Discontinuous noun phrases as an iconic strategy of marking thetic clauses.

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1. Introduction

The existence of discontinuous NPs challenges the very nature of syntactic models which are based on a strictly hierarchical arrangement of constituents. In a functional-typological perspective, they are also puzzling since they violate a principle of diagrammatic iconicity first formulated by Behaghel (1932: 4), and rephrased below (Givón 1990: 970):

“Entities that are closer together functionally, conceptually, or cognitively will be placed closer together at the code level, i.e. temporally or spatially.”

There are two popular solutions for dealing with this dilemma:

a) The language in question is denied a phrasal NP level altogether, i.e. it is called “non-configurational” or “flat” – this is still a widely held view about Australian languages, even though “nonconfigurationality” has turned out not to be tenable as a single parameter (Austin & Bresnan 1996).

The existence in Warlpiri of discontinuous expressions – in particular, discontinuous nominal expressions (...) – can also be seen, in part, as a function of free lexical insertion. (...) It happens that Warlpiri sentences formed in this way receive coherent interpretations, including ones in which the syntactically separate nominals constitute single composite expressions in logical form. (Hale 1983: 9)

In cases of apparent discontinuity [as opposed to true discontinuity, ESB] the constituent in question is not part of an integral NP. Instead, it can be a referring expression that has an appositional relationship with another NP, as in e.g. the Australian languages referred to above (...). (Rijkhoff 2002: 256)

b) Faced with languages where the existence of a phrasal constituent NP cannot be disputed, various theoretical approaches to discontinuous structures are currently converging in finding functional motivations for their occurrence, e.g. different information structure values for the coreferential nominals – iconically reflected in formal separation (De Kuthy 2002, van Hoof 2005; for Australian languages McGregor 1997, Merlan 1994: 242).
In this paper, I will argue for the Northern Australian language Jaminjung that

- it has true NPs, and discontinuous NPs distinct from “appositional structures”
- discontinuous NPs have a function not previously recognised in the literature on split NPs or information structure: that of marking a special subtype of thetic clauses
- the motivation for this function is ultimately also iconic

2. Noun phrases in Jaminjung

2.1. Background information

- Spoken in the Victoria River District, in the north-west of the Northern Territory
- “Jaminjung” short for Jaminjung and Ngaliwurru, two closely related varieties
- Sole varieties still spoken in the Western branch of the Mindi language family (Non-Pama-Nyungan); no closely related languages
- Highly endangered: at most 100 speakers today

Main typological characteristics:

- Head + dependent marking of core arguments
- Ergative-Absolutive case system (Absolutive unmarked, not glossed in examples)
- Pragmatically conditioned word order
- Around 35 inflecting, generic verbs with classificatory function
  "Northern Australian style" (Schultze-Berndt 2000, 2003; McGregor 2002)

2.2. Continuous noun phrases

Coreferential nominals in contiguity are the unmarked case in terms of text frequency (thus iconicity principles are valid in Australia too!). They can be analysed as a single phrase, on the grounds of

- prosodic contiguity: no pause and no boundary contour intervenes between the nominals (prosodic phrases are currently being investigated by ongoing PhD research by Candide Simard)
Word order restrictions: a demonstrative determiner may precede or follow a head noun but always precedes a qualifying nominal (which itself may precede or follow).

the possibility of phrase-level case marking (ex. 2) (as well as repetition of case-marking in agreement, ex. (3))

(2) [ngarrgina marlayi] thanthu
1sg:POSS woman DEM
nyiling ganna [ngarrgina-ni mugurla]
promise.wife 3sg>1sg-hit.PST 1sg:POSS-ERG aunt
'That is my woman, my aunt promised her to me!' (Kriol: main anti bin telim mi promis, thets mai waif). (fictitious argument between a man and his rival) [DP/ES97_A02_03]

(3) [bulgarding-ni ngarrgina-ni] gan-ijja-ny \ .. yangarra \ 
father-ERG 1sg:POSS-ERG 3sg>3sg-spear-PST kangaroo
jungguwurru gan-angu \ .. malajagu \ 
echidna 3sg>3sg-get.PST goanna
'My father speared this (for you), the kangaroo; he (also) got an echidna, and a goanna.' (quotation in a narrative about traditional ways) [VP/ES99_V01_06a]

2.3. Dislocated structures
Dislocated structures are defined here in prosodic terms, as coreferential nominals or nominal structures which are separated by a pause / boundary contour (ex. 4; see also yangarra 'kangaroo' in (3)).

(4) lubayi yirramaya ngiyiwula \ .. guju-gujugu \ 
many 1pl.excl>3sg-have-PRS DEM REDUP-big
'we have many (of them) here, big ones' [IP/ES97_A03_01]
(a comment on the occurrence of a rat-like species in the area.)

2.4. True discontinuous NPs
True discontinuous NPs are found within one and the same intonation unit (see also McGregor 1997).

(5) lilaj yirr-inyji::: \ 
swim 1pl.excl-go.IMPF
mangarra yirra-mila buj-ngarna yinawurla=biyang .. wayida
plant.food 1pl.excl>3sg-get.IMPF bush-ASSOC DEM:DIR=NOW bush.yam
warnmala=gun mangarra \ warnbud \ 
bush.yam plant.food paddy.melon
'We used to swim across, and we used to get bush tucker over there – bush yam, bush yam (is the) plant, and paddy melon.' [VP/ES99_V01_06a]
3. Jaminjung discontinuous NPs in annuntiative utterances

*Annuntiative*: “out-of-the-blue” statement, “announcing” a state of affairs, or alerting the addressee to the existence or appearance of an entity not previously present in the universe of discourse (see further Section 4 below).

Discontinuous NPs are used recurrently (though not exclusively) in such annuntiative contexts by Jaminjung speakers (but are rarely recorded ...). The NP always consists of two nominals, denoting a quality/quantity and an entity, respectively, in either order.

**Fig. 1: Representation of the “annuntiative discontinuous NP” construction**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>N1i</th>
<th>Predicate</th>
<th>N2i</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entity OR quality/quantity</td>
<td>(existence or appearance)</td>
<td>Quality/quantity OR entity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Constr. Meaning**
Alerting the addressee to the presence of a new entity in the discourse universe while highlighting a special quality of the participant

**Examples**

(6) `gujugu ga-ram motika thanhiya`
big 3sg-come.PRS car DEM:ADV

’a big car is coming there!’ [overheard, ER:ESB:12/05/2008]

(Context: out-of-the-blue utterance uttered by the speaker in the passenger seat when spotting a truck coming towards us.)

(7) `warrgad ga-ram=yirrag mayi`
long 3sg-come.PRS man

’a tall man is coming for us!’ (Context: spontaneous example illustrating `warrgad` ‘long, tall’ during elicitation of size expressions.)

(8) “`burduj ba-jga gabardag`
go.up IMP-go quick
`burdaj ga-ram=ngardi gujugu! yaniny-ma!”`
wind 3sg-come.PRS=SENT.FOC big IRR-3sg>2sg-hit
`yirriyu=nu=biyang`
1pl.excl>3SG-say/do.PST=3sg.OBL=NOW

‘”Climb up quickly! A big wind is coming! It might hit us!” we said to her’

[IP/ES97_A03_10] (quotation within a narrative)
4. **An iconic motivation for “annuntiative discontinuous NPs”: marking of sentence focus (theticity)**

- The “annuntiative” utterances illustrated in Section 3 constitute a subtype of “sentence focus” / “all-new” / “thetic” clauses (Sasse 2006: 281-284).

4.1. **Theticity defined**

- In sentence focus (“thetic”) structures, assertion and focus coincide; “no pragmatic presupposition is formally evoked” (Lambrecht 1994: 233). This may mean, but does not necessarily mean, that participants and the event itself that is discussed are “new”, i.e. not identifiable by the hearer.

**Main functions of sentence focus / thetic utterances** (Sasse 1987, 2006)

- **Annuntiative**: Out-of-the-blue utterances, exclamations, headlines
- **Introductive**: Introduction of new discourse topic / new referents
- **Interruptive**: Event which interrupts “normal” topic chain; sudden event
- **Descriptive**: Scene-setting – existential or related verb
- **Explanative**: Answer to the question “what happened”; explanation of preceding discourse context or non-linguistic situation

- Sentence focus (“thetic”) constructions universally tend to be maximally different formally from the much more frequent topic-comment (“predicate focus”, “categorical”) constructions. In contrast, formal overlap with other constructions – e.g. narrow focus constructions – seems to be tolerated (see Kuroda 1972, Sasse 1987, 1995, 2006, Lambrecht 1994:235, 2000).

Categorical utterances are said to be bipartite predications, involving a **predication base**, the entity about which the predication is made, and a **predicate**, which says something about the predication base. In other words, one of the arguments of the predicate is picked out as a “topic” in the literal
sense, namely, an object about which something is asserted. Thetic utterances, on the other hand, are monomial predications (...); no argument is picked out as a predication base; the entire situation, including all of its participants, is asserted as a unitary whole. (...) [T]his notional difference is often reflected “iconically” in the formal structure of the two types of utterances, whatever mechanism a language uses to express the distinction.

(Sasse 1995: 4-5)

- The formal correlates of theticity attested cross-linguistically (and also within individual languages) are rather heterogeneous, but all are maximally different from topic-comment structures, and iconically reflect the “monomial” nature of thetic clauses.

4.2. Cross-linguistically attested formal correlates of the thetic-categorical distinction

Table 1. Frequent structures found in categorical and thetic statements (Sasse 1987, 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic-Comment (categorical)</th>
<th>Sentence focus (thetic)</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accent</strong></td>
<td>Accent on constituent within predicate</td>
<td>Accented subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Word order</strong></td>
<td>SV(X)</td>
<td>VS, XVS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic</strong></td>
<td>Topic marking</td>
<td>No topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Special constr.</strong></td>
<td>“Unmarked”</td>
<td>Split structure (cleft), Expletive subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nr of arguments</strong></td>
<td>Several argument expressions possible</td>
<td>Usually only one overt argument (monoargumentality)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subject accent vs. predicate accent (German and English)

(10a) (Warum bist du so spät? / Why are you late?)

_Das TELEfon hat geklingelt_ / _The PHONE rang_ “thetic”

_Mein AUTO ist kaputt_ / _My CAR broke down_

NB. Subject-accented clauses can receive a sentence-focus or (narrow) argument focus interpretation (e.g. as a reply to the question _Did your motorcycle break down?)_ – see Lambrecht (1994, 2000).

(b) (Was ist denn mit deinem Auto? / What’s wrong with your car?)

_Es verliert ÖL / It’s losing OIL._ “categorical”
Expletive subjects (German and English)

(11a) *Es regnet / It's raining*  
      "thetic"

(b) *Es waren viele Linguisten eingeladen*  
    'Many LINGUISTS were invited'

(c) *There were many LINGUISTS in the room*  
    "thetic"

(d) *Many linguists skipped the morning session*  
    "categorical"

Verb-initial vs. subject-initial word order (Modern Greek)

(12a) *Xtipise to tilefono*  
      "thetic"
      rang ART telephone  
      'The PHONE rang'

(b) *To tilefono xtipise*  
    "categorical"  
    'The phone RANG’ (Sasse 1987)

Absence vs. presence of topic marker *wa* (Japanese)

(13a) *Inu ga hassit-te iru*  
      "thetic"
      dog NOM run-CONV is  
      'There is a dog running'

(b) *Inu wa hassit-te iru*  
    "categorical"  
    'A/the dog is running' (Sasse 1987: 538)

Presentational/cleft constructions (Modern spoken French)

(14a) *Voilà la sirène qui hurle.*  
      "thetic"
      there.it.is DEF sirene REL wail  
      'The SIRENE is wailing' (lit.: 'That’s the sirene that’s wailing’)

(b) *Que se passe-t-il? – Le chat qui est tombé par la fenêtre.*  
    "thetic"
    DEF cat REL AUX fallen through DEF window  
    'What’s happening? –The CAT has fallen out of the window'  
    (Sasse 1987: 563)

4.3. Discontinuous NPs as a further strategy of marking sentence focus?

- The strategies of marking sentence focus illustrated above are iconic in the 
  sense that they remove from its position, or mark in an unusual way, the 
  typical candidate for topic assignment (the subject). By preventing the 
  default assignment of a topic-comment structure to the sentence in question, 
  they underline the monolithic character of the structure and facilitate 
  assignment of focus to the sentence as a whole.
Arguably, the occurrence of split NPs in sentence focus utterances is motivated in the same way: framing the predicate with the two nominal elements signals the monolithic, “all-new” character of the sentence: distributing the information about the discourse participant in this way makes it a less likely target for topic assignment. In other words, the structure is iconically motivated.

Discontinuous NPs thus constitute a further strategy of marking sentence focus that has not previously been described in the literature.

This strategy is possible in annuntiative clauses because in announcing the presence of an entity not previously part of the discourse, often a specific property of that entity is being pointed out, such as the size of the car in (2) and the strength of the wind in (4) – thus, more than one nominal is available.

It is however to be expected that languages employing this strategy also have other strategies at their disposal (in Jaminjung e.g. a sentence-focus clitic, illustrated in (4))

In a thetic structure, all constituents are equally in the scope of the focus, so there is less motivation for an analysis as distinct, coreferential phrases than in the case of split constructions with different information structure values of the nominal constituents (as in (1)). The annuntiative construction could profitably be described in a construction-based framework that separates semantic dependency and hierarchical configuration (McGregor 1997, Croft 2001, 2006), where the discontinuity is licenced by the occurrence in a larger construction, the thetic clause (as in Fig. 1).
References


