Grammatical Relations

Grammatical relations will be the focus of much of this course. They will appear in your grammar writing exercise, and they are central to Lexical Functional Grammar.

The grammatical relations most commonly discussed by linguists are **subject, and (direct) object**.

Necessity of Grammatical Relations

Comrie (page 66) points out that **many linguists have attempted to do away with grammatical relations and make due with just semantic or pragmatic roles**. For example, to explain English word order, they would say that the topic comes first in the sentence or the argument that is highest on the scale of control comes first instead of saying that the subject comes first.

Chomsky's theories have never acknowledged the existence of grammatical relations. However, grammatical relations appear in Chomsky's theories as artifacts of the structure of the sentence and the verb's assignment of case and semantic roles to it's arguments.

We will not review all of the arguments for the existence of grammatical relations now, but will procede with the assumption that they are necessary for the description of human languages, and are **particularly useful for illustrating what diverse languages have in common**. (Review the comparison of passive constructions in different languages.)

Tests for Grammatical Relations

Tests are important so that you do not have to rely on vague definitions of subject and object. If the definition is vague, linguists might not agree on how to apply it. A test is supposed to be formulated so that linguists can apply the test reliably and reproducibly and always get the same results.

Another reason why tests are important: This is how you will make decisions when you write a grammar.

Tests for Grammatical Relations

Coding Properties: Coding properties help speakers of the language determine who did what to who. For example, in a sentence with the nouns *Sam* and *Sue* and the verb *saw*, who is the actor/subject and who is the undergoer/object?

In English, word order is the strongest coding property. The subject is the noun phrase just to the left of the verb and the object is the noun phrase just to the right. 3SG verb agreement is a weaker coding property for subject. Macwhinney (Psychology Dept., CMU) did experiments where people had to judge which noun was the actor in *ungrammatical* sentences with conflicting coding properties.

(1) * The horses kicks the cow.

Behavioral Properties: Behavioral properties have to do with how grammatical relations behave in different syntactic constructions. This will become more clear when we look at some examples.

Coding Properties

Agreement: In many languages, verbs *agree* with their subjects. This means that the verb changes (usually by getting an affix) according to the number, person, and sometimes gender of the subject.
In English which verb agreement is a coding property of subjects, but not objects. Agreement can be used as a test for subjecthood in English.
Some unclear cases: There-Insertion and Locative Inversion

(2) a. There are people in the room.

b.* There is people in the room.

c.* There are a person in the room.

(3) a. In this village live many people.

b.* In this village lives many people.

c.* In this village live an important person.

Coding Properties

Agreement with subject and object: See handout from Van Valin's Book.

Coding Properties

Word Order: In some languages, the order of words in the sentence determines which noun phrase is the subject and which is the object.

A test for subjecthood in English: The subject comes before the verb with no other noun phrase in between (except for apposatives and parentheticals – *The president, Bill Clinton, said* . . . , *The president, a man who keeps his word, said* . . .).

What does the word order test tell you about the sentences with there-insertion and locative inversion? Does it give the same result as the agreement test?

Coding Properties

Case Marking: In many languages, a particular case marking, usually nominative, can be used as a test for subjecthood. However, it is also true that in many languages, a non-nominative noun phrase (usually an experiencer) can be the subject.

See handout from Van Valin's book.

Non-Nominative Subjects

See handout from Van Valin's book.

How do we know that it is the subject if it is not nominative? (Non-nominative subjects usually fail another coding test for subjects too — at least in European languages, verbs don't agree with non-nominative subjects. There is a significant, maybe universal, connection between nominative case and verb agreement.) We call them subjects because they pass other tests for subjecthood, usually behavioral tests.

(Non-)Universality of Coding Properties

There isn't any coding property that works as a test for subjecthood in all languages.

Nominative-Accusative and Ergative-Absolutive Languages

A	*He* broke the glass, *He* ate the apple, *He* cut the bread, *He* saw the boy
S	*He* ran, *He* worked, *He* ate, *He* fell
O	He saw *the boy*, hit *the boy*

Nominative-Accusative languages have one case, accusative, for O and another case, nominative for S and A.

Ergative-Absolutive languages have one case, ergative, for A and another case, absolutive for S and O.

Examples of Ergative-Absolutive Case Marking

Burushaski, (isolate[1], Pakistan), (Manning, *Ergativity*)

(4) a. ne hír-e
the.MASC man-ERG
phaló bók-i
seed.PL.ABS sow.PRET-3SG.MASC.S
The man planted the seeds.

b. ne hír yált-i
the.MASC man.ABS yawn.PRET-3SG.MASC.S
The man yawned.

Greenlandic Eskimo, (Manning, *Ergativity*)

(5) a. Oli-p neqi neri-vaa
Oli-ERG meat.ABS eat-IND.TR.3SG.3SG
Oli eats meat.

b. Oli sinippoq
Oli.ABS sleep-IND.INTR.3SG
Oli sleeps.

[1] An isolate is not related to any other known languages.

How can you tell if a language is ergative-absolutive or nominative-accusative?

1. You have to find two sentences, one with a transitive verb and one with an intransitive verb. (A transitive verb has a subject and an object. An intransitive verb just has a subject.)

2. Look at the case markers morphemes on
   a. the subject of the transitive verb
   b. the subject of the intransitive verb
   c. the object of the transitive verb

(Please ask me if you don’t know how to ident -ify the subject and object. We will go over this in class, but I expect you to have some idea now of what subject and object are.)

3. For a nominative-accusative language, a and b are the same. That is, the case mor -pheme on the subject of the transitive verb and the subject of the intransitive

verb are the same.

For an ergative-absolutive language, b and c are the same. That is, the case morpheme of the subject of the intransitive verb and the object of the transitive verb are the same.

For example, page 7 of the lecture notes:
1. Greenlandic Eskimo Sentence 4a has a transitive verb. Sentence 4b has an intransitive verb.

2. a. The subject of the transitive verb is "oli" with case marker "-p".
   b. The subject of the intransitive verb is "oli" with an empty case marker. That is, no suffix is added to "oli".
   c. The object of the transitive verb is "neqi" with an empty case marker (no suffix).

3. The empty case marker on b and c is the same, so this is an ergative -absolutive language. The suffix "-p"

is the ergative marker, and when there is no suffix, the noun is in absolutive case.

See below for a discussion of empty case markers. Absolutive is called the "unmarked case" in Greenlandic Eskimo because they don't use a suffix for it.

Another Example, Latin:

1. Sentence with a transitive verb:
   Oli-us libr-um videt.
   Oli book saw

   Sentence with an intransitive verb:
   Oli-us dorm...
   (don't remember the verb form)
   Oli slept

2. a. The subject of the transitive verb is "oli" and it's case marker morpheme is "-us"
   b. The subject of the intransitive verb is "oli" and it's case marker

is "-us".

c. The object of the transitive verb is "libr-" and it's case marker is "-um".

3. Since a and b are the same, Latin is a nominiative-accusative language. In these sentences, the nominative morpheme is "-us" and the accusative morpheme is "-um". In many other nominative-accusative languages, the nominative case is unmarked.

Marked and Unmarked Cases

A case is *unmarked* if there is no morpheme separate from the noun stem. In nominative-accusative languages, nominative case might be unmarked, whereas accusative is almost always marked with an overt morpheme. In ergative-absolutive languages, absolutive case might be unmarked, whereas ergative is almost always marked.

Ergative-absolutive can be shortened to ergative and nominative-accusative can be shortened to accusative, naming just the marked cases.

Oblique Case

The term *oblique case* usually refers to anything other than nominative, accusative, or absolutive for example, dative, locative, instrumental etc. Prepositional phrases (e.g., *with a stick*, *on the table*, etc.) are also called oblique. Whether or not ergative is an oblique case is the subject of much research.

Variations on Ergative and Accusative Systems

Case systems can be complicated. *Split ergative* systems use both ergative and accusative case marking systems. For example, Hindi and Urdu use ergative case when the aspect is perfective and accusative case when the aspect is not perfective.

Examples of variations from standard accusative case systems are: Tagalog (Phillipines) uses different allomorphs of case markers for common and proper nouns (Schachter page 8-9); Russian and Finnish use genitive/partitive case for direct objects of negative sentences (Comrie, pages 65 and 120) and accusative case for direct objects in non-negative sentences.

Comrie (Chapter 6) points out that it is common to use Ergative case only for subjects that are low in animacy and/or definiteness. It is also common to use accusative case only for objects that are high in animacy and/or definiteness. (See also the Yidiny examples on page 67).