

THE IMPERSONAL CONSTRUCTION IN MANIPURI (MEITHEI)

Chungkham Yashawanta Singh
Manipur University, Imphal

The grammar of a particular language can be regarded as simply a specification of values of parameters of Universal Grammar (Chomsky 1981). It is the general notion among linguists dealing with "language universals" that the subject-predicate relationship is one among the several parameters of language universals. In most languages "subject" generally occurs initially in a syntactic construction.¹ In other words, in most languages subject precedes the other major NPs within clauses. Secondly, the predicate, in general, is bound to the subject in terms of one or more grammatical categories, such as gender, number, person, case, or voice, with varying degrees of involvement of them.

Subjecthood is, according to Keenan (1987), related to a wide variety of other syntactic and semantic properties. The best understood of these are the roles of various grammatical relations in the structural descriptions of the major cyclic syntactic rules, such as Equi-NP Deletion, Raising, Reflexive, Conjunction Formation, etc. The subject is an independent instantiation of the action or property expressed by the predicate, and is syntactically indispensable. This is less true for non-subjects. Other than these properties, the subject is always (in general, not necessarily in every sentence) the possible controller:

- (a) of stipulated co-reference, either positive or negative,
- (b) of reflexive pronouns,
- (c) of co-referential deletions,
- (d) of pronominalizations,
- (e) of switch reference indicators, and
- (f) of verb agreement.

¹ This does not mean that there is no language in which subject occurs finally or medially. In Malagasy (Malayo-Polynesian, Madagascar), for example, the subject characteristically occurs clause finally, as in the following sentence:

(i)	mampianatra	angilisy	an-d	Rabe	aho
	cause-learn	English	to	(name)	I

'I am teaching Rabe English.' (Keenan 1987:107)

In pursuing the claim that subject is universal, i.e., obligatory for every system, one soon finds that many language types offer a real challenge to the hypothesis. Ergative languages pose one kind of problem, since their subject departs most blatantly from that semantic-syntactic convergence and since a good many are mixed: morphologically one thing but syntactically another (Anderson 1976, Dixon 1872:128-129). So-called topic-prominent languages like Lisu (Li and Thompson 1976) offer another difficulty, since subject is apparently all but effaced by the dominant presence of the topic. That is to say, there seems to be little or no need to refer to anything like subject in accounting for the structure of these systems (Schwartz 1976:521).

In countless languages the verb fails to agree with the NP, e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Malagasy, Thai, Vietnamese, Sinhalese, and Swedish, among many others. On the other hand, there are also languages in which the verb does agree with the subject NP, e.g., Sanskrit, Basque, Chinook, Arosi (Melanesian), Jacalteco (Mayan), Kapampangan (Philippines), etc. There are also a very few languages in which the verb agrees with objects but not with subjects, such as Avar (Caucasian), Mabuiag (Australian), and, very partially, Hindi.² Such object-verb agreement makes the subject insignificant and leads to the formation of "impersonal constructions".

In most Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages, the predicate in active-voice constructions is bound to the subject in terms of number, person, and gender. But in Manipuri (a TB language like Lisu) there is no agreement at all between subject and predicate in terms of person, number, or gender:

Person:

- | | | | |
|-----|------------------------------------|------------|----------|
| (1) | əy / nəŋ / məhak | Mary-bu | nunsi-y |
| | I / you/ (s)he | (name)-ACC | love-ASP |
| | 'I / You / He / She love(s) Mary.' | | |

What example (1) shows is that the verb **nunsi** remains as it is, irrespective of different persons in the subject: əy 'I', nəŋ 'you', or məhak 's/he.'

-
- | | | | | |
|------------------|----------|--------|----------|------------------------|
| ² (i) | larka-ne | roti | khayii | thii |
| | boy-ERG | bread | eat-PAST | COP-Past Perf/FEM OBJ |
| (ii) | larki-ne | kela | khaya | tha |
| | girl-ERG | banana | eat-PAST | COP-Past Perf/MASC OBJ |

In (i) the verb agrees with the feminine object *roti*; in (ii) it agrees with the masculine object *kela*. Mahajan (1990) argues that the "specificity" property of nominative objects derives as a result of structural case assignment by AGR that heads the V, and hence the object agreement. Bhatt's (1993) argument is that object agreement derives from specifier-head coindexing in the VP, just as subject agreement is specified-head coindexing in the NP (codified subject).

Number:

- (2) *satra* *əma* CIEFL Library-da *layrik* *pa-ri*
 student one (CIEFL) (Library)-LOC book read-ASP
 ‘A student is reading in the CIEFL Library.’
- (3) *satra* *təra* CIEFL Library-da *layrik* *pa-ri*
 student ten (CIEFL) (Library)-LOC book read-ASP
 ‘Ten students are reading in the CIEFL Library.’

The verb **pa-ri** in examples (2) and (3) remains unchanged regardless of whether the subject is singular or plural.

Gender:

- (4) Professor Tomba-nə əykhoy-bu / Mary-bu syntax *təm̐bi*
 (name)-TOP we-ACC / (name)-ACC (syntax) teach-ASP
 ‘Professor Tomba teaches us / Mary syntax.’
- (5) Professor Mary-nə əykhoy-bu / Bill-bu syntax *təm̐bi*
 (name)-TOP we-ACC / (name)-ACC (syntax) teach-ASP
 ‘Professor Mary teaches us / Bill syntax.’

The verb **təm̐bi** in examples (4) and (5) does not show any change according to the natural gender of the respective subjects. It is very obvious that any kind of grammatical agreement does not take place between subject and verb or object and verb. This is completely opposed to Hindi. (In the Kuki-Chin subgroup of Tibeto-Burman languages, however, there are other languages where the relevance of person and number does stand as a valid category for binding subject and predicate.)

In Manipuri there are constructions that are completely impersonal. In such constructions, who does the action is immaterial; what is more important in the construction is the ‘action’ (examples 6a-b and 7a-b):

- (6a) *kəri-mətə* *ca-de*
 nothing eat-NEG
 ‘Nothing has been eaten.’

Or the VP alone can be used instead, as in example (6b):

- (6b) *ca-de*
 ‘hasn’t eaten’

Similarly,

- (7a) *kəsu-su* *phu-de*
 none beat-NEG
 ‘None has been beaten.’

As in example (6b), the VP alone can be used instead, as in (7b):

- (7b) *phu-de*
 ‘hasn’t beaten’

The NPs *kəri-mətə* in example (6a) and *kəna-su* in (7a) apparently look like the ‘subject’, but in fact they are the objects: the subjects are underlying. The notion that *kəri-mətə* in (6a) and *kəna-su* in (7a) are grammatically subjects of their respective sentences is fallacious. There are other constructions also in which abstract nouns are apparently functioning as subject, as in sentences (8), (9), and (10):

- (8) *sawniŋ-məndu-nə* *məhak-pu* *phu-y*
 anger-excess-TOP he-ACC beat-ASP
 ‘So much anger makes him beaten.’
- (9) *əkhaŋ kənbə-nə* *məhak-pu* *mi* *oy-həl-le*
 patience-TOP he-ACC man make-CAUS-ASP
 ‘Patience makes him a man.’
- (10) *əsawbə-nə* *məhak-pu* *maŋ-həl-le*
 anger-TOP he-ACC destroy-CAUS-ASP
 ‘Anger makes him a useless man.’

In these three sentences, *sawniŋ-məndu-nə* (8), *əkhaŋ kənbə-nə* (9), and *əsawbə-nə* (10) are all abstract nouns that function grammatically as subjects in their sentences. Each of these subjects is represented as third person, but in fact there is no proper personal relevance. These are purely impersonal constructions.

There is another type of construction in which the subject is completely deleted, as in sentences (11) and (12):

- | | | |
|------|--|-------------------|
| (11) | hay-bə
say-NOMINALIZER
'can't be said' | ηəm-də
can-NEG |
| (12) | u-bə
see-NOMINALIZER
'can't be seen' | ηəm-de
can-NEG |

In one-word sentences, subject and object can be completely deleted, as in examples (13) and (14). (Examples 6b and 7b are of the same type.)

- | | |
|------|---|
| (13) | cət-le
go-ASP
'(X) has gone.' / 'OK, bye, I'm going.' |
| (14) | ca-ri
eat-ASP
'(X) is having a meal.' (Any person can replace 'Mr. X'.) |

Sentence (13) can be a reporting speech, informing a person that 'the very man is going,' with extralinguistic pointing to 'the man'. This is a situational-coincident-context (SCC) sentence because 'discourse' and 'other's event' are occurring simultaneously. Here the action of 'going' is not completed, but is still going on. The same sentence (13) can be used in another situation, to mean 'I'm leaving' (in taking leave from a person). A third situation of use would be as the reply to a question like 'Are you going?' Sentence (14) can be an answer to either of the questions 'What are you / is he doing?' or 'Are you / is he taking a meal?' Any person can be the subject; however, the question of subjectivity is not pivotal here. Additional examples are the following:

- | | |
|------|--|
| (15) | tum-me
sleep-ASP
'(X) have / has slept.' |
| (16) | i-re
write-ASP
'(X) have / has written.' |

There is another type of construction where the subject is completely deleted: here the question 'Who is the agent?' is absolutely out of the context. The only question is of the object, as in examples (17) and (18):³

- (17) huran-bə pha-re
 steal-NOM arrest-ASP
 'The thief is arrested.'

- (18) tha u-re
 moon see-ASP
 'The moon is seen.'

It may be seen that there are many possibilities of deletion of the subject in this language, and it is very common to use only the VP in discourse. It is said generally that it is the agent-subject of transitives that is demoted or deleted; an intransitive subject may be similarly deleted or demoted, but only if it is an agent (Palmer 1994). This choice is not determined by the verb in Manipuri. Alternatively, it might also be noted that agentive verbs have unexpressed 'cognate objects' ('fight a fight', 'dance a dance', etc.), and that in English, one can 'have a fight / a dance / a walk / a dream / a swim' but cannot '*have a dig / a show'. Notionally at least, these cognate objects might be considered to be the unexpressed subjects of the passive ('A fight was fought'). There is even some grammatical evidence for this in the constructions with the impersonal *it*-Subject, which might suggest the promotion of an unexpressed *it* (the cognate object) in the active.

Unlike, say, Latin or German, Manipuri has no impersonal verbs that take oblique arguments. Impersonal passives in other languages are also found with verbs that have a second argument that is not marked as object as an oblique term. Thus in Latin, *invideo* 'envy' is followed not by the accusative but by the dative, yet it has a passive. However, Latin also has a number of active impersonal verbs, such as *oportet* 'must' and *licet* 'is permitted', all requiring the human or animate NP to be in the dative: *mihi oportet* 'I must', *mihi licet* 'I am permitted'. There are similar impersonal verbs in German that are followed

³ Traditional Manipuri grammarians have treated these types of constructions, i.e., subject NP deletion, as Quasi-Passive. In fact, Manipuri, like Sino-Tibetan languages in general, is a passiveless language. The agent or subject is insignificant. When semantic emphasis is wanted, the agent or subject is topicalized, not passivized. The difference between passivization and topicalization according to Keenan (1985) is that passive tends to be integrated into the rest of the grammar, whereas topicalization tends to be limited to main clauses. Secondly, the formation of passives in a language takes place at the level of VP syntax, whereas topicalization takes place at the level of sentence syntax.

by the dative (as well as others that are followed by the accusative). These impersonal passives all fall into the same pattern.

In sharp contrast, any noun in Manipuri can be inserted as a subject, as in example (19), which rewrites example (18):

- (19) tomba / əy / məhak / əykhoy-nə tha u-re
 (name) / I / 3p / we-TOP moon see-ASP
 'Tomba / I / He / We has / have seen the moon.'

Here we maintain that any subject in the various sentences can be inserted syntactically. At the same time, these sentences can stand without any subject or agent, and still be perfectly grammatical. The impersonal constructions discussed in examples (11)-(18) further refute the notion of the indispensability of subject in Universal Grammar.

REFERENCES

- ANDERSON, Stephen. 1976. "On the notion of subject in ergative languages." In *Subject and Topic*, ed. by Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson. New York: Academic Press.
- BHATT, Rakesh M. 1993. "On agreement in Hindi." *South-Asian Language Review* 111.1.
- CHOMSKY, Noam. 1981. "Principles and parameters in syntactic theory." In *Explanation in Linguistics*, ed. by N. Hornstein and D. Lightfoot. London: Longmans.
- DIXON, R. M. W. 1972. *The Dyirbal Language of North Queensland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- KEENAN, Edward L. 1975. "The logical diversity of natural languages." Paper presented to the Conference on the Origin and Evolution of Language and Speech.
- . 1985. "Passive in the world's languages." In *Language Typology and Syntactic Description*, ed. by Timothy Shopen, vol. 1. Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1987. "Towards a universal definition of 'subject of'." In *Universal Grammar: Fifteen Essays*. London: Croom Helm.
- PALMER, F. R. 1994. *Grammatical Roles and Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LI, Charles N., & Sandra A. THOMPSON. "Evidence against topicalization in topic prominent languages." In *Subject and Topic*, ed. by Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson. New York: Academic Press.
- MAHAJAN, A. K. 1990. *The A/A-bar Distinction and Movement Theory*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Ph.D. dissertation/MIT Working Papers in Linguistics.