Universal vs. language-specific influences on agent prominence and differential agent marking: a view from Down Under

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Universal vs. language-specific influences on agent prominence and differential agent marking: a view from Down Under

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OUTLINE

- Differential argument marking and the notion of Prominence
- A quantitative discourse study on “fluid” agent marking in Jaminjung/Ngaliwurru (Australia)
- Implications for disentangling universal and language-specific factors in differential argument marking
Prominence ...

- inherent

B02 - Split-Ergativität in Tima
Gerrit Dimmendaal, Birgit Hellwig,
Tatjana Schnellinger, Gertrud Schneider-Blum

Prominence ...

- inherent
- established

B02 - Split-Ergativität in Tima
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Linguistic Prominence ...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>inherent</th>
<th>established</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;How we identify the antecedent of an ambiguous pronoun has been a topic of interest in discourse anaphora studies. Crudely speaking, the most prominent entity is selected as the antecedent, but what determines the ranking of an entity as prominent is still an open question.&quot; (Özge et al. 2018, ICPL2)</td>
<td>&quot;In many languages speakers employ prosody to highlight new or unpredictable information, making it more prominent.&quot; (Röhr et al. 2018, ICPL2)</td>
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Linguistic Prominence ...

<table>
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| - hearer salience – known and easily retrievable for the hearer  
- “backward-looking”  
- formally unmarked  
- For referential phrases: preferred controller of coreference relationships | - speaker salience – new, important, not predictable, or something the speaker wants to put special emphasis on (Chiarcos 2011: 107-8)  
- “forward-looking” (Centering Theory, Grosz et al. 1995)  
- formally marked |
Prominence in differential argument marking

established

- Contrast between formally (case-)marked and formally unmarked argument
- Overt marking signals a mismatch between the case role and other properties of the referent or the construction (“unexpected role”)

Factors e.g.
- person
- animacy
- definiteness
- verb semantics

Spanish

Pepe ve la película. [inanimate object]
Pepe ve a la actriz. [human object]

‘Pepe sees the film / the actress.’
(García García 2018: 211)

“Discourse Prominence” in “fluid” differential argument marking

- In many languages, differential argument marking appears to depend not (only) on inherent characteristics of the referential phrase or the predicate, but (also) on the status of the referential phrase in discourse.

Factors e.g.
- Local sentence topic / focal constituent
- Discourse activation / persistence

Romanian

Petru a vizitat un prieten. [less likely to become topic]
Petru l-a vizitat pe un prieten. [more likely to become topic]

‘Petru visited a friend.’
(Chiriacescu & von Heusinger 2010: 299)
“Discourse Prominence” in “fluid” differential argument marking

Issues addressed in current research:

- What is the evidence for the role of discourse prominence in differential argument marking?
- Which aspects of discourse prominence can play a role for what type of differential argument marking?
  - Verb agreement vs. case marking
  - Differential agent vs. object marking
- How do they interact with other, potentially competing factors?

Categorical splits conditioned by information structure

... appear to be rare

Object marking

  - Dislocated topics when O: marked
  - non-topical Os: unmarked (except pronouns and a few other classes)

Agent marking

- Categorical split in Motuna (Onishi 1994: 46,49) and possibly in Tima (Schneider-Blum 2018)
  - topical As (1st position, no ergative-marking)
  - non-topical As (ergative-marked)
Information structure constructions as the diachronic source of case markers

Object marking
- Dislocated topic construction >> object marking
  - Evidence from diachronic development of DOM in Romance languages with some cross-linguistic evidence (Iemmolo 2010: 259-260)

Agent marking
- Demonstrative / pronoun (cleft construction) >> agent marking
  - Evidence from formal overlap in a number of Australian languages, with some cross-linguistic evidence (McGregor 2008; 2017: 455)
- Focus marker >> agent marking
  - Evidence from formal overlap between ergative markers and discourse/focus markers in some languages (Pensalfini 1999 on Jingulu, Gaby 2008, 2010 on Kuuk Thayorre, Chelliah 2009 on Meithei)

Information structure / status as one of multiple factors responsible for differential argument marking

e.g. for Fluid Agent marking (“optional ergativity”):
- Focus / “new information” (e.g. Tournadre 1991, 1995; Onishi 1994: 46-49; Denwood 1999: 197; Malchukov 2008; Chelliah 2009; Hyslop 2010; Suter 2010; Meakins 2011; Verstraete 2010; Fauconnier and Verstraete 2014)
- Contrast (e.g. Tournadre 1991; Chelliah 2009; Jacques 2010)
- Topic/actor switch (e.g. Lidz 2011; Bond et al. 2013)
- Unexpectedness of agent (e.g. McGregor 1992, 1998; Gaby 2008)
- Emphasis / Prominence (cross-cutting topic and focus) (e.g. LaPolla and Huang 2008: 76–88, Tournadre 1991, 1995; Meakins 2009: 78, 2011: 228–236; Meakins and O'Shannessy 2010)
Information structure / status as one of multiple factors responsible for differential argument marking

- The overall prediction that can be extracted from previous studies is that overt marking of A is more likely for focal than for topical As

- BUT: most studies lack quantitative detail and/or clear definitions of information structure categories such as “focus” or “prominence”

A quantitative discourse study: Agent marking in Jaminjung/Ngaliwurru

Joint work with Felicity Meakins, University of Queensland
Jaminjung / Ngaliwurru

- Two named varieties; closely related
- Mirndi family (western branch) (Chadwick 1997; Green & Nordlinger 2004; Harvey 2008)
- Area around Timber Creek, Northern Territory, Australia
- Speakers mostly elderly
- Spoken corpora 1994-2016
  
  
  http://dobes.mpi.nl/research/
Agent marking in Jaminjung/Ngali

- Obligatory cross-referencing on verbs for S (intr) or A>P (tr)
- Frequent omission of NP arguments
- Three possibilities for case-marking of macro-agents
  - **Zero** (relatively infrequent)
  - **Ergative / Instrumental** =ni ~ =di (default)
  - **Ablative** =ngunyi (infrequent)
    - can always be replaced with ergative

→ overt case-marking

- No passive or antipassive
- No case marking on intransitive subjects
- No syntactic ergativity (Schultze-Berndt 2017)

Examples of variable agent marking

**pigipigi=biyang ngiyinthu,**
pig=then this
mung ganuny-ngayi-m buliki:, nindu
look.at 3SG>3DU-see-PRS cow horse

‘this pig here then, it looks at the two, the cow and horse’
(CP, ES96_A13_03.153-4)

mung ganuny-ngayi-m **pigipigi-ni**
look.at 3SG>3DU-see-PRS pig-ERG

‘the pig is looking at the two’ (CP, ES96_A13_03.157)
Data

- 116 texts (approximately 12,500 intonation units)
  - mythological and personal narratives, procedural texts, re-tellings of picture books and other descriptions of visual stimuli, conversations
  - representing 15 (mostly female) speakers
- 531 (clear cases of) clauses with overt As, extracted manually

Coding

All clauses with overt As coded for

- Information structure category of A
- Person of A
- TAM
- Verb class / effectiveness of event
- Constituent order
- Definiteness (clearly definite vs. unspecified)
- Nominal subclass: pronoun, demonstrative, noun
- “Local” animacy: human / animate / inanimate
- “Global” animacy/person: Direct, equipollent and inverse patterns
Information structure categories

**Sentence topic** (NB: no dislocation construction)
- Left edge topic
- Right edge topic

**Focus**
- Narrow / argument focus [focused constituent = A]
  - Prosodically integrated AF (initial or postverbal)
  - Afterthought
- Broad focus (BF)
- Thetic clauses

**Background** (rare for Agent NPs)

Definitions: Focus and Background

- **Focus**: expression that fills a variable in an open proposition
  - answers an implicit question
  - evokes potential alternatives

  Broad focus:
  *What happened to the frog?* – *[A dog found it].*

  Narrow focus:
  *Who found the frog?* – *[The dog] found it.*

- **Background**: non-focused rhematic (i.e. non-topical) part of the clause (if any) (e.g Krifka 1992)
Definition: (Sentence) topic

- The topic “limits the applicability of the main predication to a certain restricted domain” ... “sets a spatial, temporal, or individual framework within which the main predication holds” (Chafe 1976: 50)

“Topic selection is a speech act itself, an initiating speech act that requires a subsequent speech act like an assertion, question, command, or curse about the entity that was selected.” (Krifka 2001: 25)

- By definition, initial position (or final, for right-edge topics) (Li & Thompson 1976: 465)
- Informational separation (in terms of prosodic phrasing) (Jacobs 2001: 645)

Initial topical vs. focal Agent

In Jam/Ngali:

- Focal constituents have a salient high-low (falling) contour associated with the left edge (Simard 2010, 2014, 2015)
- Left-edge topics precede this focal contour

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{bulany}= & n_{i} & \text{gani-wirri=m} & \text{yirri}= & \text{biya munuwi} & \text{yirr-arra=m} \\
\text{snake=ERG} & & 3SG>3SG\text{-bite-PRS} & & 1PL=\text{then} & \text{native.bee} & 1PL>3SG\text{-put-PRS} \\
\text{‘a snake bites him’} & & \text{‘we call them munuwi (native bee)’} & & & & \\
\text{(IP; ES08_A16_02.036)} & & \text{(IP, ES97_A03_01.188)} & & & &
\end{align*}
\]
Statistical method

- Generalised linear mixed model (GLMM) with logistic link function (glmr; glm2 package in R)
- Fixed effects:
  - Information structure (of A): Topic / Non-topic
  - Person (of A): 1st, 2nd / 3rd
  - Effectiveness of event: Y/N
  - Past Perfective: Y/N
- Random effect: Speaker (15)

Information structure

- Marking is more likely to be absent on topical As (significant, $p>0.001$)
- Note that the majority of (overt) As are rhematic (mostly focal)
Marking is more likely to be absent with 1st/2nd than with 3rd person Agents (significant, p>0.001)

Marking is more likely to be absent for non-effective verbs (possessive ‘have’; verb introducing direct speech) (significant, p>0.001)
TAM: Past perfective vs. others

Marking is somewhat more likely to be absent in non-past perfective clauses (not significant)

Summary of patterns in Jam/Ngali

Likelihood of As to be unmarked:

Other TAM > Past perfective clause – not significant
(but categorically unmarked As in imperfective “pseudo-progressives” were excluded from consideration)

1st/2nd > 3rd person – significant

Topic > Non-topic (rhematic) – significant

Non-affected > affected object – significant

$R^2 c = 0.51$ (good for human speech data...)
Summary of patterns in Jam/Ngali

- Our findings provide the first quantitative evidence for the influence of (independently defined) information structure categories on case marking in an “optional” ergative language

- Cf. for differential object marking Iemmolo (2010)

Discussion and implications: Disentangling universal and language-specific factors in Differential Argument marking
Disentangling universal and language-specific factors in Differential Argument marking

- Why so much diversity in alignment systems?
  - Competing motivations in terms of universal discourse preferences, grammaticalized to different degrees
    - **Explicitness** of marking of a given semantic role (“Faithfulness”, “Indexing”)
    - **Economy**: arguments in a predictable semantic role can be left unmarked
      - Predictability derived from frequency of the relevant association in discourse
  

Competing motivations

- **Explicitness** of marking of a given semantic role (“Faithfulness”, “Indexing”)
- **Economy**: arguments in a predictable semantic role can be left unmarked
  - Predictability derived from frequency of the relevant association in discourse

Plus:
- **Analogy** (Itkonen 2005; de Smet 2009) / “**System Pressure**” (Haspelmath 2014)
  - The tendency for grammatical coding to target entire classes of items
  - E.g. “mark all 1st arguments of transitive clauses with ergative case”
Competing motivations in Jaminjung/Ngaliwurru

Index
“Do not mark NP unless it is a good instantiation of the role encoded by the case marker”

Factor 3: Non-effective As are not good instantiations of the Jam/Ngali Effector case role (see Schultze-Berndt 2017)

Economy
“Do not mark NP if its role is predictable”

Factor 2: 1st/2nd p. pronouns are expected to be As

Factor 1: Referents encoded as sentence topics are expected to be As

(e.g. Hopper & Thompson 1980; Tsunoda 1981; Malchukov 2008, 2015)

Economy and the role of Information Structure

Frequent version of the argument:
- Agents are overwhelmingly discourse-given (e.g. Du Bois 1987, 2003; Everett 2009; Haig & Schnell 2016)
- New Agents are therefore the unexpected case and have to be marked (cf. McGregor 2008, Malchukov 2008: 214-5, Verstraete 2010: 1649)

However,
- Agents that are discourse topics are usually omitted
- In our dataset, the majority of overt Agents (66%) are not topics
- Rather, in order to explain the likelihood of zero-marking on sentence topics, we will have to assume that sentence topics are most frequently Agents.
The validity of the referential hierarchy

- The universal relevance of the referential (animacy/person) hierarchy has recently been called into question.

- However, Bickel et al. (2015) conflate the referential hierarchy and discourse status (as does the critical review of their data and conclusions by Schmidtke-Bode & Levshina 2018).
  - Theoretically and – as shown for Jaminjung – actually independent, and potentially competing with one another

- “Discourse status” in turn conflates a number of factors: “... higher vs. lower prominence in discourse, manifested variably as specific vs. nonspecific, definite vs. indefinite, topical vs. nontopical and similar” (Bickel et al. 2015: 17)

Referential hierarchy competing with information structure

- The independence of information structure and the referential hierarchy also suggests a way of accounting for apparent violations of the nominal hierarchy (Filimonova 2005; Bickel et al. 2015):

  E.g. Kalaw Lagaw Ya:
  - Singular pronouns take ergative marking
  - Nonsingular pronouns and proper names do not

    (Bani & Klokeid 1976; Comrie 1981; also discussed in Filimonova 2005: 100)
Referential hierarchy competing with information structure

- Such counterexamples to the referential hierarchy could plausibly be the diachronic result of conventionalisation – by analogy – of a “competing” pattern (cf. also Simpson 2012), e.g.
  - regular case-marking of focal A pronouns
  - Low overall frequency of free pronouns, with relatively high proportion of SG focal pronouns
    > By analogical extension, categorical case-marking on SG as opposed to all other pronouns.
- But actual diachronic evidence hard to come by for most languages

Language-specific factors constraining the applicability of universal motivations

- Language-specific affinities of particular verb classes with case patterns (e.g. Tsunoda 1981; von Heusinger 2008; von Heusinger & Kaiser 2011; García García 2018: 228-235)
- Alternative constructions vs. canonical transitive, e.g. for
  - Inanimate “Agents” (Fauconnier 2011)
  - Specific classes of predicate, e.g.
    - Emotions and physical responses (‘be hungry; ‘like‘; ‘fear‘)
    - Cognition
    - Predicative possession
  - Imperfectives (e.g. in Jaminjung; Schultze-Berndt 2012, 2017)
Language-specific factors constraining the applicability of universal motivations

Language-specific differences in the “Macro-Agent” category, e.g.
- Sentient being
- Volitional instigator of an action

... may in turn reflect the diachronic processes that brought about the relevant constructions (e.g. Creissels 2008, Cristofaro 2009, 2013, 2014)

Are discourse patterns universal?

- Language-specificity could conceivably also arise in terms of language- or culture-specific discourse patterns:
  - Cross-linguistic differences in frequency (e.g. of pronouns or sentence topics as Agents) would lead to different outcomes of the application of the Economy principle
- Assumptions about preferred discourse patterns need to be subjected to empirical scrutiny (cf. Everett 2009; Haig & Schnell 2006 for Preferred Argument Structure)
Information structure and DAM: methodological lessons

- Actual discourse studies of the association of information structure categories with particular grammatical roles are urgently needed.

  E.g. combination of GRAID annotation scheme (Haig & Schnell 2014) with referent tracking (Schiborr, Schnell & Thiele 2018) and basic information structure annotation (Schnell, Schultze-Berndt & Singer in prep.)

- Requires clarity of definition and terminology, e.g.
  - Sentence topic (speaker prominence) vs discourse topic (hearer prominence)
  - Discourse activation vs. persistence vs. accessibility
  - Focus vs. contrast
  - It may be best to add further specification to the notion of "prominence"

Thank you

- To all Jaminjung and Ngaliwurru contributors
- To Felicity Meakins, for joint work on the quantitative study
- To Candide Simard, for joint work on prosody and information structure in Jaminjung/Ngaliwurru
- To the Max Planck Society and the Volkswagen Foundation (DoBeS Programme Grants 82957 and 86101) for financial support
In deep gratitude to a great linguist and teacher

Hans-Jürgen Sasse
1943–2015

- On the typology of grammatical relations (1991):

Es scheint doch alles etwas komplizierter zu sein als man dachte (...).

[Es beginnt eine neue Periode der Beschäftigung mit der Typologie grammatischer Relationen], die durch die Einsicht gekennzeichnet ist, dass mehr Parameter als die bloße Kodierung von Partizipantenrelationen für die Typologie des einfachen Satzes eine Rolle spielen.

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