Towards a universal typology of Non-Nominative Subjects (NNSs)

The purpose of this paper is two-fold: (i) to discuss some specific syntactic issues of the syntax of the non-nominative subject construction (dative/genitive subjects in particular) in South Asian languages (SALs) and (ii) to compare and contrast them with similar such constructions in Icelandic and German with a view to arrive at a typology of NNSs in the languages under consideration. Based on several syntactic parameters such as (i) the occurrence of PRO in governed and ungoverned positions, (ii) agreement of the verb with the dative/genitive subject, (iii) NNS as an antecedent to an anaphor, (iv) NNS subjects in conjunction reduction, (v) the occurrence of vector verbs (converbs) with NNS subjects, (vi) the ability of an NNS argument to head an externally-headed relative clause with an affirmative, a negative, and a modal, (vii) the ability of a dative subject to be the subject in sentences in Backward Control, (viii) the occurrence of Double Dative Subject constructions, and (ix) the ability of an NNS to participate in an ECM construction, we will demonstrate that Icelandic is at the top of the ‘NNS-scale’ in terms of the most ‘productive utilization’ of the NNS construction while Dravidian is next to be followed by Indo-Aryan, German and possibly Russian.

We will show (i) that the predicate in a dative/genitive subject construction (DSC) in SALs is [-transitive] and unaccusative; (ii) all NNSs except the ergative are inherently case-marked; (iii) such inherent case marking cannot be done by an intransitive verb alone, but by the whole predicate compositionally consisting of a theme or an adjective along with the [-transitive] verb; and (iv) information concerning agreement should be available vP-internally (in the lower thematic S) for proper assignment of inherent case to the NNS.

We will also show that in spite of some putative evidence the accusative/dative case marking of the theme in dative/genitive subject constructions in Bangla, Tamil, Malayalam and Bodo does not count as counter-evidence to treating the predicate in NNS constructions as [-transitive]. We shall also show that the dative subject construction, which is predominant in Dravidian languages, provides crucial evidence in support of the presence of the phenomenon of Backward Control. Further, we demonstrate that the occurrence of the double dative subject construction in Dravidian may necessitate positing double Spec-Subjects in the underlying representation.

We show that SALs which have two distinct verbs for ‘be’ and ‘have’ in general lack the NNS construction (e.g., Tibeto-Burman) – for some reason, this does not extend to European NNS languages. We also demonstrate that some Tibeto-Burman languages in contact with Indo-Aryan acquired the NNS construction due to syntactic convergence. The parameters enunciated in our paper might eventually enable us to arrive at a universal typology of the NNS construction, which will enhance our understanding of the properties of the inherent case markers used in non-nominative subject constructions. Relevant data from the languages of South Asia, Icelandic, German and Russian will be presented in support of our analysis.