

What are subjects good for?

In this paper, I address the question of what is on the basis of the fundamental relation between subject and predicate in language. I will argue that the subject has the function to situationally anchor the predicate in the clause. This implies in turn that clauses cannot have a (semantically) expletive subject and leads to a reanalysis of the fundamental role of so-called expletive elements in the grammar.

It is generally assumed that the subject predicate relation constitutes a core notion of human grammar. The introduction and the wide-spread acceptance of the vP-internal subject hypothesis leads to the question of why a particular argument of the verb should enter into a specific agreement relation with the tensed verb or into a Spec-head relation with T. One can either stipulate the subject predicate relation as a purely syntactic necessity in the grammar (cf. EPP) or investigate the question whether the relation between the subject and the finite verb / Tense has a semantic or pragmatic role to play.

To appreciate better the question at issue, let us look at the interpretation of a simple case like (1). In event semantics, the interpretation of (1a) can be specified as in (1b), that is, the sentence represents the claim of the speaker that there is an event of visiting in the past (at a time before the speech event) in which a certain individual, named John, figured as the agent of this event and the individual's mother figured as the theme of the event.

- (1) a. John visited his mother
b. $\exists e$ visiting(e) & past (e) & agent (e, John) & theme (e, his mother)

From a semantic point of view, one may want to ask what does it buy us to know that the individual *John* figures also as the subject of the clause? A possible answer to this question is the observation that it is normally not sufficient to temporally anchor the clause to the speech event alone, as is indicated in (2). Anaphorically linking *she* to *his mother* in (2a), the meaning of (2b) amounts to the claim that there is an event of sickness in the past whose theme is John's mother. This rendition is incomplete since speakers typically interpret (2b) as a claim about John's mother being sick at the time of his visit.

- (2) a. John visited his mother.
b. She was sick
c. She was sick one week before/earlier

It is often claimed that this specification in meaning is due to a pragmatic mechanism that instantiates the non-specified discourse relation between (2a) and (2b): the utterance in (2b) is relevant in the context of the utterance of (2a) only if the speaker intends to say that there was a temporal overlap between John's visit and his mother's sickness. Note that this will not do, since there are linguistic expressions that explicitly refer to the time of John's visit as a reference point, as is indicated in (2c).

The proposal that I would like to make is that the reference time in (2c) is not determined by verbal categories like Tense and Mood directly but mediated by the subject. The anaphoric subject in (2b) and (2c) refers to a discourse antecedent that has been established in a previous event in the context, namely the event of John's visit, and it is this event with respect to which the predicate is (temporally) situated in (2b) and (2c).

There are various possibilities conceivable of achieving this temporal anaphoric link. One way, advocated for in this paper, is the assumption that nominal expressions are individuated with respect to an event (cf. Carnap 1928, Elbourne 2005). This is immediately evident with deictic nominal expressions of the type *this man (here)* or *that woman (there)* which designate an individual with respect to (a location of) the speech event, but can be extended to all kinds of

nominal expressions. In this approach, the meaning of the definite description *the man* (a DP in syntactic terms) is the unique individual that has the property of being a man in a given situation or event. The crucial point of this approach is that this event, depending on the DP's interpretation and syntactic position in the clause, can be identified with the event denoted by the verb or can be identified with an event in the context (as is the case with discourse anaphoric DPs).

We are now in a position to explain why subjects in [Spec,TP] serve to anchor the predicate denoted by the verb (phrase). It is T - by establishing a relation between speech time and reference time - that, next to the verb - introduces two further event arguments. According to Reichenbach (1947), Tense establishes a link between speech time and reference time and Aspect then anchors the event time (the event denoted by the verb) to the established reference time, with imperfective aspect specifying that the event time contains the reference time and with perfective aspect specifying that the event time immediately follows the reference time. As is illustrated in (3), past tense establishes that the reference time precedes the speech time. I propose that the Spec-head relation between the subject and T is interpreted as the identification of the event arguments of the subject and T. In other words, the reference time of T (and henceforth of the verb) is identified with the event with respect to which the subject is evaluated in the discourse. Value assignment to the event argument is then constrained by the subject in the following way: the individual mapped from this event must be identical with the discourse antecedent of the subject.

- (3) a. $\lambda e_r \lambda e_s. e_r < e_s$ (interpretation of a past morpheme in T)
 b. $\lambda e \lambda x. \text{the unique man } (x,e)$ (interpretation of the subject in Spec,T)
 c. event identification (Kratzer 1996: 122): $\lambda e_1 \lambda x. \text{the unique man } (x,e_1) \ \& \ \lambda e_s. e_1 < e_s$

Not all subjects qualify as anchors for the main predicate. In particular, indefinite DPs are not evaluated with respect to a pre-established event in the context. In this case, the event argument of the indefinite DP is identified with the event argument of the verb and the predicate has to be anchored in an alternative way. In English, the adverbial *there* is inserted in Spec,TP in this case. I will argue that *there* is not an expletive but serves as an alternative anchor in the clause, as is illustrated in (4ab).

- (4) a. John visited his mother
 b. There was a child crying in the garden
 c. I went to the local bar last night. Into the room walked a man with a green hat ...

In the present account, *there* is a function that maps an event onto its location and referring back to the event of John's visit provides the event with respect to which the predicate *was a child crying in the garden* is temporally and locally evaluated.

In conclusion, subject-verb agreement probably results from the grammaticalisation of this important relation between subject and Tense, but what is crucial is that a referentially anchored expression enters into a Spec-head relation with T, allowing for the temporal location of the event denoted by the predicate. That is why PPs, by denoting the resultant location of a predicate expressing a change of state (location) can serve as *subject* / anchor in cases of locative inversion, as illustrated in (4c).

References

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