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The grammar of fear in Ese’eja

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The expression of fear, one of the five uncontroversial basic emotions (see e.g. Ekman, 1992), appears to be particularly well grammaticalized in Ese’eja (Takanan), although the grammatical encoding of this negative emotion has been described as cross-linguistically uncommon (Majid, 2012). Indeed, this Amazonian language spoken by about 1,700 speakers has developed three distinct morphemes or construction exclusively dedicated to the expression of fear. This paper examines their semantic and syntactic specificities.

1 Apprehensive

The apprehensive morpheme -chana belongs to the tense-mood paradigm, i.e. to the only slot of the verbal paradigm that must be filled (Vuillermet, 2012, pp. 367ff.). This verbal suffix encodes the fear of the speaker: it conveys that the event encoded by the verb will probably happen, and that the realization of this event is undesirable. In (1a), the speaker evaluates that the event of slipping is highly probable, and therefore warns the addressee. In (1b), the context is that the speaker does not want a third person to know about his trip with the addressee: he fears this third person may hear about it, and go with them (the undesirable event).1

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1 Abbreviations: A = agent; APF = adjectival prefix; APPR = apprehensive; DS = different subject; ERG = ergative; GEN = genitive; IMP = imperative; MID = middle; NPF = noun prefix; PAS = past; PREC = precautive;PRS = present; RED = reduplication; (Sp) = Spanish loanword; TEL = telic
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(1)  a. *Ja-kuia-pi’i-ki-chanan*
    MID-crush-slippery-MID-APPR
    [*kia-hioji-pi’i-hoho*]
    APF-path-slippery-REAISON.DS
    ‘(watch out,) you may slip [because the path is slippery.]’

    b. *Poki-chanan!*
    go-APPR
    ‘(beware of that) she may come along!’

In Ese'eja, the apprehensive marker only refers to unrealized situations. By contrast, Lichtenberk (1995, pp. 294-296) reports that the apprehensive marker in Toqabaqita is unspecified with regard to tense, and can refer to a past, present, or future situation, like in ‘you may have been/be sick’. What both apprehensive markers have thus in common is the high probability and undesirability of the event.

2 Precautive

The precautive construction e-VERB-*kuanije* is a subordinate marker. In this case, not only the ‘apprehension causing situation’ is expressed, but also the ‘precautionary situation’ (Lichtenberk, 1995, p. 298), i.e. the reaction in order to avoid the apprehension causing situation (or its consequences). The person experiencing the fear is no longer the speaker, but the subject of the precautionary situation. In (2a), a mother gives a medicine to her child in order to prevent him from being too hot, the situation that causes apprehension to her. In (2b), a mother lifted her child so that he does not get trampled by the cow, the apprehension causing situation from her point of view.

(2)  a. *Owaya shemeño kia-ka-ani, [kia-kiyo e-po*
    3ERG medicine(Sp) give-3A-PRS APF-hot PREC-be
    *kuanije.*]
    PREC
    ‘S/he gives him medicine so that he does not get (too) warm/lest he gets warm.’
b. Owaya oha=bakua jekisowa-ka-nahe [maka=a
cow=ERG
3ERG 3GEN=child lift-3A-PAS
e-kishi-ka  kuanije.]
PREC-trample-3A 
‘She lifted her child, so that he does not get trampled by the cow.’

Contrary to the apprehensive marker, the precautive does not require an interactional context, since the fear is not experienced by the speaker, but by the subject of the precautionary situation. However, when a precautionary situation is a command, then the fear is that of the speaker. In (3), the addressee may not fear that the child may go out, or may not consider that as an undesirable event; the speaker commands him to look after the child, because he, the speaker, considers the possibility of the child going out as probable (if he is not looked after) and undesirable (the reason why he commands someone to avoid that).

(3) E-kuayaki-’io  kuanije haawana-kue.
PREC-go.out-TEL PREC care.after-IMP
‘Look after him so that he does not go out!’

3 Aversive

The aversive clitic =yajaho belongs to the complex adposition paradigm, like many spatial adpositions (e.g. =pejeho ‘close to’). It is semantically very similar to the precautive, as the precautionary situation is explicitly encoded (by the main verb), and the fear is experienced by the subject of the reaction event. However, the scope of the adposition is not over a verb, but over an NP: the fear is not due to a probable and undesirable event, but to an unpleasant entity.

(4) a. Iñawewa kuahi-kuahi-ani biya=yajaho.
dog run-RED-PRS bee=AVERSIVE
‘The dog is running for fear of the bee.’
b. \(E\)-sho’i  ‘oke-‘io-nahe  pejepeje=\text{yajaho}.\)  
\(\text{NPF-child go.down-TEL-PAS owl}=\text{aversive}\)  
‘The child fell (on the floor) out of fear of the owl.’

4 Conclusion

I showed that Ese’eja displays three markers dedicated to the expression of fear; they vary with regard to whom the experiencer of the negative emotion is, and with regard to what is feared – event or entity. One may wonder if the Ese’eja people are more sensitive than other people to this negative emotion, and maybe more sympathetic? The very famous space-oriented stimulus ‘Frog, Where are you’ (Mayer, 1969) seems to have offered me a supportive clue: while Slobin (Slobin, 2004, p. 223) expected speakers across languages to focus on the emergence of the owl, all four Ese’eja consultants have, separately, produced fear-oriented utterances, of which (4b) is an illustration.

References