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PREDICATION, PREDICATE FRONTING,
AND WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A VERB

This paper looks at two unrelated languages which nonetheless share a range of properties: Chol, a Mayan language spoken in southern Mexico, and Tagalog, an Austronesian language of the Philippines. In this paper, I argue for a connection among the characteristics in (1).

(1) a. predicate initial word order
 b. lack of an overt copula
 c. subjects of non-verbal predicates behave as unaccusative subjects

Following Bowers (1993), Baker (2003) and others, I adopt the proposal that predication requires a functional projection PredP (2–3). The Pred[0] head, glossed roughly as *BE*, combines first with a property-denoting root. The resulting predicate then combines with a theme argument. According to Baker (2003), verbal predicates like *arrive* (3–4) differ from NVPs (2) in that they undergo "conflation" (incorporation prior to vocabulary insertion) of a property-denoting root with a functional Pred[0] head, resulting in the VP shown in (4); see also (Hale and Keyser 1993). While Pred itself is a functional category, the result of conflation is a lexical category, V^0. NVPs do not undergo conflation and remain functional (2).

(2) NON-VERBAL PREDICATE   (3) "PRE"-CONFLATION   (4) VERBAL PREDICATE AFTER CONFLATION
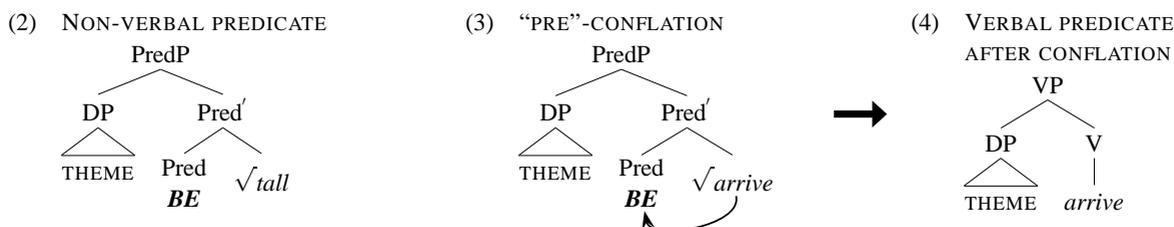
I propose that "verbs" in Chol and Tagalog differ fundamentally from verbs in languages like English in that they do not form lexical categories via conflation (Hale and Keyser 1993; Baker 2003). Instead, they are built on top of the same functional PredP projections involved in non-verbal predication (e.g. via the addition of an eventive v^0 projection). I argue that all properties in (1) stem from the absence of a lexical vs. functional division between verbal and non-verbal predication. While this proposal accurately captures the range of data below, it also raises important questions, notably the role of the functional/lexical divide in the grammar and its connection to grammatical categories, as well as Baker's conception of *conflation*.

Data & background: Chol and Tagalog verbal and non-verbal predicates are given in (5) and (6). In both languages, predicates (underlined) precede subjects (bold-faced) whether verbal (a) or non-verbal (b). The (b) examples illustrate the absence of an overt copula. While this absence is not unusual cross-linguistically, many null-copula languages nonetheless exhibit an overt copula in *some* environments. For example, Russian and Arabic both have a null copula in present tense, but an overt one in the past. In Chol and Tagalog, however, matrix clauses *never* show a copula.

(5) CHOL

 a. <u>Tyi</u>   <u>majl-i</u> **jiñi wiñik**.
  PRFV go-ITV DET man
  'The man went.'

 b. <u>Maystroj</u> **jiñi wiñik**.
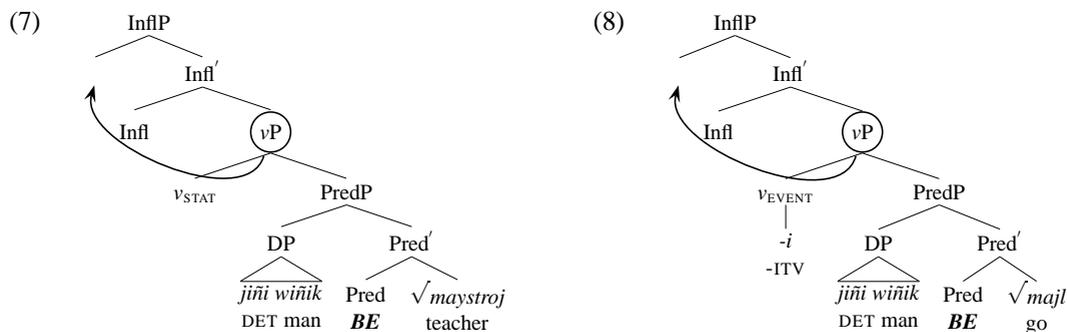 teacher   DET man
  'The man is a teacher.'

(6) TAGALOG

 a. <u>Nag-aaral</u>   **ako**.
  IMPF.NOM-study 1SUBJ
  'I'm studying.'

 b. <u>Doktor</u> **ako**.
  doctor 1SUBJ
  'I'm a doctor.' (Richards 2009b, 181)

Sabbagh (2011) shows that subjects of adjectival passives—a class of NVPs in Tagalog—behave as unaccusatives with respect to a number of diagnostics. A similar state of affairs is seen in Chol: in the domain of verbal predicates, possessors may be extracted out of internal arguments (unaccusative subjects and transitive objects), but not out of external arguments (transitive/unergative subjects) (Coon 2009). Subjects of NVPs like (5b) behave as unaccusative subjects in this respect.

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Given that subjects of NVPs are THEMES, like unaccusative subjects, this fact comes as a surprise only to those familiar with the fact that NVP subjects behave as *unergative* subjects in a range of other languages, for example Russian (Pesetsky 1982), Hebrew (Borer 1984), English (Levin and Rappaport-Hovav 1986), and Italian (Belletti and Rizzi 1981). In order to account for the unergative behaviour of NVP subjects in these languages, while still maintaining the UTAH, Baker (2003) capitalizes on the distinction between *functional* versus *lexical* categories, e.g. (2) vs. (4). In addition to using this to account for the different behaviour of NVP vs. unaccusative verbal subjects, Baker argues that the presence, in many languages, of a copula in NVP constructions falls out from this division: the head $Infl^0$ must attract a *lexical* category. Verbs may thus directly bear tense morphology, while NVPs may not: *John walked*; **John talled*; *John **was** tall*. The copula, under this view, is a lexical element inserted above PredP to host tense morphology.

Proposal: The proposal that Chol and Tagalog lack conflation accounts for the differences above. **First**, all internal arguments will be specifiers of a functional projection, PredP, explaining the absence of differential behaviour of unaccusative and NVP subjects (1c). **Second**, the proposal that $Infl^0$ may attract only a *lexical* category (Baker 2003) accounts for the absence of V^0-to-$Infl^0$ movement; *there are no lexical verbs in these languages*. Instead, in order to establish a relationship with higher temporal elements, the entire predicate fronts to Spec,IP (1a). In Chol, for example, I propose that the property-denoting root undergoes head-movement (*not* conflation, i.e. post-insertion) up to v^0, placing the predicate before the THEME; next phrasal vP is attracted to Spec,IP. External arguments of transitives remain in situ, in a VoiceP projection above vP, resulting in VOS order. Note that this analysis requires a division between *conflation* and standard *head-movement* (Hale and Keyser 1993), with important consequences for the timing of insertion.

(7)

```
        InflP
         /\
          Infl′
          /\
    Infl    vP
    /      /\
  v_STAT   PredP
           /\
         DP    Pred′
          |    /\
     jiñi wiñik Pred  √maystroj
     DET man    BE    teacher
```

(8)

```
        InflP
         /\
          Infl′
          /\
    Infl    vP
    /      /\
  v_EVENT  PredP
    |      /\
   -i     DP   Pred′
   -ITV    |   /\
      jiñi wiñik Pred  √majl
      DET man    BE    go
```

Third, as copula insertion in English is argued to be the driven by the requirement that $Infl^0$ attract a *lexical* element, and lexical verbs (including copulas) are simply unavailable in these languages, the consistent absence of a copula in NVPs is accounted for as well (1b).

Finally, this proposal connects to a fourth shared trait between the two languages: the questionable status of grammatical categories. At least since Charencey 1884, Mayanists have questioned the division between verbs and nouns (Seler 1887; Tozzer 1921; Bruce 1968). Similarly, the noun/verb distinction has been called into question in languages of the Austronesian family; see for example Lopez 1928, Seiter 1975, Capell 1964, and more recently, Kaufman 2009. Though I follow a range of recent work argues that at some level a distinction *must* be maintained between nominal and verbal categories (Lois and Vapnarsky 2006; Richards 2009a; Sabbagh 2009), the abundant work on this topic suggests a further point of comparison, as well as a possible extension to Salishan languages, which have are also predicate initial, lack a copula, and have been claimed to lack noun/verb distinctions (Jelinek and Demers 1994).

Select references: Baker, M. 2003. *Lexical categories: Verbs, nouns and adjectives.* Cambridge U. Press. **Bowers, J. 1993.** The syntax of predication. *LI* 24:591–656. **Coon, J. 2009.** Interrogative possessors and the problem with pied-piping in Chol. *LI* 40:165–175. **Hale, K. and S. Keyser. 1993.** On argument structure and the lexical expression of syntactic relations. In *The View from Building 20*, 53–109. MIT Press. **Sabbagh, J. 2011.** Adjectival passives and the structure of VP in Tagalog. *Lingua* 121:1424–1452.