DIFFERENTIAL OBJECT MARKING: THE CASE OF BASQUE DIALECTS

I. Introduction: Certain southwestern Basque dialects seem to display Differential Object Marking (DOM) (Bossong 1991, Aissen 2001), since they show a non-canonical way of assigning case and agreement to animate direct objects of transitive predicates (Fernández & Rezac 2012). In these varieties, instead of the canonical absolutive (1), animate direct objects bear dative case and trigger dative agreement (2), as indirect objects do (3).

II. Proposal: In this talk I propose that, in Basque DOM varieties, animate objects bear an ‘animate feature’ that makes them move to a higher position from which they can only check structural dative case and agreement against the functional head T_{DAT} – those moved objects are no longer able to check absolutive case and agreement against \( v \).

III. The ‘animate feature’ triggers scrambling of animate objects: animate objects contain an ‘animate feature’ that distinguishes them from inanimate objects. This ‘animate feature’ is a morpho-semantic feature such as the ‘WH feature’ or the ‘focus feature’ and it triggers movement whenever an animate object appears in the derivation. Given that the DOM object does not c-command the subject, I assume that the scrambling movement triggered by the ‘animate feature’ can be very short, moving the object out of the VP to some other phrase internal to the vP – see López (2012) for a similar approach for Spanish, Hindi-Urdu, Persian, Kiswahili, Romanian and German DOM. The main evidence indicating a movement for Basque DOM objects comes from non-standard double dative constructions, where the DOM objects precedes the indirect object (4), rather than following it as in standard double object constructions (5).

IV. Scrambling of animate objects results in dative case and agreement checking: When case and agreement checking takes place, animate objects are no longer in their base-generated position, and as a result, they do not check absolutive case and agreement against the light verb \( v \) as inanimate objects do, but rather dative case and agreement against a higher functional head. Conversely, since inanimate objects do not move, they check absolutive case and agreement at the point at which case and agreement checking takes place – this implies that case and agreement checking takes place quite late in the syntactic derivation, at least after the required movement of the ‘animate feature’ has occurred (Bhatt 2006).

V. Animate objects check dative case and agreement against T_{DAT}: At least in some dialects, DOM objects can only occur in finite contexts; there are no dative marked animate objects in non-finite contexts lacking agreement markers (6). Hence, it seems reasonable to think that the functional head in charge of checking dative case and agreement against animate objects is a dative head containing T’s properties related to the finiteness of the auxiliary verb. I suggest that this functional head that checks structural dative case may be T_{DAT}. Additional evidence supporting the structural nature of dative case in DOM objects is provided by the impossibility to have DOM objects inside small clauses like causative constructions (7). It seems that, in these varieties, DOM objects have to be in a specific position to be structurally licensed. Those animate
objects that are inside small clauses do not check dative case and agreement, whereas those that are in a position with no intervening elements between them and the functional head, do check dative case and agreement. The fact that DOM objects are the objects that trigger agreement in double dative constructions (4) also corroborates the assumption that dative case and agreement are related in DOM objects, and as a consequence, that case licensing in these objects is structural rather than inherent.

VI. Examples:

(1) Ni-k zu-Ø ikusi z-a-it-u-t
    I_E you_A see 2A-ep-2pl-root-1sgE
    ‘I saw you’

(2) Ni-k zu-ri ikusi d-i-zu-t
    I_E you_D see expl-(root)-DF-2D-1sgE
    ‘I saw you’

(3) Ni-k zu-ri liburua-Ø eman d-i-zu-t
    I_E you_D book_A give expl(3A)-(root)-DF-2D-1sgE
    ‘I gave the book’

(4) Ni-k umie-ri amama-ri eruan d-i-e-t
    I_E children_D grandmother_DAT carry expl-(root)-DF-3plD-1sgE
    ‘I carried the children to the grandmother’

(5) Ni-k amama-ri umiak-Ø eruan d-i-zki-o-t
    I_E grandmother_D children_A carry expl(3A)-(root)-DF-3plA-3sgD-1sgE
    ‘I carried the children to the grandmother’

(6) a. *Zu-ri ikustera etorri d-a
    you_D see come expl(3A)-root
    ‘He came to see you’

   b. Zu-ri ikustera etorri j-a-t-zu
    you_D see come expl(3A)-(root)-ep-DF-2D
    ‘He came to see you’

(7) a. *Ama-k umia-ri ekarr-arazi d-i-o
    mum_E child_D bring-caus expl-(root)-DF-3sgD-3sgE
    ‘The mum has made bring the child’

   b. Ama-k umia-Ø ekarr-arazi d-au
    mum_E child-A bring-caus expl(3A)-root-(3sgE)
    ‘The mum has made bring the child’

VII. Selected references:


