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Sequence and salience in Namia discourse

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Abstract

This paper examines the morphosyntax marking the mainline of discourses in Namia, a Papuan language of the upper Sepik valley, Papua New Guinea. Namia is a Sepik family language with agglutinative morphology and SOV constituent order. The verbal prefix *pə-* marks clauses on the mainline of sequentially organised texts (narratives and procedures). Unlike functionally similar morphemes in many languages, *pə-* does not indicate aspect or tense. Instead it marks a chronologically sequential relationship with preceding clauses, resembling markers of sequentiality in SVO languages found elsewhere in the world (e.g. Swahili). The typologically anomalous paragraph structure in Namia suggests that *pə-* has developed diachronically from a sequential affix to a former clause chaining structure. This development may have resulted from extended past contact with a SVO language. In narratives and procedures, the affix is the pragmatically expected marker of the mainline. Zero marked clauses are either supporting material or highlight important developments. This pattern supports previous research which questions the designation by Hopper (1979) of narrative mainlines as ‘foreground’.

Key words: Papuan languages, Sepik languages, Namia, discourse, narrative, foregrounding.

1. Introduction

This paper describes the morphological marking of the mainline of discourses in Namia, a Papuan language of the upper Sepik valley, Papua New Guinea. The grammatical coding of discourse mainlines was first brought to the attention of the linguistic world by Labov (1972). He noted that narratives in English are built around a sequence of temporally ordered clauses, each with a verb in simple past tense. He described these clauses as the narrative ‘skeleton’. Departures from this syntax were associated with ‘non-events’ (propositions not part of the temporal sequence of events). Other studies (Grimes 1975; Levinsohn 1976; Longacre 1976a,b; Jones & Jones 1979, *inter alia*) found that numerous languages make a morphosyntactic contrast between the mainline or event-line of the discourse (Labov’s ‘narrative skeleton’) and supporting material (Labov’s ‘non-events’).

The most influential contribution to the discussion has been that of Hopper (1979). He found an association in many languages between different types of narrative material and variations in tense, aspect and mood (TAM). The mainline is often associated with past tense or perfective aspect, whereas supporting material is associated with present tense or imperfective aspect. Hopper introduced the term foreground for the mainline and background for supporting material, implying that the mainline is the most salient material in the

discourse. The use of these terms in his important paper on transitivity (Hopper and Thompson 1980) facilitated their widespread adoption in linguistic literature (Payne 1997; Timberlake 2007, *inter alia*). Nevertheless, the assumed equation of mainline with high discourse salience has been criticised (Fleischman 1985; Givón 1987; Dry 1992; Luraghi 1995, *inter alia*). In this paper, I will show how the marking of discourse mainlines in the Papuan language Namia supports this criticism. For this reason, I will refer to ‘mainline’ and ‘supporting material’, rather than ‘foreground’ and ‘background’.

Several previous studies of New Guinea languages have found variations in TAM marking associated with marking of mainline. Hepner (1995) found that narrative mainlines in Bargam are marked as perfective aspect, whereas supporting material is coded as imperfective. A number of languages mark mainline as realis mood and supporting material as irrealis, e.g. Sentani (Hartzler 1983), Bukiyip (Conrad 1987) and Manam (Blewett 1991). Unlike these languages, Namia does not mark the discourse mainline by exploiting oppositions in standard TAM categories. Rather, discourse mainlines are marked with the prefix *pə-*, which appears to have the sole purpose of indicating that events described in each marked clause follow in sequence from one another. I will suggest that this prefix originated in a collapsed medial-final clause-chaining structure. I will also note the typological similarity of the structure in Namia to that found in numerous SVO languages.

Section 2 of this paper summarises relevant features of the Namia language, drawing on previous research.

Section 3 demonstrates that *pə-* marks the mainlines of sequentially ordered texts.

Section 4 shows that *pə-* is not a marker of tense or aspect.

Section 5 examines the connection between *pə-* and the typologically odd paragraph structure in Namia.

Section 6 examines how absence of *pə-* in sequentially ordered texts contributes to meaning.

Finally, section 7 considers some implications of this study of Namia discourse for the understanding of discourse structure in other languages.

The data in this paper come from texts recorded and transcribed by Tom and Becky Feldpausch, and are used with their permission, as well as that of the Namia speakers.

2. Key features of Namia

Namia (ISO 639-3 language code nnm) is spoken in Sandaun and East Sepik provinces of Papua New Guinea (refer Figure 1). The language has also been called Namie, Edwapi and Lujere. In 2007, the population was estimated at 6000 (Eberhard et al. 2019).

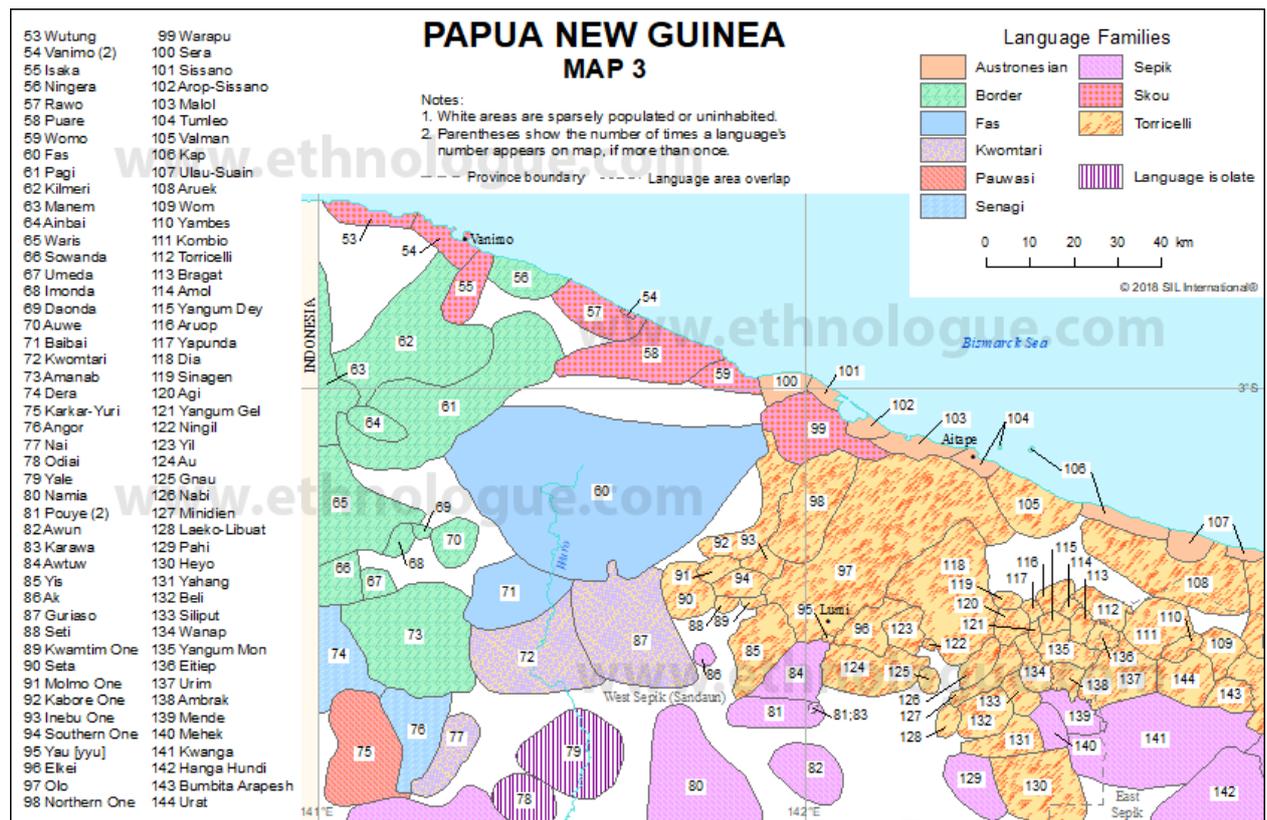


Figure 1: Map of languages in Sandaun Province, including Namia (80).

Source: Eberhard *et al.* (2019). Used by permission

The people who speak Namia live in the shallow valleys of the Sand and Yellow Rivers; one village is on the south bank of the Sepik River, downstream from its confluence with the Yellow River (Feldpausch & Feldpausch 1999). Their staple diet is sago, supplemented by hunting and fishing. Namia has been classified in the Yellow River subgroup of the Sepik family (Foley 2005, 2018; Ross 2005; Eberhard *et al.* 2019).

Most linguistic research and analysis in the language has been undertaken by SIL members Tom and Becky Feldpausch, who began work in the language area in 1986. Their publications include a phonology statement (Feldpausch & Feldpausch 2009), preliminary grammar sketch (Feldpausch & Feldpausch 1992), dialect survey (Feldpausch & Feldpausch 1999) and an analysis of TAM marking (Feldpausch & Feldpausch 2007). The Feldpausches' publications are the source of the following brief description of the language, which focuses on points relevant to discourse in Namia. Namia has six vowels: /a, e, i, o, u, ə/. Some processes affecting schwa should be noted: (a) /ə/ fronts to [e] before a front vocoid /i, e, y/; (b) /ə/ retracts to [o] preceding a syllable with a back vocoid /u, o, w/; (c) /ə/ deletes before /a/ or /l/; (d) geminates reduce to single vowels. For instance, /ə/ + /u/ > [ou] but /ə/ + /o/ > *[oo] > [o].

Namia has agglutinative morphology. Constituent order is strictly subject-object-verb (SOV), although adverbial material and non-core participants may be right-dislocated. Dependent clauses invariably precede main clauses. Semantic roles are not verbally indexed but may be indicated by free personal pronouns. Pronouns distinguish person, number (singular, dual and plural) and gender (third person singular only). There is a separate suppletive set of pronouns with emphatic and other functions; accusatively coded pronouns are also partially suppletive in third person. Pronouns may function as pronominal articles modifying a preceding noun phrase or clause.

Case is nominative-accusative. Noun phrases in nominative case are unmarked, whereas noun phrases in accusative case take the clitic *-mə*. Accusative case marks any non-actor participant in a transitive clause, including patients, goals of actions and recipients (Tupper 2009). The allative clitic *-ya* marks movement toward a place or entity. The clitic *-kə*, glossed as ‘oblique case’, marks entities with locative, instrumental or possessive function.

The clause nucleus may consist of up to three verbal stems in serial construction. The verb takes both prefixes and suffixes, with as many as six prefixes and five suffixes being recorded. The only obligatory morphemes are the verbal stem(s) and the mood suffix, which occurs at the right edge of the verb. The slot at the left edge of the verb is available to two contrasting prefixes, *pə-* and *tapə-*. These prefixes respectively indicate sequential and simultaneous relationships between clauses, a function which is typically associated with the medial-final clause chains commonly found in Papuan languages (Foley 1986:175-198). Nevertheless, Namia lacks medial-final clause chaining. This paper will explore the contributions made to Namia discourse structure by *pə-*, including its relationship to clause combining strategies.

Namia does not indicate absolute tense, i.e. morphological marking of temporal location relative to the present moment (Comrie 1985). Temporal location is coded with verbal suffixes originally described as non-future versus future tense (Feldpausch & Feldpausch 1992:42). Comrie (1985:50-52) argues that languages with a non-future / future distinction in fact make a modal distinction between realis and irrealis, and this analysis was later adopted by Feldpausch & Feldpausch (2007:6-9). Realis mood is used for all present and past events, as well as future events considered certain. Irrealis mood marks future events considered uncertain of fulfilment, while imperatives are unmarked for mood. Habitual actions have a distinct modal suffix. Temporal location is indicated by adverbs, e.g. *apo* ‘today’, *aro* ‘at this time’, *ari* ‘previously’. Verbs may take a range of suffixes encoding aspectual notions, including iterative, durative, telic, cessative and inceptive (Feldpausch & Feldpausch 2007:15-18).

3. The prefix *pə-* as a marker of sequentiality

This section of the paper examines the distribution of the verbal prefix *pə-* within different text types. I will conclude that *pə-* functions to mark the mainline of sequentially ordered

texts.

The prefix *pə-* appears at the left edge of the verb in independent and subordinate clauses. Successive instances of the same verb stem may appear with and without the prefix. Its distribution will be described with the aid of Longacre's (1996) typology of notional text types. The typology is diagrammed in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Discourse macro-types (after Longacre 1996:10)

	+ Agent oriented	– Agent oriented
+ Contingent temporal succession	narrative	procedural
– Contingent temporal succession	behavioural	expository

Longacre identifies four broad types of texts: narrative, procedural, behavioural (e.g. hortatory discourse, eulogies) and expository (e.g. descriptions, budget proposals, academic papers). The four text types are categorised against two primary parameters: contingent temporal succession and agent orientation. Texts characterised as '+ contingent temporal succession' (i.e. narratives and procedures) recount series of temporally ordered events, in which each event is dependent on preceding events. In contrast, temporal ordering is unimportant in texts characterised as '- contingent temporal succession' (behavioural and expository texts). Agent orientation' refers to discourses in which discourse cohesion is provided by the actions of identifiable participants, e.g. narratives and behavioural texts.

Texts with + contingent temporal succession are built around a mainline, which is a sequence of temporally ordered clauses recounting the temporally successive events in the text. Normally the ordering of clauses mirrors the order of events; the text is then termed sequentially or iconically ordered (Haiman 1980). Supporting material (to be discussed more fully in section 6) is any material which is not part of the mainline, for example introductions, conclusions and events overlapping temporally with the events on the mainline.

In Namia narratives, the occurrences of *pə-* correlate with the mainline. Mainline clauses normally carry the prefix; exceptions are predictable (to be discussed below and in section 6). The general principle is illustrated in example (1), which is an account of a fishing expedition:

- (1) 5 *i mokuran pitjaki pe-yak-yarəm-le-le.*
 and some first seq-first-ur-red-go.r
 6 *Pe-yaki-rr-e e, Norombalip.*
 seq-go.upriver-brf-r until, Norombalip
 7 *Pə-ni-re.*
 seq-sit-r

- 8 *On lir titja pe-ya-wo-we,*
1sg coconut a seq-up-do-r
- 9 *i em waleitja lir lommomə pə-ra-e.*
and 1pl all coconut 3pl.acc seq-eat-r
- 10 *Lir lommomə pə-ra-təmna-e*
coconut 3pl.acc seq-eat-ces-r
- 11 *i em arkokə pə-kə-naki-re loko e, Alipnitjwai.*
and 1pl thm seq-tr-stand-r 3sg until, Alipnitjwai

‘...and some first travelled upriver. (Our group) went upriver until we got to Norombalip. (We) sat (there). I climbed a coconut tree, and we ate all the coconuts. We finished eating the coconuts, and then we stood up (and walked) until we got to Alipnitjwai Creek.’ (‘Fishing’, by Matyu Kokro).¹

Example (1) is a chronicle in which all clauses describe successive contingent events. All clauses are independent and contain verbs inflected as realis. The sequence of clauses corresponds with the temporal succession of events, hence all clauses are mainline clauses. All clauses in the example are also marked with *pə-*. The distribution of the prefix is unaffected by the semantics of the verb stem. For instance, the prefix appears on motion verbs (e.g. *peyakirre* ‘went upriver’ in clause 6), as well as stative verbs (e.g. *pənire* ‘sat’ in clause 7). Although most verbs are intransitive, *pə-* also prefixes both instances of the transitive verb stem *ra* ‘eat’ (clauses 9 and 10).

Whereas *pə-* signals temporal succession of events, thematic cohesion is marked with the conjunction *i* ‘and’.² The latter indicates that the clause it introduces continues the same theme (paragraph-level topic) as the preceding clause. Thematic paragraphs can thus be identified by the clustering of clauses commencing with *i*; absence of *i* indicates a boundary with a new theme or text segment. Example (2), which gives the opening clauses of a narrative about a bank robbery, illustrates how *i* and *pə-* work in tandem to give cohesion to Namia narratives.

- (2) 1 *Pijou lu lommom, amutjwamu nalwani lu loko kali-tja yarei-le.*
steal man 3pl.acc food boss man 3sg talk-min come-go.r

¹ The following abbreviations are used in this paper: acc – accusative case; acm – accompaniment; all – allative case; brf – brief interval before following event; ces – cessative; col – collective; dedct – deductive; dev – development marker; dist – distal; dstr – distributive; ds – different subject; du – dual; em – emphatic; exh – exhortative; f – feminine; foc – focus; imp – imperative; incp – inceptive; irr – irrealis; itr – iterative; m – masculine; min – minimiser; neg – negation; obl – oblique case; pl – plural; prox – proximal; r – realis; red – reduplication; rep – repetitive; seq – sequential; sg – singular; sim – simultaneous; SOV subject-object-verb; spec – speculative; ss – same subject; SVO subject-verb-object; TAM – tense, aspect and mood; tel – telic; thm – thematic marker; tr – transitivity; ur – upriver; VSO – verb-subject-object. A broad phonetic transcription has been used. Clause numbering is given only for some texts.

² Feldpausch & Feldpausch (1992:47-48) note that the most common use of *i* is to conjoin clauses into coordinate sentences. Less commonly, it conjoins phrases, although the existence of the variant forms *ija* and *iya* makes it unclear whether this is the same conjunction.

- 2 *Lomko pe-yaki-re,*
3pl seq-go.upriver-r
- 3 *i kali pe-yarei-le lu lomom aro yaram-ke-inaki-re,*
and talk seq-come-go.r man 3sg.acc then ur-tr-see-r
- 4a *i lomko amutjwamu nalwani lu loko-kə wala p-ona-e loko-kə,*
and 3pl food boss man 3sg-obl house seq-sleep-r 3sg-obl
- 4b *kali aro kə-warira-e,*
talk then tr-decide-r
- 5 *i amutjwamu nalwani lu loko pe-ikam-e,*
and food boss man 3sg seq-say-r
- 6 *"On Pewani napu-tja kar-mə nak-yawo-we,*
1sg Pewani road-all car-acc acm-go.up-r
- 7 *i wom on-mə aro yəm-wani-naki-mo napu-kə.*
and 2pl 1sg-acc then prox-sit-wait-exh road-obl
- 8 *On kar nak-war-e loko-kə,*
1sg car acm-come-r 3sg-obl
- 9 *i on-mə napu-kə aro yəm-kə-woki-tjəm-mo.*
and 1sg-acc road-obl then prox-tr-watch-2pl-exh
- 10 *Er larawou mir loko-kə,*
1du fear run 3sg-obl
- 11 *i wom kar-mə pə-nak-yawar-e Wanimo-k-ya,*
and 2pl car-acc seq-acm-go.down-r Vanimo-obl-all,
- 12 *i aura wala lok-ya pə-nakə-le."*
and shell house 3sg-all seq-acm-go.r
- 13 *Lomko kar aura wala poprae-kə pə-kə-ra-e popo,*
3pl car shell house near-obl seq-tr-put-r after
- 14 *i lu pli wala anwar-ia pə-wa-e.*
and man two house inside-all seq-go.in-r

‘1 About these thieves, the storekeeper sent a message to them. 2 They went north. 3 And then in the north they saw the man who sent the message, 4 and they, when they slept at the storekeeper’s house, then decided on the plan, 5 and the storekeeper said, 6“I will bring the van up to the Pewani road, 7 and then you wait for me there on the road, guys. 8 When I bring the van, 9 watch for me on the road, guys. 10 When we both run in fear, 11 take the van down to Vanimo, 12 and take it to the bank.” 13 After they put the van near the bank, 14 two of the men went inside.’ (‘Vanimo thieves’, by Maiye Bau.)

The structure of this text is summarised in (2'). Square brackets [] indicate thematic paragraphs.

(2') [1] [2 i 3 i 4 i 5 “{6 i 7} {8 i 9} {10 i 11 i 12}”] [13 i 14]

Example (2) contains three thematic paragraphs, defined by the distribution of *i*. These are:

(a) the initiation of the plan by the storekeeper (clause 1); (b) the planning of the heist by storekeeper and robbers (clauses 2-12); and (c) the robbers' actions on arriving at the bank (clauses 13-14). Paragraph (b) includes multiple internal layers; it contains a quotative margin introducing a quotative frame (represented by inverted commas “ ”), which reports the storekeeper's words. Note that *i* does not occur in clause 6 because the preceding quotative margin marks a transition to a new segment of text (the quotation). Within the quotative frame are three subparagraphs, represented by the pairs of braces { }; boundaries between subparagraphs (e.g. clauses 7, 8) are also signalled by lack of *i*. Each subparagraph contains a different subtheme within the storekeeper's plan: (i) the robbers are to wait while he brings the van; (ii) they are to ambush the van; (iii) when he runs away, they are to drive the van to the town. If comparison is made with example (1), it can be seen that in that text also the occurrence of *i* marks continuity of theme between successive clauses (clauses 5, 9 and 11).

As in example (1), the discourse mainline in example (2) is signalled by *pə-*. The initial clause lacks the prefix and describes the first action in the narrative. This clause provides the point of reference for the subsequent events in the text, which are all marked with the prefix (clauses 2-5, 13-14). The quotative frame (clauses 6-12) contains a hortatory (behavioural) text, and thus is not part of the mainline. It is therefore unsurprising that clauses 6-9 are not marked with *pə-*. The occurrence of *pə-* in clauses 11-12 will be addressed below, in the discussion of behavioural texts.

When a mainline clause is preceded by a subordinate clause, *pə-* is attracted to the first verb in the sentence, which is that in the subordinate clause. In example (3), which comes from the beginning of a narrative, the verb in the subordinate clause (*ple* 'went') carries *pə-*, but the prefix is absent from the main clause.

- (3) *On Anguganak wal wala-ya p-le loko-kə,*
 1sg Anguganak from house-all seq-go.r 3sg-obl
i on Tapo-la-mə ta-plak-e,
 and 1sg Tapo-m-acc spec-ask-r

'When I went home from Anguganak, I asked Tapo.' ('How Tapo was bitten by a pig', by Percy Winau.)

Similar morphosyntax can be seen in example (2), where *pə-* appears on the adverbial clause 4a and not on the following main clause 4b. Note also that *pə-* appears in clause 3 – a relative clause (*kali peyareile lu lomom* 'the man who sent the message') – rather than on the main verb in the clause (*yaramkeinakire* 'they saw').

Pə- prefixes all verbs on the mainline of procedural texts in Namia. Example (4) comes from a typical procedural text. It is a sequence of simple clauses, each of which details an action contingent on the previous one. Every clause contains *pə-* apart from the introductory frame.

- (4) *On na titjei kali i-tjar-le.*
 1sg sago stone talk say-dedct-incp
Titjei pə-k-lora-e. i pe-irl-e. Waləmao p-o-we.
 stone seq-tr-roast-r and seq-burn-r hot seq-do-r
i ewae-mə pə-kik-e. i ewae-mə pə-kə-nekira-e.
 and leaves-acc seq-get-r and leaves-acc seq-tr-lay.flat-r
i na-mə pə-k-emkora-e.
 and sago-acc seq-tr-crumble.spread-r

‘I am about to say a talk (about preparing) sago (on) a stone. (One) roasts the stone. (One) burns it. (One) makes it hot. (One) gets the leaves. (One) lays the leaves flat. (One) crumbles and spreads out the sago.’ (‘Preparing sago’, by Nokwa Joe Wamane.)

Example (5) gives the first and last clauses of a procedure. Both clauses contain *pə-*, as do the intervening clauses.

- (5) *Aijan-ya p-le, ewae lip-wa.*
 bush-all seq-go.r leaves pick-irr
 ...
napa lomom pə-wari-pa-e.
 sago.jelly 3s.acc seq-wrap-dstr-r

‘(One) goes to the bush to pick leaves...[8 clauses later]... and wraps the sago jelly.’ (‘Picking leaves’, by Awani Kokro.)

In contrast with the frequency of *pə-* in sequentially organised texts, it is rare in conceptually organised texts (behavioural and expository). Example (6) comes from a behavioural text:

- (6) *Lwər aro kona.*
 clothes now put.on
Trausis ar-e, set ar-e, aro kona.
 trousers here-r shirt here-r now put.on
Weipamu-mə k-litjapə.
 penis.gourd-acc tr-throw

‘Put on clothes now. Here are trousers, here are shirts, put them on now. Throw away (your) gourds.’ (‘The first *kiap* to come to the area’, by Meno Itjwo.)

Example (6) comes from a description of the arrival of the first *kiap* (patrol officer) during the Australian administration. The example is quoted speech representing the orders of the *kiap* to the local people. All verbs in the example (underlined) lack overt modal inflection and so are imperative. Since the actions are not temporally contingent, none is prefixed with *pə-*.

In behavioural texts, *pə-* may occur to designate consequences following from an action. In conditional constructions *pə-* marks a consequence which the speaker considers certain if a proposed action is carried out (7).

- (7) *Amnə ta-o rən, i amnə-mə tea pə-k-eləlitjə-le wəla-ya*
 2sg.em spec-do if and 2sg.em-acc just seq-tr-make-incp house-all

‘If you do this, we will just make you go home.’ (‘Headmaster’s rules’, by Jack Minya.)

However, a consequence considered less certain does not carry *pə-* (8).

- (8) *Amnə on-kə kali-mə mak ao kə ra-e rən*
 2sg.em 1sg-obl talk-acc ear neg put-tr-r if
i loko amnə-mə weirou-kə ta-k-o-wə.
 and 3sg 2sg.em-acc knife-obl spec-tr-do-irr

‘If you don’t listen to me, he might stab you.’ (‘Rebuking my daughter’, by Jack Minya)

In example (8), the verb in the apodosis (*takowə* ‘(he) might (stab)’) is not prefixed with *pə-* and is inflected as irrealis mood. By contrast, in example (7), the verb in the apodosis (*pəkeləlitjəle* ‘(we) will make (you) go’) is inflected with inceptive aspect (indicating an action about to occur) and also takes *pə-*. It is probable that the speaker uses the prefix here to reinforce the certainty of the projected consequence. Note also clauses 11 and 12 of example (2), where the speaker marks with *pə-* two successive actions which he wants the hearers to carry out as a consequence of his initiating action.

Example (9) comes from an expository text. Since the passage is a description, the clauses do not refer to a sequence of events. The verbs have a variety of inflections; none is prefixed with *pə-*.

- (9) *Tapə-mir-e loko-kə, lomko-kə ləl kik-yəm-lwae-nak-i,*
 sim-run-r 3sg-obl 3pl-obl hand above-prox-hang-dur-hab
lipəl pli-tja mir-mir-li.
 leg two-min red-run-hab
Pəklə ar no we, i lu ta-ke-inəki rən,
 wallaby dog similar do.r and man spec-tr-see if
loko area ko-kwam-wə, 'ar ar'.
 3sg always tr-tell-irr here dog

‘When (they are) running, their hands are always hanging up here, and just the two legs run. A wallaby is like a dog, and if a man happens to see one, he will always say, “Here is a dog”’. (‘What wallabies are like’, author unknown, Namia writer’s workshop, 1996.)

Table 2 maps the occurrence of *pə-* in Namia discourse against Longacre’s macro-types. In the table, X indicates ‘occurs in most clauses’ and 0 indicates ‘rare’). It can be seen that *pə-* occurs in most clauses of the two macro-types organised by contingent temporal succession (narrative and procedural texts). In contrast, it is rarely present in texts not organised by contingent temporal succession (behavioural and expository texts).

Table 2: Occurrence of *pə-* within Longacre's discourse macro-types

	+ Agent oriented	– Agent oriented
+ Contingent temporal succession	narrative (X)	procedural (X)
– Contingent temporal succession	behavioural (0)	expository (0)

In summary, the occurrence of *pə-* in Namia texts strongly correlates with temporally ordered discourses. All occurrences of *pə-* in such texts occur in the mainline, i.e. the sequence of sentences which refer to the successive events around which the text is organised. It can therefore be concluded that *pə-* functions to mark the mainline. This was also the finding of Feldpausch & Feldpausch (1992:37), who concluded that the prefix marks 'foreground or storyline information'. They found that Namia speakers questioned whether events had really occurred when the prefix was not marked in translated narratives (Becky Feldpausch, p.c.).

4. Tense and Aspect

As noted in section 1, many languages worldwide mark mainlines of sequentially ordered discourses with past tense or perfective aspect. I now examine whether *pə-* indicates tense or aspect, giving first the typological considerations before proceeding to examples demonstrating that the occurrences of *pə-* are inconsistent with either.

First, *pə-* does not mark absolute tense (section 2). As noted in section 2, Feldpausch & Feldpausch (2007) concluded that Namia lacks tense marking. Papuan languages have a general preference for encoding tense markers as suffixes (Foley 1986). The position of *pə-* preceding the verb stem deviates from this typological norm, and suggests that *pə-* does not indicate (absolute) tense. Evidence that *pə-* is not a tense marker is its occurrence in past (10), present (11) and future (12) contexts.

- (10) *yao p-o-pa-e, i pə-kitjwalom-pro-we,*
fight seq-do-pl-r and seq-kill-col-r

'...(the ancestors) fought and killed...' ('The first *kiap* to come to the area')

- (11) *Lumi maem kiap ar pamtar-ya pə-kə-wani-re ar-ya.*
Lumi place officer here today-all seq-tr-live-r here-all

'Until today this officer is living at Lumi.' ('The first *kiap* to come to the area')

- (12) *Em ewəliya pe-ilon-e-le Inei-mə*
1pl tomorrow seq-spear-r-go Inei-acc

'We will be going to spear (fish) tomorrow at Inei.' (Feldpausch & Feldpausch 1992:47)

Feldpausch & Feldpausch (1992:37) originally concluded that *pə-* ‘encodes perfective aspect’, because of the frequent association of perfective with discourse mainlines.³ However, the position of *pə-* on the left edge of the verb also raises doubts about its being an aspectual marker, since in Papuan languages aspect tends to occur adjacent to the verb stem (Foley 1986:143).

Perfective aspect has been defined as representing a situation as a whole, without regard to its internal temporal structure (Comrie 1976; Payne 1997; Nurse 2008). Comrie (1976:21) states that perfectivity ‘involves lack of explicit reference to the internal temporal constituency of a situation’.⁴ Hence perfective verb forms do not co-occur with aspectual marking indicating the internal temporal structure of the situation. Since *pə-* in fact co-occurs with such aspectual suffixes, it does not mark perfective aspect. Examples (13) - (15) demonstrate that *pə-* may co-occur with the suffix *-nak*, which is glossed as ‘durative’.

- (13) *i on wala-ya pe-yawali-nak-e*
and 1sg house-all seq-go.up-dur-r

‘I was going up to the house (when)... (‘Amae’s marriage’, by Wiyan Waliyaki)

- (14) *Wopa Boksa p-elli-nak-e.*
Wopa Boxer seq-chase-dur-r
P-elli-nak-e popo e,
seq-chase-dur-r after do(?)

‘Wopa was chasing Boxer [a dog]. After chasing him...’ (‘Boxer’, by Merae Percy)

- (15) *Jon inein p-o-nak-e*
John thought seq-do-dur-r

‘John was thinking (about it).’ (Feldpausch & Feldpausch 2007:16)

Feldpausch & Feldpausch (2007:16) state that *-nak* ‘emphasises that the action is ongoing, but gives no information about how long the action will last or when it started... When the durative suffix occurs on stative and position verbs, it changes the meaning of that verb from an action... to a description of what the person or object is / was doing at a certain time.’ Since *-nak* marks ‘ongoing action’, it is a marker of continuous or progressive aspect (Comrie 1976:32-40) and is thus incompatible with perfective aspect.

In examples (16) and (17), *pə-* occurs with the iterative suffix *-raeri*. This indicates ‘events that are repeated intermittently over time, but are not as regular as a habit’ (Feldpausch & Feldpausch 2007:15). Since iterativity draws attention to the internal temporal constituency

³ In Feldpausch & Feldpausch (2007), *pə-* is glossed as ‘sequential’, as a result of our work together.

⁴ A number of other linguists regard perfective aspect as indicating a completed or bounded event. Refer Bybee et al. (1994), Timberlake (2007).

of the situation, it is also inconsistent with *pə-* being a marker of perfectivity.

- (16) *Boksa po-po-raeri-re popo...*
Boxer seq-bark-itr-r after

‘Boxer repeatedly barked and then...’ (‘Boxer’).

- (17) *Loko on-mə pe-inəki-raeri-re*
3sg 1sg-acc seq-see-itr-r

‘He repeatedly watches me.’ (Feldpausch & Feldpausch 2007:15).

Examples (18) and (19) demonstrate that *pə-* may co-occur with the suffix *-təmna*. Feldpausch & Feldpausch (2007: 18) describe this suffix as ‘cessative’; they note that it indicates the cessation of an activity that has no clear terminal point and therefore is not an accomplished goal. It is therefore inconsistent with Comrie’s definition of perfectivity.⁵

- (18) *Lir lommomə pə-ra-təmna-e,*
coconut 3pl.acc seq-eat-ces-r

‘(We) finished eating the coconuts...’ (‘Fishing’)

- (19) *loko pira lomom pə-ke-ilon-təmna-e*
3sg fish 3sg.acc seq-tr-spear-ces-r

‘He finished spearing a fish...’ (‘Fishing’)

Thus *pə-* is not a marker of absolute tense or aspect. Nevertheless, there are clues to its origin, which are connected with the atypical patterns of linking clauses in Namia. I will examine these patterns in section 5.

5. Typologies of Clause Linking Structure

The most frequently reported clause linking structures in Papuan SOV languages are medial-final clause chains (Longacre 1972, 2007; Foley 1986:180-184). Although medial-final chaining is especially associated with the Trans New Guinea family, it occurs in other languages of the Sepik family, e.g. Yessan-Mayo, Manambu (Longacre 1972) and Kwoma (Kooyers 1974). Medial-final chaining also occurs in two languages of the Kwomtari family neighbouring Namia to the north-west, Kwomtari (Spencer 2008) and Nai (N. Hamlin, p.c.). In such structures, temporal reference is specified in the final verb in a series. Preceding verbs in the chain (so-called ‘medial’ verbs) are only partially inflected. In many such

⁵ If perfectivity is taken as boundedness or completedness of an event, it might possibly co-occur with the cessative suffix, as in examples (18) and (19). Nevertheless, it remains inconsistent with the durative and iterative suffixes, as in examples (13) – (17).

systems, the final verb is specified for tense, whereas the medial verb is marked for realis or irrealis mood, as appropriate to the tense specification of the final verb. Medial verbs are typically associated with suffixes indicating (a) the temporal relationship to the following verb (sequential or simultaneous) and (b) switch-reference, i.e. whether the subject of the following verb will be the same or different. A canonical clause chaining structure from the Madang language Amele is illustrated below in (20). Tense for the entire chain is specified as ‘Yesterday’s Past’ by the tense suffix on the final verb. Both the medial verbs carry a portmanteau suffix *-cV*, which indicates that (a) mood is realis, (b) the following verb continues the temporal sequence but (c) the next subject will be different. This suffix is followed by another indicating the medial verb subject.

(20) Amele (Roberts 1987:238)

<i>ne-ce-b</i>	<i>tobo-co-min</i>	<i>bel-ow-an.</i>
come.down-seq.ds.r-3sg	climb.up-seq.ds.r-1sg	go-1du-yest.p

‘He came down, and I climbed in, and off we went.’ (Roberts 1987:238).

Against this background, the clause-linking pattern in Namia stands out in sharp relief. In a medial-final clause chain, the medial clauses gain their temporal reference from the final clause in the structure. The reverse situation applies in Namia, in which temporal reference is established at the beginning of a text (section 3). Successive clauses then are marked with *pə-* to indicate their sequential relationship to preceding events. The initial clause may lack the prefix, as in (2) and (4), but *pə-* may also appear on an initial clause, as in (3) and (5).

The pattern of clause linking in Namia matches the typology of initial-consecutive chaining structures. Such structures are widespread in African languages, where they appear to be an areal feature. They are most well-known from the Bantu family (Nurse 2008:120-123). However, they also occur in languages of other African families, as well as sporadically in other parts of the world, e.g. in some languages of Vanuatu (Longacre 2007). Initial-consecutive chains typically have an initial verb of one structure which establishes the time reference. Following verbs have a different structure indicating that their time reference is dependent on preceding events in the chain. In example (21), an initial-consecutive chain is illustrated from the Bantu language Swahili. In this language, the initial verb in a narrative is marked with the prefix *li-*, while subsequent events are marked with *ka-* (Perrott 1975; Hopper 1979).

(21) Swahili (Perrott 1975:51)

Tu-li-kwenda mjini tu-ka-mwona Ali, tu-ka-sema naye, tu-ka-ondoka, tu-ka-rudi kwetu.

‘We initial.went to the village, seq.saw Ali, seq.spoke with him, seq.came.away, seq.returned home.’

In many languages with initial-consecutive chaining structures, the sequential relationship is indicated by a verbal prefix which takes the place of other tense marking (as in Namia and Swahili). The sequential prefix can thus be considered a form of relative tense (Nurse 2008:123). Often the initial verb need not be present (Longacre 2007:417), as is the situation in Namia. Initial-consecutive chains may operate above the level of the sentence (Longacre 2007); this is the case in Namia, where the chains constitute the backbone of entire texts. Nevertheless, a typological oddity is that initial-consecutive chaining everywhere else occurs in VO languages (SVO or VSO), where it matches the head-initial structure. How is the existence of such a structure in a SOV language like Namia to be explained?

There is reason to suspect that the structure in Namia is derived from a former medial-final chaining structure. One clue is that *pə-* contrasts in the same prefixal slot with *tapə-*, which marks an event occurring simultaneously with another event. Examples (22) and (23) show this prefix occurring in adverbial clauses giving the time reference for an event in the main clause.

- (22) *Arnə tape-yəm-kə-ni-re loko-kə,*
 dev sim-prox-tr-sit-r 3sg-obl
loko-kə olo-mə towae lopu aro itjəmtou-k-e,
 3sg-obl penis-acc cockroach pincers then bite-tel-r

‘But when he sat down here, the cockroach pincers pinched his penis then.’ (‘Weipamu’, by Aporane Timothy.)

- (23) *Tapə-mir-e loko-kə,*
 sim-run-r 3sg-obl
lomko-kə ləl kik-yəm-lwae-nak-i,
 3pl-obl hand above-prox-hang-dur-hab
lipəl pli-tja mir-mir-li.
 leg two-min red-run-hab

‘When (they are) running, their hands are always hanging up here, and just the two legs run.’ (‘What wallabies are like’)

Tapə- occurs only in subordinate clauses giving time setting; even there, it is often displaced by *pə-*, as in (3). Thus *tapə-* does not contrast paradigmatically with *pə-*. Nevertheless a contrast in the same verbal slot between affixes indicating sequentiality and simultaneity is in Papuan languages typically associated with medial-final clause chaining. The contrast is difficult to explain unless Namia had such a chaining system earlier in its history.

In this regard, the medial-final clause chaining structure in Kwomtari is interesting, since it demonstrates the existence of the structure in the region. It is exemplified in (24):

(24) Kwomtari (Spencer 2008:122)

<i>Seise</i>	<i>kakali</i>	<i>yesou</i>	<i>tine-po-lee-ke</i>	<i>fo-po-ne-ke</i>
Seise	food	something	give-dstr-3sg.r-seq	eat-dstr-1/3pl.r-seq
<i>te</i>	<i>aue</i>	<i>kri-po-ne-ke</i>	<i>wa-ne.</i>	
foc	bag	carry-dstr-1/3pl.r-seq	go-1/3pl.r	

‘Seise gave us food, we ate it, we carried our bags and went.’

The system in Kwomtari differs significantly from that in Amele. Switch-reference marking is absent: the medial verb suffixes indicate only whether the next verb is sequential (*-ke*) or simultaneous (*-i*). In (24) all three medial verbs are marked with the same sequential suffix *-ke*, even though they have different subjects. Whereas final verbs in Amele are inflected for tense, in Kwomtari they are inflected for mood, indicated by a portmanteau suffix also specifying person and number. Medial verbs formally take realis mood as a dummy category, but in fact take their mood specification from the final clause (Spencer 2008:122, 159). Thus when final verbs in Kwomtari are inflected as realis, there is little formal distinction between medial and final verbs. Only the presence of the sequential or simultaneous suffix overtly marks a medial verb in Kwomtari as not fully inflected.

There are similarities between the chaining systems in Kwomtari and Namia, in particular mood-based inflection of verbs and lack of switch-reference. If Namia earlier had a similar system lacking a TAM contrast between medial and final verb, it would not have been difficult for speakers to reanalyse the system to erase the distinction.

The mechanism behind the shift from a medial-final to an initial-consecutive chaining system is not difficult to imagine. Once the distinction between medial and final verb was erased, it would have been simple for speakers to reanalyse the sequential suffix as indicating the relationship with the previous rather than the subsequent verb, resulting in its transformation to a prefix. It is nevertheless difficult to credit the chance development in a SOV language of a system that so closely resembles a clause-chaining system found in SVO languages. The situation in Namia resembles partial metatypy: the reorganisation of the morphosyntax to resemble the morphosyntax of a contact language (Ross 2007). On this hypothesis, Namia (or its ancestor) came into contact with a neighbouring SVO language with an initial-consecutive chaining system and reanalysed its own clause-chaining system to resemble that of its neighbour. A likely cause would have been a sustained pattern of intermarriage.

The hypothesis of metatypy is plausible, given that Namia is situated in a region (refer map at Figure 1) where a number of different language families come into contact with each other (Donohue and Crowther 2005; Fyfe 2009). Likely candidates for such language contact are the languages of the Torricelli family, which are almost uniformly SVO in constituent order. The languages are also geographically close; the closest Torricelli language, Yis, is closer

than 10 km from the Namia language area. However, demonstration of metatypy requires evidence as to the prior grammatical state of the language as well as of the proposed contact language (Ross 2007). So far neither of these conditions has been met. To date no Torricelli language has been reported with an initial-consecutive chaining system. This is possibly the result of lack of data, since there are few grammar descriptions of the western Torricelli family languages closest to Namia, apart from grammar sketches of two languages of the One cluster (Pehrson *et al.* 2013, 2018).

There is no record of contact between Namia speakers and speakers of Torricelli languages. A list of languages perceived as neighbours by Namia speakers (Feldpausch & Feldpausch 1999) does not mention any Torricelli language. Fyfe (2009:121) notes that earlier research mentions intermarriage between speakers of Ak (a sister language of Namia) and at least four other language groups. He suggests that among Namia speakers marriage is probably endogamous because of the large villages.

Neither of these difficulties is insuperable. It remains possible that at an earlier stage in its history, the ancestors of Namia speakers had a sustained period of contact with speakers of a Torricelli language, possibly before the divergence of the Yellow River languages from each other. Without further data, it is not possible to say more.

6. Absence of *pə-* in sequentially organised texts

We have seen (section 3) that in Namia narratives and procedures, the majority of clauses carry *pə-*. The presence of *pə-* on a verb is therefore expected in a sequentially organised text: it is pragmatically unmarked. On the other hand, clauses where *pə-* is absent are in the minority and are therefore pragmatically marked. I therefore turn to consider contexts in which *pə-* is absent, and what meaning is thereby conveyed.⁶ As expected, the prefix is typically absent in supporting material. Surprisingly, it may be absent where we would expect it, in clauses describing events critical in narratives.

Supporting material has an evaluative role (Labov 1972); it functions to give context to narrated events, enabling audiences to compare narrated events with what they know of the world and the people involved in the story. Supporting material is important in communicating the speaker's intention in telling the narrative. Its presence distinguishes a good story from a mere chronicle of events.

Dooley & Levinsohn (2001) divide supporting material into the following categories: (a) performative information; (b) participant orientation; (c) setting; (d) explanation / comment; (e) explicit evaluation; and (f) discourse irrealis. These categories correlate with the absence of *pə-* on verbs in sequentially ordered texts, as is illustrated in examples (25) - (34).

⁶ Bybee *et al.* (1994:293-295) discuss the process by which zero morphemes develop in languages through absence of an expected morpheme.

- a. Performative information** frames the discourse within the situation where it is produced. It includes introductions (25), conclusions (26) and summaries (27).

(25) *On apo kali lomom i-tjər-le.*
1sg today talk 3sg.acc say-dedct-r

‘Today I will begin to tell a story.’ (‘Fishing’)

(26) *On-kə kali nowae tea le.*
1sg-obl talk complete just go.r

‘My story is now complete.’ (‘Amae’s marriage’).

(27) *O kiap loko yəm-k-elon-rr-e em-kə yao nəpu lomom.*
O officer 3sg prox-tr-stop-brf-r 1pl-obl fight road 3sg.acc

‘Oh, this patrol officer came and stopped our fighting ways.’ (‘The first kiap to come to the area’)

- b. Participant orientation** function to introduce or describe participants (28).

(28) *Yaru lu titja el-mə yarəm-ək-e Norombalip mae.*
Yaru man a woman-acc ur-marry-r Norombalip where

‘A Yaru man married a woman from upriver, at Norombalip.’ (‘Arutjwaele’s dream’, by Paitjwale Malwali.)

- c. Setting** functions to orient the listener, such as information on place, time or circumstances (29).

(29) *Witjowe aolo-kə ar kər-mə Temau lar maem*
Witjowe 3sg.em-obl dog some-acc Temau start place
elole Elwanaowe rən alom-kə le-le.
wife Elwanaowe with 3pl.em-obl red-go.r

‘Witjowe took some dogs to Temau, with his wife Elwanaowe.’ (‘How Tapo was bitten by a pig’)

- d. Explanation / Comment** gives additional information on circumstances accompanying events (30).

(30) *Balirə le lwapnə-mə arowi ari kə-worwəra-e.*
aircraft go place-acc fog already tr-cover-r

‘The plane’s course had been covered by fog.’ (‘Plane crash’, by Timothy Aliawani.)

- e. Explicit evaluation** presents an interpretation of events in the narrative. Evaluation can be either external or internal (Labov 1972:370-373). External evaluation is

addressed by the narrator to the audience, as in (31). Internal evaluation presents an opinion attributed to a participant in the narrative, as in (32).

- (31) *On walkali lomom i-re,*
 1sg custom 3sg.acc say-r
i eko on-kə kali-mə mak ao kə-ra-e.
 and 3sg.f 1sg-obl speech-acc ear neg put-tr-r
 ‘I told (her) this custom, but she didn’t listen to my advice.’ (‘Amae’s marriage’).

- (32) *On inein aro-we,*
 1sg thought do.thus-r
 “*Opein, Amae on-kə walkali-mə mak ar-mə ao kə-ra-e*
 really! Amae 1sg-obl custom-acc ear here-acc neg put-tr-r
Amae lu ni-tjə.
 Amae man sit-irr

‘I was thinking like this, “Really! Amae isn’t listening to my teaching, because Amae wants to get married.”’ (‘Amae’s marriage’).

- f. Discourse irrealis** describes what does not occur or could have occurred. It may be presented externally, as in (33), or as a statement of intention by one of the characters in the narrative (34):

- (33) *loko ao yak-weipokulwa-ləl-e, pelwale*
 3sg neg first-shake.out-away-r definitely.not

‘...he did not first shake it out, no way!’ (‘Weipamu’)

- (34) *Awem em-kə wəla-ke-yak tea ni-tjəm.*
 1pl.em 1pl-obl house-obl-min just sit-2pl

‘(I said) “Let us just sit in our house.”’ (‘Raising kids’, by Aporane Timothy.)

Paradoxically, given that *pə-* is routinely omitted in clauses providing supporting material, it is also omitted from mainline clauses which describe critical developments in a narrative. These omissions fall into two categories: (a) omission of *pə-* in the presence of *aro* ‘at this time’; and (b) omission of *pə-* at peak or dénouement.

Mainline events which are especially important in the development of the narrative are frequently marked by the absence of the expected prefix *pə-* and the presence of the temporal deictic *aro*. This pattern serves to distinguish the more important mainline events from the more routine. Longacre (1996) notes that many languages distinguish ‘the more important happenings in the story from lesser, routine and somewhat predictable happenings.’ He

describes such events as ‘pivotal events’.⁷

Example (35) illustrates omission of *pə-* in conjunction with *aro*:

- (35) *i lomom ləl yemnawei mae-mə aro i-re.*
 and 3sg.acc hand left place-acc then bite-r

‘Then it [the pig] bit him on the left hand.’ (‘How Tapo was bitten by a pig’)

This example describes a critical development in a narrative which has as its stated purpose to describe how the main character was bitten by a pig. It is thus a mainline event, since it is an essential part of the sequence of contingent events around which the narrative is built. Despite its importance, the verb *ire* ‘bit’ is not prefixed with *pə-*. The temporal deictic *aro* ‘at this time’ anchors the event to a particular time and so marks it as significant.

A similar pattern appears in example (36):

- (36) 17 *Arnə tape-yəm-kə-ni-re loko-kə,*
 dev sim-prox-tr-sit-r 3sg-obl
 18 *loko-kə olo-mə towae lopu aro itjəmtou-k-e,*
 3sg-obl penis-acc cockroach pincers then bite-tel-r
 19 *i loko pə-nakə-ni-k-lainko-wal-e.*
 and 3sg seq-acm-sit-tr-jump.up-pl-r
 20 *Loko p-arp-ni-re,*
 3sg seq-rep-sit-r
 21 *i loko-kə olo-mə towae lopu lo pli kali-mə*
 and 3sg-obl penis-acc cockroach pincers time two time-acc
p-arpe-itjəmtou-k-e,
 seq-rep-bite-tel-r
 22 *i loko p-arpə-nak-ni-k-lainko-wal-e*
 and 3sg seq-rep-acm-sit-tr-jump.up-pl-r
 23 *Lo mani kali-mə p-arpə-ke-itjəmtou-wəl-e loko-kə,*
 time three time-acc seq-rep-tr-bite-pl-r 3sg-obl

‘17 But when he sat down here, 18 the cockroach pincers pinched his penis then, 19 and he jumped up several times. 20 He sat down again, 21 and the cockroach pincers pinched his penis a second time again, 22 and he again jumped up several times from his seat. 23 When he was again pinched a third time...’ (‘Weipamu’)

This example comes from a narrative about an old man who takes off his penis-gourd to urinate, and neglects to check it before putting it back on. When he sits down, he is pinched by a cockroach which has crawled in. All but one of the verbs in main clauses are prefixed with *pə-*, including the man’s actions of sitting (clause 20) and jumping up (clauses 19 and

⁷ Papuan languages making a morphosyntactic distinction between pivotal events and more routine events include Angaataha (Huisman 1973) and Korafe (Farr 1999:384).

22); these can be considered more predictable events. The single exception occurs in clause 18; this verb lacks *pə-* and is preceded by *aro*. It describes the first, unexpected pinching by the cockroach, which is the peak of the entire narrative; every clause in the narrative has prepared the hearer for it. In contrast, the repeated cockroach pinches in clauses 21 and 23 are routine events expected by the audience; they therefore lack *aro* and are prefixed with *pə-*.

Longacre (1996) notes that peak and dénouement are often associated with unusual surface features such as onomatopoeia or the absence of characteristic particles indicating the mainline. It is therefore noteworthy that in several narratives in the Namia corpus, *pə-* is omitted at the peak or dénouement of the narrative, without the presence of *aro*. In the narrative ‘How Tapo was bitten by a pig’, the peak follows the clause in which the pig clamps its jaws around Tapo’s hand (35). After the hearer is informed that Tapo cried out but the pig paid no attention, a clause occurs without both *pə-* and a preceding *aro* (37).

- (37) *loko-kə ləl-mə tea nakə-ki-re.*
 3sg-obl hand-acc just acm-stand-r

‘(The pig) just stood there with his hand.’ (‘How Tapo was bitten by a pig’)

The tension is released eighteen clauses later, when Tapo’s hand is removed from the pig’s mouth. This clause describing the dénouement also lacks either *pə-* or a preceding *aro* (38). There are other indicators that the clause is important: the presence of *ar* ‘here’ in clause-initial position; the emphatic pronoun *aolo* following Witjowe’s name, and the focal particle *tea*.

- (38) *Ar Witjowe aolo tea kə-naewao-we walwəkitjəl-mə.*
 here Witjowe 3sg.em just tr-remove-r jaw-acc

‘Here Witjowe himself just removed (the hand from) the jaw.’

We have seen that Namia narratives use at least three kinds of morphosyntax for mainline clauses: (a) a verb prefixed with *pə-*, (b) a clause lacking *pə-* but marked with *aro*, (c) a clause lacking either *pə-* or *aro*. All three possibilities occur in example (39), which is the climax of a story about a plane crash:

- (39) 38 *i balirə lowi loko amu-mə aro mə-weitjona-e.*
 and plane wing 3sg mountain-acc then dist-collide.with-r
 39 *Balirə lowi loko ku,*
 plane wing 3sg (noise)
 40 *i mi tea p-alnaləle-ya.*
 and fire just seq-spring.up-min
 41 *Balirə tro tro tea aro wəliro-pro-we,*
 Plane piece piece just then break-col-r
 42 *i lu pli ləplimom mi tea nake-irl-pa-e.*
 and man two 3du.acc fire just acm-burn-pl-r

43 *Balirə* *nan-mə* *mi* *lirənia* *pə-nake-irl-e.*
 plane also-acc fire complete seq-acm-burn-r

‘Then the wing of the plane hit the mountain. The plane wing (went) crunch, and fire just sprang up. The plane just broke apart into pieces then, and fire just burned up the two men. The fire also completely burned up the plane.’ (‘Plane crash’)

I take the peak of this narrative to be clause 39, which describes the impact of the plane wing on the mountainside. Alternatively, the peak might be clause 38, which states that the plane wing hit the mountain, but the onomatopoeia in clause 39 makes a stronger claim for that clause being the peak. The dénouement occurs in clause 42, in which the two passengers are burned up: this clause resolves the audience’s uncertainty about the fate of the passengers.

Within this example there are at three levels of narrative structure, which correspond to the three morphosyntactic possibilities noted above. Firstly, routine, predictable events are marked with *pə-*. These occur at clauses 40 (‘fire just sprang up’) and 43 (‘the fire also completely burned up the plane’). Both of these events are predictable outcomes of prior events in the narrative. Secondly, important narrative developments are marked by *aro* and lack *pə-*. These occur in clauses 38 (‘then the wing of the plane hit the mountain’) and 41 (‘the plane just broke apart into pieces then’). The peak (clause 39) and dénouement (clause 42) lack both *aro* and *pə-*. Additionally, supporting events (visible elsewhere in the text, although not shown in this example) lack the prefix *pə-*.

Omission of *pə-* at critical developments is typical of longer narratives in Namia. A test with translations of English-language texts found that Namia speakers preferred omission of *pə-* at the peak in one longer narrative; in a shorter narrative, they insisted on *pə-* on all narrative clauses, including the peak clause (Tom & Becky Feldpausch, p.c.). Thus it seems that *pə-* is normative for marking mainline clauses but that in longer narratives *pə-* is often omitted at critical developments, including peak and dénouement. How is this observation to be reconciled with the tendency elsewhere for omission of *pə-* to be associated with non-mainline clauses?

The difficulty originates in the binary distinction made by Hopper (1979) between ‘foreground’ (mainline) and ‘background’ (supporting material). If only these two types of material exist within narrative structure, then it is indeed difficult to see how critical developments on the mainline can be coded the same way as supporting material. However, the equation of mainline with foreground is not self-evident. In the literature a number of disparate concepts masquerade under the term ‘foreground’, including temporal sequence, thematic importance, unexpectedness and cognitive accessibility (Dry 1992; see also Luraghi 1995). Dry questions the compatibility of such disparate concepts. In particular, she questions the assumed absoluteness of the foreground / background relationship and the supposed equation of salience with importance.

The distinction between ‘foreground’ and ‘background’ is linked to the cognitive distinction between figure and ground in *Gestalt* psychology (Wallace 1982). A figure is the entity which is salient in relation to the ground; in other words, the figure stands out against the ground on which it is placed. ‘Foreground’, ‘salience’ and ‘markedness’ are thus all different terms for the same concept. The visual metaphor invites a binary conceptualisation, since any given part of the picture can only be either figure or ground at one time (Dry 1992:446). Nevertheless, the definition of foreground is not absolute but relative: ‘structures become foreground, not by virtue of possessing certain inherent qualities but rather by virtue of contrasting with an appropriate background’ (Dry 1992:444-445). For instance, Fleischman (1985) describes the phenomenon of ‘pragmatic reversal’ in Old French narratives: the deliberate flouting of expected relationships between tense marking and mainline / supporting material in order to focus attention.

Dry (1992:442-443) notes that the qualities associated with salience do not necessarily equate to importance. Salience may characterise unimportant, as well as important, textual elements. For instance, Schiffrin (1981) finds that the usage of the historical present in English language narratives is highly complex; material recounted in present tense is sometimes supporting material and sometimes critical. She notes that switches in and out of present tense serve to attract attention to the new material: ‘the historical present evaluates narrative events because it is a use of the present tense’. Similarly, Boutin (1988) finds that the affix *in* in Banggi (a language of Malaysia) functions to detach events from their contexts, but that detached events may be either ‘highlighted or downgraded against the other events’. Assignment of a salient entity as more important (‘highlighted’) or less important (‘downgraded’) than its background is a subsequent cognitive move, made by an observer / hearer on the basis of other contextual information.

The distribution of *pə-* in Namia texts can thus be seen as coherent. *Pə-* has the function of marking the mainline of events in narratives and procedures. Since the majority of clauses in such texts carry the prefix, *pə-* is pragmatically unmarked. Clauses not prefixed with *pə-* are salient, i.e. pragmatically marked. Such clauses are detached from their context. Commonly, they are downgraded, i.e. they are interpreted as supporting material. In other contexts, they are more important developments within the narrative. In such cases, there will be other indicators of the importance of the clause.

These patterns are explicable if the narrative mainline is taken to be the neutral ground of the text (Dooley & Levinsohn 2001). Hopper (1979:240) himself calls the discourse mainline ‘the ordinary uninterrupted flow of the narrative’. Thus in Namia texts, it is misleading to speak of *pə-* as ‘foregrounding’ the mainline of a narrative or procedure. The mainline is the central thread which holds everything together or, in Labov’s metaphor, the ‘skeleton’. Other material in the text is pragmatically marked, either highlighted as pivotal to development or as downgraded supporting material.

A number of studies have found similar phenomena of material normally associated with

supporting material occurring at narrative peak. In Kickapoo, the marker normally used for ‘background material’ also marks the peak (Jones & Jones 1979). In New Testament narratives (Koiné Greek), both Historic Present and Imperfect are unexpectedly used to highlight clauses, as well to downgrade them (Levinsohn 1992, 2000). In Latin, verb initial sentences, which occur most commonly in supporting material, also occur at narrative peak (Luraghi 1995). In Manam, narrative mainlines are marked with realis mood, while irrealis is used both for supporting material and for peak events (Blewett 1991). In Yapese, the marker *qu* (associated with supporting material) also occurs at narrative peak (Ballantyne 2005).

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the morphosyntax and discourse functions of the verbal prefix *pə-* in Namia. The prefix functions in discourse to mark the mainlines of sequentially organised texts (narratives and procedures). Unlike functionally similar markers in many languages, *pə-* is not an indicator of aspect or absolute tense. Rather, it marks a chronologically sequential relationship with preceding clauses, resembling initial-consecutive chaining patterns in SVO and VSO languages. The typologically anomalous chaining structure in Namia suggests that *pə-* derives diachronically from a sequential affix originally associated with a vanished clause chaining structure, perhaps as a result of past contact with a SVO language. In narratives and procedures, *pə-* appears in the majority of clauses and is thus pragmatically unmarked; its absence is noteworthy, i.e. pragmatically marked. The prefix is absent both in supporting material and in events critical to narrative development, including peak and dénouement.

This last observation suggests that there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of narrative structure than the binary foreground / background distinction introduced by Hopper (1979). If ‘foreground’ is taken to refer to salience, then it is not clear that salience equates to importance or that the mainline is the most salient element. The patterns of narrative marking in Namia suggest that the mainline is rather the most neutral ground in the text, against which multiple levels of salience can be marked.

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