Embedded subjects and processing preferences in Mongolian: some experimental evidence

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Structural case assignment depends mainly on two factors: (i) the predicate argument structure, and (ii) the semantic and pragmatic properties of the arguments. In addition to these factors the level of embedding of a clause can also be relevant, as for example in Mongolian, where the matrix subject has no case suffix (i.e. is in nominative case), whereas the subject of an embedded object clause can be either nominative (NOM) or accusative (ACC). In this talk we will present a questionnaire experiment the results of which indicate that in Mongolian the preference for marking embedded subjects as NOM or ACC depends on the interaction between the following two processing principles A and B, which are sensitive to the definiteness hierarchy (Aissen, 2003):

Principle A:

If two subjects are adjacent, then distinguish them (by ACC on the embedded subject) if and only if the embedded subject is higher on the referentiality scale than the matrix subject.

Principle B:

Prefer NOM on embedded subject, if it is lower on the referentiality scale than the object.

Definiteness hierarchy (Aissen, 2003):
pers. pronoun > prop. name > dem./def. NP > spec. indef. NP > non-spec. indef NP

The subject of a main clause cannot be ACC marked. (The direct object is differentially object marked: roughly, if it is definite or higher on the definiteness hierarchy, then it is ACC, if it is specific indefinite it can be ACC, if it is non-specific it must be NOM.)

(1) *Bold(*-ig) ene bagsh-ig har-san.*
Bold-ACC this teacher-ACC see-PST
´Bold saw this teacher.`

On the other hand, the subject of an embedded object clause can be either NOM or ACC. If the matrix and embedded subjects are adjacent, then there is a preference for either NOM or ACC marking: In (2), the preference is for the embedded subject to be ACC, whereas in (3) the preference is for the embedded subject to be NOM. (√ indicates the preferred option, ? indicates the dispreferred option.)

(2) a. ? *Ene bagsh Tuya ir-h-ig hus-ej bai-na.*
this teacher Tuya come-INF-ACC want-KNV be-PRS
´This teacher wants Tuya to come.`

b. √ *Ene bagsh Tuya-g ir-h-ig hus-ej bai-na.*
this teacher Tuya-ACC come-INF-ACC want-KNV be-PRS

´This teacher wants Tuya to come.`

(3) a. √ *Bi ene bagsh ir-h-ig hus-ej bai-na.*
I this teacher come-INF-ACC want-KNV be-PRS
´I want this teacher to come.`

b. ? *Bi ene bagsh-ig ir-h-ig hus-ej bai-na.*
I this teacher-ACC come-INF-ACC want-KNV be-PRS
´I want this teacher to come.`

If, however, the two subjects are not adjacent, then there is no preference for NOM or ACC:

(4) a. *Tuya ir-h-ig ene bagsh hus-ej bai-na.*
Tuya come-INF-ACC this teacher want-KNV be-PRS
´This teacher wants Tuya to come.`

b. *Tuya-g ir-h-ig ene bagsh hus-ej bai-na.*
Tuya-ACC come-INF-ACC this teacher want-KNV be-PRS
´This teacher wants Tuya to come.`

In order to explain the preference of (2b) over (2a) and (3a) over (3b) we propose the following performance principle:

Principle A: If two subjects are adjacent, then distinguish them (by ACC on the embedded subject) if and only if the embedded subject is higher on the referentiality scale than the matrix subject.

This performance principle correctly predicts the case marking preferences in the following examples, where the embedded verb is transitive.

(5) a. √ *Bi Tuya ene bagsh-ig magta-h-ig hus-ej bai-na.*
I Tuya this teacher-ACC praise-INF-ACC want-KNV be-PRS
´I want Tuya to praise this teacher.`

b. ? *Bi Tuya-g ene bagsh-ig magta-h-ig hus-ej bai-na.*
I Tuya-ACC this teacher-ACC praise-INF-ACC want-KNV be-PRS
´I want Tuja to praise this teacher.`

(6) a. ? *Tuya bi ene bagsh-ig magta-h-ig hus-ej bai-na.*
Tuya I this teacher-ACC praise-INF-ACC want-KNV be-PRS
´Tuya wants me to praise this teacher.`

b. √ *Tuya namaig ene bagsh-ig magta-h-ig hus-ej bai-na.*
Tuya me this teacher-ACC praise-INF-ACC want-KNV be-PRS
´Tuya wants me to praise this teacher.`

However, there are cases which violate principle A, since they contain embedded subjects which are not ACC marked although they are higher on the definiteness hierarchy than the matrix subject.

(7) a. √ *Ene bagsh Tuya namaig magta-h-ig hus-ej bai-na.*
this teacher Tuya me praise-INF-ACC want-KNV be-PRS
´This teacher wants Tuya to praise me.`

b. ? *Ene bagsh Tuya-g namaig magta-h-ig hus-ej bai-na.*
this teacher Tuya-ACC me praise-INF-ACC want-KNV be-PRS

´This teacher wants Tuya to praise me.`

The sentences which violate principle A are precisely those in which the subject of the embedded clause is lower in definiteness than the object, as can be seen by comparing (7), where principle A is violated, with (5) and (6), where principle A is not violated. To account for this we propose:

Principle B: Prefer NOM on embedded subject, if it is lower on the referentiality scale than the object.

(7a) violates principle A but satisfies B, whereas (7b) satisfies A but violates B. If principle B is ranked above principle A, so that the violation of principle B is worse than the violation of principle A, then we can explain why (7a) is preferred to (7b).

The grammar thus provides both the NOM and the ACC marking options for subjects of embedded object clauses, and the processor prefers one or the other option, depending on the interaction of the proposed processing principles.

References

Aissen, J. (2003): Differential Object Marking: Iconicity vs. Economy. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 21, 435-483.