

On intensional vs. extensional grammatical categories

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It is usual to recognize a subject category in languages with voice alternations in which different lexical cases can occupy the subject role. Indeed, it is precisely the existence of voice alternations that seems to show us, in such languages, that the subject is a distinct category from the various lexical cases, such as agent, patient (alias goal), etc. That is, in such languages (English being a good example), we can be sure that the subject is a distinct category from, say, agent, because not all subjects are agents and not all agents are subjects, as shown in (1).

(1) The knife was wielded by a child.

On the other hand, in languages without clearly marked voice alternations, such as many of the languages of mainland Southeast Asia, it becomes unclear whether there really is a subject category. In such languages, it may seem that there can in principle be no distinction between the agent category and a putative category of subject. As a result, some authors have argued that languages like this have no subject category at all. This was apparently part of the reason that Lisu was claimed by Li and Thompson (1976) to be a purely "topic-prominent" language, i.e., one lacking subjects altogether (but having topics). Although, as shown by Manaster Ramer (1988) much of the difficulty lay in the fact that Li and Thompson misunderstood the description of Lisu syntax (which, among other things used the term 'topic' to refer to the subject), there is no question that the absence of a passive construction added to the confusion.

The problem of distinguishing subjects from other categories also arises, though for a different reason, in another

whole group of Southeast Asian languages, especially those of the Philippines but also other languages with similar grammatical systems. These languages do have a system that resembles voice, although it is more commonly called 'focus', but there is some question as to whether they have a subject. The focus system does identify a grammatical category which is in some ways similar to the subject, but which, ever since McKaughan (1958), has often been called topic. Specifically, much as voice alternations allow different case roles, such as agent, patient, etc., to move in and out of the subject slot, so focus allows these different case roles to move in and out of the topic slot. Nevertheless, there are good reasons for distinguishing the Philippine topic from a subject in a language like English, although it should be noted that the Philippine topic has even less in common with the like-name category of languages such as Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Lisu, and so on (see Manaster Ramer 1992b).

In Philippine languages, then, while the agent is clearly distinguished from the topic, it is possible to argue that there is no special subject category. As a result, the term 'subject' has sometimes been used to denote the agent in these languages, e.g., by McKaughan, or else has been abandoned altogether, as in more recent work. There are, of course, those who would claim that the so-called topic of the Philippine languages really is the same thing as the subject in a language like English. But such analyses seem to minimize the large number of facts which distinguish these two types of language and will not be considered here any further. Rather, what I will argue is something quite different.

First, linguistic theory has to distinguish the three categories of agent, subject, and topic. This must be so because languages like English distinguish agent and subject, whereas languages like Tagalog separate agent and topic. And the significant differences between English and Tagalog suffice to show that topic does not equal subject.

Second, if linguistic theory distinguishes some set of categories, then I would argue that grammars of individual languages may also make the same distinctions, **even if** it so

happens that these categories coincide in that language. Thus, if in some language all agents are subjects and all subjects are agents, we can and indeed have to distinguish the **categories** of subject and agent **in that language**.

In such cases, what we need to be able to do, as linguists, is to refer to a class of expressions in a language in two (or more) different ways, for example, as subjects and as agents. What I am appealing to here is the distinction, familiar from formal semantics (Frege 1879), between the extension and the intension of a description. A classic example is the fact that the morning star is the same as the evening star, yet the sentences in (2) are not synonymous.

(2) a. The morning star is the morning star.

b. The morning star is the evening star.

Although (2a) and (2b) are both true, they are far from interchangeable. For example, (2a) is a tautology, whereas (2b) is not. The reason is that the phrases 'morning star' and 'evening star' have the same **extension**, that is, they denote the same object, the planet Venus, but they have different **intensions**, that is, they denote in different ways (by reference, as it were, to different properties of that object). As a further consequence, there are contexts in which the truth values of sentences with these expressions need not be the same. Thus, in (3) and (4), the (a) sentences may well be true without the (b) sentences being true as well.

(3) a. John knows that the morning star is the morning star.

b. John knows that the morning star is the evening star.

(4) a. By definition, the morning star is the morning star.

b. By definition, the morning star is the evening star.

Returning to the issue of grammatical categories, what I am saying is that in describing a language in which all subjects are agents and all agents are subjects, we should say that the categories subject and agent have the same extension but that these terms still are intensionally distinct. Hence, in our grammatical descriptions of languages in which agents and subjects are coextensive, we will not consider as synonymous such metalinguistic sentences as those in (5a):

(5) a. Verbs agree with subjects.

b. Verbs agree with agents.

The basis for making these kinds of intensional distinctions would lie in an appeal to linguistic theory, which would identify the different grammatical categories by their properties. Thus, if we decide that control of verb agreement is a subject rather than an agent property, then sentence (5a) would be close to a truism, whereas (5b) would not.

I should perhaps add, in order to forestall any confusion on this point, that I am aware of the possible objection that in ergative systems, verbs might well agree with agents rather than with subjects. However, to claim this would be simply wrong: in a typical ergative system (like those of Hindi, Georgian, or Greenlandic), only **some** agents control properties such as agreement: agents of passives, for example, do not. Thus, the ergative is a special category related to both agent and to subject though distinct from both.

To make the discussion more concrete, let us turn to some statements we find in descriptions of Southeast Asian languages regarding subjects and agents. In these, the agent is often said to possess certain characteristics which in other languages are typical of subjects. Perhaps the best examples would involve those Philippine languages which have a fixed position in the clause for the agent, but not for the topic (Schachter 1976, 1977).

Since it is subjects, not agents, which usually have a reserved position in other languages, I would want to say that it