Reference Point Constructions and the Conceptual Structure of Palauan ęr

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Meaning is likely determined by a combination of a language's overt lexicogrammatical resources and background knowledge structures (domains) and contextually inferred information. Contextual and background knowledge play an enhanced role in meaning construction when a morpheme's conceptual content is highly schematic, as with the Palauan grammatical morpheme ęr [ér], a preposition-like word whose many uses and semantic functions seem unrelated and obscure. Similar to English of in signifying an intrinsic relation between two entities (Langacker 1992), ęr's meaning is even more schematic. I argue that ęr's conceptual content resides in its designation of an abstract reference point construction (RPC) (Langacker 1993); its variety of uses reflects instantiations of the RPC construed against different backgrounds in particular contexts.

Josephs (1975:84) claims that ęr has basically two unrelated uses: as a specifying word (1) (SPEC) or a relational word (2-6) (REL) that can also signify comparison (7). The word a is a phrasal introducer (PI) (for NP and VP), and standard Palauan orthography is used:

(1) A negleke a mědtak (ęr) a derumk
PI child PI afraid of SPEC PI thunder
'My child is afraid of (the) thunder.'
(2) Ak mísuub ęr a skuuł
I was studying REL PI school
'I was studying at school.'
(3) A ngalek a lmanel ęr a děmāl
PI child PI is crying REL PI father
'The child is crying for his father.'
(4) A John a mo ęr a Guam ęr a kluku
PI John PI go REL PI Guam REL PI tomorrow
'John is going to Guam tomorrow.'
(5) A rěkung a tiłobed ęr a blísibs
PI crab PI came out REL PI hole
'A crab came out of the hole.'
(6) Ak smečer ęr a tērērēr
I sick REL PI cold
'I'm sick with a cold/I've got a cold.'
(7) A Droteo a mēsiiich ęr a Toki
PI Droteo PI stronger REL PI Toki
'Droteo is stronger than Toki.'

The absence of ęr in (1) evokes a non-specific reading where the child is afraid of thunder (derumk) in general; the presence of ęr signifies a specific, definite instance of thunder. Palauan relational phrases with ęr (boldface) variously evoke location (2), goal (3), direction/time (4), source (5), cause (6), and comparison (7), etc. (1-7) show how ęr's uses instantiate the RPC in different domains and contexts.

RPCs consist of a conceptualizer establishing mental contact with a target entity via another cognitive-salient entity, the reference point, within a "conceptual region...to which a particular reference point affords direct access" (Langacker 1993:6). Langacker claims the RPC is the abstract basis for such phunolmena as possessive constructions, topic-like constructions, and metonymy. In John's car, e.g. John is the reference point for locating the target, car. Reference points are generally always specific.

I argue that in all its uses ęr is a relational predication designating a RPC where its landmark (LM) (object) is construed as a particular reference point used to establish mental contact with its trajector (TR), the target. The target of ęr is typically a process of some type. Thus the LM of ęr in (1), derumk 'thunder', is a reference point with respect to which the target, the state of the child's fear, is mentally accessed. This use of ęr induces a specific reading of its LM, because the reference point relation requires the reference point (the thunder) to be one particular entity that affords mental contact with the target (the child's fearful reaction). When ęr is absent, the lack of a reference point relation allows for the verbal object to be interpreted as non-specific. The specific reading of the LM of ęr in (1) thus follows as a natural consequence of ęr's reference point sense.

The different senses of ęr in (2-7) also fall out as natural consequences of ęr's designating a RPC against different knowledge domains or contexts. In (2) the LM of ęr, skuuł 'school', is a reference point with respect to which the studying is located. Construing the relation between school and studying is natural, hence the usual English translation of ęr as 'at/in' in locative contexts. Similar accounts can be given for (3-6). In (4) klukuł 'tomorrow' is a temporal reference point for John's going to Guam, and Guam is a locative reference point with respect to which John's going is accessed; it is natural to construe John's going to Guam as transpiring in/on tomorrow; and the directional verb in (4) forces the sense that John will be going to ęr's LM, Guam. In (7) the LM of ęr, Toki, is a standard of comparison (reference point) with respect to which Droteo's strength is measured.

The paper therefore shows that, because the meaning of ęr primarily resides in the reference point notion, it is greatly underspecified. The precise details of its sense must be supplied by background and contextual knowledge.