

On differential subject and object marking: Western Armenian evidence

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1. Abstract

Languages across language families exhibit the phenomenon of differential subject and object marking (a.o., Silverstein 1976; Bossong 1985; Comrie 1989; Aissen 1999, 2000 and references there). The marking reflects to various degrees semantic prominence of subjects vs. objects (*markedness reversal*) in terms of animacy and/or definiteness. Recently, Aissen (1999, 2000) gives an optimality-theoretic account of the data, using the operation of Harmonic Alignment in order to combine the *animacy* (1) and *definiteness* (2) scales with the *relational* scale (3) into OT constraints. The language-dependent cut-off point imposed over the hierarchies is expressed by an economy constraint. Finally, for languages where differential marking is determined both by (1) and (2), Aissen proposes a two-dimensional lattice (viz below).

In the proposal, the original functional explanation of the phenomena in question in terms of a pragmatic need to distinguish between subjects and direct objects is lost. There is no interaction between types of subjects and types of objects, which is problematic for languages like Jakaltek and Halkomelem which exclude inanimate subjects in transitive clauses, or Tzotzil and Chamorro which exclude inanimate subjects in transitive clauses with human objects. Even if we limit the constraints on admissible subject-object combinations to transitive constructions in some languages, there are still examples like Hua, in which the object marker is used context-dependently, in case the speaker assesses the likelihood of confusion to be high (Comrie, 1981:123). Zeevat (2001) brings up additional points of criticism, e.g., regarding the fact that even human pronominal subjects are considered “marked” in Aissen’s interpretation.

Nevertheless, the proposal can unify a number of typological facts in a simple manner and it would be desirable if with some improvements it could be applied on data observed in Western Armenian. In this language,

- animate direct objects of certain verbs appear in dative (instead of the zero-marked accusative);
- personal proper names and some instances of the 3rd person pronoun $\text{___} / \text{Ք} \text{ և } \text{Յ} /$ if direct object appear with the suffix $\text{--}_\star /$, otherwise used as the specificity marker;
- mass nouns in subject positions appear with the suffix $\text{--}_\text{.}$.

At first it seems that two different morphemes are used for the purposes of prominence marking – dative for differential objects and $\text{--}_\text{.}$ for differential objects and subjects. I will argue, however, that an application of Aissen’s constraint hierarchy would be inadequate, given

- (i) the limited distribution of datives;
- (ii) the fact that the cut-off points of the two markers are different, as indicated in (5), (although interpretation of the data from Aissen’s perspective is impeded by the fact that the suffix $\text{--}_\text{.}$ is also used to express specificity (Sigler 1997));
- (iii) that $\text{--}_\text{.}$ appears optionally also on subject proper names and pronouns but not, e.g., on human non-specific indefinites (and thus cannot be considered a differential subject marker in these cases).

Therefore, an alternative account of the data has to be found. In my present contribution, I will focus on the interpretation of the $\text{--}_\text{.}$ marker and explore the possibility of a purely semantic analysis, using Partee’s flexible type-theory (Partee 1987, recently de Swart 1999). Similarly to the English definite article, the $\text{--}_\text{.}$ suffix would be analyzed as a type shifter, which shifts NPs in order for them to comply with the language dependent semantic requirements of the verb or position in the clause (i.e., topic). Thus predicate NPs of the type $\langle e, t \rangle$ would be mapped onto the generalized quantifier type $\langle \langle e, t \rangle, t \rangle$, while entities of type $\langle e \rangle$ would be lifted to GQ (5). As it stands, Partee’s triangle can account for most of the facts as summarized above, but further refinement is needed in order to distinguish between different types of pronouns (1st and 2nd person vs. 3rd, proximate vs. obviative) and types of proper names (personal vs. toponyms).

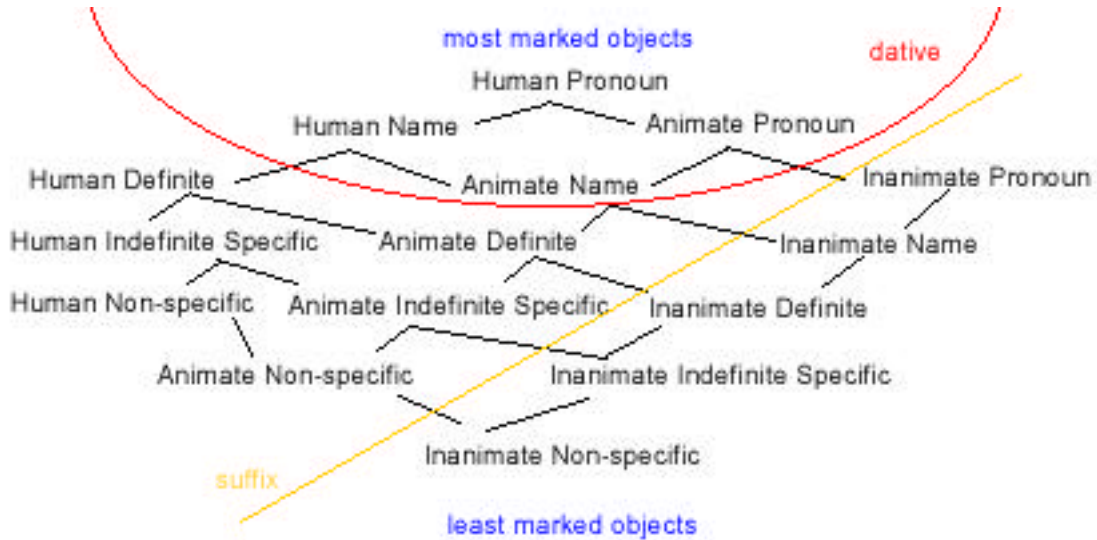
2. Figures

(1) Human \gg Animate \gg Inanimate

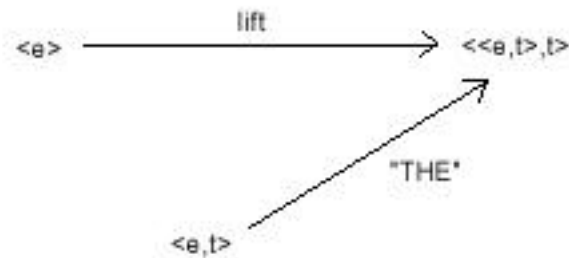
(2) Personal pronoun >> Proper noun >> Definite NP >> Indefinite specific NP >> Non-specific NP

(3) Subject >> Object

(4)



(5)



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