The (im)possibility of lexicalized alignment – insights from Ket

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Abstract
The discussion of grammatical relations presupposes a grammatical context on whose basis the relations can be established. For example – a 'subject' argument can be understood as the equal treatment of the single intransitive argument (S) and the agentive transitive argument (A). Likewise, an ‘absolutive argument’ is the equal treatment of the single intransitive argument (S) and a patientive transitive argument (P). Therefore, to state grammatical relations, the S arguments must be comparable to either A or P; this comparability results from the equal coding of S arguments among all intransitive verbs and the equal coding of A and P arguments among all transitive verbs. Grammatical restrictions lead to alignment splits, yet defining alignment is possible within these grammatical restrictions (e.g. ergativity in perfective, accusativity in imperfective). With lexical restrictions, the picture is more complicated; here, grammatical relations might be stated based on the majority or the most productive pattern of both intransitive and transitive verbs, the ones that are not lexically restricted. But what if all intransitive and transitive argument coding patterns in a language are lexically restricted?

I will present data of a language where this is the case – namely Ket, a Yeniseian language from Siberia. In Ket, there are 6 different agreement patterns of encoding S and 8 patterns of encoding A and P. The choice of these patterns is based on specific (groups of) lexemes and not on grammatical categories or semantic features of the verb. Vajda (2004) and Georg (2007) classify these patterns into five major ‘alignment classes’. For example, Vajda (2004: 51–52) classifies the verb ‘go’ (1) and ‘look at’ (2) into the ‘absolutive conjugation’ class, since S (bo–) is encoded in the same templatic position (position 6, see superscript) as P in 'look at' (ku–). A in ‘look at’ is encoded in a different prefix position (da–). ‘Grow’ (3) and ‘sell off’ (4) are classified into the ‘coreferential (in)active conjugation’, since these verbs encode active S (ku–…ku–) and A (du–…aŋ–) arguments in position 8 and 1; and inactive arguments in position 6 (ku–). However, there is no reason why one couldn't associate the pattern of the verb ‘go’ (1) with the pattern of the verb 'bring away' (5), where position 6 marks S (bo–) and A (ku–). In that case, one could classify these verbs into a hypothetical ‘accusative–alignment’ class. When all patterns are lexically conditioned, there is no semantic basis among intransitive and transitive verbs and therefore, no a-priori reason to choose certain intransitive and transitive patterns to state a ‘lexical alignment’ class.

The stability of these patterns across Yeniseian languages suggests that speakers are perfectly fine with this ‘lack’ of grammatical relations in the agreement system; similarities between patterns might exist across verbs, but not necessary between transitive on the one hand and intransitives on the other hand. Towards the end of the talk, some possible factors for the stability of this peculiar agreement system will be mentioned.
Examples

(1) \textit{bo}^6-k^5-a^4-tn^0
   \textit{1sg.S}^6-TH^5-PR^4-go^0
   ‘I go.’ (Vajda 2004a: 51)

(2) \textit{da}^8-ku^6-k^5-o^4-il^2-do^0
   \textit{3.F.A}^8-2sg.P^6-TH^5-DR^4-PT^2-look^0
   ‘She looked at you.’ (Vajda 2004a: 52)

(3) \textit{ku}^8-a^4-ku^1-tij^0
   \textit{2.S}^8-PR^4-2sg.S^1-bring^0
   ‘You grow.’ (Vajda 2004a: 55)

(4) \textit{du}^8-ku^6-k^5-s-aŋ^1-qa^0
   \textit{3.A}^8-2sg.P^6-TH^5-3pl.A sell^0
   ‘They sell you off.’ (Vajda 2004: 57)

(5) \textit{ku}^8-ku^6-k^5-di^1-qos^0
   \textit{2.A}^8-2sg.A^6-TH^5-1sg.P-bring^0
   ‘you bring me away.’ (Georg 2007: 197)

Abbreviations

8,6,5,4,1,0 Templatic positions where affixes occur.
A Agentive transitive argument
DR Durative
F Feminine
P Patientive transitive argument
PR Present
PT Past
S Single intransitive argument
TH Thematic affix

References


Vajda E J (2004a) \textit{Ket} (Languages of the world: Materials 204). Lincom Europa, Munich