WHAT ARE S, A, AND O?

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ABSTRACT

The letters S, A, and O have been used heuristically for distinguishing ergative-absolutive languages from nominative-accusative languages. This schema, however, has serious disadvantages for the understanding of individual grammars and even more for broad typological work, because it obscures the incommensurable ways in which participants may be related to events or states. Three of these ways are described here and their incommensurability demonstrated. One is the starting point function, reflected in grammatical subjects; another consists of the semantic roles that are reflected in grammaticized agent-patient marking; the third is immediacy of involvement, reflected in absolutive marking. These relations may be cognitively available to speakers of all languages, and are often grammaticized in different parts of the grammar of a single language. Now that more is known about ways in which languages vary, it is time to sharpen our tools so that we may move on to understanding the forces that shape the grammatical structures we find.

The letters S, A, and O were originally introduced into linguistics as a way of explaining the nature of an ergative language to speakers of English (Dixon 1968, 1972). S was defined as the subject of an intransitive verb. A as the subject of a transitive verb, and O as the object of a transitive verb. These three relations have since come to be widely accepted as a basis for assigning languages to major types, as noted for example by Blake (1994), Palmer (1994), and Comrie (1978, 1989) (where P replaces O). It has been suggested that the world contains just two basic language types defined in this way: nominative-accusative languages in which ‘S and A naturally group together’ as subjects and absolutive-ergative languages which ‘link S and O’ as absolutes (Dixon 1994: 6).
There is certainly a sense in which the presence of S, A, and O in all languages may seem uncontroversial. It follows from the observation that 'all languages distinguish between clauses that involve a verb and one core noun phrase ... and those that involve a verb and two or more core NPs' (Dixon 1994: 6). If there is only one core noun phrase, it is an S. If there are two, they are an A and an O. Some languages choose to align the S with the A, others with the O.

Given the apparent obviousness of this picture, as well as its wide acceptance, it may seem strange to question it. Yet what S, A, and O actually represent is still unsettled, as is their suitability for assigning languages to types. As originally defined, for example, S, A, and O assumed the universality of subjects and objects, and although some might still accept that assumption, not all have found it satisfying (Mithun 1991a and Chafe 1994 among others). More recently, in fact, Dixon has proposed that 'for any discussion of universal grammar, it is most useful to take S, A and O as the basic grammatical relations, and to define "subject" ... in terms of them' (Dixon 1994: 7). If one proceeds in this way there must of course be some other basis for distinguishing the A from the O of a transitive clause, since they cannot then be defined as the subject and object. Recognizing this need, Dixon continues, 'There is always a semantic basis for the assignment of A and O relations, and it relates to the prototypical meaning of the verb used'.

Thus the subject and object of a transitive clause are distinguished on semantic grounds, while the subject of an intransitive clause is defined by default: it is the only core argument available for that role. In what follows it will be proposed that if we look more deeply into the different kinds of distinctions on which case marking is based, a more coherent account that dispenses with S, A, and O is possible.

Behind discussions of case and grammatical relations is the assumption of a basic dichotomy. On one side are ideas of referents (people, objects, abstractions); on the other are ideas of the events and states in which those referents participate. Ideas of referents are often characterized by persistence in active consciousness, as evidenced by their recurrence over stretches of discourse. Ideas of events, in contrast, typically occupy a shorter time span in active consciousness, reflecting the shorter time span typical of events themselves (Givón 1984: 51–52; Langacker 1987; Chafe 1994: 65–69). Ideas of states are more complex in this regard. So far as states 'in the real world' are concerned, some are persistent like referents, while others are transient like events. Observations of language in use, however, suggest that ideas of states tend, for the most part, to be just as transient in active consciousness as ideas of events.

With this dichotomy of referents versus events and states as background, the point to be developed here is that referents can be related to the events or states in which they participate in several quite different and incommensurable ways. Each of these ways may be cognitively available no matter what language one speaks, reflecting universal possibilities of human thought. The important point here, however, is that particular languages have evolved so that some of them give grammatical marking to one kind of relation, others to another, and many to more than one, encoding different relations in different parts of their grammars.

The original purpose of the letters S, A, and O was as a tool for the identification of what are termed core relations. Many languages distinguish certain privileged participants in events or states, the core arguments, from others, termed obliques. Languages differ in the degree to which such a distinction is expressed formally and in the mechanisms used to express it. In English the relations of core participants to events are expressed by agreement and typical word order (subject before verb, object after), while the relations of oblique participants are indicated by prepositions. In Seneca and Yup’ik Eskimo, discussed below, core participants are specified by pronominal affixes on every verb (sometimes in addition to separate nominals), while obliques are not. A full consideration of the basis underlying this core/oblique distinction is beyond the scope of the present discussion, but it can be noted that core arguments generally share certain properties of discourse centrality (Mithun 1994).

Though a number of relations may exist between referents on the one hand and events or states on the other, certain kinds of core roles are encoded particularly often in grammar. Three will be examined here. First, a referent may be the starting point for expressing the idea of an event or state. Second a referent may play some semantic role in an event or state, for example as the agent of an action, as the patient of a state or change of state, or perhaps as a beneficiary. Third, a referent may be more or less immediately involved in an event or state. These three kinds of relations are distinct, though there are certain recurring associations among them; for example, there is a tendency for starting points to be agents. But such associations are only tendencies; thus, it is by no means rare for starting points to be patients. Each kind of relation can vary independently of the others. Because the starting point and agent-patient roles have been discussed at length else-
where, by us as well as others, we will treat them more briefly here and devote more space to the nature of immediate involvement and its relevance to what is commonly called the absolutive relation.

1. Starting points

A common kind of relation between referents and events or states, grammaticalized in a large number of languages, is the one that underlies grammatical subjects. Of all the relations under discussion here, it is perhaps easiest to attribute this one to purely structural or formal motivations. Yet it seems unlikely that something as clearly marked as subjecthood in a language like English would fail to perform an important function. As emphasized by Halliday, ‘The subject is not an arbitrary grammatical category; being the subject of a clause means something’ (1985: 73). Intuitions regarding this function have sometimes led to associations of subjects with ‘topics’, or ‘what a clause is about’. An early discussion of such proposals can be found in Jespersen (1924; 146). Lambrecht 1994 provides a more recent critical comparison of topicality, aboutness, and subjecthood. Chafe (1994: 82–92) uses the metaphor of a ‘starting point’ as a way of capturing the notion that a subject is the grammaticized expression of the referent a speaker uses as a point of departure for whatever is expressed by the rest of the clause.

This characterization of grammatical subjects as the expression of starting points is an intuitive one, but it is supported by the observation that in ordinary conversational language subjects can be observed to have various properties one might expect of starting points. Most subjects, for example, are given (judged to be already active in the listener’s consciousness), a smaller proportion are at least accessible (judged to be semi-active), and only a few are new (judged to be inactive), and then only under specific limited circumstances. In the sample of conversational language discussed in Chafe (1994: 85–91), for example, 81 percent of the subjects were given, 16 percent accessible, and 3 percent new. An already active referent obviously makes the best point of departure for adding something new. Furthermore, in conversational language subjects are usually identifiable (‘definite’) as well, and again we might expect a starting point to have this property. When there is a choice among participants in an event or state, speakers typically select as subjects first persons over second or third, humans over non-humans, animates over inanimates. In other words, people tend to start from their own point of view, or at least from the point of view of someone with whom they can easily empathize, another human. Agents are typically viewed as more natural starting points for transitive events than patients. None of the properties just listed determines in itself what will be a subject, but each contributes to a speaker’s preference when it comes to choosing a starting point. As with other functions that have come to be grammaticized, subjecthood can be observed to adhere more closely to its functional origins in ordinary conversation, less closely in certain styles of writing (Chafe 1991).

Starting points are determined by the flow of discourse, and their function can be understood only in a discourse context. There may be a tendency toward continuity of starting points within a topic (Chafe 1994: 120–136), but starting points may also shift and be interwoven, as subtopics within a larger topic are introduced and developed. The dynamics of this process can be illustrated with excerpts from a conversational topic that began as in (1), where the subjects are underlined. The preceding conversation had dealt with the unpleasantness of mosquitoes. Once the speaker had anchored this new topic to herself with the first person pronouns in (1a)–(1b), she introduced her parents as an isolated new referent in (1c). She then narrowed the referent to her father as the starting point in (1d)–(1f) and (1i), inserting a momentary contrast of her father with herself and her siblings in (1g). The you know in (1h) is of course a discourse marker with a frozen second person subject (Schiffrin 1987: 267–295).

(1) First segment of English conversation
   a. Well the only thing I’ve ever seen worse than mosquitoes is,
   b. once when I was about fourteen or so,
   c. my parents,
   d. my father likes to fish too.
   e. So he’d always take us off to Canada.
   f. He’d go fishing,
   g. and we’d get bored.
   h. You know.
   i. So he’d take us to some lake,
   j. in Quebec,
   k. way way up in Quebec.
Then came a shift to the idea of black flies, introduced as a new referent with the there construction in (2c), but fully categorized only by an interlocutor who is quoted in parentheses in (2e). After that it was possible to treat the flies repeatedly as a starting point in (1f)–(11).

(2) Second segment of English conversation
   a. And when we got there,
   b. there weren't any mosquitoes,
   c. but there were these little —
   d. I don't know what you call them,
   e. (Black flies.)
   f. Well they were teeny though.
   g. They were so small,
   h. they could come through the screen.
   i. Is that what they are?
   j. Black flies?

After telling how she herself had been bitten (omitted here), the speaker went on to activate the idea of what she called the native kids as an isolated referent in (3a)–(3b). The kids were then available as the starting point in (3c)–(3d) and again in (3k). Meanwhile their backs was introduced as another isolated referent in (3e), then abandoned temporarily in favor of the child who was introduced as a grammatical object in (3f). That idea was thus accessible as a starting point in (3g). The idea of the backs was retrieved as a starting point in (3i). The speaker easily returned to herself as a starting point when she inserted her epistemological evaluations in (3b), (3g)–(3h), and (3k).

(3) Third segment of English conversation
   a. And and some of the kids,
   b. the native kids I guess,
   c. that lived there all the time,
   d. they were out just in swimsuits or something,
   e. and their backs
   f. well after I saw one,
   g. I thought that he had leprosy or something.
   h. I didn't know,
   i. cause their backs were just a mess of welts,
   j. and open.
   k. You know cause I guess they scratched them?

The topic concluded with the segment in (4), beginning with the starting point it that referred to the entire experience just described. There was then a return to the father as a starting point in (4c)–(4d), and to the entire family in (4e)–(4f). Thus the speaker closed this topic by pulling together all the people who had been mentioned when it was first introduced in (1).

(4) Fourth segment of English conversation
   a. Oh it was awful.
   b. So the next day,
   c. my father packed us up,
   d. and he said,
   e. we'll go back to the old place.
   f. And we drove,
   g. you know,
   h. two days,
   i. in the opposite direction.

The example shows how easily starting points may shift as a topic proceeds, but also how their interweaving can shed light on topic subdivisions, as well as on the means by which new ideas may be activated with the there construction, as isolated referents, or as grammatical objects before they are available for the starting point role.

The function of subjects as the grammaticization of starting points is reflected in the areas of grammar in which subjects are encoded. It is not surprising, for example, to find that subjects are identified by nominative (often zero) case marking on nouns and pronouns; such forms identify a referent as playing a starting point role. In languages with fixed word order, the order is most commonly expressible in terms of subjects and objects (the latter to be discussed below). The orders in which the subject precedes the object (SOV, SVO, VSO) predominate over those in which it follows, in line with the starting point role. The category of subjection very often plays a pivotal role in clause-combining patterns: in many languages clauses are combined in relative, complement, and/or adverbial constructions only if they share a common starting point. However one may choose to view its function, this role has qualities quite distinct from those of other roles served by core arguments.
2. Agents and patients

One quite different kind of relation between a referent and an event or state has, somewhat surprisingly, often been overlooked or misunderstood: that involving semantic roles such as agent and patient. This lack of proper recognition may be due in part to the fact that this relation is not marked in a straightforward way in European languages. This fact may underlie 'unaccusative' analyses, for example, according to which grammatical agent-patient systems are reduced to subject-object systems where some clauses simply lack subjects. It is useful to note at this point the distinction between agent-patient systems, in which arguments are categorized grammatically according to their semantic roles, and active-stative systems, in which grammatical categorization reflects aspect (Mithun 1991b). Agent-patient patterns are substantially more common than active-stative patterns cross-linguistically, though they have not always been labeled clearly in the literature.

The Iroquoian languages provide useful illustrations of grammatical marking based on such relations. The following examples are from Seneca, spoken in western New York State, though any Iroquoian language would do equally well. The sentence in (5), excerpted from a Seneca folktale, illustrates the basic point.

(5) Seneca Folktale: Lena Snow, speaker
   a. Daʔdόγ sawagadόswεʔdεʔ
      tεʔ-dόh s-a-waʔ-kətəsweʔ-tiʔ-εʔ-ʔ
      impossible again-FACTUAL-1.PAT-cause.hunger-DATIVE-PFV
      weʔ-dόh
      wεʔ-tοh
      ever
      ‘I (PATIENT) won’t ever get hungry again,’
   b. gyoʔ-ε waʔ-a-geʔ.
      kyoʔ-tοh waʔ-yak-εʔ-ʔ
      HEARSAY FACTUAL-FEMININE.AGT-say-PFV
      she (AGENT) said.’

Two events are portrayed here: the quoted event of getting hungry and the event of saying something. In the English translation both ‘I’ and ‘she’ are subjects. In the Seneca version the referent translated as English ‘I’ is expressed with a grammatical patient prefix, whereas the referent translated ‘she’ is expressed with an agent prefix. The semantic bases of the two different Seneca case assignments are clear: getting hungry is a change of state, something that happens to someone, whereas saying something is an action a person performs.

The difference between these semantic relations and the discourse-based starting point relation encoded in English subjects can be seen by comparing the stretch of Seneca conversation in (6) with its English translation. Speaker A had been talking about a kind of root from which he liked to make tea.

(6) Seneca Conversation: Leland Hemlock and Stanley Huff, speakers
   a. A Agєγáʔ-has nєʔ niʔ.
      wak-kaʔ-h-as nєh niʔ
      1.PAT-like.taste-IMPFV HIGHLIGHT I
      ‘I (PATIENT) myself like the taste of it.’
   b. B εʔ-h.
      ‘Yes.’
   c. A Nєʔ niʔ i-wiʔ daʔ-awakngiʔ-gεʔ-h.
      nєʔ niʔ i-wiʔ teʔ-a-waʔ-niʔkєʔ-h-0
      HIGHLIGHT I I.think NEG-FACTUAL-1.PAT-forget-PFV
      ‘For my part, I don’t think I (PATIENT) will forget it.
   d. A oʔ-gadεnεʔ-ʔ.
      waʔ-k-atεnεʔ-
      FACTUAL-1.AGT-save-PFV
      I (AGENT) saved it,
   e. A odοʔ-hοʔ-φεʔ gεʔ-s  oʔ-gε-γοʔ
      otοʔ-φοʔ kεʔ-s waʔ-k-koʔ-
      lots habitually FACTUAL-1.AGT-pick-PFV
      ga-nyoʔ hi-gε-h.
      kanyoʔ hикε-h
      when that
      I (AGENT) picked lots of it at that time.’

Throughout the English translation the initial starting point is retained: the first person from whose point of view these things were being told. It is expressed consistently with the subject pronoun I. In the Seneca, by contrast, the same referent is expressed sometimes with a patient prefix (wa-), sometimes with an agent prefix (k-). In lines (6a) and (6c) the referent is
expressed with a patient prefix, reflecting its semantic role as patient, first in liking the taste of something and then in forgetting something. In lines (6d) and (6e), on the other hand, the same referent is expressed with an agent prefix reflecting its semantic agentive role, first in saving something and then in picking something. The bases of the English and Seneca markings are simply different.

The details of agent-patient-marking systems can vary, but all represent a categorization of referents according to the nature of their semantic roles in events and states. In general, referents treated as grammatical agents willfully instigate events over which they have control. Those treated as grammatical patients are typically not in control, but rather feel the effects of events that befall them or of states in which they find themselves. A fuller discussion of the precise semantic features underlying grammatical systems like these and the ways in which they vary from language to language can be found in Mithun 1991b.

As with starting points, the semantic basis of these relations is reflected in the areas of grammar in which we find them encoded. The agent and patient roles of participants are determined primarily by the inherent nature of the events or states themselves, not by discourse factors. One who gathers herbs or saves them is usually a semantic agent, while one who feels hunger or forgets things is usually a semantic patient. Not surprisingly, grammatical agent-patient patterns appear most often as part of the verb morphology, typically in pronominal affixes on verbs.

One might try to reconcile the nominative-accusative (subject-object) and grammatical agent-patient patterns, thereby retaining the S, A, and O schema, by partitioning the S relation into two subtypes: agentive subjects (S_a) and objective or patient subjects (S_o). Languages in which the S_a and S_o relations are distinguished — those with agent-patient patterns — can then be characterized as 'split S' systems. A serious drawback of this split S notion is the fact that it obscures the underlying unity of S_a and A, as well as the corresponding unity of S_o and O. Speakers of Iroquoian languages could say with equal justification that English is a 'split patient' language, since English sometimes marks patients as subjects, sometimes as objects. For Seneca speakers agent and patient are each functionally unitary, not 'split' categories.

One additional consideration here is the fact that the split-S proposal depends on the assumption that the differences between the two patterns are confined to intransitive clauses. Grammatical agents of transitive clauses are assumed to correspond unfailingly to A, and grammatical patients of transitive clauses to O. Even in transitive clauses, however, the categories are not isomorphic. In both Central Pomo and Lakhota, for example, a transitive clause may contain two grammatical patients.

3. Immediacy of involvement

A third kind of relation, distinct from both starting points and semantic roles, can be illustrated with examples from Central Alaskan Yup'ik, a language of the Eskimo-Aleut family spoken in southwestern Alaska. Both nominal case and the pronominal suffixes on indicative verbs in Yup'ik show the kind of patterning that has been termed ergative-absolutive. In each of the sentences in (9), for example, the noun translated 'man' is in the morphologically unmarked absolutive case, even though the referent in question is the agent of the intransitive 'get angry' in (9a), but the patient of the intransitive 'torment' in (9c).

9. Yup'ik absolutes: Elizabeth Ali, speaker

a. una angun kiturtuq.
   una angun kitur-tu-q
   this,RESTRICTED man pass.by-INTRANSITIVE.INDICATIVE-3SG
   'A man (ABSOLUTE) passed by.'
b. *tuagguq gnerluni
tual=gguaq gner-lu-ni
and.then=Hearsay be.angry-SUBORDINATIVE-3SG
tauna angun
tauna angun
that.RESTRICTED man
’so that man (ABSOLUTIVE) got angry ...

c. Tauna angun nakukaa.
tauna angun nakuk-a-a
that.RESTRICTED man torment-TRANSITIVE.INDICATIVE-
3.SG.ERG/3.SG.ABS
‘He tormented that man (ABSOLUTIVE).’

A different case suffix, the ergative, marks the other core argument of transitive clauses. We will return to a discussion of this ergative case below.

(10) Yup’ik ergative: Elizabeth Ali, speaker
taum angutem nakukaa
tau-m angute-m nakuk-a-a
that.RESTRICTED-ERG man-ERG torment-TRANSITIVE.INDICATIVE-
3.SG.ERG/3.SG.ABS
‘That man (ERGATIVE) tormented him.’

Yup’ik appears at first glance to offer just the kind of system the S, A, and O schema was designed to elucidate. It is easy to keep in mind the notion that absolutes are equivalent to English intransitive subjects and transitive objects, while ergatives are equivalent to English transitive subjects. When one moves beyond recognizing such cross-linguistic equivalences, however, to understanding why the differences exist, the S/A/O schema has some undesirable consequences. For some linguists it has reduced the issue to one of arbitrary formal alignment: accusative systems are simply those in which S is grouped with A, while ergative systems are simply those in which S is grouped with O.

The existence of these two alternatives has sometimes been interpreted as reflecting the function of case marking as simple discrimination of the two core arguments of transitive clauses (cf. Comrie 1989: 124–127). A and O are distinguished in both systems, and since there is no discrimination problem in intransitive clauses, S may arbitrarily match either A or O. There is in fact some evidence that this discrimination factor can indeed play a role in case marking. Frachtenberg (1922: 324) notes that in Coos, a language formerly spoken in Oregon, the ergative case prefix x- (termed by him the ‘discriminative’) is optional. The marker appears when ‘the person spoken to may be in doubt’ as to the roles of referents. It is used when both core arguments of a transitive clause are expressed by nouns, or when the ergative referent ‘is an animal or inanimate object, or any other part of speech other than a noun’, all unexpected ergative referents. But additional evidence suggests that there is more to the function of this kind of case marking than discrimination alone. Several directions have been taken in investigating deeper reasons behind the pervasiveness of ergative patterns cross-linguistically. A survey of views on the bases of ergative patterns is available in Plank 1979.

One early direction was semantic. Ergativity was taken to represent a grammaticization of the patient role: all O’s are patients (he hit me) and some S’s are patients (I’m sick), so the relation was extended to include those S’s that are agents as well (I jumped, I spoke). Several considerations have put such an analysis out of favor. First, it demands that a major and pervasive relation, that of intransitive agent, be overlooked or overridden. Second, as we have just seen, there are other systems that do reflect the grammaticization of the semantic roles of agent and patient, and they differ substantially from ergative systems.

A different approach has been to assume that ergative-absolutive patterns have essentially the same basis as nominative-accusative patterns, with the absolutive (or, according to some accounts, the ergative) in a subject relation, either structurally or functionally. Du Bois (1987: 840–843) and Cooreman (1988) provide extensive evidence against this view. The inappropriateness of it can be seen in patterns in Yup’ik discourse. An example of the coding of relations in connected speech is in (11), part of a conversation in which Mrs. Elena Charles was telling her family about a hunting trip.

(11) Yup’ik: Elena Charles, speaker

a. Atmautaq imirluku
   atma-utaq imir-lu-ku
   carry.on.back-device fill-SUBORDINATIVE-(1.SG.ERG)/3.SG.ABS
   ‘I (ERGATIVE) filled my backpack’

b. negtaraagluku;
   negt-arag-lu-ku
   push.down-little.by.little-SUBORDINATIVE-(1.SG.ERG)/3.SG.ABS
   and (I ERGATIVE) pressed (the contents) down;
c. a turpaglua...
   atur-pag-lu-
   sing-intensely-SUBORDINATIVE-1.SG.ABS
I (ABSOLUTIVE) sang loudly ...
(The ones over there said “Don’t sing so loudly now. Come help us.”)
d. Ėnglarтурлуа
   tuai
   englar-tur-lu-
   laugh-continuously-SUBORDINATIVE-1.SG.ABS however
Even so I (ABSOLUTIVE) continued to laugh:
e. temciyuglua
   temci-yug-lu-
   be.amused-feel-SUBORDINATIVE-1.SG.ABS
I (ABSOLUTIVE) was amused,
f. u llagлуук’ил
   ullag-lu-kek=llu
   approach-SUBORDINATIVE-(1.SG.ERG)/3.DU.ABS=too
but I (ERGATIVE) approached them (ABSOLUTIVE)
g. tuai ikayurlukek
   tuai ikayur-lu-kek
then help-SUBORDINATIVE-(1.SG.ERG)/3.DU.ABS
and I (ERGATIVE) helped them (ABSOLUTIVE)
h. civluki
   tautuk.
civ-lu-ki
   tautuk
(set-SUBORDINATIVE-(1.SG.ERG)/3.PL.ABS those.RESTRICTED.PL
(I ERGATIVE) set those things out.’

The pronominal suffixes here exhibit a clear ergative-absolutive pattern, as
seen in (12). The first person singular absolutive marker in this mood
shows the form -a in both intransitive and transitive clauses.

(12) Yup’ik first person absolutes
   aturpaglu-a ‘I (ABSOLUTIVE) sang loudly’
   englarтурлуа-a ‘I (ABSOLUTIVE) continued to laugh’
   ullagлуу-a ‘[They] approached me (ABSOLUTIVE)’
   ikayurlu-a ‘[They] helped me (ABSOLUTIVE)’

First person singular ergatives are not expressed with the marker -a.

(13) Yup’ik unmarked first person ergatives
    ullagлуу-kek ‘[ERGATIVE] approached them two.’
    ikayurlu-kek ‘[ERGATIVE] helped them two.’

(In fact ergative arguments are not overtly marked in the pronominal
complexes in this mood. The verb ullagлуу-kek would also be used for ‘you
approached them’, ‘he or she approached them’, or ‘they approached them’
in the appropriate contexts.)

A continuing starting point runs through the passage in (11), as can be
seen from the English translation: the speaker ‘I’ is consistently cast as the
subject. In lines (11a) and b this argument is ergative, but in lines (11c,d),
and (e) it is absolutive. In (11f) through (h) it is again ergative. No attempt
was made to express this continuing starting point consistently in either
grammatical case. An interpretation of either the absolutive or the ergative as
a functional subject thus has little success here.

There is actually structural evidence within Yup’ik itself that all of
the clauses in (11) share a common starting point, the speaker. Pragmatically
related clauses, particularly in narrative, are frequently linked in Yup’ik by
means of what is termed the subordinative mood. There is a grammatical
requirement on clauses linked in this way: they must share a starting point,
a referent that would be the subject in English. The starting point relation
does thus appear in Yup’ik grammar, but not in the indicative or subordinative
mood pronominal suffixes, nor in the case suffixes on nouns. The first
person starting point, the argument on which the subordinative constuctions
are built, is cast sometimes as an ergative, sometimes as an absolutive. In
short, neither agent-patient roles nor starting points can account for the
distribution of Yup’ik nominal cases and pronominal shape.

Other researchers have also recognized the fact that the ergative-
absolutive pattern is based neither on the starting point role nor on agent-
patient roles. One approach taken by several investigators, among them
Kibrik (1979), Keenan (1984), and Mithun (1994), fits the Yup’ik pattern
well. Each sees ergative-absolutive patterning as dominated by the absolutive
relation, the one that is usually unmarked formally and is obligatorily present
in all clauses. Kibrik (1979: 66) characterizes this absolutive referent (which
he terms the ‘factitive’) as the ‘closest participant in the situation … an
actant [core argument] who directly takes part in it’. Keenan (1984:
200–205) characterizes it in terms of ‘bondedness to the verb’. Mithun
(1994: 255) characterizes it as the ‘participant most immediately or directly
involved in the event or state’. In the Yup’ik clause in (7) above, translated ‘I set those things out’, the entities most immediately involved in the setting out were the objects that were moved. In ‘I sang’ or ‘I was amused’ the most immediately involved was of course the speaker. From such examples, but especially from the kinds of evidence that will be set forth below, it appears that one of the core participants in an event or state is portrayed as a more integral part of that event or state than any other. We will be using the phrase immediately involved to characterize a participant of this kind.

 Speakers have choices. Both (14a) and (14b) could be said truly in the same situation.

(14) Yup’ik absolutive choices

a. ner’uq
   ner-u-q
   eat-INTRANSITIVE.INDICATIVE-3.SG.ABS
   ‘She (ABSOLUTIVE) is eating.’

b. luqrwuyak neraa
   luqrwuyak ner-a-a
   pike.ABS eat-TRANSITIVE.INDICATIVE-3.SG.ERG/3.SG.ABS
   ‘She is eating the pike (ABSOLUTIVE).’

In (14a) the absolutive is the eater, while in (14b) it is the pike. Why should both alternatives be available? In (14a) the speaker chooses to portray the immediate involvement of the eater: perhaps she is busy so should not be disturbed. In (14b) the speaker portrays the immediate involvement of the fish: perhaps it was prepared a special way for the occasion.

This property of immediate involvement accounts for a number of other aspects of ergative systems. Participants that are not involved fully, for example, are not categorized as absolutes. In (15) the pike appear in an oblique (ablative) rather than absolute case because only an indeterminate portion of the catch was cut up. (The choice of the extended demonstrative tamakut reflects the vagueness of the amount.)

(15) Yup’ik partially affected referents: Elena Charles

a. imkuneq
   imku-neq
   those.aforementioned-ABL.PL
   apremteneg
   aper-mte-neq
   luqruuyagnek
   luqruag-neq
   pronounce-1.PL.ERG/3.ABL.PL pike-ABL.PL

b. ulligcirianga,
   ulligcri-tria-nga
   cut.fish.for.drying-INTRANSITIVE.PARTICIPIAL-1.SG.ABS
tamakut
tamakut
   those.EXTENDED-PL
   ‘I cut up some of those things (OBlique) that we call pike.’

An additional feature of the Yup’ik system is the fact that relative involvement is marked grammatically only for identifiable referents, those judged by the speaker to be identifiable by the hearer. The first clause of (16) introduces the sourdocks for the first time. They are new and nonidentifiable, not yet suitable for absolute status. Though they are cast as direct objects in the English translation, they are relegated to oblique status in the Yup’ik, and the clause is grammatically intransitive. By the next clause, however, they are judged to be active in the consciousness of the hearer, given and identifiable. Here they are treated as absolute and the clause is grammatically transitive.

(16) Yup’ik nonidentifiable referents: Elena Charles, speaker

a. Quacinek tuaten eritarluu
   quaci-neq tuaten eritar-lu-a
   sourdock-ABL.PL that.way pluck-SUBORDINATIVE-1.SG.ABS
   ‘I picked sourdocks (OBlique) that way;

b. misuuggaqluuki
   misuuk-gaq-lu-ki
   bag-repeatedly-SUBORDINATIVE-1.SG.ERG/3.PL.ABS
   I would bag them (ABSOLUTIVE).’

Such prohibitions against incompletely affected and nonidentifiable referents in the absolutive relation are common cross-linguistically (Mithun 1994), but they pose a dilemma for cross-linguistic comparisons based on S, A, and O. The hypothesis that S, A, and O represent universal relations presupposes
that the distinction between intransitive and transitive clauses is constant across languages. S is defined as the single core argument of intransitives, A and O as the two core arguments of transitives. As Hopper & Thompson (1980) have shown, however, transitivity can be a matter of degree, and the line dividing intransitives from transitives can vary both from one language to the next, and even from one construction to the next within a single language (Mithun 1994). This cross-linguistic difference can result in comparisons of incommensurable relations: should ‘I’, the picker in ‘I picked sordocks’ in (16), be classified as A or as S? Should the sordocks be classified as O or not?

Differences in transitivity between Yup’ik and English appear in another construction as well. What is expressed in a transitive predicate in English is sometimes expressed in a complex intransitive verb in Yup’ik. The line in (17) is from the same account of the moose hunt.

(17) Yup’ik complex intransitive: Elena Charles, speaker

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Cakma} & \quad \text{tuai} \\
\text{cakma} & \quad \text{tuai} \\
\text{down.there} & \quad \text{evidently} \\
\text{tuntutuk} & \\
\text{tuntu-t-u-k} & \\
\text{moose-catch-INTRANSITIVE.INDICATIVE-3.DUAL.ABS} & \\
\text{‘Evidently they (ABSOLUTE) caught a moose down there.’}
\end{align*}
\]

This sentence is grammatically intransitive, built around a complex verb stem roughly translatable as ‘moose-catch’, while the English translation of the sentence treats it as transitive. Should ‘they’ be classified as an S, since the clause is grammatically intransitive in Yup’ik (‘They moose-caught’), or as an A, since its translation equivalent is transitive in English (‘They caught a moose’)? Should the moose be classified as an O or not classified at all? Such issues are not always addressed in typological work based on the S/A/O model. If S, A, and O are identified in terms of the specific grammatical relations of referents within the language concerned, they will be different from their translation equivalents in a language like English, and facile cross-linguistic comparisons will be misleading. To reduce the definitions of S, A, and O to their translation equivalents is obviously not an attractive option.

As with the other patterns discussed above, the nature of the distinctions underlying the categories on which ergative-absolute patterns are based can be seen in the areas of the grammar in which they appear. Patterns centered on the absolutive relation appear in the lexicons of many if not all languages, whether or not these languages show ergative-absolute patterning elsewhere. These lexical patterns provide several kinds of evidence for the characterization of the absolutive as the most immediately involved participant.

Moravcsik (1978:267) points out that noun-verb compounding seems universally to involve nouns in an absolutive relation to the associated verbs. In English we have compounds such as foreigner talk and waterfall, or trout fishing and garbage disposal, but not man-fishing (unless the man is to be caught). This pattern is not surprising. The most immediately involved referent in an event has the strongest effect on the nature of the event itself. It thus serves as the most appropriate qualifier. Moravcsik and others have also pointed to the special semantic relations that often exist between predicates and their absolutes, but rarely their ergatives. The range of absolutive referents appropriate with a given predicate may be quite narrow, but the range of possible ergative referents is typically broad.

The only requirement that subjects of transitive verbs typically have to fulfill is that they be self-motivated (mostly human, or animate) or possible instruments or agents. Objects of transitive verbs, however, together with subjects of intransitive verbs, are more finely subcategorized. Thus, both the object of the transitive verb smell in English and also the subject of the intransitive verb sink have to be things that are capable of emitting an odor; both the object of the transitive verb hear and the subjects of the intransitive verbs sound, rattle, buzz, boom, must be things that are capable of emitting some sound; both the object of the transitive roll and also the subject of the intransitive verb roll require objects bounded by a curving line; and both the object of the transitive verb bend and the subject of its intransitive homophone must be things with some amount of elasticity. At the same time, there are no transitive verbs in English that would require their subjects to be odor-emitting, or sound-emitting, or curved, or elastic (Moravcsik 1978: 271).

Several other observations reflect the immediate involvement associated with absolutives. Keenan (1984: 201) notes that the meanings of predicates are often highly dependent on the nature of the absolutive referent. The meaning we attribute to the intransitive verb run varies considerably with the nature of its absolutive argument: the kind of running we envision in John is still running is quite different from that in My watch is still running or My nose is still running or The Braque exhibition is still running. The same
dependence on the nature of the absolutive can be seen with transitives. The meaning of the verb cut is interpreted differently with different kinds of patients: John cut his foot/the lawn/his whisky with water. Such differences rarely depend on ergative referents. Keenan notes still another indication of the close bond between predicates and their absolutes, the fact that referents of absolutes need not even have an independent existence apart from the predicate: A puddle formed on the floor, A crowd gathered around John, or He committed a crime.

Languages may possess entirely different lexical items whose sole semantic difference is some feature of the absolutive referent, often its number or shape. Many languages contain two distinct verb roots for ‘die’, for example (Central Pomo mądál, léy). The first is used if one person dies, the second if more do. Similarly, there may be two or more roots for ‘go’ (Central Pomo wá-, hladā). The first is used for one person walking alone, the second for a group. With transitive verbs the alternation also depends on the nature of the absolutive (Central Pomo hújam ‘kill one’, ?léy ‘kill many’). In Natchez, a language isolate of the southeastern United States, verbs may carry a diminutive suffix. The suffix indicates that the movement involved is small, or that the referent of the absolutive argument is small (he-ti-ciʔiš ‘little one to sit, live’, heipi-tiʔiš ‘little one to go around’, nech-etiʔiš ‘little one to laugh’, he-li-yákhuʔiš ‘find a little one’, whehe-li-lahciiʔiš ‘gather little ones’). The smallness never applies to an ergative participant; there is no *‘little one to catch a fish’ (Mary Haas p.c. 1983). It is the absolutive, the participant most directly involved, that most affects and defines the nature of the activity or state.

The special status of the absolutive as the most immediately involved participant is reflected in an interesting way in the Yup’ik lexicon. Many transitive verbs in Yup’ik have intransitive counterparts. Some transitive-intransitive pairs of this kind share a semantic agent. The ergative argument of the transitive is expressed as the absolutive of the intransitive, as in the pairs of verbs in (18).

(18) Yup’ik transitive ergative argument = intransitive absolutive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yup'ik</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>umlagarta</td>
<td>'s/he rushed up to it'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>umlagartuq</td>
<td>'s/he rushed up'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ek'araa</td>
<td>'s/he is crossing over it'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ek'ertuq</td>
<td>'s/he is crossing over'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other transitive-intransitive pairs share a semantic patient, as in (19). The absolutive argument of the transitive is retained as the absolutive of the intransitive: she cut it up and it is cut up.

(19) Yup’ik transitive absolutive argument = intransitive absolutive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yup'ik</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>utigtau</td>
<td>'s/he cut it (fish) for drying'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>utigtauq</td>
<td>'it is cut for drying'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imirau</td>
<td>'s/he put contents in (filled) it'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imirtuq</td>
<td>'it has had contents put in it (is filled)'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emairau</td>
<td>'she calmed him down'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emairuq</td>
<td>'he quietec down'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ek'aa</td>
<td>'s/he put it in'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ek'erq</td>
<td>'it got in'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Many languages, among them English, show this pattern to some degree. The transitive verb ‘eat’ (She ate the pike) has an intransitive counterpart ‘eat’ whose sole argument is a semantic agent (‘She ate’). The transitive verb ‘break’ (‘They broke it’) has an intransitive counterpart whose only argument is a semantic patient (‘It broke’). Why should the intransitive ‘rush up’ (or ‘eat’) have an agent-like absolutive, while the intransitive ‘cut’ (or ‘break’) has a patient-like absolutive?

Lexicalization patterns reflect the concepts speakers have considered themworthy in the course of development of their language. Presumably when the involvement of only one entity was to be specified in an event of rushing up, it was more often the one rushing than whatever was rushed up to. In an event of crossing over something, the immediate involvement of those doing the crossing was presumably more often of interest than the involvement of whatever was crossed. On the other hand when it was a question of cutting up fish, the involvement of the fish must have been of greater interest than the condition of the cutter. When a bag was filled, the immediate involvement of the bag must have been more often noteworthy than the involvement of the person filling it. If for some reason speakers wish to focus on the involvement of a house that was rushed up to or a river
that was crossed, they need only select the transitive versions of the verbs "rush up to" or "cross".

Overall, the location and use of ergative-absolutive patterns in both the grammar and the lexicon of Yup'ik accord well with the characterization of the absolutive as the most immediately involved participant in an event or state. In the area of grammar, referents that are not fully affected are cast as obliques. Within the lexicon, the single arguments of intransitive verbs are generally those referents whose involvement in the event or state is most likely to be of interest.

4. What are objects and ergatives?

We have not yet dealt with the functional role of the other core arguments: objects in a language like English, where the starting point role is dominant, and ergatives in a language like Yup'ik, where it is the status of the most immediately involved participant that is dominant.

It would appear that, up to a point, English objects play much the same role as Yup'ik absolutes. That they are the most immediately involved participants in events or states is reflected in the ease with which they can be used to translate absolute referents in examples like those given above, so long as the example is transitive. It is noteworthy that English idioms typically consist of a verb-object combination that functions quite independently of the subject, as in break the ice, and only very rarely of a subject-verb combination that is independent of the object. Tomlin (1986: 73–101) discusses a variety of other ways — syntactic, semantic, and phonological — in which objects are "bonded" more closely to the verb than subjects, a bonding that we take to reflect their greater immediacy of involvement.

But English is not otherwise like Yup'ik. The fact that objects constitute a separate category only when the verb is transitive reflects the greater weight English gives to starting points. Although English has grammaticized both starting points (in its subjects) and most immediately involved participants (in its objects), whenever there is competition between these two roles, as there is when a verb is intransitive, it is the starting point role that wins. With Yup'ik the winner is immediacy of involvement.

Something parallel can be said of the role of ergatives in ergative-absolutive patterning. It has often been said that ergatives function as agents, and that seems to be generally correct. Whereas absolutes express immediacy of involvement, ergatives express agency. But Yup'ik is not otherwise like Seneca. Just as the starting point role takes priority in English, in ergative-absolutive patterning what takes priority is immediacy of involvement. With intransitive verbs, then, we find only the absolutive role, regardless of whether the referent in question functions as an agent or a patient. With Seneca, quite differently, priority goes to the agent-patient roles. Objects in English and ergatives in Yup'ik thus both provide especially good illustrations of the fact that incommensurable relations can interact to produce the total patterning that is found within a single language. As pointed out by Du Bois (1985), diverse functional motivations may conspire and compete in the shaping of grammatical systems.

5. Conclusion

The S/A/O schema was useful in helping linguists familiar with the nominative-accusative pattern orient themselves to the alternative structural alignments found in ergative-absolutive systems. What may have originated as nothing more than a heuristic device, however — a device for first catching sight of the structural outlines of such patterns — has had the effect of imposing more far-reaching interpretations of its own. S, A, and O were not left behind as finer analyses became possible. Such an outcome would be unobjectionable if these relations did indeed represent a universal foundation upon which all systems are built. But because they have proven to be less universal than may have been expected, they have imposed interpretations that obscure the diversity of functions underlying the relations actually found. Alternative patterns are not simply a question of alternative structural "alignments", but the result of the grammaticization of distinct ways in which referents may be related to events and states. Among these ways may be (1) their status as starting points, (2) their agent or patient roles, and (3) the immediacy of their involvement. The proposals made here are not meant to be the final word on this matter, and clearly more remains to be discovered about the relations grammaticized in different languages and in different areas of the same language. Such discoveries, however, may be hampered by the limitations of S, A, and O.

Investigating these different kinds of relations is crucial if we are to move beyond recognizing alternative structural patterns to understanding the functions that shape them. The fact that different patterns tend to predominate
ir different parts of the grammar and lexicon becomes easier to understand, once we discover that the foundations on which they are based are pertinent to different areas of structure. The relevance of subjects to word order and clause combining makes sense once they are recognized as starting points. The concentration of agent-patient patterns in pronominal affixes in verbal morphology accords well with their function of coding the semantic roles of participants in specific events and states, expressed by verbs. The relevance of the absolute relation to lexical semantics is what we would expect once the absolute referent is recognized as the most immediately involved participant. Observations like these cannot help but sharpen our understanding of grammatical relations in general.

The prevalence of different relations in different parts of language structure also shows that it makes better sense to talk of ‘ergative-absolutive patterns’ than of ‘ergative-absolutive languages’, and similarly with nominative-accusative and agent-patient patterns. We need not add up the number of constructions exhibiting each pattern to determine the ‘true grammatical relations’ of a language; we can simply recognize that different constructions may show different patterning. Within a single language, for example, pronouns might show an agent-patient pattern, lexical alternations an ergative-absolutive pattern, and clause-combining a nominative-accusative pattern. We need no longer feel compelled to decide whether it is really the ergative or the absolutive that is the subject; ergative-absolutive and subject relations are different in kind. We need not be forced to determine which argument of every clause is the subject. A particular argument may be categorized as an absolutive with respect to one construction (such as Yup’ik nominal case marking or pronominal suffix shape), but as a subject with respect to another (as in the Yup’ik subordinative mood). Value-laden notions of ‘deep accusativity’ or ‘superficial ergativity’ become unnecessary once we recognize that different patterns are most pertinent to different areas of a language structure.

Where does this leave the linguist who is approaching a language for the first time and wants to discover the patterns peculiar to that language? To begin with, of course, it is important not to assume that there will be a single coherent pattern throughout the language. Within individual areas of grammar, then, one might begin by examining the single arguments of clearly intransitive verbs. If they are not all marked in the same way, the possibility of agent-patient patterning should be pursued, with attention to the special ways in which that patterning may have been grammaticized in that language, as discussed in detail in Mithun 1991b. If all intransitive arguments are marked in the same way, a comparison of them with the core arguments of highly transitive verbs can show whether the language gives priority to the starting point role or to immediacy of involvement. Again, it is important to watch for language-specific patterns of grammaticization. In some ways, aside from avoiding the misleading fiction of ‘split-S’ languages, such procedures may not seem so different from exploration guided by concepts underlying S, A, and O. The goal, however, will be to circumvent relations that have no basis in any language, and to direct attention instead to the precise nature of the concepts actually grammaticized in the language concerned.

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NOTES

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2. The following abbreviations appear in glosses.

   ABL ablative case
   ABS absolutive case
   AGT agent case
   DU dual
   ERG ergative case
   IMPFV imperfective aspect
   NEG negative
   PAT patient case
   PPV perfective aspect
   PL plural
   SG singular
   1 first person
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AN OPTIMALITY-THEORETIC ACCOUNT OF THE JAPANESE CASE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an Optimality-Theoretic account of the Japanese case system within the framework of Role and Reference Grammar [RRG] (Van Valin 1993; Van Valin and LaPolla 1997). It is shown that a particular ranking of universal constraints may accommodate not only the regular case marking patterns of Japanese, but the irregular ones displayed by inversion, causative, and a variety of double-nominative constructions. Finally, it is suggested that characterizing case systems in terms of the way universal constraint are ranked opens up a way to a principled typology of case systems.

Introduction

Japanese grammar presents a host of intriguing problems for case theories, in particular the use of quirky case, i.e. the marking of subjects and objects with cases other than the expected ones (e.g. dative subjects, nominative and dative objects), double-nominative case frames, and a set of case alternations in potential constructions and causative constructions. These issues have been investigated intensively since the 1970’s, but never entirely satisfactorily.\(^1\) The aim of this paper is to propose an alternative account of the Japanese case system within the framework of Role and Reference Grammar [RRG] (Van Valin 1993; Van Valin and LaPolla 1997), augmented by Optimality Theory [OT] (Prince and Smolensky 1993; see also Archangeli and Langendoen 1997; Barbosa et al. 1998; Gilbers and de Hoop 1998; and Kager 1999).\(^2\)