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Problèmes de sémantique et de syntaxe en palau
[Semantic and syntactic problems in Palauan]

Palauan belongs to the Northwestern branch of Austronesian languages. It is spoken in the Palau Islands, or Palaos, in the Carolines. Because of its eventful history, its vocabulary contains many words borrowed from German, Japanese, and English.

The author addresses five 'enigmas' concerning the Palauan language: the competition between two different assertive structures, the passive construction, the ubiquitous word a, the three different objective constructions, and the so-called hypothetical verb form.

This is a well-written and well-organised book packed with ideas kindled by the analysis of the examples provided by Lewis S. Josephs in his Palauan Reference Grammar, 1975 (henceforth PRG). Every chapter begins with a resumption of the conclusion from the preceding one, and a reader who shared the author's view would certainly enjoy his reasoning.

Before I proceed any further I think it necessary to give my own interpretation of basic Palauan syntax as culled from PRG. This will be all the more useful as this grammar is more empirical than systematic. The average reader Josephs had in mind was a highschool teacher rather than a linguist. In addition, he often uses approximative phraseology, e.g. "The past tense forms of the perfective verbs ... simply refer to past events ..." (p. 98). He must have been hampered by pronouns and verb forms coalesced into complex forms, and this tells a lot on his analyses. Obviously unaware of the concept 'focus' as developed for Austronesian languages through Philippine languages, he only uses the term 'focus' the way they used to in pre-WWII grammar books (p. 142, p. 401). For all its defects, however, PRG is a valuable book and Josephs may be trusted for the correctness of his examples.

Linguists interested in Palauan should rather use Claude Hagège's La langue palau (1986), which is a remarkable work in so far as the author has said everything exactly and concisely while offering valuable scientific analyses.

Palauan spelling is simple, though it exhibits two bizarre features: schwa is represented by e, and the glottal stop by ch. These ought to have been disposed of a long time ago and replaced by simpler
letters such as ë and q, but there seems to be no reform in the offing. One just wonders, however, how these people manage to type ç using a typical QWERTY keyboard.

The core functional structure of the Palauan clause is 'subject + predicator + object + etc.'. Its morphological structure results from the left to right development of the formula n(M + N) in which n is the number of functional groups, M a group marker, and N any verbal or nominal nucleus.

The group marker is a before nouns, names and verbs.

(1) *A sensei a luches a babier. 
   M teacher M write M letter

Tense and mode inflection (I) is borne by the verb.

(2) A sensei a mç-luches a babier. 
    M teacher M I-write M letter
    'The teacher is writing a letter/letters.'

Palauan's unique, multipurpose preposition (PREP) çr is added before a definite object in the imperfective. In the perfective, definition is taken for granted.

(3) A sensei a mç-luchçs çr a babier. 
    M teacher M I-write PREP M letter
    'The teacher is writing the letter.'

A pronoun corresponding to the subject covers the (M + N) + (M segment as if it were prefixed to the verb.

(4) Ng φ mç-luchçs çr a babier. 
   M 3sg M I-write PREP M letter
   'He is writing the letter.'

A pronoun corresponding to the object covers the (M + N) segment.