

The Relational Noun Marker *ma* in Tobelo, North Halmahera

Gary Holton

University of Alaska

In Tobelo (West Papuan) and many other North Halmaheran languages, nouns are immediately preceded by the morpheme *o*, *ma*, or one of a set of possessive pronouns indexing the person and number of the possessor. The morpheme *ma* appears to have many functions. Most notably, *ma* serves to mark the dependent noun in a possessive-like attributive construction, as in (1).

- (1) o nauoko ma amoko
NM fish NM large

'a/the large fish'

It may also mark the possessed noun in a possessive construction with third-person non-human possessor, as in (2). This construction is formally identical to the attributive construction above except that here *ma* marks the syntactic head (cf. Ross 1998).

- (2) o ode ma ngunungu
NM pig NM nose

'a/the pig's nose'

In addition to its attributive and possessive functions, *ma* also occurs with isolated noun phrases, in many cases alternating with *o*. Some nouns obligatorily occur with *ma*. These include nouns referring to kinship (*ma ama* 'father'); certain body parts (*ma lako* 'eye'); property concepts (*ma ngunungu* 'nose'); parts of wholes (*ma roehe* 'tree, plant trunk'); and certain titles (*ma koana* 'king').

However, other nouns occur freely with either *o* or *ma* when not explicitly possessed. In isolated phrase-level contexts it is difficult to characterize the difference in meaning between a noun preceded by *o* and one preceded by *ma*. For example, both *o mia* and *ma mia* can be glossed as 'monkey'. In connected discourse it has been observed that nouns tend to be introduced with *o* and then referred to subsequently with *ma*, a pattern which is reminiscent of the patterning of indefinite and definite articles in European languages (cf. Hueting 1936:348).

In this paper I argue that while the functional domain of *ma* may overlap with that of a definite article, *ma* cannot be accurately characterized as a marker of definiteness. Rather, I analyze *ma* as a relational marker which signals a dependency relationship between the following noun and another discourse entity, which may or may not be explicitly mentioned. This argument is supported by an analysis of texts collected by the author and by Hueting (1908).

For Tobelo, the notion of dependency appears to be more useful than the notion of headship. So while *ngunungu* 'nose' in (2) may not be the syntactic head, it is related to its antecedent possessor in the same way that the attribute in (1) relates to the bearer of that attribute. The pathway via which the dependency relationship is established may

vary, and a variety of types of dependency relationships exist, including possession, attribution, and antecedence. This analysis thus helps to confirm van der Veen's (1915) original intuition, as reflected in the label "relation indicator" ("betrekking-aanduiders").

This paper concludes with a discussion of relationship between Tobelo *ma* and Proto-Malayo-Polynesian **ma*, suggesting a possible additional path of contact between North Halmaheran languages and neighboring Austronesian languages.

REFERENCES

- Hueting, Anton. 1908. O Tobelohoka manga totoade: verhalen en vertellingen in de Tobeloreesche taal. *Bijdragen tot de Taal, Land en Volkenkunde* 61:1-318.
- Hueting, Anton. 1936. Iets over de spaakkunst van de Tobeloreesche taal. *Bijdragen tot de Taal, Land en Volkenkunde* 94:295-407.
- Ross, Malcom. 1998. Possessive-like attribute constructions in the Oceanic languages of Northwest Melanesia. *Oceanic Linguistics* 37(2):234-76.
- van der Veen, Hendrik. 1915. *De Noord-Halmahera'se Taalgroep tegenover de Austronesiese talen*. Leiden: Van Nifterik.