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Components of the nominal (“animacy”) hierarchy

Animacy hierarchy

human > animate nonhuman > inanimate

Person hierarchy

local persons > 3rd person [local persons= 1st and 2nd, i.e. participants in the discourse]

(There is no universal hierarchical difference between 1st and 2nd persons, although individual languages may have such a difference)

Definiteness hierarchy

pronoun > name > definite > specific indefinite > nonspecific

(This is a little different from the discussion in the textbook, where definiteness is not mentioned in the discussion of “animacy”. However, it is noted that pronouns and proper names are not inherently more animate. The relation with definiteness is that the reference of a pronoun is more fixed than that of a proper name, and the reference of a proper name is more fixed than that of an ordinary definite NP.)

The Relational Hierarchy

usually said to be:

subject > direct object > indirect object > oblique

but can be decomposed into more basic hierarchies:

core arguments (SUBJ, OBJ, OBJ_{indirect}) > noncore arguments (OBL)

thematically unrestricted (SUBJ, OBJ) > thematically restricted (OBJ_{indirect}, OBL)

subject > object [or maybe subject > non-subject]

For our purposes, we will refer to the last of these as the Relational Hierarchy

The Thematic Hierarchy

includes:

Agent > Patient

Harmonic Alignment

The top of a binary prominence hierarchy (such as the relational hierarchy) most naturally aligns with the top of another prominence hierarchy. Similarly, the bottom of a binary hierarchy most naturally aligns with the bottom of another hierarchy. (In other words, prominence properties tend to go together.) These natural alignments can be said to be **harmonic**. The farther on the hierarchy one gets from the most harmonic alignment, the less natural the combination is. In traditional work on typology, comparative naturalness is called

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markedness, with the most natural combination being the least **marked** and the least natural being the most marked. Alignment of hierarchies can account for many phenomena in syntax. For example, the fact that Agents are realized in the syntax as subjects and Patients as objects can be seen as the result of harmonically aligning the Relational Hierarchy with the Thematic Hierarchy.

If we align the Relational Hierarchy with the nominal hierarchies, we get the following markedness hierarchies (or harmonic scales). (In the formal notation, we use the symbol “>” to mean “is more harmonic than” or “is less marked than”.)

Su/Hum > Su/Anim > Su/Inan

human subjects are unmarked / animate (nonhuman) subjects are intermediate / inanimate subjects are marked

Su/Local > Su/3

local subjects are unmarked / 3rd person subjects are marked

Su/Pron > Su/PN > Su/Def > Su/Spec > Su/NSpec

pronominal subjects are unmarked / proper-noun subjects are a little more marked / definite subjects are a little more marked / indefinite specific subjects are a little more marked / nonspecific subjects are the most marked

Oj/Inan > Oj/Anim > Oj/Hum

inanimate objects are unmarked / animate objects are intermediate / human objects are marked

Oj/3 > Oj/Local

3rd person objects are unmarked / local objects are marked

Oj/NSpec > Oj/Spec > Oj/Def > Oj/PN > Oj/Pron

nonspecific objects are unmarked / indefinite specific objects are a little more marked / definite objects are a little more marked / proper-noun objects are a little more / pronominal objects are the most marked

In differential marking, we can say that a language draws a line along one of these markedness hierarchies, and marks arguments only if they are less harmonic than the point at which the line is drawn. For example, Hebrew draws a line between Oj/Spec and Oj/Def; above the line there is no **תא**, below the line **תא** is used. Turkish, on the other hand, draws it one position higher. This is why specific indefinite objects are not marked with Case in Hebrew but are in Turkish.

In nominative-accusative languages, only the object-related scales matter, since there is no way to mark subjects, but in ergative languages two scales may be involved, and since they are separate scales the lines may be drawn differently for the two. For example, in Ritharngu what matters for marking the subject is whether or not it is a pronoun (so the line is drawn between Su/Pron and Su/PN) while what matters for objects is whether or not they are inanimate (so the line is drawn between Oj/Inan and Oj/Anim).