

24.956 Topics in Syntax: Subjecthood

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Canvas:	https://canvas.mit.edu/courses/19243
Class schedule:	W 10-1
Location:	32-D461

Description of the Course

Subject is one of the most fundamental and most frequently appealed to notions in the discussion of argument asymmetries cross-linguistically. Subjects are taken to display a cluster of properties, which in tree-geometric terms are associated with being the structurally highest argument in the clause. Properties typically associated with subjects include: (i) unmarked (nominative) case; (ii) the ability to control verbal agreement; (iii) the ability to bind anaphors; (iv) the ability to be PRO and to participate in raising; (v) agentivity and thematic prominence; (vi) topicality; (vii) accessibility for wh-movement. In modern Minimalism these properties are distributed across several positions in the clause, but tend to converge on a single nominal due to standard constraints on locality and movement.

In this seminar we will explore phenomena that challenge a universally homogeneous notion of subjecthood, focusing on cases where the subject displays only a subset of typical subjecthood properties, or where subjecthood properties are distributed across more than one argument in the clause. We will discuss both the empirical landscape of research on subjecthood and the implications that research has for syntactic theory and our understanding of locality, intervention, licensing, case, agreement, thematic and structural prominence, etc.

Requirements

1. Reading assigned literature and participation in class discussion.
2. Final paper on a topic related to the class content. Includes a written up text (10–15 pages) and in-class presentation at the end of the semester.

Class plan (subject to change)

1. Defining subjecthood and setting the scene
(Anderson 1976; Keenan 1976; Schachter 1977; McCloskey 1997)
2. Quirky subjects (Sigurðsson 2002, 2004; Poole 2015; Citko et al. 2018)
3. External arguments (Tollan 2018; Tollan and Oxford 2018; Tollan and Massam 2022)
4. Passives (Cole and Hermon 2008; Hofherr 2017; Legate 2021)
5. Ergativity
 - (Bittner and Hale 1996; Aldridge 2008; Yuan 2022)
 - (Coon et al. 2021; Tollan and Clemens 2022)
 - (Brodkin and Royer 2021; Royer to appear; Ershova to appear)
6. Austronesian voice
 - (Guilfoyle et al. 1992; Manning 1996; Aldridge 2004; Erlewine et al. 2017)
 - (Legate 2014)
7. Obligatory and spurious voice constructions
(Aissen 1999; Jelinek and Carnie 2003; Bobaljik and Branigan 2006)
8. Direct/inverse systems
(Bejar and Rezac 2009; Oxford 2022; Oxford to appear)

Students with Documented Disabilities

MIT is committed to the principle of equal access. Students who need disability accommodations are encouraged to speak with Disability and Access Services (DAS), prior to or early in the semester so that accommodation requests can be evaluated and addressed in a timely fashion. If you have a disability and are not planning to use accommodations, it is still recommended that you meet with DAS staff to familiarize yourself with their services and resources. Please visit the DAS website for contact information.

If you have already been approved for accommodations, please inform either of us as soon as possible.

Diversity and Inclusion Statement

Both MIT [1,2] and MIT Linguistics [3] value diversity of backgrounds and perspectives in an inclusive and respectful environment. We would like to echo these values and policies here, and we encourage you to familiarize yourself with the relevant resources made available to you in the links provided below. We also provide a venue in the form of an anonymous survey to reach out to us if you encounter issues that go against these values. The survey will be active throughout the semester (and the link will also be available through Canvas).

Anonymous survey: <https://forms.gle/e6mJwxgpoimsA6UA9>

[1] <https://hr.mit.edu/diversity-equity-inclusion>

[2] <https://studentlife.mit.edu/impact-opportunities/diversity-inclusion>

[3] <https://linguistics.mit.edu/diversity-statement/>

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