

Week 6 -Week 8: Case and Agreement; Grammatical Functions

PART I.

1. Introduction: case, agreement, word order

→ It is an old saying that “Dog bites man” is no news, but “Man bites dog” is. How do you know who did what to whom when you look at a sentence of English?

→ In many languages case is a way of encoding grammatical relations (e.g. showing who did what to whom). In many other languages, agreement, i.e. the morphological marking on the verb is a way of encoding the same. Case/ agreement diversity among languages is very high:

MOHAWK (from Baker 1996, p. 116) (*Agreement only; obligatory agreement with thematic arguments*)

(1) a. Sak rake-nuhwe'-s
Sak MsS/1sO-like-hab
Sak likes me

b. Sak ri-nuhwe'-s
Sak 1sS/MsO-like-hab
I like Sak

CHICHEWA (BANTU) (from Bresnan and Mchombo 1987) (*Agreement only; optional object agreement*)

(2) Alenjje zi- na- (wa-) lum- a njuchi
Hunters SM past OM bite- INDIC bees
Bees bit the hunters

JAPANESE (*Case only: nominative-accusative*)

(3) Taro-ga pizza-o tabe-ta
Taro-NOM pizza-ACC eat-past
Taro ate pizza

RUSSIAN (*Case and agreement; nominative-accusative*)

(5) Homer udaril Bart-a
Homer hit-3rd-SgMasc Bart-ACC
Homer hit Bart

WEST GREENLANDIC (data from Manning 1996: 3) (*Case and agreement; ergative-absolutive*)

(6) Oli-p neqi neri-vaa
Oli-ERG meat-ABS eat-ind-tr-3rd-SG-3rd-SG
Oli eats meat

CHINESE (from Sigurdsson 2003) (*No case and no agreement*)

(7) Ta bu chi rou
She/he not eat meat
She/he does not eat meat

→ Languages with rich case systems tend to have a very free word order; languages with rich agreement systems also tend to allow agreed-with NPs to be moved around in the sentence.

However, languages such as Chinese or English for that matter limit constituent movement possibilities.

→ Furthermore, some word orders are more common across languages than others:

SVO

SOV

VSO

VOS

OVS (extremely rare)

OSV (extremely rare)

→ in fact, it is a rather common view in linguistics nowadays that no language has as OVS or OSV its basic word order. This word order is considered to be derived via movement. More on that will be said when we talk about Greenberg 1966

→ in this regard, we say that SOV and SVO word orders are unmarked – or crosslinguistically common, while OSV and OVS are marked, or crosslinguistically rare.

→ There are other languages still (usually those that are heavily headmarking) in which the basic order of constituents cannot be easily determined. This is so because the order is so free and constituents can be dropped or split.

→ For example in Mohawk, NPs can be dropped and you can also say things like “That I gave John basket” meaning “I gave John that basket”

→ This is referred to as **non-configurationality**.

non-configurational languages (Hale 1983) = discontinuous constituents, radical pro-drop, extreme freedom word order

non-configurational languages are almost always head-marking, i.e. require agreement with all/ most dependents

2. Ways of case marking

2.1 Nominative-Accusative case systems

S = subject of an intransitive verb

A = subject of a transitive verb

O = object of a transitive verb

Nominative –Accusative system = groups S and A for the purposes of case marking (or agreement) to the exclusion of the object

(8) She hit him

(9) She ran

2.2 Ergativity

Ergative-Absolutive case system = groups S and O for the purposes of case marking (or agreement) to the exclusion of the A

→ “Ergative Agreement”

BASQUE (U.Etxeberria pc; Bittner & Hale 1996)

- (10) a. Jon-ek Miren jo **du** b. Jon erori **da**
Jon-erg Miren-abs hit **aux3rdSgTr** Jon-abs fallen aux**3rdSgIntr**
Jon hit Miren Jon fell

→ “Accusative Agreement”

WARLPIRI (Bittner & Hale 1996)

- (11a. Nyuntulu-rlu ka- **npa**- ju ngaju nya-nyi b. Nyuntu ka-**npa** parnka-mi
You-erg prs-**2sg**-1sg me-abs see-npst you-abs pres-**2sg** run-npst
You see me you run

‘Active’ ergative languages: Basque vs. Inuit

INUIT

- (12)a. Oli sinippoq
Oli-abs sleep-ind-intr-3Sg
Oli sleeps
- b. Oli-p neqi neri-vaa
Oli-erg meat-abs eat-Ind.Tr.3Sg3Sg
Oli eats meat

BASQUE (data from Woolford 2005: 9, Austin and Lopes 1995, Levin 1989)

- (13) a. Makina hon-ek funtzionatu du
Mashine this-erg function aux
This machine works
- b. Gizona-k kurritu du
man-erg ran aux
The man ran
- c. Ni etorri naiz
I-nom come aux
I came.

What difference with respect to ergative case do we observe between Basque and Inuit?
How can we describe the main difference?

A digression on intransitive verbs... (to be continued on 2.21.08)

- (14) a. John ran b. John fell

Where is the sole argument of the intransitive verb positioned?

Part II.

2.28.08 Case/ agreement continued

→ so why does Basque along with some other languages show ergative case on the subject of some intransitive verbs and absolutive (unmarked) case on the subject of other intransitive verbs ?

→ this can be explained if the subject of some intransitive verbs such as 'fall' actually appears in a different syntactic position than the subject of an intransitive verb such as 'run'

→ Compare:

(15) a. John ran a good run / a marathon
b. John lived a happy life

(16) a. *John fell a bad fall
b. *John arrived a happy arrival
c. *John existed a happy existence

→ What generalization can we draw based on these examples?

Some intransitive verbs are more like _____ verbs

→ why does the generalization explain the ergative patterns in Basque intransitives?

3. Split ergativity (ways of splitting)

→ ergative languages often exhibit a split, i.e. they are ergative in some respects and nominative-accusative in others. One example of a split is something we see in Warlpiri, a language that has an ergative case system and a nominative- accusative case system

WARLPIRI (Bittner & Hale 1996)

(11a. Nyuntulu-rlu ka- npa - ju ngaju nya-nyi	b. Nyuntu ka- npa parnka-mi
You- erg prs- 2sg -1sg me-abs see-npst	you-abs pres- 2sg run-npst
You see me	you run

→ a very common split is to treat nouns as ergative/absolutive and pronouns as nominative-accusative. this is what happens in Dyirbal (24, 25 textbook p. 164-65)

→ other factors have to do with the tense/ aspect. for example, verbs in perfective aspect in Hindi take ergative subjects, but imperfective verbs do not

→ in addition, there are also languages that show ergative-accusative case systems (Pitta-Pitta) p. 165

- marked vs. unmarked forms: the nominative/ absolutive in the unmarked in both senses, it is the more common form; it lacks any morphological marking. in fact, very few languages mark nominative/absolutive case overtly, especially in the presence of agreement.

4. Agreement

- A language can also indicate ergativity/ accusativity via agreement. In fact, we already saw this in Basque and Warlpiri.

Agreement = marking the head with certain morphology to indicate grammatical relations.

MOHAWK (from Baker 1996, p. 116)

(17) a. Sak rake-nuhwe' - s
 Sak MsS/1sO-like-hab
 Sak likes me

b. Sak ri-nuhwe' -s
 Sak 1sS/MsO-like-hab
 I like Sak

CHICHEWA (BANTU) (from Bresnan and Mchombo 1987)

(18) Njuchi zi- na- wa- lum- a alenje
 Bees Subj past Obj bite- INDIC hunters
 Bees bit the hunters

- Indo-European languages as well as Turkish, Finnish, Hungarian, and Dravidian languages (to name a few) agree only with the subject. This is not what we see in Mohawk and Chichewa, for example, where there is object agreement in addition to subject agreement. There are languages where agreement is with all the arguments of the verb: the subject, the object, and the indirect object (Kambera p. 169)

Interestingly, a language may have subject agreement and lack object agreement, but the opposite does not hold: we don't find languages that have agreement only with the object

- Agreement in Chichewa, for example, is nominative-accusative: the subject of intransitives receives the same marking as the subject of transitives.
- Some languages like Basque show ergative agreement – the marking triggered by the subject of a transitive verb is different from that triggered by the subject of an intransitive verb. Ergative agreement may exist in languages that lack an overtly expressed ergative system. Jacaltec, Selayarese, Yimas exemplify this type (among others)
- However, we never find languages that have ergative agreement and a nominative-accusative case system. The “converse” of Warlpiri does not exist!

5. Grammatical Relations

certain grammatical phenomena are best understood if we refer to the grammatical notions of subject and object (or indirect object). In other words, subjects and objects have certain identifiable properties. Subjects, for example, form a natural class and are targeted by certain syntactic processes.

Subject properties:

- subjects are used to express the agent of the event
- subjects tend to appear in the sentence-prominent position, usually first
- subjects are understood as the implied argument in the imperative construction
- subjects bind the reflexive pronoun (anaphor) e.g. *John hit himself* vs. **Himself hit John*
- subjects can be omitted under conjunction: *John pushed Bill and fell* (cannot mean *John hit Bill and BILL fell*, even though it would be the more plausible meaning!)
- subjects are positions that are targeted for promotion from other positions. For example, under passivization, the object becomes the subject.

examining subject properties:

Nominative is not the only case for subjects even in nominative-accusative languages!

Icelandic p. 173

Why are quirky subjects subjects?