Universal definition of subject

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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 subjecthood 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. \[ = \text{John ate something (nonspecific)} \]
c. * ate the hot dog. \[ \neq \text{Someone ate the hot dog.} \]

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.


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 \{ -q
-qa
-diff subj
-same subj
\}

"He thinks he will win."

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Shared NP in clause coordination

a. Fred$_i$ praised Mona$_j$ and ∅$_i$ criticized Alice.
b. * Fred$_i$ praised Mona$_j$ and Alice criticized ∅$_j$.
c. Fred$_i$ praised ∅, and Alice criticized ∅, 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\textsubscript{i} tried \[ s \emptyset; \text{to examine the doctor.} \]
b. * Fred\textsubscript{i} tried \[ s \text{the doctor to examine } \emptyset; \]
c. Fred\textsubscript{i} tried \[ s \emptyset; \text{to be examined by the doctor.} \]
d. Fred\textsubscript{i} seems \[ s \emptyset; \text{to be laughing.} \]
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
‘Heₐ wants himⱼ to do it.’
* ‘Heₐ 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
‘Heₐ has gone to see him.
* ‘Heₐ has gone for himⱼ to see himᵢ.’
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
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.

Towards a universal definition of “subject”.  
In Li (Li 1975).

*Subject and topic*.  

Is Maori an ergative language?  