TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF "GRAMMATICAL RELATION"

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There is no common understanding of grammatical relations in linguistic literature. Relational Grammar and Functional Grammar usually recognize only three grammatical relations, namely subject, direct object and indirect object. In [Payne, 1997] ergative and absolutive were added to these. These are relations that are recognized traditionally, and they are sufficient for an adequate description of the core of the majority of languages. Nevertheless, it is not clear if there are grammatical relations in languages of active structure, nor in those of inversive or hierarchical structure. Moreover, there are several complex cases in languages of nominative-ergative continuum, and identifying grammatical relations is not simple for them.


Such a variety of interpretations is a result of the fact that there is no theoretical definition of “grammatical relation”. The aim of this paper is to suggest an approach to the definition of this concept. We shall start with the introduction of meta-language for the definition.

The approach requires traditional semantic roles and a new notion of information transfer from actant to verb. We deal with information transfer with respect to agreement in particular. In addition, we propose to consider the transfer of information about actant semantic roles to the verb.

The most obvious example proving the existence of such phenomenon is the Tabasaran language. In Tabasaran a verb agrees with the absolutive in class and number, with the ergative in person and number, and besides, optionally, agrees with the oblique object (expressed by a pronoun of the 1 or 2 person) in person, number and case (!) [Mel’cuk, 1998]. A case form coding the semantic role of an actant is thus expressed both in the actant and in the verb.

In such rare form as in Tabasaran, the transfer of information about an actant’s semantic role is quite rare, and, since language tends to be economical, a marker duplicating information in both the verb and an actant contradicts this principle. This phenomenon has been dealt with more naturally in the Tagalog language (and other Philippine languages): the semantic role of one of the arguments, marked as focus, is coded on the verb. Coding semantic roles on the verb exists not only in exotic languages. Here are examples from Russian and English: the semantic role of subject in sentences like On ubil … ‘He killed …’ and On ubit ‘He was killed’ is defined by the verb form, but not by the form of the subject.

Thus, the semantic role of an actant can be expressed either in the actant itself (no information transfer) or in the verb (full transfer) or in both of them (partial transfer). This division is analogous to head/dependent marking, studied by J. Nichols [Nichols, 1992]. However, the main difference is that J. Nichols deals with marking of grammatical relations, but not semantic roles. In other words, grammatical relations are primary for her and are considered to be given. We define grammatical relations through head/dependent marking of semantic roles.

The following two cases need attention: 1) registration in the verb, i.e. mere indication of the presence of an argument; 2) agreement affixes of polypersonal verbs which have fixed positions in verb structure, and where the semantic role of an argument can be represented by the position of the agreement affixes, even without its material expression in a verb. In this case we say that there is a “weak” transfer of information.

Our research is devoted not to all grammatical relations, but only to head marking, i.e. the relations between a verb and an argument, where one can retrieve information about an argument from the verb form. In fact, the existence of such information in a verb, both agreement and information about the semantic role of actants, is enough for to determine the existence of grammatical relations. Different syntactic properties of actants, usually present in subjects, are considered to be a result of secondary aggregation and are not necessary for the constitution of grammatical relations.
The selected grammatical relations are classified in accordance with the following main parameters: what kind of information is transferred (agreement or semantic roles)? what type of transfer is involved (full, partial, weak, registration)? which actants can participate in a given grammatical relation (list of semantic roles, deictic characteristics, communicative properties, etc.)?

If we compare the approach being developed here with the multifactor subject definition by Keenan [Keenan, 1976], we should pay attention to the difference in the choice of elementary features. First, we select a smaller number of features. Considering many features simultaneously causes the following problem: a few NPs can share features, and it will not be clear what type of grammatical relation the NP has. A large number of elementary features results in a tremendous number of distributions among NPs, which cannot then be described in practice. Second, the suggested choice of features is aimed at a cognitive language level. It is more a way of representing information in human memory, and re-distributing information between representations of different words in a sentence, than a set of syntactic and semantic properties.

In a typical nominative language (English, Russian or Tatar) there is only one nominative actant and a subject in a multiactant verb. The nominative form does not carry information about the semantic role of this actant, and thus here we are dealing with full transfer. The same point concerns the absolutive in ergative languages and both arguments of transitive verbs in languages of the active system. Thus, traditional relations agree well with relations defined according to the proposed meta-language.

At the same time, introducing new parameters lets us make a more detailed classification of grammatical relations, and based on this classification a more detailed typological classification of languages. It seems that in this way, one could realize an idea of Ch. Fillmore of constructing a new typology of languages, formulated by him in his work [Fillmore, 1968]. This typology must be based on semantic roles, agreement and new parameters – the number of arguments characterized by transfer of information about their semantic role to the verb and the type of this transfer.

I suppose that these parameters are quite stable and can remain unchanged during a few millennia (in accordance with J. Nichols [Nichols, 1992]). Only for a few languages has changing these parameters been established. One can find examples in the work by M. Mithun presented at this symposium. In addition, these changes are defined by inner cognitive mechanisms, and are not borrowed. Such facts as the appearance of elements of the active system in dialects of the Tabasaran (an ergative language), which are absent not only in the languages of neighboring territories, but also in languages spoken at a distance of thousands of kilometers, confirm this.

Returning to the classification of Itelmen, we should mention that this language is characterized as a language with full transfer for both main arguments of the verb. This makes the language similar to those of the active system. Other languages of the Chukhto-Kamchatkan group have full transfer for one argument (absolutive) and partial transfer for another (ergative). Such a considerable difference in the structure of languages fits well with the opinion of A. P. Volodin [Volodin, 1997], already noted, that the Itelmen language does not have a genetic affiliation with the languages of the Chukhto-Kamchatkan group, their lexical and morphological similarities being the result of borrowing. This hypothesis is also confirmed by the results of phonetic researches [Volodin, 1992].

According to the parameter introduced, namely the transfer of semantic information, Itelmen is closer to genetically isolated languages of this region – Ainu and Nivkh.

The definition of grammatical relations by means of the concept of transfer of information from argument to verb is a cognitive one in essence and suggest considering grammatical relations as a means of effective packaging of information. Such an approach lets us describe from a unified point of view phenomena that seem to be different, such as agreement in Tabasaran, the focus construction in Philippine languages and the passive voice in Russian. The approach also allows creating a theoretical basis for constructing a new typology of languages.

References