

## Objects

In both typological and theoretical work the characterization of the core relation object has taken second place to that of subject, with very few studies being devoted exclusively to the properties of objects (Plank 1984 is an honourable but by now inevitably dated exception). Our goal is to develop a characterization of the object relation generally and the OBJ function in LFG more specifically. We shall present evidence from a range of construction types in a variety of languages and argue on the basis of this evidence that the OBJ relation is the only truly semantically inert GR. We will show that the data discussed and the conclusion it leads us to have implications for the links between OBJ and s-, a-, m- and c-structure.

In early LFG, OBJ was a primitive, a status not greatly altered by the introduction of LMT, where its features include the tautological property [+ objective]. Hence Butt's (2006: 127) observation that the feature [ $\pm$  objective] is 'more difficult to justify', and Alsina's (1996: 19) largely ignored proposal for an alternative feature set which did by contrast seek to reduce objecthood to two other properties: [- subject, - oblique]. The only independently verifiable property of OBJ is therefore that it is [-semantically restricted], a property which it shares with SUBJ. We suggest, however, that even this feature is more problematic than is commonly recognised. Although SUBJ shows a considerable range of semantic freedom, this freedom is restricted to different degrees in different languages (Hawkins 1986: ch 4). At the same time, there is a strong cross-linguistic preference for subjects to be Agents and to a lesser extent Experiencers. Put another way the unmarked SUBJ is restricted to certain roles, but in marked circumstances (passive, sentential arguments, etc) may be associated with other arguments or with expletives. The unmarked OBJ on the other hand is, we argue, inherently unrestricted, and thus is capable cross-linguistically of assuming a wide range of functions. Whether a shared [- r] value genuinely captures these differences between the semantic voidability of SUBJ and OBJ is open to doubt.

The idea that there is a single argument in the sentence which is semantically inert and depends for its interpretation on the main predicate goes back at least as far as Fillmore (1968: 25), where the case Objective is defined as 'the semantically most neutral case, the case of anything representable by a noun whose role in the action or state identified by the verb is identified by the semantic interpretation of the verb itself'. A very similar definition is given for the role Theme from Gruber (1976) on. The challenge is to retain this idea but apply it to the relation OBJ. We begin then by reviewing the evidence in support of this semantic non-restrictiveness of objects, evidence that has not to our knowledge been systematised before.

**1. Cognate objects:** The extreme case of semantic neutrality of the OBJ function occurs with so-called cognate objects, e.g. *he laughed a hearty laugh, they lived a quiet life*. In such sentences we assume the mapping from f-structure to s-structure will remove the OBJ argument to yield an interpretation equivalent to *laugh heartily, live quietly*, which is only possible if OBJ, although syntactically available, makes no semantic contribution.

**2. Non-canonical objects and case marking:** The converse circumstance occurs when an object has additional semantic properties such as agentivity, experiencerhood or instrumentality not usually associated with objects. In these circumstances there is a cross-linguistic tendency to mark the objects with a non-canonical case (Aikhenvald, Dixon & Onishi 2001): thus German *er diente dem König*, Latin *regi serviebat* both meaning 'he served the king.DAT'. Hawkins (1986: 53) generalization that 'the class of subjects and direct objects ... is larger in English than it is in German' thus holds good but in complementary ways: German subjects are semantically restricted while German objects are less open to additional semantic content. Subjects become non-canonical the more they depart from their core semantic content; conversely objects become non-canonical the more they add to their intrinsic lack of content.

**3. Double objects:** if OBJ is defined via the semantics of the predicate then — *pace* a considerable literature — it will not be able to change in a double-object construction, so that the OBJ in *give the dog a bone* is *a bone*. We refer to Hudson (1992) for arguments that this is independently the right conclusion.

**4. OBJ and COMP:** The view that OBJ brings no semantic contribution of its own fits neatly with Alsina, Mohanan & Mohanan's (2005) argument that COMP is not needed since the categorial status of the complement is predicted by the propositional value of the argument, which in turn follows from the semantics of the verb, while the OBJ relation defines its function.

**5. Absence of object expletives:** A further respect in which objects and subjects differ is that while subject expletives (e.g. *it is raining*, Danish *der tales om valg* 'there is talk of an election') are well attested and have been widely discussed, object expletives are unusual. They seem to be linked in the main to sentential arguments as English *I hate it when you do that* (Postal & Pullum 1988) or to occur in idiomatic constructions such as English *I take it Bill has failed the exam* or Italian *me la vedo brutta* [lit: me-it.FEM.SING-see.1.SING-

ugly.FEMSING] ‘things look bad to me’. On our account this absence follows from the intrinsically empty nature of the object relation: in a sense an object is already its own expletive, and therefore an overt expletive is only called for in the exceptional circumstances of idioms or when a clausal complement has non-canonical form as with *hate it when*.

**6. Pseudo-objects:** A special kind of object expletive which once again trades on the semantic openness of the function is found in resultative constructions such as *she cried her eyes out, she worked her fingers to the bone, he drank himself to death*. In these constructions, which often resemble idioms in that they exhibit special verb-object collocations (*cry-eyes, work-fingers, etc*), the object is close to cognate in the sense of making no semantic addition to the main predicate but is required as a syntactic pivot for the secondary predicate.

**7. Subject to object raising (SOR):** The SOR construction can exist precisely because OBJ is semantically inert and therefore there need be no incompatibility between an argument drawn from the semantic frame of the lower predicate and the requirements of the main predicate as in *The police believe Bill to be a liar*. In LMT this effect is captured by Zaenen & Engdahl (1994) through a [-r] argument placed outside the angled brackets containing the main clause argument structure. Our account of OBJ allows this elegant analysis to be retained and avoids the need to re-introduce a series of empty argument slots as proposed by Kibort (2007).

**8. The OBJ-accusative link:** The view that OBJ is the semantically empty GR par excellence opens up an interesting account of the role of accusative case. We follow Smith (1994: 40ff) in arguing that accusative is the default case. Taking this to mean that accusative has the fewest, perhaps even no, intrinsic case specifications, we can then establish an iconic relation between the ‘empty’ GR and the ‘empty’ case. In this sense we move in the opposite direction from Svenonius (2002) and Grimm (2005) who argue — in different ways — that accusative has inherent semantic content. Independent evidence to support our position includes the use of accusative to mark subjects in accusative and infinitive (Acl) constructions, such as Latin *dixit servos celebrare canendo* [say.3SG.PERF the slaves.ACC dance.INF sing.GER] ‘he said the slaves celebrated by singing’

**10. OBJ and position:** Just as indirect objects moved to post-verbal position do not thereby acquire the OBJ function, so postverbal subjects must remain SUBJ in order to avoid a clash of properties. This conclusion is argued for on independent grounds by Börjars & Vincent (2005).

**11. OBJ and Theme:** Perhaps the most radical consequence of our argument is that there is now little or no discernible difference between the f-structure construct OBJ and the a-structure construct Theme. This in turn invites the thought that a-structure and f-structure are not parallel domains but rather axes that converge at the point of null content.

#### REFERENCES

- Aikhenvald, Alexandra Y., Robert M. W. Dixon, and Masayuki Onishi (eds) (2001) *Non-canonical marking of subjects and objects*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Alsina, Alex (1996) *The role of argument structure in grammar*. Stanford: CSLI.
- Alsina, Alex, K.P. Mohanan & T. Mohanan (2005) How to get rid of the COMP. In Butt & King (eds) *Proceedings of LFG05*. <http://csli-publications.stanford.edu/LFG/10/lfg05amm.pdf>
- Börjars, K & N. Vincent (2005) Position vs function in Scandinavian presentational constructions. In Butt & King (eds) *Proceedings of LFG05*. <http://csli-publications.stanford.edu/LFG/10/lfg05borjarsvincent.pdf>
- Butt, Miriam (2006) *Theories of case*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fillmore, C. (1968) The case for case. In Bach & Harms *Universals in Linguistic Theory*, 1-88.
- Grimm, S. (2005) *The lattice of case and agentivity*. Amsterdam: Institute for Logic, Language and Computation.
- Gruber, J. (1976) *Lexical structures in syntax and semantics*. Amsterdam: North Holland.
- Hawkins, John A. (1986) *A comparative typology of English and German*. London: Croom Helm.
- Hudson, Richard (1992) So-called ‘double objects’ and grammatical relations. *Language* 68: 251-276
- Kibort, Anna (2007) Extending the applicability of lexical mapping theory. Butt & King (eds) *Proceedings of LFG07*. <http://csli-publications.stanford.edu/LFG/12/papers/lfg07kibort.pdf>
- Palmer, F.R. (1994) *Grammatical roles and relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Plank, Frans (ed.) *Objects*. London & New York: Academic Press.
- Postal, Paul & Pullum, Geoffrey (1988) Expletive noun phrases in subcategorized positions. *LI* 19: 635-670
- Smith, Henry (1996) *Restrictiveness in case theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Svenonius, Peter (2002) Icelandic case and the structure of events. *Journal of Comparative Germanic Linguistics* 5: 197-225.
- Zaenen, A. & E. Engdahl (1994) Descriptive and theoretical syntax in the lexicon. In Atkins & Zampolli (eds) *Computational Approaches to the Lexicon*. OUP, 181-212.