

Discourse prominence, event prominence and grammatical variation

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It has been noted for a number of African, Asian, Austronesian and South-American languages that the (morpho)syntactic structure of transitive clauses tends to be influenced, if not determined, by the relative referential prominence of the actor and the undergoer arguments. If we assume that the referentiality of an expression concerns the status of its referent on two dimensions: (i) individuation (Is the referent of an argument phrase identifiable based on the descriptive content of the phrase?) and (ii) discourse status (Is the referent in the foreground of the awareness of the interlocutors?), then we are dealing with a two-dimensional prominence evaluation cross-cutting the domains of semantics and pragmatics. Studies on grammatical variation, such as work on differential object marking and obviation (e.g. Aissen 1997, 2003), have taught us furthermore, that we should not only compare whether the actor or the undergoer is higher on the hierarchy of referentiality, but also pay heed to the fact whether a given feature is a default (interpretational) feature for the actor or the undergoer argument. The basic idea is then that the departure from an unmarked semantic feature and/or discourse prominence feature is signaled by non-default morphosyntactic marking, e.g. by divergent case- and voice-marking, fronting or inversion constructions.

In this talk, I build on these insights and argue that in addition to referentiality of a given argument, we need to take into account the levels of event structure and discourse structure, if we wish to explain morphosyntactic variation and construction choice in languages, such as Japanese and Tagalog. The consequence of this approach is two-fold: (i) prominence calculations with respect to the referents of arguments have a certain complexity, and (ii) marked morphosyntactic constructions may have quite different information-structural functions depending on whether they target the actor or the undergoer.

The focus of this paper will be on fronting constructions in Japanese and Tagalog. In both languages, undergoer fronting can be shown to be more restricted than actor fronting (cf. Shimojo (2005), Watanabe (2000)). This cannot be traced back to any morphosyntactic similarities of the two languages, as they crucially differ with respect to word order as well as their diathesis system and their morphosyntactic means of marking information structure. However, they are alike in that it can be shown that it is non-default information-structural values associated with arguments that require morphosyntactic marking and that asymmetries with respect to fronting possibilities are directly relatable to the asymmetry between actors and undergoers. Given that a certain information-structural feature may be marked/prominent for the actor but not for the undergoer and vice versa, it follows that one and the same morphosyntactic strategy may lead to different IS-interpretations depending on whether which of the two arguments is targeted.) Time permitting, I will also touch on the topic of event prominence of arguments, as it can be shown that verb class also plays a role with respect to the acceptability of fronting constructions.

References:

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