The women sang a song. They (DU) will come to you.

Edwin is hitting the pig.

Jerry burped and laughed.

The Southern Vanuatu subgroup is an established language group consisting of all but one language in the TAFEA region. They share in the least a common grammatical innovation, the use of the ‘Echo Subject’. While all are derived from the same historical source, the form and function of the Echo Subject varies in each language.

What is switch reference?
‘Switch reference’ is a grammatical system that uses arguments/relationships across clauses for reference tracking. Canonical switch reference is generally a choice in morphemes that delineate whether or not the grammatical subject of their clause is the same (SS) or different (DS) from the subject of an adjacent related clause. A basic example would be as follows;

Florence hit SS Joe and ran away-SSG (Florence ran away)

Florence hit DS Joe and ran away-DSG (Joe ran away)

The key to these similar constructs is that grammatical relations and morphology are being used for non-grammatical functions, that is, for reference tracking. Syntactically related clauses share (or distinguish) common points of reference using the grammar’s morphology.

There is much variability within the various languages that utilise switch reference, with some systems being more obligate in use, some more specific in reference and there is also variability in its interaction with the Tense, Aspect or Mood system. Further, the level of syntactic ‘connectivity’ of the adjacent clauses is variable. Some systems require main co-ordinate clauses, while others can also incorporate subordinate clauses into the switch reference system.

Switch reference is well known in the non-Austroasiatic languages of Papua New Guinea and also in the Americas, and central Australia. In Austroasiatic languages it appears to be limited to the southern Vanuatu sub-group that Whitesands belongs to and is clearly an innovation of the sub-group. There is one possible expectation to this; the geographically adjacent language of South Efate that also exhibits some similar grammatical constructs.

Issues in Analysis

The Echo Subject system has some unique and relating properties about it.

• ES is solely anaphoric and it is used with all person/number combinations. It points backwards for its reference pivot in the fully inflected predicate.

Florence hit SS Joe and ran away-SSG
(Florence ran away)

Florence hit DS Joe and ran away-DSG
(Joe ran away)

• Most other switch reference systems are cataphoric, with the switch reference morphemes coming before the fully inflected predicate. Historically related, is that the ES is a preposition whereas other switch reference systems are suffused from its development from clause coordination.

• In Whitesands the echo subject is compatible with a range of clausal coordinators and also profiles to a relativiser.

Summary

This research seeks to clearly document and describe the grammar of the Echo Subject system of switch reference found in the languages southern Vanuatu. It investigates primary data of one language, Nalag/Whitesands. The Echo Subject system is not a singular or unified grammatical process, but is in fact, accounts for a wide range of grammatical structures. Further, it also appears to be influenced by speakers’ pragmatic priming, thus exhibiting the important link between functional (pragmatics) and formal (syntactic constructions) levels of grammar. Finally, the paper concludes by asserting that real text analysis is required to fully explicate this grammatical feature. Basic elicited or prompted (experimental) speech is not sufficient to discover all possible variation within the Echo Subject system, therefore supporting arguments for corpus collection in typologically diverse languages.