Universal definition of subject

Jean Mark Gawron

Linguistics 503 San Diego State University

2013 Jan

Functional labels

Grammatical function

1. Subject (SUBJ)
2. Object (OBJ)
3. Indirect Object (OBJ2)
4. Object of Preposition (POBJ)
5. Possessor (POSS)

Defining subject

Keenan (1975)

1. Define a set of BASIC CLAUSES: roughly sentences which do not presuppose understanding of a simpler sentence to be understood.

2. Identify properties of subjects of basic clauses.

3. Avoids a lot of problems introduced by potentially "derived" constructions like passives, focus constructions (*it*-clefts), existential (*there*-clause) sentences, and embedded subjects.

Summary

1. 30 properties identified.
2. We discuss a subset here.
3. No necessary and sufficient set of properties discovered.
4. We'll look at how the syntactic tests decide subjecthopod for some ergative languages.
5. SUBJECT is a cluster concept (Keenan, while for Comrie: a prototype concept)

Indispensability

A non b-subject can be eliminated from a sentence and the result is still a complete sentence.

   a.   John ate the hot dog.
   b.   John ate. [= John ate something (nonspecific)]
   c.   * ate the hot dog. [≠ Someone ate the hot dog.]

Tongan (Churchward 1953) Ergative

a.	Na'e tamate'i	'e	Tevita	'a	Koliate
	killed	Erg.	David	Abs.	Goliath

     "David killed Goliath"

b.	Na'e tamate'i	'a	Koliate
	killed	Abs.	Goliath

     "Goliath was killed" [nonspecific interpretation]

Autonomous reference

The reference of a b-subject must be determinable by the addressee at the moment of utterance. It cannot be dependent on the reference of other NPs which follow it.

a.   John admires himself.
b.   * He -self admires John.

Tagalog: Complex voice system, various issues, but VOS

a.   sinampal   ng   lalake   ang   babae
     hit-pass?   Agt   man   Subj   woman
     "The woman was hit by the man"

b.   sinampal   ng   lalake   ang   kaniyang   sarili
     hit-pass?   Agt   man   Subj   his   self
     "The man hit himself."

Other VOS

Malagasy

a.	manja	tena	Rabe
	respect	self	Rabe

"Rabe respects himself."

b.	*manaja		an-dRabe	tena / ny tena-ny
	respect		acc-Rabe	self / the self-his

"He-self respects Rabe."

Possible necessary condition for subjects: They are controllers of reflexives.

Switch reference

Head marking version of reflexives: Verb-internal markers which indicate that the subject of a dependent clause is same/different from the subject of another clause.

Hopi switch reference

a.	pam	naoti:ta	pam	mo:titani	$\begin{cases} \text{-q} \\ \text{-qa} \end{cases}$
	He	thinks	he	win	$\begin{cases} \text{-diff subj} \\ \text{-same subj} \end{cases}$

"He thinks he will win."

Shared NP in clause coordination

a.   Fred$_i$ praised Mona$_j$ and $\emptyset_i$ criticized Alice.
b.   *   Fred$_i$ praised Mona$_j$ and Alice criticized $\emptyset_j$.
c.   Fred$_i$ praised $\emptyset$, and Alice criticized $\emptyset$, Mona$_j$.

Kate Ergative Anderson (1975)

Last clause-case marking

a. | vale-la | nana | na-la | be? | guy | fo-ve? |
     |---------|------|-------|-----|-----|--------|
     | come-past | taro-Abs | eat-past | pig-Abs. | sleep | lie-3sgpast |

     The pig came, ate taro, and lay down to sleep.

b. | vale-la | be?-ko | nana | taro | na-ve? |
     |---------|--------|------|------|--------|
     | come-past | pig-Erg. | taro-Abs | eat-3sgpast | |

     The pig came and ate taro.

Controlled position in Control structure/Raising

a.   Fred$_i$ tried [$_S$ $\emptyset_i$ to examine the doctor.]
b.   * Fred$_i$ tried [$_S$ the doctor to examine $\emptyset_i$.]
c.   Fred$_i$ tried [$_S$ $\emptyset_i$ to be examined by the doctor.]
d   Fred$_i$ seems [$_S$ $\emptyset_i$ to be laughing.]

Maori raising

Sinclair (1976)

a.   kaore   i patua   a   Hone   e   Rewi.
       not   hit   Abs.   John   Erg.   Rewi
       "Rewi did not hit John"

b.   kaore   a   Hone   i patua   e   Rewi.
       not   Abs.   John   hit   Erg.   Rewi
       "Rewi did not hit John"

Equi in Basque

Anderson (1975)

a.   nahi   du   egin   dezan
      desire   he-Aux-it   do   he-Aux(subjunct)-iit
    'He$_i$ wants him$_j$ to do it.'
    * 'He$_i$ wants to do it.'

b.   nahi   dut   egin
      desire   I-Aux-it   do
    'I want to do it.'

c.   ikhusterat   joan   da
      see-infinitive-to   go   he-Aux
    'He$_i$ has gone to see him.
    * 'He$_i$ has gone for him$_j$ to see him$_i$.'

Addressee of imperatives

a. $\emptyset$ buy the car from John.
b. * John sell the car to $\emptyset$.

Maori passive imperative (Hale 1968)

a. tua-ina   te   raakau   raa   (ke te toki)
    fell-passive the   tree   yonder   (with this axe)
    "be-chopped down (by you) the tree there" = "Chop
    down the tree there (with this axe)."

Sinclair (1976) argues this is not a passive, but an anti-passive, in a
language which is making the transition to ergative.

Other properties of b-subjects

1. Controllers of verb agreement (where there is agreement) always include subjects.

2. Referentiality: default topic; personal pronouns, proper names, and demonstratives can always be subjects; default is to be definite, and in some languages must be (Philippine and Bantu)

3. Normally the leftmost occurring NPs

4. Normally the Agent, if there is one [Ergative languages?]

5. Not case marked in intransitive clauses, if any NP is case-marked.

6. Subjects are always among the NPs that can be relativized.

Some properties are hierarchical

Subj   The boy [who gave the book to the man]
Obj   The book [that the boy gave t to the man]
PObj   The man [that the boy gave the book to t]

In Malagasy, only subjects can be relativized.

The NPs which can be relativized always **include** subjects (other hierarchical properties, controllers of reflexives, verb agreement,lack of case marking)

Coding properties

How is subjecthood coded?

1. Position
2. Case marking
3. Verb agreement

Behavior and control properties

How referentially prominent is the subject?

1. Deletability (non specific object deletion, imperative deletion)
2. Control of reflexives
3. Controllee in control constructions
4. Verb agreement

Semantic/discourse properties

1. Agency
2. Autonomous existence
3. Definiteness
4. Topicality

Prototype theory (Comrie)

1. Subject is "defined" as the intersection of topic and agent (Grammaticalized topic: Givon)

2. Of course this is not a necessary and sufficient condition, so a prototype analysis is necessary.

3. Derived subjects might be in various ways less subjectlike than b-subjects

Anderson, Stephen. 1975.
    On the notion of subject in ergative languages.
    In Li (Li 1975), 3–9.

Hale, Kenneth. 1968.
    Review of Hohepa.
    The journal of the Polynesian society 81:5–18.

Keenan, Edward L. 1975.
    Towards a universal definition of "subject".
    In Li (Li 1975).

Li, Charles, N. (Ed.). 1975.
    Subject and topic.
    New York: Academic Press.

Sinclair, M. B. W. 1976.
    Is Maori an ergative language?
    The journal of the Polynesian society 85:9–26.