Experiencer objects in Nen (Southern New Guinea)

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In this presentation I discuss the subclass of Nen verbs which encode 'experiencer objects' – a phenomenon widespread in the languages of Sahul, both Papuan (e.g. Kalam (Pawley et al 2000), Yagaria (Windschuttel 2012, Sougb (Reesink 2005)) and Australian (e.g. Iwaidja and Mawng (Evans 2004, Singer 2007), Murrinh-Patha (Walsh 1987)). They are also found in some African languages such as Yoruba (Atoyebi 2013).

This class, which in its semantics corresponds rather closely to 'dative subject' constructions in those languages that have them, is used for most expressions denoting a bodily stimulus, drive, or illness, such as 'be hungry', 'be ill', 'feel cold', 'feel sad' or 'feel sexually aroused'. On the Leipzig valency project's verb list, they form the third largest group after regular transitive and inherent middle verbs.

In terms of their coding, they behave like normal transitives in most regards, with an ergative-marked NP denoting the stimulus, an absolute NP denoting the experiencer, and agreement on the verb (respectively for actor and undergoer) with both these arguments. But whereas the dominant word order with regular transitives is AOV, that found in experiencer-object constructions is OAV, with the result that the human experiencer (the O argument) occurs clause-initially like a normal transitiv subject. The head of the stimulus NP is lexically fixed, in what is effectively a transitive-subject idiom, and there are some selectional restrictions on the verb as well (thus 'do/make' is used in 'hunger makes' (BE HUNGRY) 'sadness makes' (BE SAD) etc, while 'seize' is used in 'lust seizes' (be sexually aroused'). The stimulus noun may, however, be modified, e.g. by the type of food the hunger is targetting, e.g. 'cassowary meat hunger does' for 'be hungry for cassowary meat'.

In this talk I focus on three questions: what is the best syntactic analysis of experiencer object constructions in Nn? What is their full semantic range? And to what extent is their analysis as transitive-subject idioms a problem for claims that have been made (e.g. by Baker 1996, 2009) that fixed nominal arguments universally bear an absolutive relation to the verb?