

## **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

is the **subject**, not the agent, which has the fixed position, even though it may be that subjects and agents are extensionally the same. In other words, I would want to say that the agents of these languages are also subjects.

A richer set of distinctions is made in Manaster Ramer (1992a), where I present a detailed comparison of Malagasy (an expatriate Southeast Asian language), Tagalog, and English data which argues that Tagalog distinguishes *topic vs. agent/subject*, Malagasy distinguishes *subject/topic vs. agent*, and in English there is no topic. These data clearly call for the kind of analysis advocated here.

To see this, let us begin by recalling the two kinds of grammatical features typical of Philippine topics and Philippine agents, listed in Figure 1. These come from Schachter (1976, 1977), with some emendations and additions proposed by Adams and Manaster Ramer (1988) and Manaster Ramer (1992a) (of, course, Schachter calls agents actors, but that is a purely terminological point).

**Figure 1.**

Topic Properties	Agent Properties
a. Definite (except with an indefinite quantifier)	a. May have a fixed position
b. The only NP that can relativize	b. Addressee of imperatives
c. The only NP that can launch floating quantifiers	c. Antecedes reflexives
d. Does not appear in existential sentences	d. May not reflexivize
e. A definite patient always or typically becomes topic	e. Undergoes equi

To be sure, Schachter suggested that it is the subject of languages like English which conflates the Philippine topic and

the Philippine agent. However, as was shown in Manaster Ramer (1992a), it is Malagasy where this is true, whereas languages like English seem to have no single NP with the properties identified by Schachter as typical of Philippine topics.

Instead, English subjects have much the same grammatical properties as Tagalog agents, and Malagasy subjects have all the properties of Tagalog topics as well as those of English subjects (=Tagalog agents). This is true even with respect to the properties discussed by Schachter, but becomes even more striking when we consider the more refined and elaborated lists of properties based on subsequent research.

I would now like to argue that this picture can best be described by distinguishing the three cross-linguistic categories of agent, subject, and topic. We can then say that in Tagalog agent and subject have the same extension. Similarly, in Malagasy it is the subject and the topic which share the same extension. Finally, in reference to English, we say that the topic category has a null extension.

On the basis of such studies as these, then, I believe that subject, topic, and agent are all distinct categories, although it is possible for some of them to coincide in a given language or to be absent from a particular language. In particular, I believe that subjects and agents are both found in all the languages so far discussed in the syntactic and typological literature, although they may possibly be conflated in some of these languages.

Before concluding, I should add that at least some of these languages may have constructions which, on closer inspection, do show behavior typical of voice alternations and which, therefore, allow an extensional distinction to be drawn between subjects and agents after all.

However, the intensional/extensional distinction is still useful. First, because we do not **always** find such extensional confirmation of our analyses. And second, because the examples which do allow us to distinguish subjects from agents (or other such easy-to-confuse pairs of categories) are often just exceptions that prove the rule. In particular, it seems to me that such examples are very easy to miss (or at least not to see the

true significance of) unless we have the intensional category distinctions firmly in mind before we start looking.

At any rate, the examples I have in mind are four cases where subjects may be distinguished from agents in Southeast Asian languages of the types I have been focusing on.

First, Seidenadel (1909) argued that in the Philippine language Bontoc Igorot, there exists a special construction (quite distinct from the usual focus alternations involving the topic) in which the agent lacks some of what I would characterize as subject properties (notably, the agent in this construction cannot be the addressee of an imperative, apparently because the meaning of the construction is that of a true passive).

Second, Sweetser (1980) describes some related properties of the cognate construction of Tagalog, namely, the construction involving verbs with the prefix *ma-*. Her principal observation is that in most constructions in Tagalog the agent is obligatory, but in this case it is freely omitted. While Sweetser takes this to mean that the *ma-* construction is "ergative" (a term which does not seem to fit the situation very well), the relevant point for our purposes is that there is apparently a crucial difference between the behavior of agents in this construction and in other Tagalog constructions.

(6a) Na- patay (ni Juan) ang tigre.

PAST-MA kill OBL Juan TOP tiger

"The tiger was/got killed (by Juan)."

(b) P-in- -atay ni Juan ang tigre.

k-GOALFOCUS-ill OBL Juan TOP tiger

"The tiger was killed by Juan/Juan killed the tiger."

While Sweetser is not specific about this, I believe the claim is not so much that the agent phrase in the (b) sentence CANNOT be omitted at all, but rather that it can only be omitted under some very narrow conditions, viz., when it is "understood from the context" (as the saying goes), whereas in the (a) sentence no agent need be "understood" at all.

The fact that, in general, agents are not freely omissible supports my conclusion that agents are in general also subjects. And the fact that agents can be freely omitted in the *ma*-construction in (6a) would tend to argue that in this case the agent is not the subject. In other words, we have an apparent crucial example of a construction that distinguishes agents and subjects. Moreover, the existence of this construction shows that the grammatical properties which Schachter attributed to agents *qua* agents may actually attach to agents *qua* subjects instead.

Thus, the idea would be that the Tagalog agent is normally also the subject, since it is, I would contend, a property of subjects not to be omissible, and that in the *ma*-construction in (6a) we are dealing with a rare instance of an agent which is not a subject.

Of course, we can only be more or less sure of this with respect to the property of omissibility (which Schachter does not even discuss). It must remain an open question for future research whether it is also true that the various other grammatical properties which Schachter attributes to the agent are really subject properties. If so, we would predict that they would not be found in the *ma*- construction.

The third example is a construction somewhat similar to the Tagalog *ma*- construction found in another Philippine language, Sama, which is described by Foley and Van Valin (1984: 138-139) as a passive on the basis of unpublished work of Walton (1983). Whether we accept this choice of terms or not, the existence of a special construction in which, contrary to the general situation in the language, agents are freely omissible, indicates that there is a difference between subjects (= agents in most constructions but not in the passive) and agents *per se*.

Curiously enough, in a paper on the syntax of Lisu (Manaster Ramer 1988), I showed that descriptions of this language assign to agents certain properties which we should associate with subjects instead, such as the requirement (in most constructions) that an agent may not be omitted unless it is understood from the context (much as in Tagalog). I then argued that this property is really a subject rather an agent



characteristic, and this is one of the reasons why Lisu should not be considered a language without subjects.

Curiouser still, Lisu also has a construction which may be an exception that proves this rule and which constitutes my fourth example. Much as in the three cases just considered, this construction also involves agents that can be omitted without an anaphoric reading (something which is not normally supposed to be possible).

Specifically, there appears to be a phenomenon in Lisu, which is somewhat analogous to voice and resembles the English constructions which in the days of transformational grammar were analyzed in terms of tough-movement. This construction provides putative evidence of a distinction between the category of agent, identified as an argument type of lexical verbs, and the category of subject.

- (7a) dza nya nyime dza mi-a  
 rice TOP today eat tasty-DEC  
 'Today the rice is tasty (to eat).'
- (b) dza nya nyime dza fwu-a  
 rice TOP today eat take-time-DEC  
 'Today the rice is taking a long time to eat.'
- (c) ana xwa nya ngwa dza mi-a . . .  
 dog meat TOP I eat tasty-DEC  
 'I find dog meat tasty to eat . . .'

Hope (1974), from whom I have taken these examples, points out that the (a) sentence is unproblematical in his system, since it only involves the deletion of the **object** of the verb meaning 'to eat'. However, the (b) and (c) sentences have no **agent** for that verb, either. Yet these are supposed to be the more typical utterances. Indeed, as noted by Hope, according to Roop (1970:50), examples with an expressed agent are not possible at all, which I take as an indication of their extreme rarity.

Hope suggests that null agents are otherwise allowed in Lisu only when a specific referent is intended to be identifiable from the context, whereas in these examples an unspecified, generic agent is involved. If the possibility of such a "dummy" agent is indeed restricted to this construction (or to some set of related constructions), then we would indeed be dealing with an analogue to English constructions such as (8), which likewise require some special rule to account for the absence of an agent of the verb 'to eat'.

(8) Today the rice is good to eat.

In both languages, then, we would assume that the agent of 'to eat' has some kind of non-subject status, which is what enables it to be omitted on a generic interpretation. Thus, we seem to obtain the argument that was wanted for a difference between subjects and agents in Lisu.

If these arguments (Seidenadel's about Bontoc Igorot, Sweetser's about Tagalog, Foley and Van Valin's about Sama, and mine about Lisu) are correct, that would mean, of course, that there is after all an extensional difference between subjects and agents in these languages. But this would not really detract from the importance of the intensional/extensional distinction for two reasons.

First, it is most unlikely that every intensional difference made in linguistic theory will find an extensional reflex in every language. Thus, there presumably will be languages in which subjects and agents are not distinguishable extensionally in **any** construction. It certainly seems clear that in Malagasy the categories subject and topic have exactly the same extension.

Second, the intensional differences are often easier to spot than the often marginal or subtle extensional ones. Indeed, I would say that we often would miss the latter if we were not attuned to the former. Thus, in my work on Lisu I had come up with the argument that the subject category is intensionally distinct from that of agent long before I identified the tough-movement construction which extensionally distinguishes agents from subjects.

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