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The Typology of Argument Structure and Grammatical Relations
Abstracts

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GRAMMATICAL RELATIONS IN A TYPOLOGY OF AGREEMENT SYSTEMS

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1. INTRODUCTION. We ask how useful grammatical relations are for constructing a typology of agreement systems. We first sketch the development of work on grammatical relations, and earlier suggestions about their relevance for agreement. Then we move to a typology, taking as canonical those instances that can be described in terms of grammatical relations, and examining the types of construction which require access to additional information. Examples are taken from various languages, but especially from Russian which, though it appears to have a rather 'standard' agreement system, poses considerable problems for an account of agreement based on grammatical relations, as demonstrated by data from corpus-based studies.

2. THE RISE OF GRAMMATICAL RELATIONS. The notion 'grammatical relation' is well established (see Blake 1994: 48–93, Palmer 1994, Givón 2001: 173–232, Kibrik 2003: 109). It has a continuous tradition in European linguistics, while the attempt in transformational grammar to treat sentence structure in terms of dominance and linear order led to a reaction, particularly in America, in which the need for grammatical relations was carefully justified, rather than being assumed. This is most evident in Relational Grammar, where grammatical relations are given central status (see Perlmutter 1983a, Perlmutter and Rosen 1984, Postal and Joseph 1990, Blake 1990). A parallel reaction is found in the typology of Keenan and Comrie (1977).¹

Grammatical relations are treated hierarchically, as in the Relational Hierarchy (Johnson 1977: 156):

subject > direct object > indirect object > other object

The Accessibility Hierarchy of Keenan and Comrie (1977: 66) further divides 'other objects'. In subsequent years, grammatical relations have been embedded in different theories, with somewhat different interpretations. They have a core role in Lexical Functional Grammar, as 'grammatical functions' (Bresnan 2001: 44–60).

3. EARLY IDEAS ON GRAMMATICAL RELATIONS AND AGREEMENT. The Relational Hierarchy was considered directly relevant to agreement. Thus Moravcsik (1978: 364) claimed that if a language shows agreement, then there will be cases of agreement with the intransitive subject; only if there is such agreement will there be agreement with the direct object, and agreement of this type is a precondition for agreement with the indirect object. This is a typological claim at the level of possible languages. A more restrictive claim was made by Johnson (1977: 157):

THE AGREEMENT LAW: Only terms can trigger verbal agreement.

Where 'term' covers the first three items on the hierarchy.

4. PROBLEMS WITH GRAMMATICAL RELATIONS. If Johnson's claim could be maintained, we would indeed have a highly restricted theory of agreement, and a fine basis for a typology.² However, Aissen in various papers, and definitively in (1990), pointed out the problem of 'brother-in-law' agreement, as in *There are cows in next door's garden*. Such constructions have a dummy element (like English *there*) in the term position, while its 'brother-in-law' acts as the agreement controller.

¹ Note, however, that the argument is not only in one direction. After detailed discussion of Spanish psychological predicates Vogel and Villada (1999) conclude that 'subject' is not a particularly helpful notion.

² It should be pointed out that much of the early discussion dealt with verbal affixes whose status has since been debated as to whether they are agreement markers or pronominal affixes (see Corbett 2003 for discussion).

Perlmutter (1983b) permits 'silent' dummies, which allows for analyses in which apparent terms are analysed as brothers-in-law to zeroes.

There is a second type of non-term which can control agreement, namely predicate nominals, in instances of 'back' agreement. Examples will be given, of which the most convincing are from Czech (Vanek 1970, Corbett 1998).

Just as there are instances where a noun phrase which would be predicted not to be the agreement controller according to an account based on grammatical relations actually controls agreement, so also we find the converse, where the predicted controller fails to control agreement. Thus in Russian possessive constructions, the possessor phrase is subject-like in that it controls reflexivization, but agreement is not with this noun phrase.

5. A TYPOLOGY OF AGREEMENT USING GRAMMATICAL RELATIONS. Since our main focus is agreement, we shall ask how far grammatical relations allow us to determine how agreement operates in different languages. Suppose we can establish the grammatical relations in a particular construction according to other criteria (for instance according to the criteria of Keenan 1976,³ that is, controlling reflexives, being the target for promotion, being the missing argument for imperatives, and so on, discussed in Comrie 1989: 104–123). Can we then straightforwardly determine how agreement will operate?

We have seen already that our typology must include instances where the controller is outside the candidate noun phrases provided by an approach based on grammatical relations. But our typology needs to go beyond grammatical relations for a second, more subtle, reason. Even when grammatical relations are sufficient to determine the controller, they may still be insufficient for determining the feature values involved in agreement. When we have agreement options (which are prevalent in Russian, as for instance with quantified expressions),⁴ the feature value assigned can be influenced by considerations outside the scope of grammatical relations. To extend the typology, a suggestion of Polinsky proves useful. Polinsky (1995: 360) gives the following mappings for the 'regular active transitive construction'

thematic roles	Agent	Theme
grammatical relations	subject	direct object
communicative functions	topic	focus

'the clause is viewed as a linguistic sign having three distinct levels of representation, namely: the meaning of the clause, represented by thematic roles and verbal semantics, and the form of the clause represented by grammatical relations, on the one hand, and by communicative functions, on the other.' (1995: 360)

Perhaps surprisingly, a typology of agreement requires access to information of all three types. If we consider agreement with quantified noun phrases in subject position in Russian, the feature value for number depends in part on the semantics of the clause. Corpus-based studies have shown that the more agent-like is the subject (as evidenced by the semantic type of the predicate), the more likely is plural agreement (Corbett 1983, Robblee 1993). Similarly we need access to communicative function, in that the more topic-like the subject (as reflected in word order) the more likely is plural agreement (Corbett 1998). We shall provide examples of the different types, showing the role of these two sorts of information in addition to that provided by grammatical relations (as in, for instance, Nocentini 1999 and Nikolaeva 2001), in order to fill out the proposed typology.

6. THE ROLE OF CASE. We might expect that if we appeal to grammatical relations we shall not also need to refer to case. Indeed the Relational Grammar literature stressed the importance of instances where the controller was of the 'right' grammatical relation but the 'wrong' case (quirky case) and

³ We must recognise that criteria can differ substantially from researcher to researcher, and so comparison of different claims is often difficult. For careful discussion of dative subjects see Moore and Perlmutter (2000).

⁴ A relevant article, fully in the Relational Grammar tradition, arguing that quantified noun phrases in Polish can indeed be subjects, even though the verb does not agree, is Dziwirek (1990).

still controlled agreement. These were discussed in detail with regard to Georgian, notably by Harris (1981); for later analyses giving a greater role to morphology see Anderson (1984) and Kathman (1995). However, there are clear instances demonstrating the need to refer to case as well as to grammatical relations for specifying agreement. These are of two types.

First, in terms of the controller, we find instances, as in Russian, where a noun phrase in the right grammatical relation (subject) but not in the right case (nominative) cannot control agreement (as in the possessive constructions mentioned above). Moreover, the non-subject noun phrase which is in the nominative does control agreement. For other comparable examples see Bickel and Yadava (2000) and Butt (2001); and for discussion of Inari Sami see Toivonen (2003). Note the regularity that when the noun phrase in the 'right' grammatical relation has its controlling potential usurped by another, that noun phrase is typically in the 'right' case: this is true of the cases just discussed, of back agreement, and of long distance agreement (Polinsky and Comrie 1999).

Second, in terms of agreement choices, we find instances where a modifier in the 'right' (nominative) case outweighs all other factors which may determine the feature value. The examples are again from Russian, and involve determiners and adjectives within quantified expressions.

7. CONCLUSION. Attempts to determine agreement entirely in terms of grammatical relations were overly optimistic. However, grammatical relations provide a useful basis for a typology. The types of extensions needed affect first the determination of the controller, and second the determination of feature values in examples of agreement options. In addition to grammatical relations we need to refer to the meaning of the clause (thematic roles and verbal semantics) and to communicative functions. On top of all this, we also need to refer to (surface) case.

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