**Hierarchical number marking and agreement in Vera’a**

Vera’a (ISO 639-3: vra; Oceanic, North Vanuatu), has distinct systems of number marking, corresponding only roughly to different stretches of the Animacy Hierarchy (Corbett 2000): pronouns inflect for number (in addition to person and clusivity) and reflect distinctions between singular-plural-dual-trial. The trial form is a true trial, not a paucal. For a closed subclass of nouns denoting salient social roles (kin, age groups, ranks), a special personal-noun construction, distinguishing dual and plural from singular, is obligatorily used for two or more individuals referred to; the lexical noun is reduplicated (exs in (1)). This construction is used in specific as well as non-specific and generic contexts. For all other nouns, including human and animate ones, non-singular reference is optionally marked by a plural particle (ex (2a)) (which is not attested in neighbouring Mwotlap, Francois 2001:567ff). Whether a bare noun phrase (without the pluralising particle) has possible plurative reading is closely tied to cultural knowledge, but does not necessarily coincide with animacy: thus, ‘persons’ can be referred to by a bare NP with a specific plurative reading (ex (3a)), whereas ‘house’ would always have a singulative reading when being a specific referent of a bare NP.

The use of anaphoric expressions depends on the class of noun, but also more immediately on animacy and overt number marking: socially salient nouns always have exact singular, plural, or dual forms when taken up by anaphoric pronouns, and also agree in singular versus non-singular number with the aorist marker when function as subject (exs in (1)). Where human nouns are pluralised – which they usually are – they are also taken up by anaphoric pronouns of exactly the same number value (ex (2a)), and they agree in non-singular with aorist markers when they are subjects (ex (3b)). Non-human animate noun phrases are often left unmarked when having specific non-singular reference, and are then treated as singular by the aorist marker (ex (4a)). Where they are pluralised, they also agree with non-singular aorist markers (ex (4b)). In either case, an anaphoric pronoun will pick up the exact number reference. With inanimate nouns, anaphoric pronouns are singular, even where the reading of a bare NP is plurative.

Number marking is analysed here as having very different functions in noun phrases and anaphoric pronouns: in the former, they flag out collectives (groups or couples) with socially salient roles, plurality with other humans and animates, and distributive, or sorts or portion readings with inanimate and mass nouns. Number marking in pronouns serves mainly reference tracking according to semantic number. Number agreement in aorist markers is never semantic, and reacts merely to structural properties of the subject NP. It is a clearly grammatical category for only a small closed class of socially salient nouns and pronouns. The availability of the number category is not a matter of animacy as such, but an idiosyncratic property of these nouns (see Mosel 1982 for similar observations in Tolai (Oceanic)). This underlines the idea that the so-called Animacy Hierarchy is merely a conceptual space for language comparison, rather than a rendition of language-specific rules motivating constructional splits.

**Examples**

(1) number marking construction with number-marking personal nouns

sg a. *qē =n 'amarga anē* ***di******ne*** *in*

finish =art elder.man dem1.a 3sg aor:3sg drink

‘And then this elder man here will drink (it, i.e. the kava).’ JJKP.005

pl b. *e* ***raga******‘a****-‘amarga* ***dir*** *=****ēk*** *in*

pers.art hum:pl nsg-elder.man 3pl =aor:nsg drink

‘And then the elder men would drink (it).’

dl c. *e* ***ruwa******'a****'amarga rekso* ***duru******=k*** *'ō kal <eh> gidē ma*

pers.art hum:dl nsg-elder.man like 3dl =aor:nsg carry upwards 1pl.in hither

‘The two elder men, they would then bring us up here [to the new village of Vera’a].’ GMV.021

(2) number marking construction with **number-marking particle** or **numeral**

*ēn* ***'erē*** *'amarga anē <eh>* ***duru*** *=n 'ir 'an̄sara 'a Vunu Lava*

art pl elder.man dem1.a hes 3dl =art genuin person ass.sp *place.name*

‘These elder men, they (two) are true Vanua Lavans.’ GMV.023

(3) a. *nik ē ‘ēn so* ***=n 'an̄sara*** *ga mew*

pl 2sg aor:2sg see cpl =art person stat many

‘You can see that there are many people.’ JJK.020

b. ***'erē 'an̄sara =k***  *'evē su-sur va'I =n 'erē wōqa'aga 'abēne (0.4)*

pl person =aor:nsg throw distr-down still =art pl post pro:obl

‘The people are still throwing down all the posts for it.’ house29JAN0705.006

(4) a. ***tōo anē******ne*** *lu-luwo wal*

dl fowl dem1.a aor:3sg red-big intens

‘[They (two) each took their chicken.] The [two] chickens had gotten quite big.’ ANV.046

b. ***'erē tōo anē =k***  *gav duru =k din*

pl pl fowl dem1.a =aor:nsg fly 3dl =aor:nsg reach

‘Then these (two) chickens flew (off).’ ANV.085

**References**

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