

Topic or Aspect: Functional heads, features & the grammaticization of events

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In recent years, there have been a number of attempts to explain how and to what extent event information is encoded in syntactic structure. Proponents of the view that event information is encoded in the syntax (including Borer, van Hout, Kratzer, Manzini & Savoia, Ramchand, Ritter & Rosen, Travis) have all assumed that it is the functional categories within the extended projection of the predicate that encode such information, but they differ on their views of what specifically is encoded, and how. Building on our own previous work, we provide new evidence that if event information is grammaticized, it is encoded in the functional heads responsible for licensing subjects and direct objects. Specifically, there is a connection between subjects and agency and/or between direct objects and termination because the functors responsible for these grammatical relations are specified for particular formal features when their specifiers participate in agentive or delimited events, respectively. This constitutes a departure from our own previous claims that languages could not grammaticize both delimitation and agency. Moreover, if languages can grammaticize agency, delimitation or both agency and delimitation, we

suggest that alternatively they can grammaticize neither, and that this is precisely what is going on in highly topic prominent languages.

We propose that Li & Thompson's classic typology of subjects and topics should be recast as a typology of discourse determined versus event determined organization of the clause. Extending our approach to subjects and objects, we provide a principled explanation for the observation that topic prominent languages typically lack agreement, and are frequently verb final.

Reasonably there needs to be some basic organizing principle that determines how the pieces of a sentence are put together. Observationally, there are two possibilities: the discourse – what it is you're talking about, and what you have to say on the topic; and the event you're describing – who is doing what to whom. In the first case, the relationship between the topic, the most prominent DP in the clause, and what follows is unpredictable; the topic may bear any thematic role in the event denoted by the verb¹. In the second case, the clause is structured around the verb and its arguments, and the interpretation of the most prominent DP, the subject is predictable, given the meaning of the verb.

We suggest that topic phrases are licensed in Spec, TopP, and that the head of this projection has no functional features. The claim that Top lacks features permits an

¹ See Shi (2000) for arguments that topics are always related to a position inside the comment, i.e. there are no dangling topics which are merged in Spec, TopP.

explanation of the following facts: (i) TopP is completely optional (there are no features to check); (ii) there is no topic agreement (again, there are no features); and (iii) whenever TopP is present an XP moves into its Spec (if the head is empty the Spec must be filled). Topic oriented languages have a discourse organization. Subjects and objects, on the other hand, are licensed in functional projections whose heads have event-related semantic content. We assume that the phi and case features of the subject are checked in Spec, TP, following Chomsky (2001), and those of the object are checked in Spec, AspP, following Travis (2000).

A simple event is initiated when an agent performs some action. In languages that grammaticize event initiation, Tense carries information about agency, and only agentive subjects check their phi/case features in Spec, TP. Non-agentive subjects either have no phi features (more precisely no person features), or they check their features elsewhere. The result is subject splits based upon person or animacy, since prototypical agentive subjects are animate or human (Dowty 1991). The claim, then, is that languages that have subject splits along the lines of agency and person, are languages that grammaticize event initiation.

Similarly, in languages that grammaticize event delimitation, (Inner) Aspect carries this information, and only objects that delimit the event check their phi/case features in Spec, AspP, (Travis 2000). Objects of non-delimited predicates either fail to check their features or check them *in situ*. This leads to object splits on the basis of

delimitation, but also on the basis of properties of the object, including specificity or definiteness. Languages with object splits based upon aspect and specificity are languages that grammaticize event initiation.

Our approach is minimalist in that we assume only those functional projections which have independent semantic motivation, i.e. projections of temporal functors, Tense and Aspect, and a discourse-determined functor, Topic. Additionally, we assume that the feature content of these heads is minimal—spatio-temporal features as required for Tense and Aspect, (perhaps along the lines of proposals by Demirdache & Uribe-Etxebarria), and, in some languages, these functors may or must also bear phi & case features. An analysis of the content of Tense and Aspect will determine whether a given language grammaticizes event initiation and/or delimitation. Topic is fundamentally different from Tense and Aspect in two important respects (i) it is optional and (ii) it lacks phi and case features. These differences are due to its distinct function: Topic provides information about the structure of the discourse, not the event. Cross-linguistic variation in the content of Tense and Aspect is attributed to variation in the feature content of these heads. Similarly, variation in the use of topics is related to the degree to which event information is grammaticized.