

Subjective and objective conjugation in Northern Khanty: a lexically conditioned choice?

Verbal object indexing in Northern Khanty is said to be conditioned by information structure (Kulonen 1989, Nikolaeva 2001, Koshkaryova 2002, É. Kiss 2019 among others) or information status (Däbritz 2020, Muravyev 2023) of the participants. In particular, the verb takes objective conjugation whenever its P-argument is topical or given as in (1a), otherwise subjective conjugation is chosen as in (1b).

(1b) luw pe:tra re:sk-əs-li / *re:sk-əs
 he peter hit-PST-3SG>SG / hit-PST.3SG
 {What did John do to Peter?} ‘He hit Peter.’ (Nikolaeva 2001: 29)

(1a) juwan pe:tra e:sk-əs / *re:sk-əs-li
 John Peter hit-PST.3SG hit-PST-3SG>SG
 {Whom did John hit?} ‘John hit Peter.’ (ibid.: 30)

However, these parameters appear to have very limited explanatory power. According to the data from an offline corpus of Kazym dialect of Northern Khanty (42174 tokens), objective conjugation in a transitive clause arises only with about 70-80% of topical and/or given objects, that is some topical/given objects do not get indexed (2) as well as vice versa (3):

(2) mān-əs λqxs-əλ xośa, λqxs-əλ wəx-əs
 go-PST[3SG] friend-3SG to friend-3SG call-PST[3SG]
 ‘He went to his friend, called his friend (to join).’

(3) xət wεr-t-aλ sāxət λajm-əλ jɪŋk-a tārəpt-əs-λε
 house make-NFIN.NPST-3SG when axe-3SG.POSS water-DAT drop-PST-3SG>SG
 ‘When he was building a house, he dropped his axe into the water.’

In this talk, I will explore the variation of subjective and objective conjugation across argument structure patterns taking a constructionist (Goldberg 1995, Croft 2001) perspective, based on manually annotated corpus examples. The main finding is that verbs and associated valency patterns tend to have a clear preference towards either of the two conjugation paradigms, and such preferences reflect individual ways in which each verb and/or valency pattern foregrounds or backgrounds the object in the sense of (Talmy 1978), cf. a foregrounded Patient ‘friend’ in (2) and a backgrounded Theme ‘axe’ together with a foregrounded Goal ‘water’ in (3). I will thus argue that the kind of information structure needed to explain and predict the conjugation choice can be defined at the lexical and/or constructional level.

Literature:

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