The phenomenon

Many languages exhibit non-uniform grammatical marking on objects. Variations can occur within one and the same language with objects of one and the same verb. For example, in Turkish (Altaic) the object of the same verb either takes the accusative suffix or remains unmarked. In Palauan (Austronesian), the object of the same verb either does or does not trigger agreement on that verb:

/EXAMPLES OMITTED/

Such patterns are widely known under the rubric of differential object marking or DOM (a term introduced by Bossong 1985).

We understand DOM as covering both agreement and casemarking (case or adpositional marking on the object). Though we recognise that agreement and casemarking differ both historically and synchronically, as noted by Comrie (1979) and Croft (1988:167–168), among many others, we believe that they share commonalities in the context of DOM, and we will use the cover term (grammatical) marking to refer to them. This approach is in line with Nichols (1986), who analyses agreement and casemarking as alternative strategies for encoding the relation between the head and a dependent, as well as some generative literature, where case and agreement are inherently linked.

The aim of this book /AND THE LECTURES AND SEMINARS BASED ON IT/ is to provide a new view of DOM which encompasses syntactic, semantic, and information-structural differences between marked and unmarked objects. We will make the following claims:

• Marked objects are associated with the information-structural role of topic. The association is synchronic in some languages, and may be historical in others. Where the direct connection between marked objects and topicality has been lost through grammaticalisation, marked objects in some languages become associated with semantic features typical of topics (animacy, definiteness, specificity).

• In some languages, marked and unmarked objects display an identical behavioural profile and can be assigned to the same grammatical function. Other languages distinguish syntactically between marked and unmarked objects: marked objects are primary objects, while unmarked objects are secondary objects. This reflects the tendency for topical arguments to appear high on the grammatical function hierarchy.

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Our proposal

We believe that in many cases, the seeming unpredictability of variation in DOM is due to the limited set of features examined in previous work, and that a better account is possible if additional factors are taken into account. In particular, variations in marking can often be explained by reference to information structure, a level of sentence grammar where propositions, as conceptual states of affairs, are structured in accordance with the informational value of sentence elements and contextual factors. We propose a theory of DOM which emphasises the role of information structure in the marking patterns of objects. The information-structural distinction we make explains many of the unexplained areas in semantic analyses of DOM.

Information structure

Specifically, we propose that topicality plays an important role in DOM. Marked objects are often topical, while unmarked objects are nontopical. For example, in Ostyak, object agreement is required for topical objects. /EXAMPLE OMITTED/ This is true independent of semantic features of animacy and definiteness; in both of these examples, the object is animate and definite.

Following Lambrecht (1994) and others, we understand topicality as a pragmatic relation that holds between a referent and the proposition expressed by an utterance: topicality has to do with the construal of the referent as pragmatically salient, so that the assertion is made about this referent. Topicality is not an inherent property of a referent, and although it correlates with the role played by the referent in the preceding discourse, the correlation is imperfect. It cannot be unambiguously established on the basis of the referential features of the object either; rather, it depends on the speaker’s assessment of its saliency within a given communicative context.

Since we view information structure as part of grammar, we treat grammaticality as including pragmatic well-formedness. For instance, object agreement is ungrammatical in (13) only if it is construed as an answer to the question Which reindeer did he kill?, though it is possible in the context in (12). In order to demonstrate the pragmatic role of a referent, we provide examples in context whenever possible.

In some respects, our view most closely resembles the proposal of Næss (2004): like ours, her analysis relies not on the semantic features of the object, but rather on its perceptual role. In fact, Næss (2004) suggests that affectedness, which plays a crucial role in her treatment of DOM, has two aspects: expressing a part/whole relation, and salience. Salience is a necessary property of topics, so the two notions, though distinct, seem to be closely related (see Croft 1991:155 for further discussion of the correlation between affectedness and topicality). However, for Næss (2004) salience has to do with which entities are of more interest for human perception in general.
Her analysis does not, then, address contextual factors. On our approach, salience relates to the role played by a referent in the pragmatic structure of the proposition, established within a given context.

Our proposal provides a different functional motivation for DOM from the discriminatory/disambiguating perspective: we argue that DOM was originally motivated by the need to highlight similarities between subjects and topical objects, which tend to be grammatically marked, as opposed to nontopical objects. That is, it arises from the need to give overt expression to a property that is common to subjects and (some) objects but less typical of other non-core grammatical functions: languages tend to mark topics, whether subjects or objects, either by agreement or by casemarking. This means that topical objects are not functionally marked, atypical, or uncommon; in fact, we suggest that objects are just as likely to be topical (grammatically marked) as nontopical (focused, unmarked).

The idea that topicality may play a role in DOM has been mentioned in previous work (Aissen 2003b, Leonetti 2003, and others). However, it has not received extensive elaboration in the family of functionally-typological and Optimality Theoretic analyses of DOM, nor has it been standardly incorporated into most existing generative or transformational treatments. Some research employs the notion of prominence interpreted more broadly than Aissen’s Prominence Scales (de Hoop and Narasimhan 2005, de Hoop and Lamers 2006, de Hoop 2008). De Swart (2007:138) defines prominence as a feature that “is concerned with the centrality of an entity in the discourse or with the readiness with which an entity presents itself to the speaker as a topic of conversation”. His analysis distinguishes two levels of prominence: (i) discourse prominence, which reflects the status of the argument in the discourse, and (ii) semantic prominence, which depends on the intrinsic semantic features of the argument. The notion of discourse prominence seems to be comparable with our notion of topicality; however, de Swart does not provide a detailed characterisation of discourse prominence, noting only that semantic prominence influences discourse prominence because an inherently prominent element is more likely to be topical.

Another “exception” is Meinunger (1998): working within the Minimalist Program, he suggests that the distinction between topical and nontopical objects is interpreted syntactically, and that the semantic feature that all VP-external phrases have in common is [+TOP I C]. This feature activates VP-external agreement projections, so that topical NPs must move to a SpecAgr position for Case checking. He also assumes an inherent relationship between verbal agreement and Case, which are seen as two aspects of the same phenomenon, in that both are effects of the movement of an argument to the specifier position of an agreement head. Languages differ in how they mark scrambled topical objects: some languages mark topical and nontopical objects with morphologically different cases, while in other languages the difference in the interpretation of the objects is linked to object agreement, and in a third type of language the difference is only positional. Meinunger views topical arguments as discourse-linked/familiar and contextually salient. In addition, the speaker must intend to construe them as topics, as opposed to presentational focus or comment, which normally contains discourse-new elements.
However, his definition of topic and the relationship between topicality and the referential features of the object are not clearly spelt out. For instance, Meinunger claims that topicality is realised as specificity in Turkish and animacy in Hindi, but does not explain this difference, though object marking clearly depends on very different semantico-pragmatic conditions in these languages.

Escandell-Vidal (2009) presents a detailed analysis of DOM by means of the preposition a in Balearic Catalan. Although differential object casemarking in many varieties of Catalan is explained by appeal to semantic features of animacy or definiteness, in Balearic Catalan referential properties of the object play a secondary role. Pronominal objects are always casemarked, but for lexical objects casemarking is (partly) determined by topicality. As in our analysis, Escandell-Vidal understands topicality as “aboutness”, and therefore Balearic Catalan seems to behave very similarly to a number of the languages we discuss in this book. Her analysis differs from ours in that she does not discuss the alignment of grammatical functions of marked and unmarked objects with information structure roles, though she shows that there are positional differences between topical and nontopical objects, since Balearic Catalan is a language with designated topic and focus positions. Topical objects cannot occur in the canonical focus position, and instead must be either left- or right-dislocated. However, only discourse-old topics, and not all topical objects, are casemarked. This implies that both marked and unmarked objects can occur in topic position, and raises the question of whether they display identical syntactic behaviour.

Syntax

Our view differs from most previous proposals in another respect: we believe that existing typological analyses of DOM, which mainly concentrate on its functional motivation and the cross-linguistic distribution of morphological marking, do not pay sufficient attention to the syntactic side of the phenomenon. The behavioural properties and syntactic status of marked vs. unmarked objects are rarely discussed, and to our knowledge, there are few systematic cross-linguistic studies of the differences between them.

We have found that in some languages marked and unmarked objects do not differ syntactically and, arguably, realise the same grammatical function, the object. In other languages they not only have different information structure roles, but also exhibit different behavioural syntactic profiles. For example, marked and unmarked objects in Ostyak differ in their ability to control coreference with the subject of an action nominal dependent clause, allow possessor topicalisation, control possessor reflexivisation, and launch floated quantifiers. In other languages as well, a number of syntactic tests distinguish marked objects and unmarked objects, with the marked object displaying a larger number of properties associated with core arguments. We suggest that in these languages, marked and unmarked objects bear different grammatical functions. Our proposal is cast within the framework of Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG), which distinguishes between the primary object OBJ and the secondary or semantically restricted object OBJθ (Bresnan and Kanerva 1989).
These two types of objects are usually discussed in connection with double object constructions, but in many languages, both types are available in single object constructions as well, with the choice between them determined by their information structure role.

As mentioned above, many analyses of DOM assume two distinct positions for objects, VP-internal and VP-external, and posit a correlation between the position of the object and grammatical marking (Diesing 1992, Dobrovie-Sorin 1994, van Geenhoven 1998, Torrego 1998, Ritter and Rosen 2001, Woolford 1999, 2000, 2001, de Hoop and Malchukov 2007, among others). Issues of word order and the positions of objects have been studied thoroughly within the LFG framework by Butt and King (1996), Choi (1999) and many other researchers: their work has clearly shown that information structure role can be relevant for word order constraints, and that information structure has a strong effect on where objects can appear. However, we do not posit a direct relation between DOM and phrase structure position in all languages, because at least in some of the languages we analyse there is no obvious connection between the position of the object and its grammatical marking. More generally, we do not assume that grammatical functions or information structure roles must be identified configurationally. LFG analyses grammatical functions as syntactic primitives, and does not define them in terms of phrase structure position. Positional generalisations concerning the behaviour of different grammatical functions or arguments bearing different information-structure roles can be easily modelled within LFG’s projection architecture (Kaplan 1987, Asudeh 2006), which allows constraints to refer to and relate different aspects of the structure of an utterance.

Diachrony and grammaticalisation

Our analysis also provides a diachronic explanation for why referential semantic features such as animacy, definiteness, and specificity often play a role in DOM. We propose that these features are involved in grammaticalisation of topichood.

Abundant diachronic evidence shows that DOM often originates as a marking device for topics. We take this situation to be historically primary. One possible direction of change involves widening of topical marking, where marking spreads to certain nontopical objects. In a language with topical object marking, the marking can generalise or extend, applying to nontopical objects which have features typical of topics. When this happens, marking patterns become automatic consequences of distinctions at other levels of structure. As a result, the role of information structure in object marking is diminished: marking is obligatory not only for topical objects, but also for objects with certain semantic features, independent of their information structure role.

The opposite direction of change involves narrowing of topical marking: marking becomes specialised for topics which bear certain semantic features. In the relevant languages, only a subset of topical objects are formally marked, while nontopical objects remain unmarked. Narrowing usually involves the most typical members of the set. Objects ranked high on the prominence hierarchies are frequent topics, so topical marking can become restricted to them.
At the next stage of grammaticalisation, the connection to information structure may be completely lost, so that object marking becomes dependent on semantic features alone.

Thus, we propose that different patterns of DOM arise as a result of different directions of grammaticalisation of topic marking on objects. Features that are typical of topics come to be required, or sufficient, for object marking.

Limits of our analysis

Our theory of DOM does not extend to all instances of variable marking of objects. Since we are interested in differences in interpretation that depend on the presence or absence of grammatical marking, we only consider languages where a subset of objects is grammatically marked (by either case or agreement), while another subset receives no marking at all, as in the examples cited above. We will not address those instances of DOM where objects can take two alternative casemarkers, as attested, for example, in Icelandic (North Germanic). /EXAMPLE OMITTED/ The Icelandic accusative-dative alternation has been reported to reflect a semantic contrast: in (14a) the scratching is perceived as a forceful act of violence, possibly painful for the patient participant, while in (14b) the interpretation involves volitionality on the part of the patient. In other languages, such as Russian (Slavic) or Finnish, the case of the object differs depending on aspectual characteristics of the verb. As interesting as such instances may be, we believe that they deserve separate treatment and do not fall under the same generalisations as DOM in languages which contrast formally marked and unmarked objects.

The focus of this book is the grammatical function of object. We limit the scope of our study to object marking — casemarking or agreement — in order to more fully explore the relation between the presence and absence of marking and the status of object arguments at different levels of linguistic representation. We exclude languages where some patient/themes are not syntactic objects at all, but participate in various de-transitivising constructions, and may remain syntactically unexpressed or incorporated into the verb. In other words, we only deal with proper syntactic arguments. In this way, our work differs from some previous research on DOM such as, for example, Næss (2004), which treats alternative encodings of patient/theme arguments independently of their syntactic status.

Furthermore, our analysis does not address the distribution of verbal clitics or incorporated pronouns, although in many languages they are associated with some but not all objects, as discussed by Bresnan and Mchombo (1987) for Chichewa (Central Bantu), Culy (2000) for Takelma (Penutian), Bowern (2004) for Bardi (Nyulnyulan), Donohue (2004) for Tukang Besi (Austronesian), and Jaeger and Gerassimova (2002) and Jaeger (2004) for Bulgarian (Slavic), among others.
The status of object markers in a number of Bantu languages is debatable (see, for example, Seidl and Dimitriadis 1997 and Morimoto 2002 on Swahili, and Woolford 2001 on Ruwund), so we will not discuss such languages unless we can demonstrate that the marking on the verb is actually agreement marking and not pronominal incorporation (see Bresnan and Mchombo 1987 and Chapter 2, Section 2.6 for detailed discussion of this issue).

We also limit our scope to the examination of nominative-accusative languages, and have little to say about languages with an ergative-absolutive case-marking system, where the object is absolutive. Malchukov (2006) notes that DOM is more typical of nominative-accusative systems, and proposes a principle of argument marking that holds of both types of languages: languages tend to avoid manipulation of the casemarking of the unmarked argument, i.e. the nominative argument in nominative-accusative systems, and the absolutive argument in ergative-absolutive systems. Deemphasis of the absolutive object tends to give rise to voice alternations such as antipassive, rather than case alternations. We do not take a stand here on whether this view is correct, but the fact remains that DOM is more frequent in nominative-accusative languages, and we will concentrate on such languages in this book.