

# The case for verb classes and quirky subjects (in ~~Æ~~leña)

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# The basics



Æleña is spoken in Ælenor

It is based on 3 pillars:

- It's Celtic / Indo-European
- It's 'cellar door'
- It's 'semantically consistent'

My challenge (as 'conlaynger') is to reconcile the first and last 'to my taste'



LCC 4 Groningen  
Hi

# Semantically consistent ?

Some semantically inconsistent object syntactics:

- Jack<sub>nom</sub> calls/kicks Bob<sub>acc</sub>
- Jack<sub>nom</sub> gives Bob<sub>dat</sub> a call/kick<sub>acc</sub>

...yet his nose is bleeding as much in either expression !

- How to organise my language that syntactics make sense to me ?

Another inconsistency:

- Jack<sub>nom</sub> sees Bob<sub>acc</sub>
- Jack<sub>nom</sub> looks (at) Bob<sub>dat/obl</sub>

A different verb, a different object case, yet Jack does the same !

- (Or does he ? Isn't there something... looking intentional ?)



# Semantically consistent ?

But there are other ways to organise cases.

Besides nom-acc, I met its opposite, absolutive-ergative:

- **Gizon-a etorri da** 'The man has arrived' [Basque]
- **Gizon-ak mutil-a ikusi du** 'The man saw the boy' [Basque]

... but while that was semantically as unfit, it was

- **Ram khãś-a** 'Ram coughed' [Urdu]
- **Ram-ne khãś-a** 'Ram coughed (purposeful)

... which used ergativity to discern intentionality,

And I made acquaintance with quirky subjects:

- **Mig<sub>acc</sub> vantar peninga** 'I need money' [Icelandic]
- **Mér<sub>dat</sub> líkar maturinn** 'I like the food' [Icelandic]

Intentionality



# The right way

But then I found the right way: Active transitivity based on meaning:

- Semantically-Based Split-Ergativity (in Ergato):
  - **Kelina sapu** 'The woman is sleeping'
  - **Kelinam sapu** 'The woman is sleeping on purpose'
  - **Kelinam talu** 'The woman is dancing'
  - **Kelina talu** 'The woman is dancing on accident'
- There was my syntactic realisation of the semantic **see/look** dichotomy: subject intentionality!



# Losing the Celtic link?

But wouldn't making Æleña 'active' cause it to drift away from Celticity?

NOPE! I discovered Middle Welsh was an active language !

VN AGT

- **ymlad** [ohonafi] dros vym baryf 'I fought for my beard'

fighting of-me

VN P

- **kynn diodef** (before suffering 1995)

Ymlad 'fight' thus diodef 'suffer' ma

- There are ev



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## I then started a quest for verb classes...

- Fillmore ("The grammar of hitting and breaking", 1970): 230 semantic frames based on lexical semantics
- Beth Levin (1993): 193 verb classes based on argument syntax
- Problems:
  - too many classes
  - 'multiple class membership

FrameNet

Levin (1993)



**Multiple class  
membership...  
Hihhi**



# I tried some other verb classes...

- Vendler's four aspectual event classes:
  - **states, activities, accomplishments, achievements**
- go back to Kenny's three classes:
  - **states <> events (activities and performances)**
- which hark back to Aristotle's two: kinesis vs. energeia

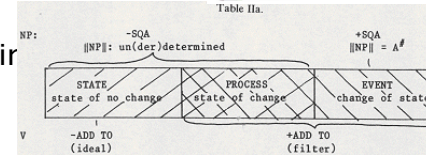
➢ oud' hugiazetai kai hugiastai  
not cure<sub>sub.3.SG.MED.PRES</sub> and cure<sub>sub.3.SG.MED.PFCT</sub>

➢ eu zei kai eu ezeken hama  
well live<sub>sub.3.SG.PRES</sub> and well live<sub>sub.3.SG.PFCT</sub> at the

➢ Aspectual class vs. Aktionsart type

- Verkuyl summarised Vendler again in

(im)  
perfective  
verbs!





## Rick Morneau's classes

- 7 transitivity classes:

type	code	static	dynamic
verbs without subject	nil	it rains	it starts raining
Patient	P	I sleep	I recuperate
Patient with Focus	P/F	I see X	I recall X
Agent/Patient	AP	I behave (myself)	I escape (free myself)
Agent/Patient with Focus	AP/F	I ignore (to myself) ↓	I memorise (to myself) ↓
Agent with Patient	A/P	I manage X	I cure X
Agent with Patient and Focus	A/P/	I conduct X (to) Y	I tell X Y

... which led me to add a 'dynamic prefix' **(e)s-** to my language

- but also set me on a quest towards reflexive verbs



## Middle voice & reflexives

- Middle voice is found in Sanskrit and classical Greek and contrasts with active and passive.
- The middle voice is semantically similar to reflexive constructions in that it describes an action which is performed by the subject for his/her own benefit or in which the subject affects itself:
  - **loúo** (act.) 'I wash' vs **loúomai** (mid.) 'I wash myself' (cf. Kemmer 1993)
- Another use of middle is "**I have my hair cut**" (intentional passivity)



Middle  
vs.  
Passive!



# Sample English semantic

- **Affect** (hit, cut): agent target manip
- **Giving** (give, lend): donor gift recipient
- **Speaking** (tell): speaker addressee message medium
- **Thinking** (consider): cogitator thought
- **Attention** (see, hear): perceiver impression
- **Liking** (love, hate): experiencer stimulus (Dixon, 2010)

For verbs like 'to give', where subjects have very different status,

- **A gives B to C / C is given B by A / B is given C**

the case of each object is ruled by 'ditransitive alignment'

- Dative (Indo-European etc.)



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**Deictic-  
ativity...?**

# Ditransitive ditroubles

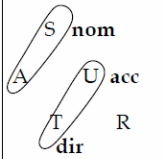
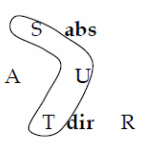
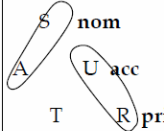
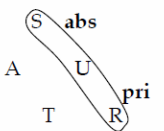
Citation: "The status of indirect objects is something I certainly didn't think about in many of my languages, and I believe they're the less realistic for it."

By whom?

Martin Haspelmath (2005):

- there are four basic positions for object argument marking:

- But is there active ditransitivity

	accusative alignment	ergative alignment
indirective alignment	 <p>German (nominative and accusative-directive)</p>	 <p>Lezgian (absolutive-directive)</p>
secundative alignment	 <p>Yoruba (nominative and accusative-primitive)</p>	 <p>Greenlandic (absolutive-primitive)</p>



# Ditransitive active alignment?

Anna Siewierska researched the ditransitive equivalent to monotransitive active alignment; she found none:

- “[T]his can only be a real equivalent if the ditransitive ‘active–passive’ opposition also has semantic meaning”
- Nevertheless a recurring alignment principle was animacy hierarchy.
- For instance, in Kashmiri, “the P is marked for dative agreement rather than absolutive whenever the A is lower on the person hierarchy than the P”.

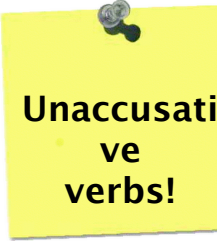
1<sup>st</sup> person > 2<sup>nd</sup> person > 3<sup>rd</sup> person > proper names > humans > non-anim

**Animacy!**



# Unaccusative & unergative verbs

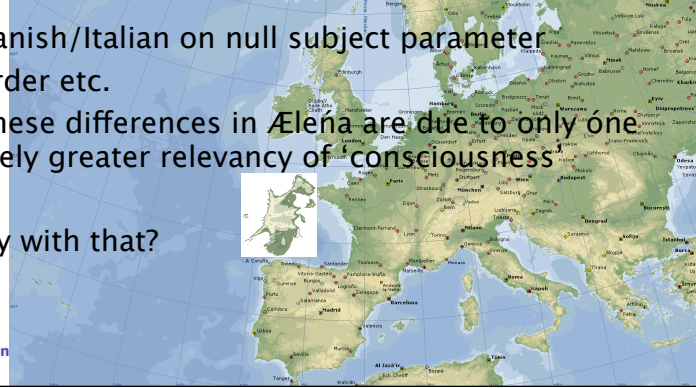
- Sapir (1917) made the suggestion that inactive predicates in 'active' languages could be interpreted as having unexpressed impersonal subjects, e.g., that 'I sleep' could be interpreted as 'it sleeps me'
- Perlmutter (1987) elaborated this and discerned unaccusative and unergative verbs
- Unaccusative verbs:
  - fall, die, sleep (per se experiential)
- Unergative verbs:
  - walk, work (per se intentional)
- [Ergative verbs:]
  - burst, blossom (inherent, unintentional action)



# Animacy? Intentionality? Affectedness?

Can this still be named Indo-European?

- But then I read (Baker, 2001) about universals, and that it's often that even closely related languages can differ much by just one universal:
  - Slavic languages with aspectual distinctions on the lexical level
  - French vs. Spanish/Italian on null subject parameter
  - Celtic word order etc.
- So, no sweat: all these differences in ~~Elena~~ are due to only one universal: a relatively greater relevancy of consciousness.
  - Can I get away with that?



## So now, what have we learned?

**(im)perfective  
verbs!**

**Dechticae-  
tiativity...?**

**Middle  
vs.  
Passive!**

**Unaccusative  
verbs!**

**Animacy!**

**Intentionality**

➤ All I needed now was a nice verb classification...





# Tsunoda and Malchukov

Tsunoda (1981, 1985) proposed a verb type hierarchy predicting distribution of intransitive and transitive patterns in languages:

**Effective action > Perception > Pursuit > Knowledge > Feeling > Relation**

**+result -result +att -att**

kill	hit	see	look	search	know	like,fear	possess
break	shoot	hear	listen	wait	understand	fond of	consist

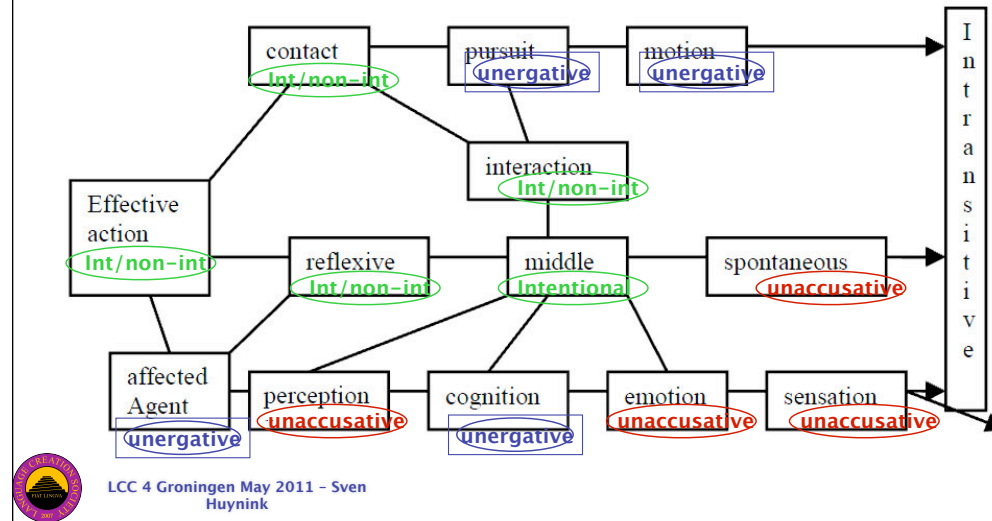
Malchukov expanded this to a two dimensional verb-type hierarchy:

⌞ **contact**      = **pursuit**      = **(motion)**



# Malchukov thinks some more

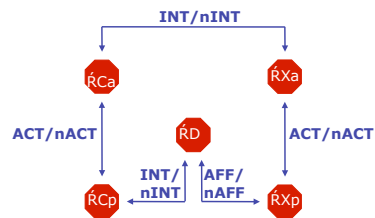
...and comes up with an integrated view:



# The resulting Æleña verb system

Three (+ 1) conjugations:

- **Řehdámw Cinnħe** (ŘC): Intentional verbs (& middles)
- **Řehdámw Dæeħe** (ŘD): Unaccusative verbs (no passive)
- **Řehdámw Xriħ** (ŘX): Non-intentional verbs (& real passives)
- **Řehdámw Mirreúltá** (ŘM): a small class of irregular verbs.



	actor	intentional	affected
ŘCa	✓	✓	✓
ŘCp	–	✓	✓
ŘD	–	–	✓
ŘXa	–	–	–
ŘXp	✓	–	– / ✓



# This is as quirky as subjects can get...

Can this still be named Indo-European?

- Well, remember Icelandic?

➤ þig<sub>acc</sub> hefur dreymt Svein<sub>acc</sub>

‘You have dreamt of Sveinn’

➤ þér<sub>dat</sub> hefur líkað maturinn<sub>nom</sub>?

‘Did you like the food?’

- What happens in that language by ‘quirky subjects’, happens in Ælëna by verb constructions

Distribution of Morphological Case across Syntactic Functions.

	Nom	Acc	Dat	Gen
Subject	x	x	x	x
Pred. Compl.	x	x	x	x
Object	x	x	x	x
Indirect object		x	x	
Prep. object		x	x	x
Attribute			x	x
Adverbial		x	x	x

Table 3.2: Distribution of morphological case across thematic roles.


	Nom	Acc	Dat	Gen
Agent	x			
Cause	x			
Theme	x	x	x	x
Content	x	x	x	x
Station	x		x	
Experiencer	x	x	x	
Cognizer	x	x	x	
Perceiver	x		x	
Beneficiary	x	x	x	
Goal		x	x	x
Reason		x	x	x
Source	x	x	x	x
Instrument			x	
Comitative		x	x	x
Path	x	x	x	x
Location		x	x	x
Time	x	x	x	x
Manner	x	x	x	x
Measure		x	x	x



# What Icelandic is to Germanic, is Æleña for Celtic languages; so what is the problem?

The semantic clarity that Icelandic creates by 'quirky subjects', is done (better, of course ;-)) in Æleña by verb constructions:

- Æ **deamne** means to push. Then I push him (INT) is **deamnei eaϕ** (ŖCa) and I push him (INC) is **deamn-is-ei eaϕ** (ŖX active).
- Æ **dede** means to give. Then I give him (INT) is **dedei eaϕ hlira** (again ŖCa). The book is given (INC) is **eaϕre hlir** (ŖXp). I let him give me (INT) is **dedr (ϕ) mei hlira**.
- Æ **dedeia** is to receive (**ded-ei-a**) making an active ŖC verb into an INC verb. The book is given (= receives) a book by me (INC) is **dedeia** (ŖD).



Multiple class membership...  
er...



# Thank you !

## DISCLAIMER:

“You must remember that these things were constructed deliberately to be personal, and give private satisfaction – not for scientific experiment, nor yet in expectation of any audience. A consequent weakness is therefore their tendency, too free as they were from cold exterior criticism, to be ‘over-pretty’, to be phonetically and semantically sentimental – while their bare meaning is probably trivial, not full of red blood or the heat of the world such as critics demand. Be kindly.”

from The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays – A Secret Vice,  
by J.R.R. Tolkien



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