

Predicates and argument selection: grammatical marking and grammatical functions

Following Dowty 1991; Ackerman and Moore 1999,2001,2011; Primus 1999, 2002; Beavers 2011) semantic arguments of a predicator are construable as lexical entailments that are set in correspondence with an independent array of syntactic functions: cross-theoretically the entities participating in these correspondences are given the status of arguments (ARGS), with different languages displaying different grammatical strategies for marking these arguments. This yields an ensemble of alignable and independent dimensions of information in terms of semantic roles, grammatical functions and surface encoding.

There is also a common cross-theoretical assumption concerning the uniqueness of functions: any given syntactic function of an argument can appear only once within the domain defined by a governing predicate. This means that a verb can have only a single SUBJ, OBJ etc. Various theories are designed to reflect this putatively universal constraint. We will refer to this as *Functional Uniqueness* (FU).

There is another class of syntactic elements that is standardly distinguished from ARGS: ADJS, of whatever semantic role, are not semantically entailed by the lexical semantics of predicators, can appear multiple times within a clausal domain, and are syntactically optional elements. This simple division between ARGS and ADJS is known to be problematic on the basis of cross-linguistic research. In this presentation we explore perplexing issues relating to the ARG and ADJ distinction in a single language, specifically, Thetogovela Moro, a Kordofanian language spoken in Sudan.

Ackerman and Moore (2011), developing a tradition parallel to the one represented by FU (Kimenyi 1978; Gary and Keenan 1978; Duranti 1977; Hyman and Duranti 1982; Rugemalira 1991; Alsina 2001, Beck 2006; McKay and Trechsel 2008), demonstrate that Moro causative and applicative verbs are associated with the canonical properties of symmetrical object constructions (Bresnan and Moshi 1990). On this basis, and contrary to frameworks assuming FU, they argue for an OBJ* parameter according to which grammar design permits multiple co-occurring OBJs, with the consequence that FU is simply the limiting case of OBJ* i.e., the case where uniqueness actually obtains.

Ackerman and Moore (2011) explore the syntactic behavior of bare NP ARGS. However, all of the syntactic behaviors diagnostic of OBJ status for bare NPs also obtain for nouns marked with locative prefixes, nouns marked with instrumental suffixes, and nouns appearing in adpositional phrases. In other words, Moro has a very large class of diversely marked nominals that all exhibit the consensus diagnostic syntactic behaviors of OBJs. Moreover, unlike the bare NPs which fit the usual profile of ARGS in terms of their relation to the lexical entailments of verb meaning and syntactic obligatoriness, the forms of the prefixed, suffixed and adpositional nominals appear to be canonical ADJS with respect to these criteria, despite their syntactic behavior as an ARG, specifically, as an OBJ. An example with prefixes and suffixes is illustrated in (1), where (1a) represents the active variant with two “adjuncts” and (1b) represents the passive variant in which the instrumentally marked nominal is the SUBJ and the locative is pronominalized: (it is important to note that either nominal can be passivized or pronominalized)

(1) a. um^{ie} k-a-ndr-ó í-ð- ódí ləvərðja-la
boy CM.SG-MAIN-sleep-PFV LOC-crevice blanket-CM.INSTR
'the boy slept in the crevice with the blanket'

b. ləvərðja l-_A-ndr-ən-í-j'_A-u
blanket CM.PL-MAIN-sleep-PASS-PFV-INSTR-LOC
'the blanket was slept with in it.'

We will provide an analysis of how the Moro system seems to be organized. We argue that the degree of semantic obliqueness is correlated with a coding property whereby the more semantically oblique the (class of) distinctions, the more periphrastic the encoding. Thus, adpositional NPs are the most semantically oblique, affixed NPs less so, and bare NPs the least. OBJ status appears to span this hierarchy, mitigating the value of standard notion of ARG status for these NPs. However, we demonstrate that in contrast to this class of NPs in Moro there is a category of conventional ADJ arguments that do not exhibit the syntactic behaviors of OBJs. Moro, thus, partitions nominals into two familiar classes that seem to reflect something like the LFG distinction between governable and non-governable grammatical functions, i.e., OBJ versus ADJ function is more relevant in the Moro system than the conventional distinction between ARG versus ADJ.

In general, Moro appears to represent an unfamiliar alignment of familiar distinctions: it aligns numerous semantic roles simultaneously with the OBJ function, it aligns various surface encoding strategies with the OBJ function; it aligns "ARG" status with a class of semantic arguments that is different and larger than the entailment sets of governing predicates. We suggest that Moro represents a variation on alignments that raises challenges for theory construction in the domain of verbal government and subcategorization.