

# *That's What I'm Talking About:* Discourse Level Deixis in Buhutu

*Russ Cooper*  
*Summer Institute of Linguistics*

## 1. Introduction

What do you do with a word that can almost never be translated the way mother tongue speakers gloss its meaning? *That's* the word I'm talking about in this paper.

Recent work with "Tok Ples"<sup>1</sup> grammarians from various parts of Papua New Guinea has confirmed that space-related deictics are also used in each language for various discourse level (non-pointing) functions. These functions vary from language to language, but in Buhutu the word for "that" most often functions as a topic overlay device.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The Spatial Deictics in Buhutu

Buhutu, which is a linguistically conservative lect in the Suauic group of the Papuan Tip Cluster (Cooper 1975; Ross 1988), has two basic demonstrative forms, *ite...te*, and *mate* which correspond to 'this/here' and 'that/there' respectively. Additional forms encode the relative spatial location of more distant referents: *ne*, *ne'i*, or *ni* refer to more distant objects 'that yonder', and for very distant objects one uses *au-* (sometimes with a directional preceding it).

<sup>1</sup> I have been involved in training "Tok ples" or vernacular Mother Tongue Translators [MTTs] with the Summer Institute of Linguistics [SIL] since 1985, and in the grammar component of the 1990 National Training Course (involving about 15 language groups) we worked specifically on the topic of discourse level deixis.

<sup>2</sup> Perlmutter and Postal (1983) discuss the concept of overlay relationships such as topic, question and relative. Bell (1983) applies the topic-overlay concept to Cebuano, a Filipino language which has a topic/focus system as classically described. Later, Berinstein (1984) discusses topic and focus overlays in K'ekchi Mayan. It is important to note that an overlay relationship is not "instead of" a central relationship—such as "subject of" or "object of," but is overlaid onto a construction "in addition to" such central relationships.

## 1) Spatial Deictics in Buhutu

<i>ite buka te</i>	'this book' (closer to speaker)
<i>buka mate</i>	'that book' (closer to hearer)
<i>luma ni</i>	'that house' (away from speaker and hearer)
<i>luma au-</i>	'that house' (far away)
<i>luma kwalidi au-</i>	'that house way down there' (west)

With intonation shifts or when shifted positionally, *mate*, *ni*, and *ite* can take on the existential function 'that/this is...' in an equative construction.

2) Equative contrasted with Demonstrative uses:<sup>3</sup>

Equative	Demonstrative
<i>Mate em waga.</i>	<i>Em waga mate haba ya bulu.</i> <sup>4</sup>
that your canoe	your canoe that will 3sS sink
'That's your canoe.'	'That canoe of yours will sink.'
<i>Em waga mate.</i>	<i>Ite luma te ya loholoho.</i>
your canoe there	this house here 3sS good
'Your canoe is there.'	'This house is nice.'

Any Buhutu speaker who also speaks English will immediately say that *mate* means 'that', but anyone who listens to people speak, or looks at Buhutu texts<sup>5</sup> will discover that *mate* is not usually used in its deictic-referent function in texts. In fact, after parsing approximately 200 pages of Buhutu text (from both oral and written sources) with an

<sup>3</sup> Abbreviations are used as follows:

## Person Markers

1s - 1st person singular	1pn - 1st person plural (inclusive)	sm - subject marker
	1px - 1st person plural (exclusive)	om - object marker
2s - 2nd person singular	2p - 2nd person plural	
3s - 3rd person singular	3p - 3rd person plural	

Grammatical Relation of Person Marker is shown by adding one of the following:

O - object marker	S - subject marker	P - possessive marker
e.g. 2sS - 2nd person singular subject marker	1pnP - 1st person plural inclusive possessive marker	
3pO - 3rd person plural object marker	3s - 3rd person singular agreement	

Grammatical Relations and other parsing conventions

1 - "subject of" relation	Ø - zero morpheme
2 - "object of" relation	COM - comitative, or accompaniment
3 - "indirect object of" relation	CONT - continuous or habitual aspect
OBL - oblique relation, or oblique registration on a verb	
TOP - topic overlay relation	EPC - the "edible" possession carrier
TR - transitive registration on a verb	GPC - the "general" possession carrier
NOM - nominalizer	IPC - the "inalienable" possession carrier

<sup>4</sup> *Mate* in this sentence can function either as a deictic, or in the overlay relation described below in this paper.

<sup>5</sup> Traditional narrative, personal narrative, hortatory, argumentive, descriptive, and procedural texts were examined. However, in ordinary conversation, *mate* is frequently used in its deictic, pointing function.

Interlinear Text Program (ITP) more than 98% of the occurrences of *mate* involved discourse-level, non-spatial relationships.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. The Discourse Function(s) of *mate*

#### 3.1 *Side-Tracks and Hints*

##### What then does *mate* do?

At first I was puzzled by the wide range of functions it seemed to perform. One usage pointed out by mother tongue speakers seemed to be that of marking equative clauses, and *mate* was often translated by some form of the verb 'to be' in these constructions.

- 3) Equative (Stative) use:
  - a. *Atai'a-na mate hesa-na Silosilo.*  
bird -3s ?? name-3sP Silosilo  
'The bird was called a Silosilo.'
  - b. *E-di mesinale-na mate dog aya'ayahan-na.*  
GPC-3pP missionary-3s ?? person sorcerer-3s  
'Their pastor was a sorcerer.'

When translating from English, some Buhutu speakers made the over-generalization that *mate* should also replace the English verb 'to be' where it is used to mark continuous action, but that this is not the case either can be seen below:

- 4) Continuous action marked on verb:
  - a) *Dodoga mate bolu-di sa lao-laoma.*  
people ?? plenty-3p 3pS CONT-come  
'Plenty of people were coming.'/'People, plenty of them were coming.'
  - b) *Dodoga bolu-di sa lao-laoma.*  
people plenty-3p 3pS CONT-come  
'Plenty of people were coming.'
- 5) Continuous action not marked on verb:  
*Dodoga mahudo'i-di mate sa laoma.*  
people all-3p ?? 3pS come  
'All of the people came.'/'As for all of the people, they came.'

<sup>6</sup>I do not prove that all non-deictic occurrences of *mate* are topic-comment, for, in fact, a small percentage have other discourse level functions. The ultimate focus of this paper, however, is to look at the various environments in which *mate* occurs with a topic-comment-like function, and then to show for the Suauic group how this discourse device varies considerably from lect to lect—probably more so than do core syntactic devices.

### 3.2. Sentence and Discourse Level Overlay Relations

It turns out that *mate* can occur (optionally) in many, seemingly different, syntactic environments:<sup>7</sup>

6) Environments in which *mate* occurs:

Noun Phrase - *mate* - Noun Phrase

Pronoun - *mate* - Noun Phrase

Postpositional Phrase - *mate* - Clause

Clause - *mate* - Postpositional Phrase (locative or temporal)

Pronoun - *mate* - Clause

Quantifier - *mate* - Clause

Noun Phrase - *mate* - Clause (Subject or Object)

Clause - *mate* - Pronoun

Clause - *mate* - Noun Phrase

Clause - *mate* - Clause

Clause - *mate* - Quote Introducer

Paragraph - *mate* - Clause

Clause - *mate* - Paragraph

Whole Text - *mate* - Clause

Clause - *mate* - Whole Text

External Situation - *mate* - Clause

However, when we look at the discourse, we find that the first element in each construction contains known, or given information, and that the element following the *mate* gives additional information or a comment about the earlier information. In other words all of the above constructions may be reduced to one:

7) TOPIC - *mate* - COMMENT

where the topic which is in focus is the first element in a construction and contains old or given information, and the comment which follows is signalled by *mate* and gives additional information about the topic.

Normal word order in a simple transitive clause is SOV, as shown in (8).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>This sweeping statement does have some restrictions. For example, in antipassive constructions where the object noun has been incorporated, the 2-chômeur cannot then be fronted as topic. Certain adverbs, when constituents of the verb phrase, cannot bear the topic-overlay relation. However, relative clauses, and object complements may also be topic.

<sup>8</sup>I use the normal conventions of Relational Grammar where "subject of" is marked by 1, and "object of" by 2.

- 8) *Wayowa wa salai hesa ya nali-Ø.*  
 dog the pig one 3sS bite-3sO  
 1 2 sm P om  
 'The dog bit a pig.'

3.2.1. *Central Arcs which Bear Topic Overlay Relations.* As will be exemplified below, in such clausal constructions, a nominal or noun phrase bearing a central grammatical relation, may also bear a topic overlay relation.<sup>9</sup> This topic overlay rule can be formulated as in (9).

- 9) a. A central arc may also bear a topic overlay relation.  
 b. If a nominal bears a topic overlay relation, it must occur in clause-initial position immediately followed by *mate*.

The subject (1), the object (2), or the indirect object (3) may be made the topic of the sentence by using *mate*. In addition, obliques such as locatives, temporals, and instruments may be fronted as topic:

- 10) Subject (1) bearing topic overlay relation:

TOPIC	COMMENT					
<i>Kamkam mate walagofe wa ya manabala'-e-n.</i>						
chicken TOP	crocodile the	3sS	angry-at-3sO			
1	2	sm	P	om		
'The chicken was angry at the crocodile.'						
'As for the chicken, she was angry at the crocodile.'						

<sup>9</sup> A "central grammatical relation" may be an oblique [Benefactive, Instrument, Temporal, etc] or term relation [1 "subject of," 2 "object of," 3 "indirect object of"]. Overlays may include: Question, Relative, Topic, Overweight, etc. (See Perlmutter and Postal 1983:86-87 or Bernstein 1984:10-11.)

Working as I do "in the bush" in PNG, I am not yet aware of any recent studies done in a Relational Grammar framework which treat these constructions on higher discourse levels. The topic-overlay relation may be Inter-clausal in some constructions. Bell's treatment of Cebuano allows for the final 1 of a downstairs clause to bear the topic relation in an upstairs clause (1983:173-76), but in Buhutu at any rate, the topic-overlay relation applies to discourse constituents as well as to arcs bearing central relations. E.g., a paragraph, episode, or text bears a topic overlay relation to some other constituent. I would be interested in feedback on defining how discourse level "chunks" function in topic overlay relations.

<sup>10</sup> That topic/comment does not take the place of central GRs but is an overlay relationship can be shown by the following facts:

- a. It occurs with other than sentence level constituents.  
 b. The *mate* is optional in otherwise identical constructions, when the discourse pragmatics are different.

- 10') *Kamkam hudo'i walagofe wa ya manabala'-e-n.*  
 chicken certain crocodile the 3sS angry-OBL-3sO  
 1 2 sm P om  
 'A certain chicken was angry at the crocodile.'

## 11) Object (2) bearing topic overlay relation:

TOPIC	COMMENT			
<i>Na luma-di</i>	<i>mate</i>	<i>sa</i>	<i>hato-i-di.</i>	
and house-their	TOP	3pS	thatch-TR-3pO	
2	sm	P	om	

'And they thatch their houses.'/'And their houses, they thatch them.'

Locatives and temporals may also have the topic overlay relationship:

## 12) Locative bearing the topic overlay relation:

TOPIC	COMMENT			
<i>E-na</i>	<i>aba</i>	<i>gwane yai</i>	<i>mate, sa</i>	<i>ta'i'ili hinaga.</i>
GPC-3sP	NOM	sing	at TOP	3pS circle also
	LOC	sm	P	

'At his singing grounds they would also circle around.'

## 12') Locative not bearing topic overlay relation.

- a. *Ena aba gwane yai sa ta'i'ili hinaga.*  
'At his singing grounds, they also circled around.'
- b. *Sa ta'i'ili hinaga ena aba gwane yai.*  
'They also circled around at his singing grounds.'

---

11')	<i>Dodoga</i>	<i>haisa</i>	<i>luma-di</i>	<i>sa</i>	<i>hato-i-di.</i>	
	people	some	house-3p	3pS	thatch-TR-3pO	
	1		2	sm	P	om

Some people put thatch on their houses.

c. The verb still agrees with the 1 and 2 in person and number even when it is also marked for the topic overlay relationship.

	TOPIC	COMMENT					
10')	<i>Kamkam</i>	<i>luwaga</i>	<i>mate</i>	<i>walagofe</i>	<i>wa</i>	<i>sa</i>	<i>manabala-'e-n.</i>
	chicken	two	TOP	crocodile	the	3pS	angry-OBL-3sO
	1			2		sm	p

The two chickens were angry at the crocodile.

	TOPIC	COMMENT			
11')	<i>Na</i>	<i>luma-na</i>	<i>mate</i>	<i>sa</i>	<i>hato-i-Ø.</i>
	and	house-3s	TOP	3pS	thatch-TR-3sO
		2		sm	P

They thatched their house.

I don't think this is a specious argument, but it could be parallel in its implications to the following, where there is no overt subject nominal in the second clause:

11'')	<i>Kamkam</i>	<i>ya</i>	<i>gegeli.</i>	<i>be</i>	<i>walagofe</i>	<i>wa</i>	<i>ya</i>	<i>manabala-'e-n.</i>
	chicken	3sS	squawked	and	crocodile	the	3sS	angry-OBL-3sO
	1	sm	P		2	sm	P	om

The chicken squawked, and she was angry at the crocodile.

13) Temporal with *mate*

TOPIC					COMMENT			
<i>Fuya-na</i>	<i>yai</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>kiukiu-gu</i>	<i>mate</i>	<i>tina-gu</i>	<i>ya</i>	<i>pe'i</i>	
time-3s	PP	COM	little-1sP	TOP	mother-1sP	3sS	die	
OBL					l	sm	P	

'At the time when I was small, my mother died.'

3.2.2. *Higher Level Discourse Constituents which Bear Topic Overlay Relations.* Differing from K'ekchi Mayan (Berinstein 1984:10-11), Buhutu does not restrict the topic overlay relation to central arcs. Complete clauses or sentences, paragraphs, episodes, and the complete body of a text may occur in the topic overlay relation.

## 14) Topic overlay with complete clause on either side.

TOPIC					COMMENT			
<i>Weso</i>	<i>dele-na</i>	<i>ya</i>	<i>oi-ye-n</i>	<i>mate, a-di</i>	<i>gabu</i>	<i>ya...</i>		
snake	tail-3s	3sS	strike-TR-3sO	TOP	EPC-3pP	garden	3sS	
l	2	sm	P	om		l	sm	

'The snake struck with his tail, their garden was ...'

15) Discourse use of *mate* concluding a story.

TOPIC		COMMENT	
TOTAL TEXT. <i>Mate, e-gu lau-tiga wasu-na, ofi'ofi-na.</i>			
= 5 paragraphs	TOP	GPC-1sP	go-travel news-3s finish-3s
STORY	EQUATIONAL CLAUSE		

'With that, the news of my journey is finished.'

In Buhutu the topic overlay relation is not just marked for central terms, but also for relationships between sentences, paragraphs and whole texts.

The topic overlay rule in (9) should be restated accordingly as in (16) to take into account overlay relations on the discourse levels higher than the sentence.

- 16) a. An arc at any level of discourse may also bear a topic overlay relation.  
 b. If a constituent at any level bears a topic overlay relation, it must occur in construction-initial position immediately followed by *mate*.

Possible alternative solutions have not been argued formally in this paper, however, mother tongue grammar students in a number of Austronesian languages of PNG seem to have similar feelings about their own use of deictics to mark topic-comment relations.

#### 4. Marking Topic in Other Suau Lects

The response of mother tongue speakers to the topic-overlay feature (for example in Sinauḡoro, see Tauberschmidt and Bala 1992) raises the question as to what extent the functions of a device like *mate* will map over onto other Suauic lects.

In earlier work with speakers of four Coastal Suau lects during 1968-69 (see map), more than 50 texts were collected and edited.<sup>11</sup>

##### 4.1. *Suau and Bonalua Lects*

In Suau and Bonalua lects, *ede* is used to optionally mark equational constructions; SU<sup>12</sup> *meta* 'that' was used in one procedural text in a manner that could have been interpreted as either a spatial deictic or a topic marker. No other features were found in the Suau or Bonalua texts which could be mapped to the discourse function of *mate*. However, in all of the coastal lects *ta'iyede* 'that's it' can take the place of *mate* where it is used to end a discourse or episode.

##### 4.2. *Dauī Lect*

Dauī, which is contiguous geographically to Buhutu, uses *nate* for 'that'. *Nate* (or, rarely, *mate*) is used in a few topic overlay constructions but does not seem to be as frequently used as in Buhutu. However, *boto* 'and then' seems to be used where BH *mate* would sometimes focus a temporal phrase. In equative constructions 'a is used occasionally where Suau would use *ede*. In one construction, both *nate* and 'a are used where Buhutu would use *mate* in both cases.

17) Example of both *nate* and 'a in Dauī lect.

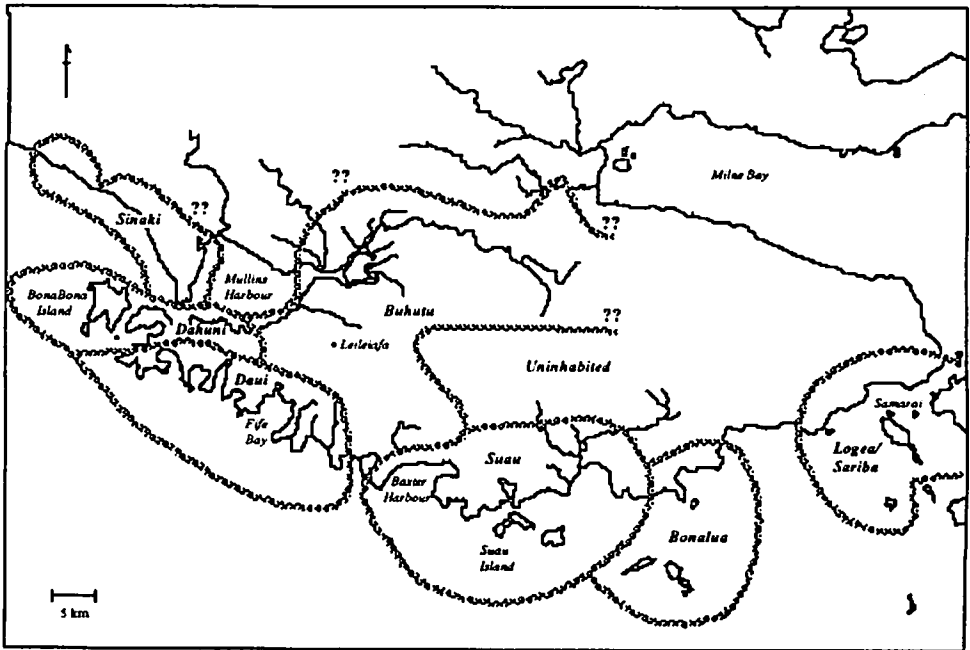
*Nate, e-da pilipilidai a-na sigu 'a.*  
 there GPC-1pnP story EPC-3sP end is  
 'With that, our story is ended.'

Both *nate* and *mate* are used in Dauī for the deictic spatial function. *Wau* 'now' is used as a focus device similar at times to topicalization.

<sup>11</sup> These texts were collected under a grant from the East West Center during field work along the Suau Coast in 1968-69.

<sup>12</sup> Abbreviations used for lects in the Suauic cluster are as follows: BH - Buhutu, DH - Dahuni, BN - Bonalua, LF - Leileiafa, DA - Dauī, SU - Suau





In sum, there is no single form in Dauí which corresponds one-on-one with *mate* but the topic overlay relation is overtly marked occasionally.

#### 4.3. *Dahuni Lect*

The *Dahuni lect*, used by Bonabona Islanders and other speakers on the eastern shore of Mullins Harbor, is bounded to the north by the Leileiafa community, a Buhutu speaking group. The two basic spatial deictics are *teka* 'this/here' and *toka* 'that/there'. *Ka* corresponds to Dauí 'a or Suau *ede*.

*Boto* 'then' could occasionally be translated by BH *mate* in its temporal-focus function. In our texts, there are but a half-dozen occurrence of *toka* used as a topic overlay.

In (18) is shown the mapping between *mate* and features found in other lects which were occasionally used to mark topic-overlay relations.

18) Buhutu-to-Coastal correspondences with *mate*

BH	DA	DH	SU	BN	
<i>mate</i>	<i>mate</i>	<i>toka</i>	<i>(meta)</i>		'that'
	<i>nate</i>				
<i>mate</i>	'a	<i>ka</i>	<i>(h)ede</i>	<i>(h)ede</i>	'to be'
<i>ate</i>	<i>boto</i>	<i>boto</i>			'then'
<i>mate</i>	<i>ta'iyede</i>	<i>ta'iyede</i>	<i>ta'iyede</i>	<i>ta'iyede</i>	'that's it'

## 5. Summary

In Buhutu *mate* 'that' most often functions to show a discourse overlay relationship, which functions according to rule 16 above.

On the sentence level, *mate* only occurs when the topic (old information) is focussed. That the overlaid construction still shows its central relationship is demonstrated by verb agreement for sentence level subject and object topic overlays.

Where the topic overlay relation in Buhutu seems to differ from those previously described in the RG literature, is in the fact that grammatical units such as sentences, paragraphs, episodes and whole texts can bear the topic overlay relation. Since the RG model has not yet clearly delineated how these discourse relationships are to be defined, some work remains to be done if we are to integrate these facts into our theoretical framework.

There is no evidence that the neighboring Suaucic lects exploit this device to the extent that Buhutu does. In fact only fragments of its total range of overlay sub-contexts occur in any single lect outside Buhutu. Even in Dauí, where it is most evident in hindsight, I did not see enough data to perceive a pattern until the Buhutu evidence was compared.

Though sentence and phrase level grammatical devices are nearly identical among the five Suaucic lects examined, discourse features are not identical but vary greatly.<sup>13</sup>

Based on this evidence, it would seem that topic-overlay, like phonological and lexical features, is a differentiating factor between lects,<sup>14</sup> and the functions of various deictics on

<sup>13</sup>Sentence connectives also vary greatly from one Suau lect to another, and quickly serve to identify a speaker from another lect.

<sup>14</sup>See Cooper (1975) for discussion of phonological correspondences between lects and the implicational relationships between features. Ted Schwartz (personal communication, 1969) felt that such linguistic or cultural features serve to provide emblematic differentiation between groups. It is certainly the case that *mate* is a high frequency lexical item in Buhutu texts of all genre, whereas the lexical items which encode its various usages in the other four lects are of relatively low frequency in the 40,000 entry Suaucic Text Concordance.

the discourse level may be a fruitful topic for further investigation in the study of comparative syntax.<sup>15</sup>

## References

- Bell, Sarah J. 1983. Advancements and ascensions in Cebuano. In Perlmutter 1983.
- Berinstein, Ava. 1984. Evidence for multiattachments in K'ekchi Mayan. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms.
- Cooper, Russell E. 1969. Suau word and morpheme concordance: Suau, Bonalua, Dau, Dahuni & Yaleba [=Buhutu] lects. programmed by Bob Hsu, University of Hawaii.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1970. Suau texts (preliminary edition). Marion, Indiana: Indiana Wesleyan University Press [formerly Marion College Press].
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1975. Coastal Suau: a preliminary study of pan-dialectal relationships. In *Studies in the languages of South-East Papua*, ed. Tom Dutton. Pacific Linguistics C-29. Canberra: Australia National University.
- Perlmutter, David M., ed. 1983. *Studies in relational grammar*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Perlmutter, David M. and Paul Postal. 1983. Some proposed laws of basic clause structure. In Perlmutter 1983.
- Ross, Malcolm D. 1988. *Proto-Oceanic and the Austronesian languages of western Melanesia*. Pacific Linguistics C-98. Canberra: Australian National University.
- Tauberschmidt, Gerhard, and Alfred Bala. 1992. Transitivity and ergativity in Sinauŋoro. *Language and Linguistics in Melanesia* 23:179-191.

Presented 24 May 1991

Revised 25 July 1992

SIL, Box 357

Ukanumpa via Lae

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

<sup>15</sup> Languages such as Dobu and Misima share some of these functions using different devices (personal communication, David Lithgow, Bill Callister, 1991), but I have not looked in detail at Tubetube, Auhelawa, or the Duau/Bunama data which should be more closely related historically to the Suau Cluster lects.

At this point in my investigation, I would lean toward the conclusion that this use of *mate* is an independent innovation, i.e., that Buhutu has expanded the function of what was earlier a relatively unimportant device, and it has subsequently become a rather powerful discourse feature.