

Word Order Variation in Yami

Abstract

This study investigated the factors governing the occurrence of SV~VS word order variation in Yami, a Philippine Batantic language spoken on Orchid Island with a population of 3000. We applied a quantitative variation analysis, using GOLDVARB 2001, to examine 510 clauses of 5 narratives of the Yami data (Rau & Dong 2006).

Previous studies on Yami (Rau 2002, Rau 2005, Rau & Dong 2006) have suggested that age and tense/aspect might be related to word order variation. In conversations and narrative styles, the SV order was found to co-occur with the progressive aspect and the recent past.

Our results indicated that topicalization and speech styles are the two significant factor groups that account for word order variation in Yami. It is confirmed that although 84% of the clauses in Yami are VS, different text types present differing basic order, as suggested in Quakenbush (1992). Whereas VS is the basic word order in narratives, SV fronting occurs most frequently in conversations (probability weight = .78). We will address the implications in second language pedagogy and dictionary making in relations to the findings.

Keywords: Word order, variation, Yami

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Yami is an Austronesian language spoken on Orchid Island, a small offshore island located in the Pacific Ocean 60 kilometers southeast of Taiwan (See Figure 1). The Yami language is a Philippine Batanic language, related to Ivatan and Itbayat of Batanes. However, Mandarin Chinese has been spoken on the Island since 1945, when Mandarin Chinese became the national language of the country. According to the Council of Aboriginal Affairs, in the year 2008 the Yami numbered 3,510 (made up about 1% of Taiwan's total indigenous population). The primary religion is Christianity (Ethnologue 2005). Traditionally, the Yami rely on fishing and farming of taro, yams, and millet. A unique part of their material culture consists of colorful and finely sculptured fishing boats, wooden sculptures, and taro farming. Nevertheless, some of them spend several months a year in Taiwan to raise their income.



Figure 1: Orchid Island located in the Pacific Ocean 60 kilometers southeast of Taiwan
(adapted from <http://google.earth.com>)