

Referential choice in 3-participant constructions

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Since the seminal work by Wallace Chafe and Talmy Givón and others, particular syntactic functions have regularly been associated with particular types of information status and respective types of referring expression. For example, Prince (1981) finds that subjects in English tend to have given, topical referents and are therefore preferably expressed by pronouns rather than full NPs, which are in run predominant in objects and have new or less accessible referents (see also Chafe 1994). Du Bois' (1987, 2003a, b), in his work on Preferred Argument Structure, not only postulates a preference for only transitive (A) subjects to have topical referents expressed by pronouns or zero form, whereas both S and P arguments, as well as all non-core argument positions, are "free" for non-activated, new referents expressed by full NPs.

We report here on an investigation of realisation patterns in non-core oblique arguments across 7 languages currently part of the multilingual online corpus Multi-CAST (Haig & Schnell 2016). Overall, we find Du Bois' generalisations confirmed in our data when contrasting oblique with core arguments. However, we also find significant patterns of preference within oblique arguments, so that goal arguments (understood here broadly as embracing locational goals, human goals, recipients, addressees) tend to show non-lexical expression when occurring in a 3-participant construction, whereas goals in intransitive clauses, as well as other oblique arguments expressing static locations and other semantic roles, tend to be lexical. Further investigating the motivations for these patterns of argument expression, we find a strong significant correlation between human reference and non-lexical forms, which can be explained in terms of the generally high discourse topicality of human participants. This is similar to motivations for alignment splits in 3-participant constructions as identified by Haspelmath (2007:83ff). We conclude, reiterating Haig & Schnell's (forthcoming) findings, that patterns of argument realisation are merely epiphenomena of basic considerations of animacy, and that particular syntactic functions are in fact not as such aligned with types of information and referential forms.

References

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