Philippine subjects in a monostratal framework

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The well known problem of subjecthood in Philippine-type Western Austronesian languages is the source of Schachter's proposal to factor the traditional grammatical function subject into two more basic grammatical functions. This paper is an attempt to implement Schachter's proposal within the framework of LFG. It is shown that this results in an explanatory account of the subject properties of the two constituents. Furthermore, the LFG analysis proposed is superior to related structurally based ideas.

Western Austronesian "Philippine-type languages have long been known to pose a problem for the notion of subjecthood. Schachter argues that the familiar notion of subject is an amalgam of two distinct functions. A similar suggestion has been made on the basis of ergative languages (e.g. Dixon). One function, which Schachter calls topic and Dixon calls pivot, is (roughly) a discourse function. The other, which Schachter calls actor and Dixon subject, is linked to semantics and argument structure. In nominative-accusative languages, the same nominal has both functions.

The usual response by theoreticians working in relational frameworks has been to reject the Schachter/Dixon claim in favor of a multistratal concept of subjecthood. For example, Bell, working in Relational Grammar, treats the actor as "initial 1 and the topic/pivot as "final 1, and Manning, working in Lexical-Functional Grammar, analyzes the actor as a (functional)-structure SUBJ and the topic/pivot as an (functional)-structure SUBJ. (Another approach, taken by Kroeger, is to identify the topic/pivot with the subject function and to deny the subjecthood of the actor.)

This paper is an exploration of the alternative: the hypothesis that researchers like Schachter and Dixon are essentially correct.¹ The theoretical framework assumed is

¹ I would like to thank Joan Bresnan for comments on much of the material in this paper. All the usual disclaimers apply.

¹ Both Schachter and Dixon make additional claims, more inimical to the LFG conception of syntax, which I do not address here and do not subscribe to Schachter, at least by implication, questions the universality of grammatical functions in general. It seems to me that that step is not justified by the facts of Philippine-type languages and ergative languages. Dixon claims that his subject and pivot are defined in terms of the more primitive functions S, A and O. Here again, I do not believe that a valid case has been made.
Lexical-Functional Grammar (LFG), a monostratal theory in which grammatical functions are represented directly instead of through constituent structure.

1. Predictions

Our descriptions of the grammatical functions and PIV provide a basis for us to predict which subject function will be implicated in various constructions.

2. Discourse prominence

In some languages, it has been shown that the PIV has special discourse prominence, as discussed by Foley & Van Valin and Manning. This prominence is difficult to pin down, but as Manning shows for Inuit it relates somehow to definiteness, specificity, and/or wide scope. For Tagalog, it has generally been identified as definiteness. Since PIV is a d-function, it is to be expected that being PIV would have discourse related consequences.

We also suggest, with a little trepidation, that the ability to launch floating quantifiers may be a discourse related property. In the Philippine languages, this is a property that is unique to the PIV. However, there are other languages where the ability to float quantifiers seems to be subject to the relational hierarchy of a-functions.

3 Final comments

It has been claimed (e.g. by Marantz) that theories of syntax in which grammatical functions are not defined in terms of structural configurations are inherently less explanatory than GB-style theories. In fact, it is often the opposite that is the case. Hiding grammatical functions behind an array of structural constraints often obscures their nature as functions.

In this study, we have attempted to motivate the properties normally attributed to subjects in terms of two more basic functions. We have shown that hypothesizing the functions and PIV, and treating them as functions, can explain the properties they exhibit, particularly the array of properties in Philippine-type languages. The resulting system is more explanatory than related c-structural approaches, in which the surface system is a coincidence instead of the direct result of the need for interclausal continuity. It is also superior to a bisstratal GF-based approach, in which the function name subj is arbitrarily used to refer to distinct functions at the different strata.
References


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