# Animacy as a prominence-lending feature in Lakurumau morphosyntax and discourse

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My paper wants to offer a further, albeit small, contribution to the ongoing research on the effects of prominence in the morphosyntax and discourse of natural languages, on the basis of data from Lakurumau, a Western Oceanic language spoken in Papua New Guinea. All data are taken from my own fieldwork and from the documentary corpus of Lakurumau (Mazzitelli 2017).

I follow the definition of prominence offered in Himmelmann & Primus (2015) and von Heusinger & Schumacher (2019). Prominence is characterised as a relational property, which can be defined on the basis of three main criteria: (1) Prominence singles out one element from a set of elements of equal type and structure; (2) Prominent elements are structural attractors: they may license more operations than their competitors; (3) Prominence status shifts in time (as discourse unfolds) (von Heusinger & Schumacher 2019: 119). Linguistic elements may be intrinsically prone to be prominent, on different levels, because of their referential, semantic or grammatical properties, such as animacy, agentivity and subjecthood; von Heusinger & Schumacher (2019) define such properties as "prominence-lending features". The role of prominence as an organising principle in language is made clear in prominence-dependent operations: that is, operations that require an element to be given prominent status by the speaker and the same element to be recognised as prominent by the hearer.

In Lakurumau, animate (and especially human) referents are construed as prominent in both morphosyntax and discourse. Morpho-syntactically, three operations are sensitive to prominence: number agreement on verb phrases, adnominal possession and comitative constructions. Only animate referents can trigger number agreement (1a.). Adnominal possessors have dedicated forms for human referents (2a.). Finally, only humans can be realised as companions by means of the dedicated proposition *demaai* (3a); a second preposition, *tomaai,* can be used to encode both animate and inanimate comitative and pseudo-comitative relations (3b and 3c.).

In discourse, animate referents are far more likely than inanimate to appear as transitive actors (this is a universal tendency; Haig & Schnell 2016); similarly, inanimate objects in anaphora are routinely encoded as zero, while animate referents receive an overt pronominal encoding (4). Schnell et al. (forthcoming) have shown that new referents tend to be introduced in discourse as non-subjects. Generally speaking, this is true of Lakurumau new referents, too. However, a humanness -driven divide can be observed: human referents are just as likely to be realised as subjects as well as non-subjects, while inanimate referents are always realised as non-subjects (Table 1).

## Examples and tables

(1) a. *A  buna xas  di   u-mitaau*
     ART  people still  3PL.S DUR-stay
     'There are still people'

  b. *A  mu  flu  awaa    kas  ka   u-mitaau*
     ART  PL  house DIR.DOWN still  3SG.S DUR-stay
     'The houses are still there' (*lox190)*

(2) a. *A  xaa-na   wiu* /  *A  wiu  sa-na*

ART    POSS=3SG         dog    ART    dog    POSS-3SG
'His dog'

    b.   *A    ret    san=a    membung    (\*a rete a xaana membung)*
ART excrement POSS=ART    flying.fox
'The excrements of the flying foxes'

(3)   a.   *Demaai a    lik    (\*demaai a mataxon)*
with    ART    child    (\* with the coconut)
'With the child'

    b.   *Lo    saande asang ga=    daa    vangan    tomaai a    fura-lik*
LOC    Sunday IAM    1SG.S    IRR    eat.INTR    with    ART    PL-child
'On Sunday I will eat with the children'

    c.   *A    zakzaak,    daa    mix-im a    zakzaak tomaai a    mataxon*
ART    sago    (Ø.3PL) IRR    mix.-R ART    sago    with ART    green.coconut
'The sago, they will mix the sago with the coconut'

|   | Human | Animate | Inanimate | All referents |
|---|-------|---------|-----------|---------------|
| A | 7 | 0 | 0 | 7 |
| S | 6 | 1 | 3 | 10 |
| O | 5 | 2 | 24 | 31 |

Table 1. New referents and grammatical relations in Lakurumau (based on a 200-clauses corpus).

**References**

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