IS THERE CASE IN HEAD-MARKING LANGUAGES?

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The distinction between head- and dependent-marking of semantic relations, formulated in the work of Johanna Nichols, constitutes one of the central typological parameters. Consistently head-marking languages express semantic relations on the heads rather than on dependents. In particular, relations between verbs and their arguments (actants) and adjuncts (circumstants) are expressed on verb forms, rather than on noun phrases. Traditional linguistic theory, still dominating the thinking of the majority of linguists, has assumed (implicitly) the dependent-marking pattern to be the basic one, and the head-marking the exotic one. This of course results from the dominance of the dependent-marking pattern in the languages that European linguists became familiar with in the first place, including Indo-European, Turkic, and Finnic.

Such dominance remains true with respect to the whole area of Europe and Central/Northern Asia. However, fragments of the head-marking pattern are scattered throughout this area here and there, in particular in the North-East. In this paper I propose to look at the data of languages that are technically beyond the area under consideration but are its immediate neighbors. I mean Athabaskan languages of North America that are generally thought to descend from the last wave of immigration from Siberia into America (not counting the Eskimo-Aleut languages that still reside on both sides of the Bering Straits).

Athabaskan languages constitute the core of the Na-Dene phylum that also comprises more distantly related Eyak and Tlingit languages. Athabaskan is a relatively closely related family, probably comparable to deeper branches of Indo-European, such as Balto-Slavic or Iranian. The Athabaskan family is composed of three geographical groups – Northern (Alaska and Western Canada), Southern, or Apachean (Southwest of the U.S.), and Pacific (U.S. Pacific coast, from Northern California northwards). My research has focused on three languages each representing one of these groups – Upper Kuskokwim (Alaska), Navajo (New Mexico and Arizona), and Hupa (California).

As is very typical of native North American languages, Athabaskan languages are strongly head-marking and polysynthetic. 1st and 2nd person arguments are coded only as pronominal affixes on the verb. In the 3rd person, of course, independent NPs can be used but they appear bare, without case markers. They are cross-referenced within the verb by pronominal affixes which in certain cases are null. Pronominal affixes occupy certain positions in the morphological template of the verbal word. Since almost all affixes in Athabaskan are prefixes, they are counted from right to left (root has position number 0). Pronominal affixes are organized according to the accusative pattern:

- arguments of one-place verbs align together with agentives (that is, agents or agent-like arguments) of two-place verbs and occupy morphological position #2 or #5 (depending on individual pronominal affix)
- they are contrasted to patientives (patients or patient-like arguments) of two-place verbs that occupy morphological position #6

See some examples from Navajo.¹

(1) One-place verb with an agentive argument
   - dahnishjáád ‘I jump’
     - dah    ni-sh- jáád
   Morph. position # 3 2
   upward   Impf- 1Sg.Nom- jump

(2) One-place verb with a patientive argument
   - Éinishgai ‘I am white, I whitened’
     Éni- sh- gai
   Morph. position # 2
   Prf- 1Sg.Nom- white

(3) Two-place verb, agentive monitored

nishteeh ‘I carry him (here)’

\[ \text{Morph. position \#} \]

\[ 3 \quad 2 \]

- 3.Acc- Impf- 1Sg.Nom- TI-handle.AnO

(4) Two-place verb, patientive monitored

\[ [\text{šéøšéèë]} \text{shøšéèeh} \text{‘He carries me (over there) [e.g. an invalid speaking]’} \]

\[ \text{Morph. position \#} \]

\[ 6 \quad 3 \]

[to.there] 1Sg.Acc- 3.Nom- Impf-TI-handle.AnO

As is well known, there is a long debate in modern linguistics on the status of this kind of pronominal affixes. Many have proposed that they are genuine arguments of the clause, while full NPs (on the occasions when they are present) are some kind of referential supplements to morphologically coded arguments. The radical formulation of this approach encounters some problems (that are not the central concern of this paper), but it is clear that pronominal affixes bear significant resemblance in many ways to what is arguments in more familiar languages.

Traditionally, in Athabaskan studies positions #2 (for some affixes, #5) and position #6 are dubbed “subject position” and “object position”, respectively. My claim is that such extension of the terms “subject” and “object” is misguided. If the function of verbal positions in which pronominal affixes are inserted can be compared with anything in traditional Indo-European languages, it should be case markers rather than grammatical relations. Linear morphological positions code the referent’s semantic roles, pretty much like case desinences in Latin.

Just as Latin would formally code the patientive argument in the equivalent of (4) by means of an Accusative form of the pronoun, Navajo codes it by means of locating the pronominal element into position #6. This approach is more systematically represented in Table 1 where Navajo phenomena are compared with Latin and English.

<table>
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<th>Navajo</th>
<th>Latin analogy</th>
<th>English analogy</th>
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<td>Position #2/5</td>
<td>Nominative case</td>
<td>Pre-VP syntactic position</td>
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<td>Position #6</td>
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**TABLE 1**: Three techniques of role marking: morphological positions (Navajo, head-marking), nominal case markers (Latin, dependent-marking) and syntactic positions (English, null-marking)

Thus morphological positions in Navajo verb are direct analogs of Latin Nominative and Accusative. I propose to call them “Nominative position”, “Accusative position”, etc. This terminology is reflected in the glossing I am using in the examples. One may like or dislike the idea of extending the grammatical case terminology to refer to verbal morphological positions, but in any case these two types of role coding are functionally identical. In English the coding technique is also order-based, but it is word order rather than morpheme order. Note that Sergej Jaxontov used to describe analytic languages of Eastern Asia, that are typologically similar to English in this respect, in terms of “syntactic cases”.

Navajo verbal positions #2/5 and #6 are functionally very different from grammatical relations “subject” and “object”, and extending grammatical relations terms to role marking is not just non-traditional, but notionally flawed. Grammatical relations are statuses related to behavioral properties of arguments. They can be (partly) defined in terms of coding techniques, such as nominal case desinences, morphological positions or syntactic positions, but they don’t coincide with coding techniques. Calling Navajo verbal positions “subject position” and “object position” is identical to calling Latin -œ and -m in Puer-œ puella-m amat ‘The boy loves the girl’ subject and object cases, respectively. Latin is postulated to possess subject and object relations not because it has such case markers but because grammatical relations associated with the markers have a range of stable syntactic properties, such as formation of participial and infinitive constructions, reflexivization, passive, and the like.

A language like Navajo can be tested for relevance of grammatical relations, independently of the head-marking technique of coding roles that is employed by this language. Theoretically, such a language may have some of the properties that substantiate the need for postulating grammatical relations. But then it
would be pronominal elements that would bear grammatical relations rather than morphological positions wherein these elements are inserted. In reality, Navajo does not stand the tests for relevance of grammatical relations, and this will be demonstrated in the paper.

Note that in Table 1 not only Nominative and Accusative, but also Dative and Oblique are postulated for the Navajo case system. Examples in (5) demonstrate the reason for postulating the Dative case in Navajo. As is clear from example (3) above, the 3rd person Accusative pronominal element is zero. In certain constructions, such as causative in (5b), non-zero 3rd person pronoun b(i) occurs.

(5) a. ŒawóóŒ Þ-si-dô
   baby 3.Nom-Pf-sit
   ‘The baby is sitting up’

b. ŒawóóŒ bi-s-ó-l-dô
   baby 3.Dat-Pf-1Sg.Nom-TI-sit
   ‘I am keeping the baby sitting up’

The Dative 3rd person pronoun may appear in the same position #6 as Accusative pronoun, but the shape of the pronominal morpheme itself is different. Thus Navajo employs a mixed technique for coding semantic roles: morphological position on the verb plus the alteration of the shape of the pronominal element.

Curiously, linguists that use the terms “subject” and “object” indiscriminately to refer to an unrestricted range of phenomena, often supplement this pair of terms with the term “dative”, as if it were also a grammatical relation term. This is another illustration of the frequent confusion of coding techniques and behavioral statuses.

In addition to core arguments, Navajo allows for many peripheral clause participants to also be coded on the verb. The pronominal element corresponding to such a participant occurs at the farthest left end of the verb (position #11b), and is followed by a preverb specifying the participant’s semantic role (position #11a).

(6) a. hastiin Œasdžïï ÈáâŒ y-e-i-þ-no-lûûz
   ‘The man brought/led the horse to the woman’

b. y-e-i-þ-no-lûûz
   ‘He brought/led it to her’

The example in (6a) is a three-place clause, and the verb displays three distinct case positions: counting from right to left, Nominative, Accusative, and Oblique. The Oblique pronoun is followed by the preverb -aa ‘to’, here surfacing as -e-. Example (6b) demonstrates that the role-marking structure remains intact when no full NPs are present in the clause.

Traditionally, grammatical relations have been viewed as nearly-elementary linguistic notions, easily identifiable in any random language. Some linguists still adhere to this view. However, there is plentiful evidence that grammatical relations are in fact very complex notions and must be attributed to individual languages with significant caution. This paper presents one additional kind of evidence supporting this view. Grammatical relations and role-marking techniques must be very clearly distinguished, both in the thinking of linguists and in linguistic terminology.

The treatment of pronominal affixes in head-marking, polysynthetic languages is a necessary prerequisite for a cross-linguistically meaningful understanding of argument structure, grammatical relations, and role-marking techniques. In Eurasia, this problem is particularly important for Abkhaz-Adyghean, some Uralic, and quite a few Paleoasiatic languages.