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## Remarks on Grammatical Categories in Typology

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### 1. Introduction

In order to give a natural explanation for language universals and variations, we need to consider the following levels and grasp various linguistic phenomena as an interaction of these levels.<sup>1</sup>

- I. level of the grammatical or semantic-syntactic structure:  
S, A (subject), O (object), oblique, syntactic pivot,  
semantic cases, grammaticalized basic word order (e.g.  
AVO, Verb-final), etc.
- II. level of the functional structure:  
new/old information, topic, focus, etc.
- III. level of cognition:  
viewpoint, attention flow, processing difficulty, etc.

Before we start employing these notions in typological explanation, however, we have to consider what kind of definition we should take for the purpose of dealing with various phenomena cross-linguistically in typology or studies of language universals and variations. In this paper, we will see how the grammatical categories should be defined for this purpose.

### 2. Definition of S, A, O, and Subject in Previous Works on Typology

It has become fairly popular in typological literature to use the symbols S (mnemonic for 'subject'), A (mnemonic for 'agent'), and P (mnemonic for 'patient') or O (mnemonic for 'object').<sup>2</sup> The labels S, A, P were employed by Comrie (1978), and S, A, O by Dixon (1979).<sup>3</sup> Yet, these symbols have not been used so consistently as is generally assumed. Although it is rarely noted in previous works on typology, these symbols are actually defined at least in the following three different ways.

Let us start with the definition given in Comrie (1978). In this article, he defines S as "the single argument of an intransitive verb," A as "that argument of a transitive verb which would be its subject in a nonergative language like English," and O (P in his paper) as "the argument that would be the direct object" (330-31). Comrie (1978, 343) further gives a definition of subject on the basis of syntactic phenomena: if a language syntactically treats S and A alike and differently from O, then S and A are grouped together as subject; if a language syntactically treats S and O alike and differently from A, then S and O are grouped together as subject.

Comrie (1981) gives another definition of the symbols without mentioning the difference from his earlier definition given above. Although S is defined in the same way as above: "the single argument of an intransitive predicate" (104), A and O are defined with respect to the prototypical transitive situation:

In the prototypical transitive situation, the participants are an agent and a patient, and this remains constant irrespective of the morphological or syntactic behaviour of the sentence in any individual language. We may therefore, starting originally with transitive predicate describing actions, label the agent as A, and the patient as P

[O in my paper], so that in the sentence I hit you, or its translation into Chukchi, irrespective of the case marking of the various noun phrases I will be A and you will be P [O]. (105)

He continues the discussion noting "the advantage of having the arbitrary labels A and P [O]" as follows:

[W]e can continue to use the arbitrary symbols even when we pass beyond prototypical transitive situations (i.e. actions) to other constructions in the language that have similar morphology and syntax. In English, for instance, the transitive verb see behaves morphologically and syntactically just like the action transitive verb hit, so that although in I saw you the pronoun I is not, in terms of semantic role, an agent, we can still symbolize it as A. A and P [O] are thus syntactic terms, whose prototypes are defined in semantic terms. (105)

We can find a definition similar to the one just given in Andrews (1985, 68, 98).

In regard to subject, Comrie (1981, 101) states the following definition in terms of prototype: "[T]he prototype of subject represents the intersection of agent and topic, i.e. the clearest instances of subjects, cross-linguistically, are agents which are also topics."

Another way of defining the categories S, A, O, and subject is found in Dixon (1979). He defines them as follows:

The basic thesis of this paper, developed in §5, is that A (roughly: underlying transitive subject), O (underlying transitive object), and S (underlying intransitive subject) are universal syntactic-semantic primitives. 'Subject' as a universal

category, which can be valid only at the level of deep structure, involves a grouping of A and S.<sup>4</sup> (60)

In the §5 of his work, a more specific definition of S, A, and O as universal syntactic-semantic functions is given: "the only obligatory NP in an intransitive clause, for S; the NP in a transitive clause which can be agent, for A; and the other obligatory NP in a transitive clause, for O" (108).<sup>5</sup> Then, he groups S and A as a further universal category subject saying that "these are the NPs which refer to participants that can be the initiating/controlling agents" (108).

### 3. Toward the Most Appropriate Definition of Grammatical Categories in Typology

#### 3.1 Consideration of S, A, and O

Although these labels S, A, and O have been generally used by a number of typologists, the trouble is that many of them have been using these labels as if some generally accepted definition had been already established. If we aim to have systematic and natural explanation of typology, however, we need to discern the differences among the definitions given above, and decide what kind of definition we should take.

As we can see from the above, the symbol S is defined practically in the same way among the works that have given its explicit definition. Thus, there is little or no problem in regard to the use of S. In contrast, there is some variation in the definition of the other symbols A and O.

For instance, although Comrie himself does not seem to notice the difference that results from the two kinds of definitions of A and O above,<sup>6</sup> we will be able to see the following difference: the definition in Comrie (1978) is given

with reference to subjects and direct objects of transitive constructions in a particular language like English,<sup>7</sup> whereas the one in Comrie (1981) is given with reference to the prototypical transitive construction in each language. According to the former definition, what is regarded as a transitive subject and what is regarded as a transitive direct object in a particular language like English will be universally called A and O respectively without regard to the morpho-syntactic variation among individual languages. By contrast, according to the latter, what counts as A or O will be different from language to language, because the scope of the constructions "that have similar morphology and syntax" to the prototypical transitive constructions varies from language to language as is demonstrated by Tsunoda (1981). As for Dixon, he defines S, A, and O in the deep structure as universal primitives. Accordingly, what is regarded as S, A, or O is constant across languages. In this respect, his definition comes close to the one in Comrie (1978). Thus, whichever noun phrase count as A or O will be constant across languages if we follow the definitions given in Dixon (1979) or Comrie (1978). Good as they might appear, they have disadvantages.

The problem with Dixon's definition is his use of A and O on the level of deep structure. He defines them with reference to universal deep semantic structure without regard to a particular language. This is what makes his definition differ from the one in Comrie (1978). As the deep structure that Dixon assumes means "underlying semantic structures, and their universal properties" (1979, 65), there is some danger that the categorization as A and O on this level might become considerably vacuous. On this kind of abstract semantic deep level, which he claims to be universal, some sort of more direct semantic nomenclature (e.g. semantic cases such as those set up in case grammar) seems to be in order.

On the other hand, the definition in Comrie (1978) is not

so abstract as the one given by Dixon in that he defines A and O with reference to subjects and direct objects of transitive constructions in a particular language like English. As is pointed out in note 7, we will have to choose a particular actual language as a basis of definition if we are to follow his definition. Thus, the first problem that arises here is which language we should take. English, which Comrie (1978) cites as an example, might be a good candidate because it is one of the rare languages that express the two arguments of almost all types of two-place predicates in a single consistent manner. Yet, even if we choose English as a basis of the definition, it seems to be inconvenient and unnatural in typological work that we have to always consult a particular actual language like English for the use of the categories A and O in other languages.

In contrast to those definitions given in Comrie (1978) and Dixon (1979), the one in Comrie (1981) is free from the disadvantages mentioned above. We can more clearly identify these categories A and O in each language with reference to those of the prototypical transitive constructions in the language. Therefore, with regard to A, O, and S, I will take the definition in Comrie (1981).<sup>8</sup>

Note that the categories A, O, and S are defined partly syntactically and partly semantically. It follows from this that I have incorporated some aspects of semantics into these categories. This is why I have referred to the level that includes these categories as "the level of the grammatical or semantic-syntactic structure." Of course, in some cases, we need to make direct reference to more purely semantic cases like those in case grammar as well. Therefore, they are also included in this level. Only if the typological phenomena that are to be explained necessitate the more specific reference to those semantic cases, may we rely on them.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2 Consideration of Subject

Given the definition of S, A, and O like the above, the next problem is how we should define the category subject. As is clear from the above citations from Comrie (1978), Comrie (1981), and Dixon (1979), each defines the subject differently.

First, the definition of subject given by Comrie (1978) is essentially based on syntactic pivot, which is introduced by Dixon (1979) and has been generally used in typology to refer to a particular NP type which is privileged in controlling many of the syntactic processes (e.g. coordinate deletion, control of the subordinate gap, relativization, etc.) in the language. Thus, it follows from the definition in Comrie (1978) that subject is defined as a purely syntactic category, and the semantic phase of subject is completely disregarded. In addition, there are some languages (e.g. Yidiny, Eskimo, Chukchee [Chukchi], Tongan) that have S/A pivot with respect to some syntactic processes and S/O pivot with respect to others (Dixon 1979, 129). Therefore, I will not identify the syntactic pivot with the subject in the present three-level framework; rather, I will directly refer to the syntactic pivot as such with respect to individual languages or to individual syntactic processes when it is necessary.

According to the definition of subject in Dixon (1979), on the other hand, subject is the grouping of A and S in the deep structure. Yet, as the S and the A in the deep structure are in danger of being vacuous categories as was pointed out above, so is the subject. Thus, we cannot accept his definition as it is. Given the definition of S and A that was adopted in the present paper, however, then S and A are valid categories that can be clearly identified on the basis of the prototypical transitive construction in each language, and we may group the S and the A as the category subject;<sup>10</sup> this is the definition of subject that I take in the present framework.

By contrast, the definition of subject by Comrie (1981) is given in terms of prototype. This might be the most appropriate device for discerning the characteristic differences among the alleged or possible subjects of various sorts. However, the validity of the definition of this sort depends on what kind of noun phrases the linguist regards as subjects at all. Furthermore, Comrie (1981) incorporates the topic into the definition of the prototypical subject; if we put this with respect to my three-level framework mentioned above, he is setting up the subject as a category which cuts across the grammatical and the functional level. This kind of further grouping of the categories across the levels might be theoretically possible. In the present framework, however, I will not make direct reference to such a superordinate notion so far as we can go without establishing it in typological explanations.<sup>11</sup> Thus, I would define subject on the level of the grammatical structure with reference to S and A, which can be clearly identified on the basis of the prototypical transitive construction in each language, rather than say, for instance, that this NP is a seventy percent subject or that NP is a thirty percent subject. In fact, subjects defined in this way seem to be the most compatible with those that we have traditionally or conventionally understood as such.

#### 4. Summary

We start with the definition of A, S, and O in accordance with Comrie (1981). Given this definition of A, S, and O, A and S are grouped together as subject, and O may be regarded as (direct) object. Then, the arguments that are neither A, S, nor O will be called obliques. As regards indirect object, it may be considered to hold an intermediate position between direct object and oblique; hence we may make reference to it



provided that the language in question has the rationale for the establishment of indirect object as an independent category.<sup>12</sup> In the present framework, we may refer to the other categories on the grammatical level, such as syntactic pivot and semantic cases, only if necessary.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> How we can reach a natural cross-linguistic explanation with reference to this three-level framework is demonstrated in Yamamoto (1986; 1987; to appear).

<sup>2</sup> According to Mallinson and Blake (1981, 40), this sort of system originated with Dixon (The Dyirbal language of North Queensland [Cambridge: University Press, 1972]).

<sup>3</sup> As regards the symbol P or O, I will consistently use O in this paper. As will be discussed, however, this does not mean that the use of O here follows Dixon's definition.

<sup>4</sup> The level of deep structure is one of three grammatical levels set up by Dixon: "Deep structure refers to underlying semantic structure, and their universal properties"; the operation of singular transformations (passive, antipassive, etc.) on this structure yields shallow structure; finally generalized transformations, which derive coordinate and subordinate constructions, may operate on the shallow structure to yield surface structure (1979, 65). Thus, it is evident that Dixon's three levels differ radically from mine.

<sup>5</sup> A similar definition is found in Dixon (1980, 438).

<sup>6</sup> Thus, it seems that each linguist referred to here is not necessarily using these labels strictly in such a way as he himself has defined them, all through his works.

<sup>7</sup> In fact, Comrie (1978) uses rather a vague expression: "a nonergative language like English." However, it is clear that in order to put this definition by Comrie (1978) into

practice we have to choose one particular actual language as a basis of definition of A and O; for which noun phrase is expressed as a transitive subject or as a transitive direct object varies considerably from language to language.

<sup>8</sup> Although in regard to A, S, and O I have taken the definition of Comrie (1981) in preference to that of Comrie (1978), it does not follow that we are not allowed to say, for instance, that the English A is expressed as dative in language X with respect to such and such a verb.

<sup>9</sup> The argument in this paragraph does not mean that semantics is entirely incorporated in the grammatical level. There are meanings derived from the grammatical level, from the functional level, and also from the cognitive level; all of them together constitute semantics. As is demonstrated in Yamamoto (1987), each of the three levels, for instance, can contribute to the meanings of passives.

<sup>10</sup> Although many languages of the world, whether they are morphologically accusative or ergative, have basically S/A pivot syntax, there are a few languages, such as Dyirbal, that have overwhelmingly S/O pivot syntax. Yet, as the syntactic pivot has also been posited as a logically independent category in the present framework, we may independently group S and A together as the subject even in those languages.

<sup>11</sup> It goes without saying that this does not mean that subject cannot be simultaneously topic in some cases. Because the notions on the level of the functional structure are overlaid on the basic grammatical structure, such an overlap is naturally possible. What I mean here is that I will not incorporate topic properties into the definition of subject, and that I will set up the category subject as a category definable with reference to S and A on the grammatical level. Only if it is necessary, may we make a closer analysis of the internal properties of the subject in question.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Comrie argues that there seems to be no internal evidence in English for the establishment of a

distinct grammatical relation of indirect object (1981, 60-61).

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## 言語類型論における文法範ちゅうに関する考察

山本秀樹

本稿では、言語類型論ないしは言語間の普遍性と多様性を扱う研究において種々の言語事象を文法的レベル、機能的レベル、認知的レベルの相互作用としてとらえていく場合に、文法的レベルに属する文法範ちゅうをどのように定義づけるのが望ましいかを考察する。特にS、A、Oは近年の言語類型論において頻繁に使われるようになってきた範ちゅうだが、これまで一般に考えられているほど統一的な定義づけはなされてきておらず、いくつかの異なった理解の下に使われてきた。そこで、本稿では言語類型論におけるこれらの範ちゅうに対する従来の定義を比較し、それぞれの利点、欠点を考察した上で、Sを自動詞の単一項、AとOをそれぞれ原型的他動詞構文(prototypical transitive constructions)における行為者(agent)と被行為者(patient)とし、それぞれの言語において形態的、統語的に同様な項に拡大していく、半ば形態・統語的及び半ば意味的範ちゅうとする方法が最も望ましいことを論じる。さらに、S、A、Oをこのように定義した上で、主語(subject)をSとAの集合と定義し、目的語をOとしていくことが、多言語間にわたって言語事象における文法的レベルの作用を扱う際に妥当な方法であることを論じる。