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CHAPTER 1

Cross-linguistic variation in differential subject marking

1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon known as Differential Subject Marking (DSM) may take many forms. First of all, languages differ in which conditions govern DSM. Some languages differentiate their subjects on the basis of the form, such as being a pronoun or not, others on the basis of semantic features such as being a real agent (volitional, in control) or not, and still others distinguish their subjects on the basis of clausal features such as tense/aspect/mood or the main/dependent clause distinction. Secondly, DSM comes in different formal guises: case marking, agreement, inverse systems, voice alternations.

Although relatively much is known about the cross-linguistic variation we find in the marking of subjects (see Dixon 1994; Aikhenvald, Dixon, and Onishi 2001 for an overview), relatively little attempt has been made to formalize the facts (see Aissen 1999). The present volume is an attempt to unify formal approaches to language with the typological enterprise. In the spirit of this project both specific case studies of DSM and theoretical approaches to the data are presented. In this introductory chapter, we will demonstrate how the respective chapters fit this general enterprise.

2. DIFFERENTIAL CASE MARKING AND PROMINENCE DISTINCTIONS

There are many languages that show differential object marking (DOM) or differential subject marking (DSM) or both. These alternations are often, yet not always, related to a difference in prominence of the arguments. One highly influential OT approach that is developed to deal with argument prominence and differential case marking is Aissen’s harmonic alignment account of DSM and DOM (1999, 2003). The functional motivation behind this type of differential case marking would be to avoid ambiguity as to what is the subject and what is the object in a transitive clause (cf. de Swart 2005). Aissen’s approach accounts for cross-linguistic patterns in which case is assigned to subjects which are low in prominence (and thus less typical subjects). However, a problem for Aissen’s analysis of differential case marking, as pointed out by Woolford (2001) and de Swart (2003), is that it predicts DSM to mirror differential object marking in the sense that case is assigned to those subjects which are low in prominence (and thus less typical...
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subjects) rather than to those which are high-prominent. In fact, however, DSM can also occur in subjects of intransitive verbs, and certain constraints show up cross-linguistically that seem to require case-marking on typical (e.g., highly agentive) subjects rather than on the atypical ones (cf. de Hoop and Malchukov, 2007).

Comrie (1989) claims that the most natural type of transitive construction is one where the transitive subject (A) is high in animacy and definiteness, and the transitive object (P) is lower in animacy and definiteness. However, consider the following example from West Greenlandic, discussed in Naess (2006) (Fortescue 1984, glosses from Cooreman 1994):

(1) inuit tuqup-pai
    people.ABS kill-TR.INDIC.3SG.ERG.3PL
    ‘He killed the people.’
(2) (inun-nik) tuqut-si-vuq
    people-INS kill-ANTIP-INTR.INDIC.3SG.ABS
    ‘He killed people.’

Sentences (1) and (2) show a difference in the definiteness or specificity of the object. In (2) the object is lower in definiteness than in (1). Hence, from Comrie’s point of view, (2) should be a more ‘natural’ transitive construction than (1). But from a morpho-syntactic point of view, only (1) is a transitive sentence. Sentence (2) is called an antipassive construction, and from a morpho-syntactic point of view antipassives, like passives, are intransitive rather than transitive. Generally, in antipassive constructions, the P argument is not realized as a ‘core’ object argument (in (2) it receives instrumental case), it can be omitted, and the verb is morphologically ‘detransitivized’ (this is also witnessed in (2)). Obviously, DOM also occurs without explicit detransitivizing morphology on the verb, but then it is usually not analysed as involving an antipassive construction (cf. Kittilä 2002). Naess (2006) wonders how one can maintain that a typical object in a transitive clause (i.e., its meaning) is low-prominent in definiteness and/or animacy, when at the same time this type of object is often not a grammatical object from a morpho-syntactic perspective point of view (i.e., its form), as in antipassives like in (2), but also in object incorporation constructions. It is well-known that in transitive clauses subjects are in general more prominent than objects in terms of animacy and definiteness, but when a subject becomes ‘much more prominent’ than the object, an antipassive construction might be used (cf. Sells 2001).

Legendre et al. (1993) provide an Optimality Theoretic (OT) analysis of case marking alternations that are triggered by prominence distinctions in the input argument structure. In their view, prominence distinctions trigger voice alternations and these voice alternations go hand in hand with case marking alternations. They claim that the input of a transitive sentence is an argument structure with two high-prominent arguments, a high-prominent subject and a high-prominent object. Thus, unlike Comrie (1989) and Aissen (1999, 2003), Legendre et al. ignore the general pattern that subjects outrank objects in prominence (animacy, definiteness). They represent a transitive input as AP (where the capital letters stand for high-prominent arguments in the input). Accordingly, they argue that a passive sentence is triggered...