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Recommended Citation

Paul, Ileana () "Introduction: Dialectal microvariation in Madagascar," *Western Papers in Linguistics / Cahiers linguistiques de Western*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wpl_clw/vol1/iss1/1

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INTRODUCTION: DIALECTAL MICROVARIATION IN MADAGASCAR*

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The papers collected here showcase research presented at the “Dialectal Variation in Madagascar” conference held in June 2014 in Antsiranana, Madagascar. There were 24 talks given by students and faculty members from Madagascar, Canada, and the US. The purpose of this introduction is to provide some background information on the project and to situate the papers within this context.¹

1. Malagasy dialects

Malagasy is an Austronesian language spoken on the island of Madagascar, which in 2014 had an estimated population of just over 23 million people. It has long been recognized that there are various dialects of Malagasy spoken on the island; Ethnologue (<http://www.ethnologue.com/subgroups/malagasy>) lists 11 dialects. There is much debate about the divisions between dialects and ethnic groups, a debate we set aside here. Linguistic research on the dialects has focused almost exclusively on lexical and phonological/phonetic differences. This research has led to very fruitful results, such as the linguistic atlases produced by Gueunier, Ramasoamalalao and Raharinjanahary (1992, 1993). See also Dez (1963).

Research on the differences between dialects in the areas of syntax and morphology, however, remains limited. There are of course descriptions of individual dialects (for example, Rabenilaina’s (1983) extensive description of Bara). Botouhely’s (2007) work draws explicit points of comparison between what he calls “le parler du nord” (the northern dialect) and Official Malagasy, in terms of syntax (e.g. word order, the distribution of determiners) and morphology (e.g. the affixal forms of pronouns). But clearly there is much work to be done.

The goal of this project is therefore to collect preliminary data from a few regions as a starting point for a more complete study. The papers in this volume provide some initial results from the project and also include work from researchers not directly associated with the project, but who have an interest in dialectal variation and who participated in the conference.

2. Syntactic microvariation

The field of dialectal microvariation has enjoyed a fairly recent uptick in interest from researchers who focus typically on formal linguistic analysis. Dialects

* The research presented in this volume was supported by funding from SSHRC (410-2011-0977, Ileana Paul PI). I would also like to thank Research Western and the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at Western for their financial support. Special thanks to Solo Raharinjanahary for his participation at the conference.

¹ Not all of the papers presented at the conference were submitted for publication in this volume.

offer an ideal opportunity to study variation across very similar grammatical systems (Rizzi 1989, Kayne 2000). Closely related dialects allow us to isolate particular properties that vary, keeping other properties constant, generating new insights into natural language, insights that are more specific than when comparing widely different languages. This field has grown rapidly in the past twenty years, with fruitful work on variation in French (Roberge and Vinet 1989), Italian (D'Alessandro et al 2010), and Dutch (Barbiers et al 2005, Barbiers et al 2008). The field of microvariation has up until now focused on European languages and would benefit from the study of “exotic” languages. The project and the papers in this volume therefore investigate whether the proposed analyses for dialectal variation in the above languages can be applied to a typologically distinct language such as Malagasy.

3. Methodology

The project received funding from a Standard Research Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Researchers from Canada, the US, and Madagascar developed the research methodology and trained students in Madagascar to collect and analyze linguistic data. Teams of two students traveled to different regions to record conversations in the local dialect. Each team visited the research site twice, once in early 2012 and again in late 2013. The recordings were then analyzed using the software PRAAT. The student researchers were responsible for transcribing the data, providing a gloss and translation, and also for making notes on linguistic phenomena that they considered worth investigating. The conference in 2014 provided the students with the opportunity to present their results at an international venue and to benefit from the other presentations and discussions that took place.

4. The papers

The papers in this volume can be roughly divided into three main categories: papers that provide a general overview of a particular dialect, papers that examine a specific aspect of a particular dialect, and papers that compare a particular phenomenon in two (or more) dialects.

4.1 General overview of particular dialects

Our keynote speaker was Professor Roger-Bruno Rabenilaina, who presented on Vezo Malagasy. His paper highlights phonetic, morphological, and syntactic properties of this dialect. Although Vezo is contrasted in places with “Classical Malagasy”, the focus of the paper is a survey of Vezo. Andriamise and Rasoamalalavao both describe dialects of Betsileo. Andriamise aims to show that Vakinankaratra, is in fact a “hybrid” of Merina and Betsileo, a dialect on the frontier between these two dialects. Rasoamalalavao, on the other hand, describes the Betsileo spoken in Ambositra and Fandriana. Finally, the paper by Ravelonjatovo is not on dialectal variation, per se, but considers how to treat lexical variants (within the specific lexical domain of the environment) using computational methods.

4.2 Specific aspects of particular dialects

Most of the papers presented at the conference fall into this second category. Five look at varieties of Betsileo, two examine the “Northern Dialect”, one considers the dialects of Nosy Be, and one provides an analysis of Bezanozano.

Rakotoalison provides a descriptive study of the *-in-* prefix in southern Betsileo, which she shows can be used to indicate voice, tense, and aspect. The paper by Raminintsoamaravo and Rasolonantenaina compares two types of fronting in Betsileo, one with *ro* and the other with *no* (the issue of fronting and these particles is one that is a recurring theme in this volume). Randriambololona considers apparent reduplication of the proper name determiner *Ra* in northern Betsileo. Razanabololona and Soafaraniriko describe *sokela* in Fianarantsoa, a particular ritualized form of salutation. Finally, Razanamampiononana looks at constructions with *de* in northern Betsileo and analyzes the particle as an intensifying conjunction.

Botouhely’s paper considers adjectives and interactions with aspectual predicates in the Northern Dialect. Rasoanantenaina focuses on the *ma* particle in this dialect and how it can be used both as a general interrogative marker and a discourse particle.

Finally, Bodihely considers the different uses and distribution of *ny* in Nosy Be, which can be a determiner, but also a focus particle used in fronting constructions (recall here the paper by Raminintsoamaravo and Rasolonantenaina on Betsileo). Similarly, Ranaivoson examines the particle *no* in Bezanozano, which has similar properties: determiner and focus marker, amongst other uses.

4.3 Inter-dialectal comparisons

The final set of papers draw explicit comparisons between dialects with respect to particular linguistic phenomena. All use as a point of comparison either Merina or Official Malagasy.

Pursuing the intriguing nature of clefts and focus particles (see above) are the papers by Potsdam and Polinsky and by Ralalaoherivony, Ranaivoson, and Travis. Potsdam and Polinsky focus in particular on information questions in Antakarana and Official Malagasy. They show that despite surface differences (absence of the focus particle in Antakarana), both use a cleft construction to form questions. Ralalaoherivony et al consider clefts in Bezanozano and show that rather than using an independent particle (e.g. *no*), Bezanozano uses a determiner. This has implications for the structure of clefts both in Malagasy dialects and cross-linguistically.

The papers by Rakotovahiny and Bodihely, by Rakotozafy and Zafindrazana, and by Travis study particular constructions in the Northern Dialects and contrast them with their Official Malagasy counterparts. Rakotovahiny and Bodihely consider the different functions and distributions of the first person singular pronouns. Rakotozafy and Zafindrazana compare the distribution and interpretation of two particles, *ndrêky* and *zeñy*. Travis considers differences in word order in measure phrases and explores the theoretical consequences.

Ranaivoson provides the one phonetics paper in the volume in his study of the distribution of the [e] vowel across different dialects. As mentioned, although phonetic differences between dialects have received some attention in

the literature, more research could be done in this area. Finally, Ramasomanana looks at translations of the Bible in two dialects (Merina and Antaisaka) and over time.

5. Summary

These papers all demonstrate the rich possibilities for linguistic research offered by the dialects spoken in Madagascar. In particular, the distribution of determiners and focus particles merit further study, as do the pronominal and demonstrative systems. Much of the research on variation among dialects of Dutch has focused on syntactic doubling – as mentioned in the article by Andriamisa, Betsileo shows doubling of personal and interrogative pronouns. The extent of doubling across dialects and which vocabulary items can be doubled remains to be determined. Finally, while Official Malagasy is described as VOS, many dialects appear to freely allow SVO. Whether subject-initial word order is a result of clefting, as is argued to be the case for Antakarana by Potsdam and Polinsky, is another topic to be investigated in other dialects.

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