LINGUIST 168 Introduction to Linguistic Typology

LECTURE 16: ARGUMENT ALIGNMENT

Ksenia Ershova

May 19, 2021

For Monday, 5/24

- Homework #7
- Reading: Velupillai (2012), Ch. 10
- Discussion post

Plan for today

Argument alignment

- basic notions
- defining alignment
- typology of alignment

Predicate

- sentence: predicate + arguments (+ adjuncts)
- predicate ≠ verb

English:

The room **is cold.**

Pat **is a student.**

West Circassian:

se sə-stwədjentə-ʁ

I 1SG-student-PAST

‘I was a student.’

Arguments and adjuncts

- arguments are necessary for utterance to be complete
- adjuncts are optional

Pat boiled some water in a pot in the kitchen.

arguments **adjuncts**

*Boiled some water in a pot in the kitchen.

*Pat boiled in a pot in the kitchen.

✓Pat boiled some water in a pot.

✓Pat boiled some water in the kitchen.

Semantic / thematic roles

- impressionistically identified role of a participant
- does not directly correlate with syntactic role

SUBJECT

John cracked the glass.

agent

The cold temperature cracked the glass.

cause

The glass cracked.

theme / patient

Syntactic role

- represents syntactic relation between argument and predicate
- intuitive, but incredibly difficult to define
- classic syntactic roles: subject and object

Thinking about subject and object in English, what are the defining properties of these syntactic roles?

Subjects are obligatory

- Every sentence has a subject.
- If a sentence has only one argument, it is the subject.

  *with some marginal exceptions

The dog ran.	*Ran.
It rains.	*Rains.

Subjects agree and bear nominative case

- If there is verb-argument agreement, the subject tends to be the thing that agrees.
- The subject tends to have the *less marked* case (nominative).

Russian

Kot-**Ø**	uvʲidʲel	ps-**ov**.
cat.M-**NOM**	saw.**SG.M**	dog-**PL.ACC**

'The cat saw the dogs.'

has a null case suffix
agrees with the verb

Subjects are prototypically agents and experiencers

- In simple active (i.e. non-passive) sentences, subjects usually refer to the “doer” or the “feeler/thinker”.

I bake cakes.	**agent**
I feel sick.	**experiencer**
I think that this is interesting.	**experiencer**

Objects are prototypically themes or patients

- In simple active (i.e. non-passive) sentences with two arguments, objects usually refer to the participant
  - that is targeted or impacted by an action
  - or is the object of thought/feeling

I wrote **a poem**.

I broke **a glass**.

I see **a bird**.

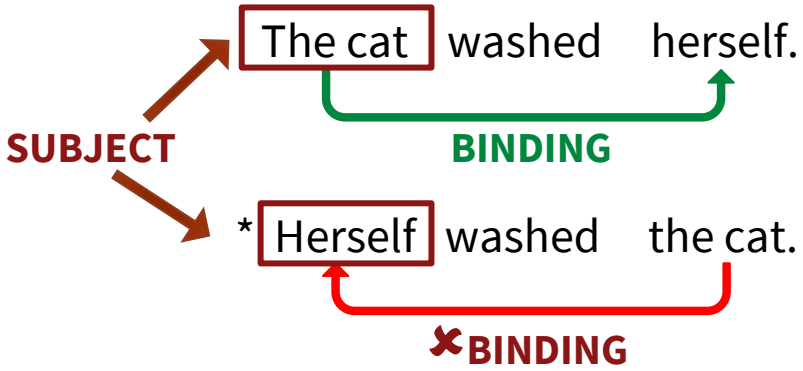
**The terms theme/patient are used interchangeably.

More complex properties syntactic of subjects

- All previously listed generalizations have exceptions.
- Most definitions of ***subject*** appeal to more complex syntactic properties than agreement, case and prototypical thematic roles.

= Velupillai's (2012) **behavior-and-control properties**

Example: A subject can bind a reflexive and cannot be bound itself.



Plan for today

Argument alignment

- basic notions
- defining alignment
- typology of alignment

Typologically salient syntactic roles: S, A and P

- Cross-linguistically, many languages distinguish between two types of subjects:
  - **S** (subject) = subject of an intransitive verb
  - **A** (agent) = subject of a transitive verb
- + **P** (patient) = object of a transitive verb
- Prototypically intransitive verbs have just one argument:

The dog fell asleep.

The cat sneezed.

- But what does it mean to be a **transitive** verb?

Transitive verbs

- have (at least) two arguments: a subject and an object
- prototypically, subject = agent
  object = patient
- prototypically, active involvement of the agent
  active influence on the patient

E.g. verbs of creation and destruction:

I baked a cake.

I broke the window.

She killed a fly.

She painted a masterpiece.

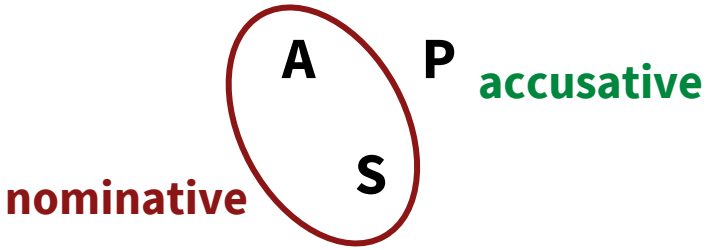
Alignment

How a language groups the major syntactic roles:

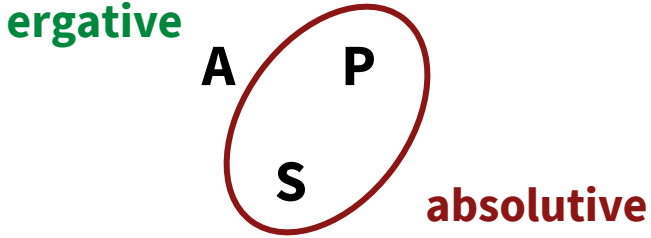
- S = subject of an intransitive verb
- A = subject of a transitive verb
- P = object of a transitive verb

Two most common types of systems:

Nominative-accusative



Ergative-absolutive



Toy ergative-absolutive language: fake English

A			
I	saw	you.	**A → ergative**
		P	
You	saw	**me**.	**P → absolutive**
S			
Me	am	walking.	**S → absolutive**

Ergative-absolutive language

Dyirbal (Pama-Nyungan)

yabu	**ŋuma-ŋgu**	buran
mother(ABS)	**father-ERG**	saw
‘**father** saw mother’		

A → ergative

ŋuma	yabu-ŋgu	buran
father(ABS)	mother-ERG	saw
‘mother saw **father**’		

P → absolutive

ŋuma	banaganʸu
father(ABS)	returned
‘father returned’	

S → absolutive

Absolutive and nominative tend to be unmarked

Absolutive and nominative case tends to be *less marked* than ergative and accusative, e.g. expressed as null morphology.

E.g. Dyirbal

Russian:

Kot-**Ø**	ukusʲil	osl-**a.**
cat-**NOM**	bit	donkey-**ACC**

‘The cat bit the donkey.’

nominative: -Ø
accusative: -a

Ergative-absolutive equally marked

It is uncommon for the absolutive/nominative to be *more marked* than the ergative and accusative.

(= accusative is null and nominative is overt)

But the two case values can be equally marked:

West Circassian

pʃ̪aʃ̪e-**m**	ħa-**r**	əɬeʁʷəʁ
girl-**ERG**	dog-**ABS**	she saw it
‘The girl saw the dog.’		

ergative = -m
absolutive = -r

Nominative-accusative equally marked

E.g. Latin:

domin**-us**
master**-NOM**

domin**-um**
master**-ACC**

nominative = -us
accusative = -um

How alignment is expressed

- All examples so far (Dyirbal, Russian, West Circassian, Latin): case morphology
- **Other possibilities:**
  - agreement
  - word order
  - (behavior-and-control properties)

Alignment in agreement

Two main strategies:

- Only a subset of syntactic roles agree.

E.g. nominative-accusative: agreement only with nominative S/A.

ergative-absolutive: agreement only with absolutive S/P.

- The form and/or position of agreement morphology correlates with syntactic role.

E.g. agreement with nominative = prefix;

agreement with accusative = suffix.

Nominative-accusative: agreement only with S/A

Russian

Ja	vʲiʒu	tʲebʲa.
I.NOM	see.PRES.**1SG**	you.ACC
‘I see you.’		

A →✓agreement

Ja	splʲu.
I.NOM	sleep.PRES.**1SG**
‘I am sleeping.’	

S →✓agreement

Ti	vʲidʲiʃ	mʲenʲa.
you.NOM	see.PRES.**2SG**	**I.ACC**
‘You see me.’		

P → *agreement

Ergative-absolutive: agreement only with S/P

Hindi (Indo-European)

Raam	baazaar	gayaa.
Ram(**M**)	market	went.**M.SG**
‘Ram went to the market.’		

S →✓agreement

Raam-ne	roṭii	k^{h}aayii	t^{h}ii.
Ram(**M**)-ERG	bread(**F**)	eaten.**F**	was.**F**
‘Ram had eaten the bread.’			

P →✓agreement

A → *agreement

Mahajan, Anoop. 1990. The A/A-bar distinction and movement theory. MIT dissertation.

Form and position of agreement depends on syntactic role

ACTIVITY

Handout with data: https://bit.ly/3ylzZR0

Identify the alignment for each dataset.

Group 1 → Language 1

Group 2 → Language 2

Group 3 → Language 3

(slide left intentionally blank)

Language 1: Q'anjob'al (Mayan)

	aspect-ABS	ERG-verb
(1)	Max-**ach**	**y**-il-a'.
	ASPECT-**2ABS**	**3ERG**-see-TRANSITIVE
	'She saw you.'	
(2)	Max-**ach**	way-i.
	ASPECT-**2ABS**	sleep-INTRANSITIVE
	'You slept.'	
(3)	Max-**in**	**h**-el-a'.
	ASPECT-**1ABS**	**2ERG**-see-TRANSITIVE
	'You saw me.'	

ergative-absolutive

Coon, Jessica, Mateo Mateo Pedro, and Omer Preminger. 2014. The role of case in A-bar extraction asymmetries: Evidence from Mayan. Linguistic Variation 14(2): 179–242.

Language 2: Tawala (Austronesian)

NOM-verb-**ACC**

nominative-accusative

(1)	Tam	**u**-himili-**u**	po	**a**-nae.
	you(SG)	**2SG**-send-**1SG**	and	**1SG**-go
	‘You sent me and I went.’			

(2)	**a**-gale-**ya**	
	1SG-see-**3SG**	
	‘I saw him.’	

(3)	Niha	**i**-gale-**ya**
	salt	**3SG**-draw-**3SG**
	‘She drew the salt water.’	

(4)	Wam	**i**-gota
	boat	**3SG**-arrive
	‘The boat arrived.’	

Ezard, Bryan. 1997. A Grammar of Tawala, an Austronesian Language of the Milne Bay Area, Papua New Guinea. Canberra: Australian National University.

Language 3: West Circassian

ABS-direction-**ERG**-verb

ergative-absolutive

(1) **wə**-qe-**s**-ɕaʁ

2SG.ABS-DIR-**1SG.ERG**-brought

‘I brought you’

(2) **sə**-qe-**p**-ɕaʁ

1SG.ABS-DIR-**2SG.ERG**-brought

‘You brought me’

(3) **wə**-qe-k’^{w}aʁ

2SG.ABS-DIR-went

‘You came here’

(4) **sə**-qe-k’^{w}aʁ

1SG.ABS-DIR-went

‘I came here’

Alignment in word order

E.g. English: nominative-accusative word order

S/A	verb	**P**
The dog	saw	**the cat.**
The dog	slept.	
	*Slept	**the dog**.

Different alignment systems in one language

- It is common for languages to have different argument alignment in different parts of the grammar.
- ***Siewierska 2013:***

  ~55% of languages have **nominative-accusative** verbal agreement

  ~5% have **ergative-absolutive** verbal agreement
- ***Comrie 2013:***

  ~27% of languages have **nominative-accusative** case marking on full noun phrases

  ~17% have **ergative-absolutive** case marking

https://wals.info/chapter/100 https://wals.info/chapter/98

ERG-ABS case and NOM-ACC agreement

Enga (Trans-New Guinea)

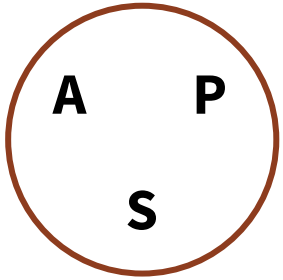
Namba-**mé**	énda	dóko	mená	dóko	maíy-ó.
I-**ERG**	woman	the.**ABS**	pig	the.**ABS**	gave-**1SG.SUBJ**
‘I gave the pig to the woman.’					

Nambá	pe-**ó**.
I.**ABS**	went-**1SG.SUBJ**
‘I gave the pig to the woman.’	

Agreement: only with S/A
Case: -me on A
-Ø on S/P

Other alignment systems

Neutral: no distinctions



- common for subparts of grammar
  e.g. case or agreement
- but there is no language that is ***fully*** neutral

Tripartite: each syntactic role is marked differently