On The Syntax of Possessors and Structural Case
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Overview. In this talk, I establish a generalization on the syntax of possessors (A), that makes manifest the relation between possessor-agreement (1a, 2a), -drop (1b, 2b) and -extraction (1c, 2c). I also propose that (A) has a principled basis, dependent on structural case. Some consequences of the results obtained are discussed, among them the plausibility of (B).

(A) Generalization on possessors: if in a language the noun agrees in φ-features with its possessor, the possessor DP can be both extracted and silent.

(B) Structural case is the trigger for agreement, pro-drop and extraction of DPs.

Correlations in the syntax of possessors. The point of departure of the talk is the existence of two correlations that are poorly understood in the theory of grammar:

(i) the correlation between the pro-drop and agreement phenomena: subjects seem to be able to be silent in languages in which agreement has a rich morphological expression (cf. Taraldsen 1981, Rizzi 1986), and


Here, I propose to take the DP as a test domain to establish the strength of both these correlations. In order to establish the generalization A, I will discuss the patterns of possessors in a sample of eleven languages that display agreement with possessors in the DP: Southern varieties of Quechua, Hungarian, Chamorro, Fijian, Nahuatl, Jacaltec, Itzaj Maya, Tzotzil, Tzutujil, Mohawk, and Wan’. I show that both correlations hold in all these languages (cf. (1) and (2)), which leads me to formulate the generalization (A).

In order to strengthen the generalization, I also give negative evidence, centering the discussion on Quechua, a language with strong typological variation among its dialects. I will show that crucially, in Imbabura Quechua, where the possessive suffixes are said to have been ‘lost’ (Cole 1985: 115), possessor DPs cannot be silent nor can they be extracted (compare (3) to (2)). That is, this variety displays the negative of the correlation found in Southern Quechua, showing that the generalization is very tight.

Towards a principled account. The second part of the talk is a discussion of the principle behind (A). The proposal that I will put forward in this talk is that agreement, dropping and extraction of the possessor are operations that are made possible by virtue of bearing structural case (as opposed to inherent case). The evidence in favor of this analysis is related to the hypothesis that DP and IP/CP are structurally parallel (cf. Szabolesi 1983, 1994, Abney 1987). I will show that in the languages in question (i) the case on the possessor is morphologically the same as the case present on one of the
arguments of the verb, typically the subject (compare (4a) and (2a)), and (ii) the clausal argument marked by the same case as the possessor (i.e. typically the subject) can also be dropped and extracted (4a, b).

Finally, I will discuss the possibility of extending the generalization (A) to the clausal level, i.e. the plausibility of a principle like (B). First, I will present evidence reported in the literature that will show that agreement, pro-drop, and extraction are related. Among them are the impossible extraction for non-agreeing DPs in Chamorro (Chung & Ladusaw 2004) and Tagalog (Rackowski 2002), and the impossible pro-drop for direct objects in Italian that do not trigger agreement (Rizzi 1986). Then, the relevance of structural case will be highlighted. I will show that agreement is not a necessary condition on extraction and pro-drop, and that in fact agreement itself is subject to a condition on case: (i) structural case is what licenses pro in Italian, be it an agreeing pro or not (cf. Rizzi 1986), (ii) non-agreeing arguments can be extracted and dropped in Basque (cf. Ortiz de Urbina 1989) (iii) only structural case-marked objects trigger agreement in French (cf. Sportiche 1990 (based on Kayne 1989), Belletti 2001), (iv) structural case-marked subjects but not quirky subjects trigger agreement in Icelandic (Taraldsen 1995).

Examples

_Wan’_ (Everett & Kern 1997)

(1) a. xiricon Xijam
    house.3SGM Xijam
    ‘Xij am’s house’

    b. _pro_ xiricon
    house.3 SGM
    ‘his house’

    c. Naroin’ jujun carawa co jam’ curucucun.
    deny 2PL.MOOD. 3PLM animal INFLM/F.MOOD tired body. 3PLM
    ‘Deny food to lazy (people)!’ (lit. ‘Deny food to those whose bodies are tired’.)

_Southern Quechua_ (Sánchez 1996)

(2) a. Maria-q wasi-n
    Maria-GEN house-3
    ‘Maria’s house’

    b. _pro_ wasi-n
    house-3
    ‘her/his house’

    c. Pi-qpa-ta requi-nki [t tura-n-ta]?
    who-GEN-ACC know-2SG brother-3SG-ACC
    ‘Whose brother do you know?’

_Imbabura Quechua_ (Cole 1985)

(3) a. pay-paj wasi
    he-GEN house
    ‘his house’

    b. _#pro_ wasi
    house
    ‘his house’
c. * pi-paj-taj riku-rka-ngui alku-ta?
   who-GEN-INTER see-PAST 2 dog-ACC
   ‘Whose dog did you see?’

Southern Quechua (Sánchez 1996)

(4) a. [(Mariap-q) papa-ta ranti-sqa-n-ta] muna-ni
   Maria-GEN potato-ACC buy-NOM-3P-ACC want-1P
   ‘I want Maria/pro to buy the potato.’

b. Pi-qpa-ta muna-nki [t platanu-ta ranti-na-n-ta]
   who-GEN-ACC want-2P banana-ACC buy-NOMFUTURE-3P-ACC
   ‘Who do you want to buy bananas?’

References


