Lecture 4: Objects cross-linguistically
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1. Definition

- Object: is defined configurationally in transformational theories and is more or less a syntactic primitive in declarative theories. This is because in many languages the appearance of a phrase in a particular position is not criterial for identification of the phrase as being an object.

- Behavioural properties vary from language to language: for example, some languages have object agreement, which can function as a test for objecthood, some languages have a special relativisation strategy for objects that is different from the strategy used for other grammatical functions, and so on.

- Objects can correspond to a variety of semantic roles. Cf. Fillmore (1968: 25): the Objective case is ‘the semantically most neutral case, the case of anything representable by a noun whose role in the action or state identified by the verb is identified by the semantic interpretation of the verb itself’.

- Borjars & Vincent (2008): Semantic neutrality of the object is manifested in several phenomena, e.g. cognate objects, which usually extend or quantify the activity denoted by the verb (I dreamed a dream), pseudo-objects (Oscar laughed himself silly) and object expletives.

2. Differential object marking

- Many languages exhibit non-uniform grammatical marking targeting objects (differential object marking or DOM) (a term introduced by Bossong 1985). Variations can occur within one and the same language with objects of one and the same verb.

(1) Turkish (Altaic)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ali} & \quad \text{bir kitap/kitab-ı aldı} \\
\text{Ali} & \quad \text{one book/book-Acc buy.Past.3Sg}
\end{align*}
\]


(2) Palauan (Austronesian) (Woolford 2000: 5)

a. Te-`illebed-ii a bilis a rengalek
   Subj.3Pl-Perf.hit-Obj.3Sg the dog the children
   ‘The kids hit the dog.’

b. Te-`illebed a bilis a rengalek
   Subj.3Pl-Perf.hit the dog the children
   ‘The kids hit a dog/the dogs/some dog(s).’

- DOM can be understood as covering both agreement and casemarking (case or adpositional marking on the object), as alternative strategies for encoding the relation between the head and a dependent.

- Cross-linguistically DOM tends to target objects that are high on the animacy hierarchy: definite and/or specific and/or animate and/or pronominal and/or proper nouns etc.

- Typological analyses of grammatical marking (in particular casemarking) have often appealed to two types of functional motivation, referred to as coding/indexing and discriminative/disambiguating/distinguishing (Comrie 1979, 1989; de Hoop & Narasimhan 2005; de Hoop & Malchukov 2007; Næss 2007; Malchukov 2008).

- Discriminatory or disambiguating casemarking serves to distinguish between different categories: for example, between the two arguments (the subject and the object) of a transitive clause. It encodes the relation between two arguments rather than the properties of an individual argument.

- Disambiguating approach to DOM: Silverstein (1976) and Comrie (1977) argue that since the basic purpose of formal marking on core arguments is to distinguish the subject from the object, the need to overtly mark the
object is greater in some cases than in others because an object with subject-like semantic properties—for example, an animate, specific, or definite object—is more likely to be confused with the subject. Therefore, objects whose semantic features are typical of subjects are more likely to be overtly marked.

- This approach stands in conformance with the widespread functional view that infrequent (and therefore functionally marked) categories receive more formal marking, whereas frequent (and therefore functionally unmarked) categories tend to remain formally unmarked. On this view, DOM is essentially iconic: formal marking on objects reflects their status as atypical or infrequent objects, and thus their functional markedness.

- Optimal-Theoretic formalization in Aissen (2003) and subsequent work.

- From the coding/indexing perspective, marking is taken to signal specific semantic and/or pragmatic properties of the relevant argument, rather than a particular relation between one argument and another. This is particularly clear for obliques, where case can bear an important semantic load in signalling the meaning contribution of the casemarked phrase.

- In the analysis of DOM, the coding/indexing perspective assumes that the presence of marking is connected to the presence of certain properties of the object. This view goes back to Hopper & Thompson’s (1980) classic study, in which DOM is taken to be one of the signals indicating high transitivity.

- Næss (2004, 2006, 2007) argues that DOM encodes affectedness, understood roughly as involvement in the verbal event and change of state of the participant as a direct result of this event. On this view, prototypical objects are those that are highly individuated and affected by the transitive event. This is formally marked.

- Affectedness correlates with the high position on the animacy hierarchy. For instance, Næss (2004) claims that definite objects are more affected than indefinite ones because the event affects the whole rather than a part (cf. I drank the milk and I drank some milk).

- But in many cases it is difficult to argue that definite or animate objects are more affected than indefinite or inanimate ones, if affectedness is understood in terms of a change of state.

(3) Hindi (Indo-Aryan)

| a. Ilaa-ne haar uṭhaayaa       | b. Ilaa-ne haar-ko uṭhaayaa |
| Ila-Erg necklace lifted       | Ila-Erg necklace-Acc lifted |
| ‘Ila lifted a necklace.’      | ‘Ila lifted the necklace.’   |


- The distinction is usually said to be semantically driven, dependent on a specific/referential/definite vs. a nonspecific/nonreferential/indefinite interpretation of the object: specific/referential/definite object are moved to or generated in the VP-external position.

- However, semantic criteria are useful in analysing patterns of DOM where objects that are characterised as semantically “strong” or “definite” show more agreement with the verb, or more casemarking, than objects without these properties. Yet these factors do not adequately account for languages in which objects with the same semantic features can be either marked or unmarked.

- For example, in modern Hindi the accusative marker ko appears on specific human objects (in some dialects, all specific animate objects), whether definite or indefinite, but is impossible on indefinite inanimate nouns. In other words, for specific human/animate nouns ko-marking is obligatory, while for inanimate indefinites, marking is disallowed. However, with inanimate/nonhuman definite objects, apparent optionality arises: such objects are either marked or unmarked.
4. (a) Ilaa-ne bacce-ko / *bacca uṭhaayaa  
   Ilaa-Erg child-Acc / child lifted  
   ‘Ila lifted the/a child.’  
   (b) Ilaa-ne haar uṭhaayaa  
   Ilaa-Erg necklace lifted  
   ‘Ila lifted the/a necklace.’ (Mohanan 1994)

- In many languages marked objects are topical and unmarked objects are not.
- In Hindi marking patterns for inanimate/nonhuman definite objects appear to depend on information structure. Objects remain unmarked, or at least ko is strongly dispreferred, if the object is focused.

5. What did Hassan sell?

Hassan-ne voh kitaab / ?kitaab-ko bec diyaa  
Hassan-Erg that book / book-Acc sell gave  
‘Hassan sold that book.’

6. What happened?

Hassan-ne meraa kalam / ?kalam-ko tod. diyaa  
Hassan-Erg my.Masc pen / pen-Acc break gave  
‘Hassan broke my pen.’

- But in contexts where the object is under discussion and the utterance updates the addressee’s knowledge about the relation that holds between the subject and the object referents, ko-marking is required.

7. What did Hassan do to the book?

us kitaab-ko / us-ko / *voh kitaab bec diyaa  
that book-Acc / that-Acc / that book sell gave  
‘He sold it/that book.’

8. You should punish Hassan for breaking your pen.

mere kalam-ko / ?kalam Ravi-ne tod.aa Hassan-ne nahī  
my.Obl pen-Acc / pen Ravi-Erg broke Hassan-Erg no  
‘It was Ravi who broke my pen, not Hassan.’

- Apparent “optionality” is also observed in languages with differential object agreement. In Ostyak (Uralic), object agreement may but need not appear with definite as well as indefinite objects (Nikolaeva 1999, 2001).

9. (a) tam kalaŋ we:l-ǝs / we:l-s-ǝlli  
   this reindeer kill-Past.3SgSubj / kill-Past-Obj.3SgSubj  
   ‘He killed this reindeer.’

   Agreeing objects are topical, while unmarked objects are nontopical/focus.

10. What did he do to this reindeer?

   tam kalaŋ we:l-s-ǝlli / *we:l-ǝs  
   this reindeer kill-Past-Obj.3SgSubj / kill-Past-Obj.3SgSubj  
   ‘He killed this reindeer.’

11. Which reindeer did he kill?

   tam kalaŋ we:l-ǝs / *we:l-s-ǝlli  
   this reindeer kill-Past.3SgSubj / kill-Past-Obj.3SgSubj  
   ‘He killed this reindeer.’
• These examples demonstrate that in some languages, semantic features such as animacy, definiteness, or specificity alone are not enough to account for the distribution of agreement or casemarking on objects, but topicality plays an important role in DOM (sometimes in combination with referential semantics).

3. DOM and grammatical functions

• In some languages with DOM marked and unmarked objects do not differ syntactically and, arguably, realise the same grammatical function, the object. In other languages they additionally exhibit different behavioural syntactic profiles.

• Tundra Nenets (Uralic): topical 3rd person objects trigger agreement, nontopical (focus) 3rd person objects and 1-2nd person objects do not.

(12) What happened? What did a/the man do? What did a/the man kill?

\[\text{xasawa ti-m xada}^3 / xada^3\text{da} \]
\[\text{man reindeer-Acc kill.3SgSubj / kill.3SgSubj} \]
\[\text{‘A/the man killed a/the reindeer.’} \]

(13) What did a/the man do to the/a reindeer?

\[\text{xasawa ti-m xada}^3\text{da / xada}^3\text{da} \]
\[\text{man reindeer-Acc kill.3SgSubj / kill.3SgSubj} \]
\[\text{‘A/the man killed a/the reindeer.’} \]

• We find no behavioural differences that distinguish agreeing and non-agreeing objects. Objects in Nenets have a number of syntactic properties that distinguish them from other grammatical functions. They can be promoted to subject in the passive. Subjects and objects are the only two grammatical functions that can be relativised using the participial strategy; all other grammatical functions must be relativised by means of another verbal form, the action nominal. These tests, however, will not help us in establishing syntactic differences between marked and unmarked objects, since there is no object agreement in the resulting construction.

• The relevant property is object control. Nenets has a number of complement-taking verbs which take a dependent null-subject clause headed by a converb. The dependent subject must be interpreted as coreferential with the matrix object. Both agreeing and nonagreeing objects can control the dependent subject.

(14) n’ís’a-da n´u-m-ta [___ xanye] toxola^3 / toxola^3da
\[\text{father-3Sg son-Acc-3Sg hunt.Conv teach.3SgSubj / teach.3SgSubj} \]
\[\text{‘The father taught his son to hunt.’} \]

• Additionally, both agreeing and non-agreeing objects can serve as the antecedent of a possessive reflexive, provided the antecedent linearly precedes the reflexive. No positional difference.

(15) P´et´a Masha-m pida m´a-kona-nta ladö/ladöda
\[\text{Peter Mary-Acc her yurt-Loc-3Sg hit.3SgSubj / hit.3SgSubj} \]
\[\text{‘Peter hit Mary, in her, yurt.’} \]

• In contrast, in Northern Khanty agreeing and non-agreeing objects exhibit different behavioural profiles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Agreeing (topical)</th>
<th>Nonagreeing (nontopical)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal agreement</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of coreference in action nominal clauses</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessor topicalisation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control of possessive reflexivisation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantifier float</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>−</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• For example:

(16) a. [∅, tutjux se:war-m-al sis] a:-s-e:m, mosa no:malm-æs  
    wood cut-AN-3Sg when father-1Sg something remember-Past.3SgSubj  
    ‘When my father was cutting wood, he remembered something.’

  b. [∅, u:n u:l-m-al pata] xul, nox an ta:l-s-e:m / *ta:l-s-əm  
    large be-AN-3Sg because fish out not carry-Past-Obj.1SgSubj / *carry-Past-1SgSubj  
    ‘Because the fish was large, I didn’t take it out.’

• The same distinction is observed in languages differential object case marking. For instance, in Dolakha Newar (Tibeto-Burman) as described in Genetti (1994, 1997, 2004) objects are either unmarked or marked with the suffix -ta. Marking depends on topicality. Objects can be distinguished from subjects by means of a number of tests: objects do not trigger agreement, do not serve as antecedents of regular reflexives, and do not participate in control constructions or certain types of relativisation. The tests do not distinguish between marked and unmarked objects, however.

• In contrast, in Chatino (Zapotecan), described in Carleton & Waksler (2000, 2002), topical marked objects have different properties from unmarked non-topical objects. Chatino is a verb-initial language (VSO), but under certain pragmatic conditions, subjects as well as marked objects preceded by the preposition jj?i can be dislocated into sentence-initial position, while unmarked objects cannot.

  (17) a. tzaka ynatę ntesu nchi?yu  
    one human cut.3Sg fruit  
    ‘A man is cutting fruit.’

  b. nkara kuną?q (jj?i) ki?yu  
    hit woman Prep man  
    ‘The woman hit the man.’

  c. [(jj?i) ki?yu] nkara kuną?q  
    ‘The woman hit the man.’

• Summary of syntactic facts:

  | marked and unmarked objects | marked and unmarked objects |
  | case marking | Dolakha Newar | Chatino |
  | agreement | Tundra Nenets | Northern Ostyak |

4. Primary and secondary object

• The question is then what grammatical functions are associated with marked and unmarked objects in languages like Ostyak and Chatino?

• Some languages distinguish between primary and secondary object (OBJ₁/OBJ₂ and OBJθ/OBJ₂).

• The distinction between primary and secondary object is normally observed in languages with ditransitive constructions because they can have double objects.

• Double object constructions in English: a construction with OBJ₁ and OBJ₂. OBJ₂ is the object which is “further away” from the verb

(18)  

\[
\text{John gave Mary a book.}
\]

| OBJ₁ | OBJ₂ |

5
● OBJ₁ and OBJ₂ have different properties in English:

(19) OBJ₁ is not semantically restricted

I saw the cat - theme
I hit the cat - patient
I gave the cat the food - recipient/goal

(20) OBJ₂ in English is semantically restricted. It can only be theme and is sometimes called OBJ_theme.

I gave her a book  *I gave a book her
I made her a cake   *I make a cake her
I asked her a question *I asked a question her

(21) Ditransitive constructions in English

a. John gave Mary the book
b. John gave the book to Mary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBJ</th>
<th>OBJ</th>
<th>OBJ₂</th>
<th>SUBJ</th>
<th>OBJ</th>
<th>OBL_rec</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>agent</td>
<td>recipient</td>
<td>theme</td>
<td>agent</td>
<td>theme</td>
<td>recipient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(22) In English OBJ₁, but not OBJ_theme, can become a passive subject

a. The book was given to Mary.  OBJ₁ is promoted to SUBJ
b. Mary was given the book.  OBJ₁ is promoted to SUBJ
c. *?The book was given Mary.  OBJ_theme is promoted to SUBJ

● The lexical rule that derives (21a) from (21b)?

● So, unlike OBJ₂, OBJ₁ shares most properties with the object of a monotransitive verb. It is higher on the hierarchy of grammatical functions and is more active in syntax.

● However, Hudson (1992) argues that secondary object shares many properties with the object of monotransitive verbs. For instance, OBJ₂ can be preceded by an adjunct under the so-called ‘heavy shift’ (25b), while OBJ₁ cannot.

(23) Heavy shift

b. Fred met on Sunday [someone he hadn’t seen since he was in college and was in love with].

b. Fred gave Ann on Sunday [some flowers that he’d bought in the market the day before].
c. *Fred gave some flowers on Sunday [the girl he had met at the party the night before].

● NB: This makes us suspect that maybe some of the relevant properties generalise over other factors, such as information structure, rather than grammatical functions, cf. Polinsky (1998).

● In languages where marked and unmarked objects are different grammatical functions such as Ostyak or Chatino they correspond to OBJ₁ and OBJ₂. This is observed even in monotransitive constructions.

● For instance, in Khanty the agreeing (topical) object is primary object (OBJ₁) and non-agreeing (non-topical object) is secondary object and is semantically restricted (theme - OBJ₂). Non-theme objects must trigger agreement independently of their information structure status.

(25) a. ma Pe:tra a:n-na ma-s-e:m / *ma-s-om
    I Peter cup-Loc give-Past-Obj.1SgSubj / give-Past-1SgSubj
    ‘I gave Peter a/the cup.’
b. ma [Pe:tra e:li] a:n ma-s-e:m / ma-s-əm
‘I gave a/the cup to Peter.’

- So a language can have two types of objects even if it has no double-object constructions.

5. **Alignment patterns in ditransitive constructions**

- Three relevant arguments: U = monotransitive patient, T = ditransitive theme, R = recipient/goal

(26) indirective alignment: T = U ≠ R

(27) secundative alignment: U = R ≠ T

I gave a book to Bill.

I gave Bill a book.

(28) neutral alignment: U = R = T

Martuthunira (Pama-Nyungan; Dench 1995: 156, 67)

a. ngayu nhawu-lha kayarra-a tharratal-yu.
‘I saw two tharratal birds.’

b. ngunhu kanyara ngurnu jinkarn-ku yungku-lha ngurnula-ngu-u mimi-i.
‘That man gave his uncle the digging stick.’

- But these patterns are based on morphological marking, not on grammatical functions.

- The issue here is the grammatical status of multiple objects. Many theories do not allow the “doubling” of the grammatical function within the same clause. So in the “neutral” pattern the two accusatives must be associated with different grammatical functions, probably OBJ₁ and OBJ₂.

- For instance, some non-standard varieties of Hindi do allow the marking of both objects by the same element ko (‘neutral’ alignment). Despite identical marking, the theme and the goal arguments have different properties: e.g. only the theme object can be moved to the pre-subject position via syntactic topicalisation. So the two objects are different grammatical functions in spite of the identical case marking.

(29) a. aadmii-ne us kitaab-ko aurat-ko diyaa
    man-Erg that.Obl book-Acc woman-Acc give.Past.MSg
    ‘The man gave that book to the woman.’

b. Tim-ko Theo-ne Sita-ko diyaa
    Tim-Acc Theo-Erg Sita-Acc give.Past.MSg
    ‘Tim, Theo gave to Sita.’ NOT: *Sita, Theo gave to Tim.’

- Double object in causative constructions: in spoken Tamil (data from Polinsky 1995) only the patient is the primary OBJ.

(30) appa intapaiyyan-e inta maneashan-e [Ø poiyinTikacce] aTikk-a ce-cc-a:
    father thisboy-ACC this man-ACC leaving hit-INF cause-PAST-HON
    ‘The father made the boy hit the man as the man/*boy was leaving.’

- This again confirms that in order to establish grammatical functions we should look at behavioural properties, not at the morphological marking of argument NPs.
Further references


Næss, Åshild 2006. ‘Case semantics and the agent-patient opposition.’ In Kulikov, Leonid, Malchukov, Andrej, & de Swart, Peter (eds.) ‘Case, valency and transitivity,’ Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 309–327


