CHAPTER SIX

PERCEPTION AND COGNITION IN MANAMBU,
A PAPUAN LANGUAGE FROM NEW GUINEA

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1 GENERAL REMARKS

In many languages of the world, verbs and other expressions associated with perception and cognition form a special subclass in terms of their grammatical features. They may have special properties in terms of argument marking, or require special complementation strategies or complement clauses. Verbs of perception and cognition often have restrictions on forming imperatives, or on taking part in serial verb constructions. They vary in the range of meanings covered. The verb referring to visual perception may also mean ‘try’, ‘taste’, or ‘understand’. The verb referring to auditory perception may also mean ‘obey’, ‘understand’, and ‘remember’. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss, in some detail, grammatical and semantic properties of verbs of visual and auditory perception, and cognition, in Manambu, a language from the Ndu family spoken in the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea. At the end, we address the role of visual perception in Manambu cultural practices.

We start with an overview of some grammatical features of Manambu.

2 BACKGROUND

Manambu belongs to the Ndu language family, and is spoken by about 2,500 people in five villages (Avatip, Yawabak, Malu, Apa:n and Yuanab (or Yambon)) in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea, plus expatriate communities in Port Moresby and in Wewak (Aikhenvald 2008a). Like other Ndu languages, Manambu is agglutinating with some fusion, and predominantly suffixing (two prefixes, several dozen suffixes). There is productive verb compounding.1

1 Other languages of the Ndu family are Iatmul, Boiken varieties, Gala (or Ngala), Wosera/Abelam continuum and Kaunga (or Yelogu). Transcription adopted here follows
Word classes are: nouns, verbs, two subclasses of adjectives (agreeing adjectives: *kwasa* ‘small’, *noma* ‘big’ and *yara* ‘fine’; and non-agreeing (the rest)), adverbs, and numerous closed classes. Nouns have two covert genders (feminine and masculine, marked via agreement in singular only) and three numbers (singular, dual and plural) marked on modifiers and on verbs. Gender assignment for humans is sex-based; for other groups of nouns, gender choice depends on the referent’s size and shape. So, a small location will be referred to as feminine, and a large one as masculine; a short stretch of time is feminine, and a long one masculine.

Nouns distinguish nine case forms: a zero-marked subject case (with the same form employed in a number of other functions, including copula complements and second arguments of extended intransitive verbs); definite or fully involved object and location case -V insurer; dative-aversive (‘for fear of’) -V insurance; with overtones to do with frustration, warnings and future projection, and incomplete involvement of the object; comitative -wa; terminative (‘up to a point’) -Vb; transportative ‘via transport’ -say, -sap; allative-instrumental -Vr; and substitutive ‘instead’ -yey.

Verbs can be intransitive, or ambitransitive (over 80% verbs are S = A ambitransitive; but there are some S = O); there are rather few strictly transitive or ditransitive verbs. Verbal categories in main clauses include personal cross-referencing fused with tense; a variety of aspects, including habitual, completive, repetitive, etc.; mood and modalities, including irrealis (distinguishable from future only in negative clauses), imperative, purposive, desiderative, and directionals; and a complex system of marking negation. Every verb has to cross-reference the subject (A/S) and optionally another argument (if it is more topical than the subject). Directionals (up, down, across away, across towards speaker, inwards, outwards, around the place) make the verb telic.

A member of any word class can head the predicate of an intransitive main clause. Verbs take tense-sensitive verbal cross-referencing suffixes. Depending on clause type and mood, modality and aspect, either just the subject (A or S) or the subject and an additional constituent can be cross-referenced. Other word classes take nominal cross-referencing enclitics with no tense distinctions. Only verbs can head transitive clauses.

the principles in Aikhenvald (2008a), a reference grammar of the language based on fieldwork over a period of 15 years by the present author. I am grateful to my Manambu family for teaching me their remarkable language. Special thanks go to R. M. W. Dixon and Anne Storch for suggestions and comments. Note that voiced stops and affricates are prenasalized, and so ʰ is realized as mb, d as ⁿd, g as ᵢg, and j as ᵢj.