

Discourse prominence and differential subject marking in Wan

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Cross-linguistically, differential argument marking and alignment splits are commonly conditioned by the arguments' discourse prominence, or topic-worthiness, defined in terms of factors such as animacy, definiteness, and information-structure properties (Silverstein 1976, Aissen 2003, Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011, among others). Compared to systems of differential object marking, differential subject marking is typologically less common, more heterogeneous, and generally less understood (de Hoop & de Swart 2008). This paper describes a system of differential subject marking attested in Wan (Southeastern Mande), which has no known parallels in other Mande languages, and appears to be a relatively recent innovation.

Like other Mande languages, Wan has a rigid SOVX word order. Syntactic positions are in strict correspondence with grammatical relations, and no argument pro-drop is allowed. In spontaneous discourse, however, the conventional SOV(X) structure is surprisingly infrequent, and it is only attested in clauses where subjects exceed objects in discourse prominence (more precisely, in definiteness and pronominality). Typical examples of SOV(X) involve combinations of pronominal subjects with NP objects (1a), and combinations of definite NP subjects with indefinite NP objects (1b).

Three different strategies are employed to avoid situations where the object is more, or equally, discourse-prominent than the subject. First, subjects with low discourse-prominence are left-dislocated, and represented within the SOV(X) core of the clause by an anaphoric pronoun (cf. the dislocated indefinite subject in 2). Second, anaphoric reference can be marked non-segmentally, by a lengthening of the vowel preceding the verb (cf. the lengthening on the subject in 3). The use of lengthening helps avoid overt pronominal objects in the context of prominence violations within a SOV(X) clause, as they result in a S:V(X) structure.

The third strategy employs a special marker that introduces subjects with relatively low discourse-prominence (4). The same marker can also appear with canonical combinations of a highly prominent subject and a less prominent object, but in that case, it serves to introduce contrastive focus (5). The subject-marking, information-structure neutral function (as in 4) does not imply any focus, and it is only attested in transitive constructions. It is in this sense parallel to the use of ergative markers in languages with pragmatically-conditioned ergativity, where "optional" subject markers also tend to derive from information-structure markers (LaPolla 1995, DeLancey 2011, Jenny & Hnin Tun 2013). Both systems provide additional marking to cases where expectations regarding the subject's relative discourse-prominence are reversed.

In Wan, as in some other languages with pragmatically-conditioned subject marking, restrictions on argument prominence are only visible in spontaneous discourse, and do not show up in elicited data. The subject marker plays little role in carefully pre-planned speech, where non-canonical mappings of information-structure properties onto grammatical relations tend to be avoided.

I present a corpus-based study of factors involved in the choice between the three strategies for avoiding prominence violations, and discuss implications of my data for traditional, elicitation-based approaches to language description (which run the risk of ignoring important discourse phenomena that are pervasive in naturally occurring data).

References

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Examples:

- (1a) *kà zò tò-má*
1PL.INCL lizard treat.as.totem-HAB
'We treat lizards as a totem.' (pronominal subject & indefinite object)
- (1b) *nàà bā é nḙ wō*
1SG:ALN field DEF child make:PAST
'My field produced crop.' (definite subject & indefinite object)
- (2) Left-dislocation of an indefinite subject:
yrāmú, à zò lè-má
children 3PL lizard eat-HAB
'Children [also] eat lizards.' (indefinite subject & indefinite object)
- (3) Lengthening as a means of avoiding overt pronominal objects:
mī nḡ wá
man+3SG give.birth:PAST NEG
'He was not born from a human.' (indefinite subject & definite object)
- (4) Subject marker (reversed prominence relations):
bé tḙḙ lā ḡ gbòlì-má
that all SUBJ 1SG annoy-HAB
'All that annoys me.' (definite subject & pronominal object)
- (5) Focus marker (canonical prominence relations):
lē lāā glà-má
woman FOC+3SG take-HAB
'It is a woman who sings it.' (not a man) (contrastive focus on subject)