The case for verb classes and quirky subjects
(in Ælena)

Sven Huynink
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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’
Semantically consistent?

Some semantically inconsistent object syntactics:

- $\text{Jack}_{\text{nom}} \text{ calls/kicks } \text{Bob}_{\text{acc}}$
- $\text{Jack}_{\text{nom}} \text{ gives } \text{Bob}_{\text{dat}} \text{ a call/kick}_{\text{acc}}$

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

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

Another inconsistency:

- $\text{Jack}_{\text{nom}} \text{ sees } \text{Bob}_{\text{acc}}$
- $\text{Jack}_{\text{nom}} \text{ looks (at) Bob}_{\text{dat/obl}}$

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

- (Or does he? Isn’t there something… looking intentional?)
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, that was

- Ram khās-a  ‘Ram coughed’ [Urdu]
- Ram–ne khās-a  ‘Ram coughed (purposefully)’ [Urdu]

... which used ergativity to discern intentionality!

And I made acquaintance with quirky subjects:

- Mig_{acc} vantar peninga  ‘I need money’ [Icelandic]
- Mér dat líkar maturinn  ‘I like the food’ [Icelandic]
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’

- **VN PAT**
  - Kynn diodef [Crist]
    - ‘Before Christ suffered.’

Ymlad ‘fight’ thus marks its subject as AGT [o-]
while diodef ‘suffer’ marks its subject as PAT.

There are even rumours that PIE itself was active, so…
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’
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. energeiai
  - *oud' hugiazetai*  *kai hugiastai*
    - not cure_{sub.3.SG.MED.PRES} and cure_{sub.3.SG.MED.PFCT}
  - *eu zei*  *kai eu ezeken hama*
    - well live_{sub.3.SG.PRES} and well live_{sub.3.SG.PFCT} at the

  - Aspectual class vs. Aktionsart type

- Verkuyl summarised Vendler again in

```plaintext
(im) perfective verbs!
```
Rick Morneau’s classes

- 7 transitivity classes:

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

... 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:
• Another use of middle is “I have my hair cut” (intentional passivity)
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 by A to C

the case of each object is ruled by 'ditransitive alignment'
- Dative (Indo-European etc.)
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?
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".

1st person > 2nd person > 3rd person > proper names > humans > non-animates
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 unergative and unaccusative verbs

- Unaccusative verbs:
  - fall, die, sleep (per se experiental)
- Unergative verbs:
  - walk, work (per se intentional)
- [Ergative verbs:]
  - burst, blossom (inherent, unintentional action)
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 Æleña 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!
- Dechticaetiativity...
- 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 Cinnhe (ŘC): Intentional verbs (& middles)
- Řehdámw Dæehe (ŘD): Unaccusative verbs (no passive)
- Řehdámw Xrif (ŘX): Non-intentional verbs (& real passives)
- Řehdámw Mirreúltá (ŘM): a small class of irregular verbs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>actor</th>
<th>intention</th>
<th>affected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ŘCa</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ŘCp</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ŘD</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ŘXa</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ŘXp</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–/✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is as quirky as subjects can get...

Can this still be named Indo-European?

- Well, remember Icelandic?
  
  $\text{þíg} _\text{acc} \text{ hefur dreymt } \text{Svein} _\text{acc}$
  
  ‘You have dreamt of Sveinn’

  $\text{þér} _\text{dat} \text{ hefur líkað} \text{ maturinn} _\text{nom}$?
  
  ‘Did you like the food?’

- What happens in that language by ‘quirky subjects’, happens in Ælina by verb constructions
What Icelandic is to Germanic, is Ælená for Celtic languages; so what is the problem?

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

- **Æ deamne** means to push. Then I push him (INT) is deamnei eaf (RCa) and I push him (INC) is deamn-is-ei eaf (RX active).

- **Æ dede** means to give. Then I give him a book (INT) is dedei eaf hlira (again RCa). Then I give a book (INC) is ded is eafre hlir (RXp). I let him give me a book (RC middle, RCm) is dedr (φ) mei hlira

- **Æ dedeia** is to receive (ded-ei-a). Making an active RC verb into an unaccusative (RD) is given (= receives) a book by me (RD).
Thank you!

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“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