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A functional approach to differential indexing: combining perspectives from typology and corpus linguistics

Just, E.C.

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Chapter 1

General introduction

[Agreement is] a quite intuitive notion which is nonetheless surprisingly difficult to delimit with precision. (Anderson 1992: 103)

This thesis is concerned with bound markers expressing argument features and mostly found on verbs. I will later cease from using the term *agreement* and use *indexing* instead. However, when this work was initiated, it was intended to be an exploration of agreement domains, i.e. of the syntactic environments in which verbal agreement occurs (Corbett 2006). I was very convinced of the first part of the statement above, but somewhat naive about the second part. Agreement is a widespread phenomenon in the languages of the world, and it has been ascribed a crucial role in the encoding of participants. Almost every grammar or grammar sketch addresses it (even if the language does not have it, in which case it has to be stated that it is not there, in response to some unspoken expectations on the part of the reader).

However, trying to delimit agreement with arguments, even for individual languages, turned out to be difficult. The following quotes are a digest of some of the accounts that raised my awareness in this regard:

1. Under, as yet, unclear circumstances, [subject] agreement *may be suppressed in certain uses* [...]. Object marking is, *generally, not* part of the Gta? verbal structure with one exception: the verbal plural marker *har-* can refer to objects in certain of its uses. (Anderson 2008: 723, emphasis mine)

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2. [In Kesawai, t]he object suffixes are *obligatory* for human referents [...] and *optional* with other highly animate referents [...]. Lower animates such as aine ‘fish’ and inanimates are *not usually* indicated by object suffixes. (Priestley 2008: 314, emphasis mine)
3. Object marking on the verb is *optional*¹ in Ndengeleko. (Ström 2013: 217, emphasis mine)
4. -PR [the pronominal enclitic] sometimes occurs in the other position, i.e. not where the ‘common pattern’ puts it [...] That discourse considerations affect -PR placement is likely, but what are these? [...] It may have to do with general phonological wellformedness, i.e. how the sentence sounds—in its (pragmatic?) discourse context. [...] -PR can attach to some words [...] under extreme (rhetorical) conditions, words they do not attach to in ‘ordinary sentences’. (Zide 1997: 325–326, no emphasis necessary)

In light of such descriptions, the question arose of how to account for inter-linguistic variation of the syntactic extent of a phenomenon which exhibited intra-linguistic variation to such a degree. I deemed it appropriate to address the latter, i.e. to start by dealing with language-internal variation, before going into a cross-linguistic overview of language-internal variation.

As some of the quotations 1–4 indicate, agreement in many languages is extremely susceptible to discourse-pragmatic realities and/or referential features. And why shouldn’t it be, considering that agreement is not assumed to be a priori associated with the syntactic status of an argument like subject or object, but arises out of topic agreement (Givón 1976): it is employed to facilitate the access towards topical referents, irrespective of the grammatical relations or argument roles (Lehmann 1982, Givón 1983, Siewierska 1997). Two consequences relevant for the present work result from this. Firstly, coding splits in verbal agreement which are triggered by discourse-pragmatic circumstances or referential features are very common in the world’s languages; thus, agreement can in many languages best be accounted for by referring to tendencies rather than rules. Secondly, agreement grammaticalizes for A referents (or subjects) more easily than for P referents (or objects), in the sense

¹This quote is used representatively for all the optional cases of agreement out there.

that it becomes syntactically obligatory (Siewierska 1999), because the subject relation is more strongly associated with topicality than the object relation (Chafe 1976, Li & Thompson 1976, Kibrik 2011: 55).

As will be elaborated on in Section 2.1, dealing with coding splits from a typological point of view is difficult if one maintains the structural implications the term *agreement entails*. Therefore, the more neutral term *indexing* (Haspelmath 2013) will be used in what follows to refer to any kind of bound referent marking, irrespective of the language-specific constructions or criteria relevant for its occurrence. In this context of syntactic impartiality, it is also more fruitful to work with the concept of macroroles instead of grammatical relations of subject and object, as will be outlined below in Section 2.3.

Coding splits involving indexing are labelled *differential indexing*, i.e. instances of *differential marking* (Witzlack-Makarevich & Seržant 2018) in analogy to the more familiar concept of differential case marking (Bossong 1982, Aissen 2003, Hoop & Malchukov 2008). Differential indexing has received substantial attention with regard to objects (or P, T and G arguments), but less regarding subjects (or S and A arguments). However, with differential object indexing, up until now, there are not many investigations which back up qualitative observations with quantitative data (some notable exceptions are, for instance, Seidl & Dimitriadis 1997 and García-Miguel 2015). This fact presents a shortcoming, as the preference for one structure over another based on tendencies rather than grammatical rules can be best accounted for on the basis of extensive annotation of large enough language corpora (cf. Schikowski 2013).

Additionally, the main focus of previous research on this topic has been the presence (for objects) or the absence (for subjects) of indexing, but the examination of *variable placement* of indexes in languages where there seems to be free variation with regard to the host of an index has been relatively neglected (but see Cysouw 2003).

The following objectives for this dissertation arise from these considerations:

1. to showcase examples of the complex interaction of variables (e.g. discourse-pragmatic or semantic) triggering differential indexing, based on quantitatively analyzed corpus data

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2. to illustrate out that differential indexing is not merely about the absence and presence of marking but can involve variable placement of the index as well
3. to address the question whether differential indexing is formally and functionally different for different argument roles across languages

This thesis consists of four articles and a chapter providing the theoretical background, as well as a chapter with a summary and conclusions. Two of the articles, *A corpus-based analysis of P indexing in Ruuli* (Chapter 3) and *Differential object indexing in Maltese – a corpus-based pilot study* (Chapter 4), address the first objective and contain corpus-based case studies of two unrelated languages, Ruuli (Bantu) and Maltese (Semitic), which present, at first glance, two similar cases of differential P indexing. In both languages, there is a strong correlation of differential indexing and constituent order, and the phenomenon has been connected to topicality.² However, as the descriptive models used in the studies show, the high-order interaction of relevant variables for indexing in the languages are different. The two studies strengthen the claims that have been suggested by previous qualitative investigations and help to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay of the different variables involved. Thus, they also illustrate that it would be inadequate to look for hard and fast rules as to when P indexing occurs in a language which displays some optionality with regard to indexing.

The third paper *Variable index placement in Gutob from a typological perspective* (Chapter 5) also encompasses a corpus-based case study, but it deals not only with the occurrence, but also with the placement of indexes. Gutob (Munda), the language under investigation, displays what is referred to as variable index placement: indexes, for S/A referents in this case, can attach to the predicate, but also to any other constituent in the clause. This behavior has been ascribed to exceptional discourse configurations in previous accounts. However, as this study shows, non-verbal index placement is anything but exceptional in terms of frequency. As for its function, the analysis accounts for the particular discourse effect index placement can have on the host of the index, showing that indexing can not only be sensitive to discourse, but be employed actively to structure it.

²To be more precise, this has been done for Maltese (Fabri 1993), as well as for other Bantu languages (e.g. Bresnan & Mchombo 1987, Ngoboka & Zeller 2017, Zerbian 2006 Creissels 2005); the present case study is the first study that addresses differential indexing in Ruuli.

The fourth paper, *A structural and functional comparison of differential A and P indexing* (Chapter 6) addresses the issue that differential A indexing has been somewhat neglected in the typological study of differential marking, as opposed to differential P indexing. It compares differential P indexing with differential A indexing and observes many similarities. It suggests that indexing should be considered to be functionally different from flagging, as it is motivated by referent tracking in discourse, irrespective of the argument role, and this explains the parallel (rather than mirror-image) behaviour of differential A and P indexing.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: Section 2.1 deals more in-depth with the notion of indexing and the considerations that make it preferable over agreement. Section 2.2 elaborates on differential marking, and addresses the phenomena which can be subsumed under what I generally refer to as differential indexing. After that, Section 2.3 briefly explains the choice of argument roles, before Section 2.4 completes the theoretical background with some considerations on information structure relevant for this thesis. Chapters 3–6 provide the four articles, and Chapter 7 provides a general discussion and concludes the thesis.