Language, Learning and Writing Assignment 2

This essay will discuss how to identify the grammatical functions of a language. This can be done through exploring:

- Word order
- Verb agreement
- Case system

Word order is useful in identifying grammatical function in languages with a fixed word order (Kroeger, 2005). For example in English, a verb is always preceded by the subject and followed by the object. For example, “I see him” – you can identify “I” as the subject of the sentence as it precedes the verb “see” and you can identify “him” as the object because it follows “see”. However, this is less useful for languages with flexible word orders, and so we must look elsewhere to identify the grammatical function.

Verb agreement allows us to do this. Verb agreement is where the “form of the verb reflects the person, number, and/or gender of one or more argument” (Kroeger, 2005). The argument is almost always the subject or the object(s). An example of verb agreement would be the following table of French:

French			Gloss
Je	mange	le pomme	1SG eat.PRES DEF.apple
Tu	manges	le pomme	2SG eat.PRES DEF.apple
Il/Elle	mange	le pomme	3SG eat.PRES DEF.apple
Nous	mangeons	le pomme	1PL eat.PRES DEF.apple

Vous	mangez	le pomme	2PL eat.PRES DEF.apple
Ils/Elles	mangent	le pomme	3PL eat.PRES DEF.apple

The form of the verb “manger” (“to eat”) alters to agree with the subject. You can tell that the words that precede the verb are the subjects of each phrase because when you interchange them, the form of the verb also changes. Whereas “le pomme” remains unchanged while the rest of the phrase changes, and it is thus the object as there is no verb agreement.

Case is a marking on a noun which helps us identify its function within a sentence (Kroeger, 2005). There are 2 main case systems that we use to identify grammatical function, depending on which system a language uses:

- Nominative-Accusative
    - In a Nominative-Accusative case system, the personal pronoun or case marking of the subject remains the same, regardless of whether the clause is transitive or intransitive and direct objects appear in a different form (Kroeger, 2005). An example of this is in English, where a subject like “I” or “she” is the subject of a transitive **or** intransitive clause, it always appears as such. However, when a subject like this is the object of a transitive clause, it becomes “me” or “her”.
- Ergative-Absolutive
    - However, when a language is Ergative-Absolutive, direct objects of transitive clauses take the same form as subjects of intransitive clauses, and subjects of transitive clauses take a different form (Kroeger, 2005).

There are also 3 semantic case systems:

- Genitive case – case markings which illustrate possession.
- Locative case – case markings which illustrate location.
- Instrumental case – case markings which illustrate the instrument.

I will now, using the above points, discuss how grammatical functions are identified in Yidiny, an Australian Aboriginal language, through its case system.

Note: Treat the endings -du, -bu and -ngu as allophones/variants of the same morpheme.

1. *yinu* ***wagu:ja*** *galin.*
   this *man.??* *go.PRES*
   'This man is going'

In this sentence, *wagu:ja* is the subject of the intransitive verb *galin*, which suggests it may be nominative or absolutive.

2. ***muja:m-bu*** ***wagu:ja*** *wawal.*
   mother-?? *man.??* *look.at.PRES*
   'Mother is looking at the man'

Muja:m-bu is the subject of the transitive verb *wawal* and *wagu:ja* is the direct object. *Wagu:ja* is marked by the same case as the previous sentence where it is the subject of an intransitive verb, suggesting that it is in the absolutive case and thus suggesting *muja:m-bu* is ergative.

3. ***waga:l-du*** ***mujam*** *wawal*

   wife-?? *mother.??* *look.at.PRES*

   ‘(My) wife is looking at mother’

Waga:l-du is the subject of the transitive verb *wawal* and *mujam* is the direct object of the transitive verb. *Mujam* appears in a different form to the previous sentence, where it was the subject of the transitive verb and was in the ergative case. This suggests that it may be absolutive, thus making *waga:l-du* ergative. The suffix *-du* would suggest that *-du* is a possessive case marker.

4. ***waguja-ngu*** ***wagal*** *bunjan* ***banga:l-da****.*

   man-?? *wife.??* *hit.PAST* *axe-??*

   ‘This man hit (his) wife with (the back of) an axe’

Waguja-ngu is the subject of the transitive verb *bunjan*. It has a different case marking to how it appeared in sentence 1, when it was the subject of an intransitive verb. This suggests it is in the ergative case. *Wagal* is the direct object of the transitive verb, and while it appears in a different form, this is because it has lost its genitive case marker, and so it can be assumed that it is absolutive to compliment the ergative subject. *Banga:l-da* is the instrument of the subject, and thus we can assume that *-da* is an instrumental case marker. It is also the secondary object of the transitive verb

5. ***galna:-n[gu]*** ***bangal*** *budi:jin.*

   uncle_?? *axe.??* *keep.PRES*

   ‘Uncle usually keeps (lit: puts down) an axe around’

Galna:-n[gu] is the subject of the transitive verb *budi:jin*. *Bangal* is the object of the transitive verb but appears differently to the previous sentence. This is because it lacks the instrumental case marker *-da*, as it is not an instrument in this sentence.

6. *nanyji* ***mayi*** ***galna:-nda*** *wiwi:na.*
   1PL food.?? uncle-?? give.PRES
   'We must give some food to uncle'

Nanyji is the subject of the transitive verb. *Mayi* is the direct object of the transitive verb. *Galna:-nda* is the secondary object and the recipient of the transitive verb. It has a different form to how it appeared in the previous sentence where it acted as the subject of the transitive verb, and thus we can deduce that in this sentence *galna:-nda* is accusative and thus *mayi* is nominative.

This also means that in the previous sentence *galna:-n[gu]* is nominative, and therefore *bangal* is accusative.

7. ***muja:m-bu*** ***waga:lni*** ***guda:ga*** *wawal.*
   mother-?? wife-?? dog.?? look.at.PRES
   'Mother is looking at (my) wife's dog'

Muja:m-bu in this sentence is the subject of the transitive verb *wawal*. It appears in the same form as sentence 2 and 3 where it acted as subject of a transitive verb and object of a transitive verb, respectively. This means that it is ergative. This means

that *guda:*ga is in the absolutive case. *Waga:lni* is the possessor of the direct object *guda:ga*, and is in the genitive case with the case marking *-ni*.

In conclusion, according to the data above, Yidiny is an ergative-absolutive system. The form of the subject of an intransitive verb matches that of the direct object of a transitive verb. However, the form of the subject of a transitive verb, does not match that of the direct object of a transitive verb nor the form of the subject of the intransitive verb.

Bibliography

Kroeger, P. R. (2005). *Analyzing Grammar: An Introduction.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

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