

What Counts as the Subject?

Linguistics 5450
Spring 2003

- A subject is a grammatical relation.
- A grammatical relation is “a restricted neutralization of semantic roles for syntactic purposes”.
- The semantic roles at issue here are: A, U, S and d S.
- “If there exists at least one construction in the language in which there is a restriction on the noun phrase types functioning in the construction and which involves a neutralization of semantic or pragmatic relations for syntactic purposes, then the language has grammatical relations” VVLP p. 274
- VVLP subsume SUBJECT under the label *privileged syntactic argument* PSA : the PSA is the argument which determines a specific formal property in a specific construction.
- There are two kinds of PSA’s: **pivots** ‘targets’ and **controllers** ‘triggers’ .
- There are two kinds of PSA’s: **syntactic** and **semantic**. If there is a RESTRICTION on the semantic roles that can be mapped to PSA e.g., PSA=A or PSA=U , but no NEUTRALIZATION, we say that the PSA is **semantic**. If there is both a restriction AND a neutralization e.g., PSA = either A or U , we say that the PSA is **syntactic**.
- Whether the selection is semantic or syntactic, the PSA is a syntactic construct.
- There are two kinds of syntactic PSA’s: **variable** and **invariable**. If the construction or language has a d S, it has a **variable syntactic pivot**.
- If a variable syntactic pivot ALSO represents a clause topic, as in English Passive, it is called a **pragmatic PSA** pivot/controller .
- Why all this complexity? Can’t we get along with plain old subject?
- No. VVLP say that there is no universally applicable definition of subject, whether within a language or across languages. Let’s see whether this is so.

I. Some properties that are generally said to be characteristic of subjects.

A. Having NOMINATIVE case.

Latin. *Mundus omnia continet.*
 world:NOM all:ACC contains
 ‘The world contains all things.’

Caesar mortuus est.
 Caesar:NOM died is
 ‘Caesar died.’

Problem. What about Ergative Absolute languages like Basque?

Basque. *Edalontzi a apurtu da*
 Glass:A broken AUX A3SG
 ‘The glass has broken.’

Jon ek edalontzi a apurtu du
 Jon:E glass:A broken AUX A3SG E3SG
 ‘Jon has broken the glass.’

B. Triggering VERB AGREEMENT.

Latin. *Solis* *oculos* *laedit.*
Sun:NOM eyes:ACC hurts:3SG
'The sun hurts one's eyes.'

Problem. What about languages in which verb agreement includes the object too?

Chichewa. *A lendo* *á ma pa kend a* *pa* *mu dzi.*
2 visitor SBJ PRS OBJ love PV I6 3 village
'Visitors love the village.'

Basque. *Jon ek* *ogi a* *moz tu* *du.*
Jon:E bread:A cut PERF AUX A3SG E3SG
'Jon cut the bread.'

C. Being the first nominal expression in the sentence.

Problem. What about VSO languages and leftward shifts?

Maasai. *Ore apa* *tenkiterunoto neatai* *Naiterukop*
SWT long.ago in.beginning exist.3 Naiterukop
'Long ago, at the beginning of time, lived Naiterukop.'

Neyam *Naiterukop* *Inkituaak* *are*
Married N. wives two
Naiterukop married three wives.'

Ore enkitok *edukuya* *neisho nkishu naanyokioo.*
SWT woman first 3.gave cattle red
'The first wife he gave red cattle.'

Ore enkitok eare *neishori* *ninye nkishu naarook*
SWT woman second 3.give.pass 3 cattle black
'As for the second wife, she was given black cattle.'

D. Being the most AGENTLIKE role in the sentence.

English. *A kid broke my window with a nerf ball.*
A nerf ball broke my window.
**A nerf ball broke my window by a kid.*

Problem. What about languages in which the UNDERGOER argument seems to have the subject properties?

Warlpiri. *Ngaju rlu* *o rna* *yankirri o*
ISG ERG AUX ISG emu A
pantu rnu, *ngapa o* *nga rninyja kurra*
spear PAST water A drink INF while
'I speared the emu; while *pro*_i drinking water.'

English. *I speared the emu_i while pro_i drinking water.

E. Being the role that a given grammatical construction ‘calls for’.

- **Raising (Matrix Coding)**. Bears seem to eat honey. *Honey seems bears to eat.
- **Equi**. They forced him to be examined by the doctor. *They forced him the doctor to examine.
- **Ellipsis in coordinate structures**. She kicked the dog and scurried away.
- **Control of reflexive**:

Latin. *Milites* *exhortatus* *est* *ut* *se*
 Soldiers:ACC exhorted is:3SG that self
sequerentur.
 follow.
 ‘He exhorted the soldiers to follow **him**, *themselves.’

Problem. What about languages in which no particular grammatical role seems to play a central role in any given construction?

Mandarin. *Xiao gou* *zhou dao* *shan* *dixia,*
 little dog walk to mountain bottom
nei ge *ren* *jiu kanjian* *le.*
 that CL person then saw PERF
 ‘The little dog_i went downhill and the man saw *pro*_i.’

Haoxiang *Lisi mai le chezi.*
 seem Lisi buy PERF vehicle
 ‘It seems Lisi bought the car.’

Lisi haoxiang mai le chezi.
 Lisi seem buy PERF vehicle
 ‘Lisi seems to have bought the car.’

Chezi haoxiang Lisi mai le.
 Vehicle seem Lisi buy PERF
 ‘The car seems Lisi to have bought.’

F. Being the sentence topic.

Mithun 1991:160: “The function of subjects is clear: They are essentially grammaticized clause topics.” Topic is described as the ‘peg on which the message is hung.’ The peg should be stationary. The referent that will serve as topic should be predictable. Topics tend to found in anaphoric chains. That is, they tend to be pronouns. This tendency is confirmed statistically for the Switchboard corpus:

	Number	Percentage
Lexical Subjects	2,858	9
Pronominal Subjects	28,163	91

Subject type distribution for 31,021 declarative sentences.

	Number	Percentage
Lexical Objects	4,921	66
Pronominal Objects	2,568	34

Object type distribution for 7,489 transitive sentences.

In an ergative language, the ergative argument tends most frequently to be missing, indicating that it is recoverable from context like a pronoun. Alternatively, it is in the 'left detached' position reserved for contrastive topics:

Basque. *Emakume ek zer nahi dute?*
 women E what want AUX
 "Women, what do they want?"

Problem. The subject position can be occupied by a FOCUS argument.

Basque. *Nere kotxea puskatu egin da.*
 my car broke do AUX
 "My CAR broke down."

Sentence-focus context. News report.

Argument-focus context. What broke down?

Although focal subjects are MARKED A=agent focus :

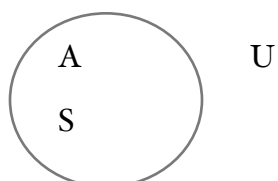
Tzotzil. *K'usti ti' on?*
 What bite AF
 "What bit him?"

S tzi I ti' on.
 A₃ dog CP bite AF
 "It was his dog that bit him."

S tzi I s ti
 A₃ dog CP A₃ bite
 "It was his dog that he bit."
 Impossible: "It was his dog that bit him."

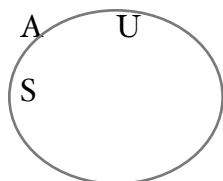
G. Being the role that NEUTRALIZES some semantic distinctions.

Nominative-Accusative languages. Neutralize distinction between A and S.



English. *I A whipped the frosting while pro =S singing.*

Ergative-Absolutive languages. Neutralize distinction between U and S.



Warlpiri. *Ngaju rlu* *o rna* *yankirri o*
 ISG ERG AUX ISG emu A
pantu rnu, *ngapa o* *nga rninyja kurra*
 spear PAST water A drink INF while
 'I speared the emu while it was drinking water.'

Problem. What about languages in which there is no obvious neutralization?

Acehnese. *Gopnyan* *geu tém* *jak.*
 3SG 3Sg want go.
 'S he wants to go.'

Gopnyan *geu tém* *taguen bu.*
 3SG 3SG want cook rice
 'S he wants to cook rice.'

 **Gopnyan* *geu tem* *rhet.*
 3SG 3 want fall
 'S he wants to fall.'

 **Aneuk agam nyan* *ji tem geu peureksa* *le dokto*
 Child male that 3 want 3 examine by doctor
 'That child wants to be examined by the doctor.'

The null argument in the complement of the *want* clause must be AGENTIVE.

Eastern Pomo. *Ha: kaluhu y* *si:ma:merqaki:hi.*
 IsgA go.home **same** went to bed
 "I went home and went to bed."

Ha: kaluhu qan *mi:p merqaki:hi.*
 IsgA go.home **diff** 3sgA went to bed
 "I went home and went to bed."

Ha: xa: qakki qan *wi qa:lalta:la*
 IsgA water bathe diff IsgU sick.become
 "I took a bath and got sick."

The switch reference system seems to monitor semantic roles of A and U directly.

II. Are there subjects then?

Generally. But the criteria which go into subject selection may differ from language to language and from construction to construction.

English imperatives agentive

Examine that patient!

??*Be examined by the doctor!*

English resultatives ergative absolutive

**She_i baked cakes pro_i tired .* on resultative reading

The cold froze the water_i pro_i solid .

The water_i froze pro_i solid .

Italian ne-cliticization ergative absolutive

Ne sono venuti molti
of.them be.3pl arrived many
“Many of them have arrived.”

Marcello ne ha comprato due
Marcello of.them have.3sg bought two
“Marcello has bought two of them.”

Ne hanno dormito molti
of.them have.3pl slept many
*“Many of them have slept.”

English finite relative clauses no neutralization; pivotless

I saw the person who swept the floor.

I saw the floor which you swept.

I saw the person to whom you gave the sweeping job.

I saw the broom with which you swept the floor.

The relative pronoun can represent any semantic relationl.