntax of Agabag in Nunukan North Borneo Indonesia: A Transformational Study on Head-Modifier Relation in The Structures of Phrases, Clauses, and Sentences of Agabag*, Ph D Thesis. Surakarta: Sebelas Maret University Surakarta.
- Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech, & Jan Svartvik. 1985, *A Comprehensive Grammar of The English Language*, London: Longman Group UK Limited, Longman House, Burnt Mill, Harlow, Essex CM 20 2 JE.