The syntax of Malagasy auxiliaries

Rajaona (1972) describes a class of pre-predicate elements in Malagasy, referring to them as auxiliaries. For Rajaona, this class is defined distributionally (they must appear in the pre-predicate position and cannot be the main predicate) and morphologically (they are invariant in form, unlike verbs). Despite these two points of similarity, auxiliaries form a heterogeneous group: there are temporal and aspectual markers, as well as modals and markers of (non-) volitionality. I will show, however, that all auxiliaries pattern together in being incompatible with VP ellipsis (question-answer pairs). The goal of this talk is thus to provide a first attempt at classifying these auxiliaries with respect to their syntactic properties.

Malagasy is a strictly predicate-initial language. Auxiliaries, as defined by Rajaona, are elements that appear before the main predicate, as illustrated below.

(1) a. Tokony   hilalao   aho.   b. Efa   niteny   aho.
      should   FUT.play 1SG(NOM)   already PST.speak 1SG(NOM)
      'I should play.'   'I already spoke.'

These elements do not host voice morphology (as shown in (2)), unlike verbs (see (3)).

(2) a. *tokoninao   b. *efako
       TT-should-2SG   TT-already-1SG
(3) a. Mikasa   hilalao   aho b. Kasainao   ve ny   hilalao?
      PRS-AT-intend FUT-AT-play 1SG   TT-intend-2SG Q DET   FUT-AT-play
      'I intend to play.'   'Do you intend to play?'

The list of auxiliaries that Rajaona supplies includes certain modals (e.g. *tokony* 'should'), temporal and aspectual markers (e.g. *efa* 'already'), and some adverbials (e.g. *saika* 'almost').

Turning now to their syntax, no auxiliaries license VP ellipsis in question-answer pairs.

(4) a. Tokony   hamaky   ve ny mpianatra? b. *Eny   tokony ~~hamaky~~   izy ireo
      should   FUT-AT-read Q DET student   yes   should ~~FUT-AT-read~~   3 PL
      'Should the students read?'   'Yes, they should.'

VP ellipsis is otherwise possible with regular (control) verbs, such as *mikasa* 'intend'. Travis (2005) argues that Malagasy does have verb-stranding VP ellipsis (Goldberg 2005). The pattern in (4) therefore suggests that auxiliaries are merged above the functional heads that license ellipsis.

Further evidence in favour of the high merge position of auxiliaries comes from ordering restrictions. As shown by Rackowski and Travis (2000), there are two pre-verbal positions for negation in Malagasy. All auxiliaries can precede negation and most cannot follow it, as shown below.

(5) a. Efa   tsy   miteny   ny   mpampianatra.
      alreadyNEG   PRS-AT-speak DET   teacher
      'The teacher is already not speaking.'

b. *Tsy   efa   miteny   ny   mpampianatra
    NEG   alreadyPRS-AT-speak DET   teacher

I will also consider ordering restrictions between auxiliaries.

    One auxiliary discussed by Rajaona does not pattern with the others: *te* 'want'. Although it occupies the pre-verbal position, it does undergo voice alternations (e.g. *tiako* 'I want') and licenses VP ellipsis. I take these facts to show that *te* is not an auxiliary, but the main predicate.

(6) a. Te   hilalao   ve ianao?   b. Eny   te   ~~hilalao~~   aho
        want   FUT-AT-play Q 2SG   yes   want   ~~FUT AT play~~ 1SG
        'Do you want to play?'   'Yes, I want to.'

In sum, auxiliaries in Malagasy have received little attention in the literature despite often being used as a diagnostic for structure. This talk sheds new light on this class of elements and also on the problem of how to derive VP ellipsis in this language.

References

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