

Fused grammatical and discourse functions in Ob-Ugric: Case, agreement, passive

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Abstract In the Ob-Ugric sentence, subject agreement and object agreement also encode the topic function of the subject and the object, respectively. A [-topic] subject candidate has to be demoted, and – owing to the EPP feature of AgrS – a [+topic] internal argument must be promoted to subject. Subject demotion and internal argument promotion are realized via passivization. Subject demotion can involve subjects of transitive, unergative and unaccusative verbs alike, and internal argument promotion can target objects, oblique internal arguments, and even adjuncts. Consequently, NP-movement is not a case-driven operation; it is triggered by the interplay of the [+topic] feature of AgrS in need of checking, and the EPP. In transitive clauses with a [+topic] subject and a [-topic] object, the object undergoes NP-movement to Spec,AgrOP, a secondary object position. In Eastern Mansi, the object moved to Spec,AgrO and entering an agreement relation with AgrO is also assigned accusative case. Focal objects remain in the VP caseless. These facts indicate that object licensing by the verb under government, and case assignment by AgrO via specifier–head agreement are separate processes. A further discourse-motivated property of Ob-Ugric is the optional replacement of the nominative case of subjects of active verbs functioning as recurring topics with an oblique case.

1. Introduction

This paper argues that the Ob-Ugric sentence displays a partial fusion of grammatical functions and discourse roles, and this has consequences for the licensing conditions of cases, agreement, and passive. In Ob-Ugric, the subject is also primary topic. The conflation of the subject and topic roles is attained by means of a liberal version of passive, involving the demotion of the [-topic] highest argument (whether it is an agent or a patient), and the promotion of a [+topic] internal argument (if there is one). Hence internal argument promotion, i.e., NP movement, is not case-driven; it can also target arguments bearing a semantic, adverbial case. The object is either information focus, in which case it remains in the VP, eliciting no verbal agreement and bearing no morphological case, or it is a VP-external secondary topic, in which case it elicits object–verb agreement and, in some of the dialects, it bears accusative case. In sentences with three arguments, the argument with the least prominent thematic role can only be secondary topic if it is promoted to object, and it can be primary topic if it is further promoted to subject. Another peculiarity of Ob-Ugric grammar is the possibility of oblique case for subjects functioning as shifted topics in active sentences. It is argued that these facts require the modification of case theory. So as to account for Ob-Ugric differential object marking, we either have to divorce NP licensing and morphological case marking, or we have to give up the Case Filter. The distribution of Ob-Ugric locative subjects could best be explained in a Fillmore (1968) style framework where structural case neutralizes an underlying semantic case.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the relevant facts of Ob-Ugric. Section 3 provides a structural analysis of the facts surveyed. Section 4 discusses the theoretical implications of the proposed analysis. Section 5 is a summary.

2 The Ob-Ugric sentence

2.1. The subject-topic

The Ob-Ugric languages of the Uralic family, Khanty and Mansi, are structurally closely related SOV languages (at present subjected to strong Russian influence). The Ob-Ugric subject bears a morphologically unmarked nominative case, and elicits verbal agreement. It is external to vP – as shown by the fact that it precedes not only the VP-internal material but also vP-adjuncts. The focal object is caseless, triggering no agreement. It is left-adjacent to the verb.

- (1) **Petra** *u:r-na mo:jpær wa:nt-əs*¹ (Khanty; Nikolaeva 2001: 18)
Peter forest-LOC bear see- PAST.3SG
'Peter saw a bear in the forest.'

The subject functions as the primary topic of the sentence. If the noun phrase merged in the position of the object is the most topical constituent, the sentence is passivized (2a,b). The demoted subject can be spelled out as an adjunct marked by locative case in Khanty and by lative case in Mansi. (The Khanty locative *-nə* and the Mansi lative *-n* are claimed by Honti (1971) to derive from the same Proto-Uralic *-na* locative suffix, which also had an instrumental-comitative function.)

- (2) a. pro *täpæt-jöŋ ñot-nə pet-aj* (Khanty; Kulonen 1989: 87)
he seventy arrow-LOC pierce-PASS.3SG
'He was pierced by seventy arrows.'
- b. *ñāwram por-nē-n tot-we-s* (Mansi; Kulonen 1989: 75)
child Por-woman-LAT take-PASS-PAST.3SG
'The child was taken by a/the Por woman.'

If the thematically highest noun phrase is non-specific, i.e., non-topical, passivization is obligatory. Thus an interrogative or a negative universal pronoun cannot surface in subject position.²

- (3) a. ***Xoj** *Juwan re:sk-əs?* (Khanty; Nikolaeva 1999: 58)
who Ivan hit-PAST.3SG
'Who hit Ivan?'
- b. *Juwan xoj-na re:sk-əs-a?*
Ivan who-LOC hit-PAST-PASS.3SG
'Who was Ivan hit by?'
- (4) a. ***Xoj** *tam xu:j an wa:nt-əs /wa:nt-əs-li* (Khanty; Nikolaeva 2001: (28a,b))
who this man not see-PAST.3SG/see-PAST-SG.3SG³
'Nobody saw this man.'
- b. *Tam xu:j xoj-na an wa:n-s-a*
this man who-LOC not see-PAST-PASS.3SG
'This man was not seen by anybody.'

Passivization also takes place in intransitive sentences with a non-specific underlying subject – whether their verb is unergative or unaccusative. In such sentences, the beneficiary, goal, or locative complement is raised into subject position; it loses its adverbial case or postposition, assumes nominative case, and elicits verbal agreement.

- (5) a. *Mõw šřw-ən ɔməs-l-a.* (Khanty; Kulonen 1989: 185)
earth mist-LOC sit.down-PRES-PASS.3SG

¹ Khanty and Mansi have no generally accepted spelling conventions, therefore, I preserve the spellings of the examples cited from various sources.

² This constraint is becoming less strict in the „Russified” language variety of the younger generations.

³ In (4a), the verb agrees with the definite object. SG<3SG in the glosses means that the verb bears an object agreement marker cross-referencing a singular object, and a subject agreement marker cross-referencing a 3rd person singular subject.

'Mist is sitting on the earth.' Literally: 'The earth is sat on by mist.'

- b. *Nāy tak mujnēt-nə jɔχt-w-ən.* (Mansi; Kulonen 1989: 158)
 you so guest.PL-LAT come-PASS-2SG
 'Guests will come to you.' Lit.: 'You will be come to by guests.'

Passivization is also triggered in presentative sentences containing a single non-specific complement. The verb assumes passive morphology, and the theme bears locative or lative case. The subject position appears to be empty, but it may be filled by an implicit personal pronoun or spatiotemporal proadverb. The verb bears default 3SG agreement.⁴

- (6) a. *puwləpsi-na e:t-s-a.* (Khanty; Nikolaeva 1999: 32)
 tumor-LOC enter-PAST-PASS.3SG
 'A tumor appeared.' Lit.: '(pro) was entered by a tumor.'
- b. *āk_o-māst kəmnə təwl-əw-s* (Mansi; Kulonen 1989: 184)
 suddenly man-LAT appear-PASS-PAST.3SG
 'Suddenly a man appeared.' Lit.: 'Suddenly, (there) was appeared by a man.'

The promotion of the oblique arguments to subject in (5) is not motivated by their lack of case; on the contrary, they lose their lexically selected oblique cases in the course of movement to subject position. The trigger of passivization in all cases is the [-topic] feature of the underlying subject, which leads to its demotion to adjunct status. The promotion of the internal argument to subject must be due to the EPP.

2.2 Focus objects versus topic objects

In active transitive sentences, the object is either in situ, bearing no morphological case and eliciting no verbal agreement, interpreted as information focus – see (1) above, or it is in a second topic position, following the subject-topic and preceding vP-adjuncts – see (7). (The morpheme preceding the symbol < in the glosses is an object agreement suffix, and the morpheme following the symbol < is a subject agreement suffix, occasionally fused with the object agreement suffix.) The topicalized object gets accusative case and elicits number (singular, dual, or plural) agreement on the verb (see Nikolaeva (2001), and Sosa (2017) on Khanty, and Skribnik (2001), Virtanen (2014; 2015), Sipőcz (2015), and Bíró and Sipőcz (2017) on Mansi).⁵ Accusative case is morphologically salient on lexical noun phrases only in the eastern dialect of Mansi. In other dialects, it is only visible on personal pronouns – but tentatively I assume a phonologically null accusative morpheme on topicalized lexical noun phrases, as well:

- (7) *Petra mo:jpər-Ø/luw-e:l u:r-na wa:nt-sə-lli* (Khanty; Nikolaeva 2001: 28)
 Peter bear-ACC /it-ACC forest-LOC see-PAST-SG<3SG

⁴ Kiparsky (2013) claims that Khanty marginally also allows transitive impersonal passives, on the basis of example (i) cited from Kulonen (1989):

- (i) *nōjət ilə oneltə-s-i* (Khanty; Kulonen 1989: 267)
 you-ACC PRT teach-PAST-PASS.3SG
 'you were taught'

This construction is known from Northern Russian; the isolated example in (i) must be a loan translation – especially because it occurs in a fairy tale with a well-known Russian original (The fisherman and the gold fish).

I also disagree with Kiparsky's analysis of (ii). He claims (ii) to be a subjectless impersonal sentence:

- (ii) *imə-nə χāt χara pōwta t'ōχlat-aj* (Khanty, Kulonen 1989: 269)
 woman-LOC house floor-LAT blow-INF start-PASS.3SG
 'the woman started to blow onto the floor'

In my view, (ii) is a regular passive construction with the infinitival phrase 'to blow onto the floor' functioning as the subject of the passive verb.

⁵ Accusative marking has been found to be restricted to specific or definite objects in several other languages, as well, among them Turkish (Enc 1991), and Hindi (Bhatt and Anagnostopoulou 1996).

'Peter saw the bear in the forest.'

The claim that the Ob-Ugric object elicits verbal agreement if and only if it is a topic has been supported by various kinds of evidence. Nikolaeva (2001) analyzed the discourse role of the object in nearly 1100 Khanty transitive clauses recorded by Pápay (1906–8). The object triggers agreement in 677 of the clauses. 87% of the agreeing objects are contextually given and an additional 7% have a contextually given possessor, i.e., altogether, 94% of the agreeing objects are familiarity topics. Among the 412 non-agreeing, i.e., focused, objects, the proportion of previously activated objects is 11%. The role of givenness in licensing object–verb agreement has also been proven by elicited examples. Observe the following minimal pair of Nikolaeva (2001):

- (8) a. What did you do? (Khanty; Nikolaeva 2001: 16)
*Ma tam kalaŋ we:l-s-əm /*we:l-s-e:m*
I this reindeer kill-PAST-1SG/kill-PAST-SG<1SG
'I killed this reindeer.'
- b. What did you do with this reindeer?
*Ma tam kalaŋ *we:l-s-əm /we:l-s-e:m*
I this reindeer kill-PAST-1SG/kill-PAST-SG<1SG
'I killed this reindeer.'

In (8a), the object conveys new information, hence it is VP-internal, eliciting no agreement. In (8b), on the contrary, the object is given, hence it is in topic position eliciting agreement.

The Eastern Mansi data in (9a,b) are cited by Virtanen (2014) from coherent stories, where the discourse status of the objects is made clear by the context. In (9a), the focal object bears no case ending and elicits no verbal agreement. (9b) contains a given object, which is marked by overt accusative case and triggers agreement on the verb.

- (9) a. *kom jowt-nyööl wə-s* (E Mansi; Virtanen 2014: (17),(11))
man bow-arrow take-PAST.3SG
'The man took a bow and an arrow'
- b. *ööw-mø öät kont-iil-øm*
door-ACC NEG find-SG<1SG
'I don't find the door.'

The correlation between agreement and topicality is not surprising. Givón (1975) argues on the basis of evidence from child language and Creol languages that subject agreement and object agreement suffixes were originally topic doubling pronouns cliticized to the verb. Among the present-day languages, the phenomenon is not unique to Ob-Ugric; Dalrymple and Nikolaeva (2011) discuss scores of languages from various language families where object–verb agreement encodes the topic status of the object.

The claim that agreeing Ob-Ugric objects occupy a vP-external topic position behind the primary subject-topic,⁶ whereas non-agreeing focal objects are in situ inside the VP can be supported by the following data of Nikolaeva (1999).

(i) Topical objects precede VP-adverbs, whereas focal objects follow them (10a,b). The focal object is left adjacent to the verb; only particles (e.g., the negative particle) can intervene between them:

- (10) a. *pro šiti wo:j wel-l-ət* (Khanty; Nikolaeva 1999: 61)
so animal kill-PRES-3PL
'So they kill an animal.'
- b. **pro Wo:j šiti wel-l-ət*
animal so kill-PRES-3PL

⁶ Jayaseelan (2001) ensures a secondary topic position for topicalized objects in the Dravidian languages by placing them in an IP-internal topic position.

- c. pro *Wo:j* *šiti* *wel-l-e:l*
 animal so kill- PRES-**SG**<3PL
 'The animal, they kill like that.'

(ii) VP-coordination can leave the object stranded only if the verb agrees with it, i.e., if it is in a VP-external topic position (11b):

- (11) a. *pro *Niŋ* *wu-l-ət* *pa* *lo:t-l-ət* (Khanty; Nikolaeva 1999: 68)
 woman take-PRES-3PL and sell-PRES-3PL
 'They take and sell a woman.'
- b. pro *Niŋ* *wu-l-e:l* *pa* *lo:t-l-e:l*
 woman take-PRES-**SG**<3PL and sell-PRES-**PL**<3PL
 'The woman, they take and sell.'

(iii) An object can be followed by a floating quantifier only if the verb agrees with it, i.e., if it is in a derived topic position (12b):

- (12) a. *Luw* (*asa*) *a:n-ət* (**asa*) *il* *pa:jət-əs* (Khanty; Nikolaeva 1999: 66)
 he all cup-PL all down drop-PAST.3SG
 'He dropped all the cups.'
- b. *Luw* (*asa*) *a:n-ət* (*asa*) *il* *pa:jət-sə-lli*
 he all cup- PL all down drop-PAST-**SG**<3SG
 'The cups were all dropped by him.'

In some Ob-Ugric dialects, 1st and 2nd person objects cannot get accusative case and/or cannot elicit verbal agreement – as illustrated by the elicited Eastern Khanty examples in (13). The 1st and 2nd person objects in (13a,b) trigger no agreement, unlike the 3rd person object in (13c).

- (13) a. *lüw* *mān-t* *wū-λ*. (Khanty; Márta Csepregi p.c.)
 he I-ACC see-PRES.3SG
 'He sees/knows me.'
- b. *lüw* *nūŋ-at* *wū-λ*.
 he you-ACC see-PRES.3SG
 'He sees/knows you_{SG}.'
- cf. c. *lüw* *mā* *āŋke-m*. *Vera* *lüw-at* *wū-λ-təy*.
 she I mother-1SG Vera she-ACC know-PRES-**SG**<3SG
 'She is my mother. Vera knows her.'

In Eastern Mansi, it is the accusative morpheme that is blocked in the case of 1st and 2nd person pronominal objects:

- (14) a. *Öänøm* *jäl-ääl-ääløn*.⁷ (E Mansi; Virtanen 2014: (15))
 I.1SG down-kill-IMP.SG<2SG
 'Kill me!'
- b. *Om* *nään* *jorøl* *tåt-əs-løm* *tøg*. (E Mansi; Virtanen 2014: (42))
 I you.2SG on.purpose bring-PAST-SG<1SG here
 'I brought you here on purpose.'

This „Person Case Constraint” (the relics of which are also present in Hungarian, a sister language) is attributed by É. Kiss (2013, 2017) to an Inverse Topicality Constraint, which rules out constructions where the structural hierarchy of topics is contrary to their ranking in the following topicality hierarchy: speaker participant > participant > non-participant of the discourse.

⁷ In (14a), the 1st person object bears a 1st person singular possessive suffix. The non-possessive use of possessive suffixes, and their appearance on personal pronouns is a common feature of Uralic languages, including Hungarian (cf. É. Kiss and Tánčzos 2018).

2.3 Topicalization of oblique internal arguments via promotion to object

The secondary topic position of the Ob-Ugric sentence can only be taken by an internal argument if it is promoted to object role. In ditransitive constructions with a beneficiary or goal promoted to object, the theme argument demoted from object bears instrumental (in a different terminology, instructive-final) case. Observe a Northern Mansi minimal pair analyzed by Skribnik (2001). In (15a), the so-called directive construction, the theme is object-topic, marked by accusative case and verbal agreement, whereas the goal bears a lative case ending. In (15b), the so-called secundative construction, the goal is promoted to object-topic, bearing accusative case and eliciting agreement; the theme has an instrumental case suffix.

- (15) a. Who do you relate the tale to?
Am mōjt tawen mojt-i-lum. (N Mansi; Skribnik 2001: 228)
 I tale he.LAT tell-PRES-SG<1SG
 'I relate the tale to him.'
- b. What do you tell him?
Am tawe mōjt-əl mōjt-i-lum.
 I he.ACC tale-INSTR tell-PRES-SG<1SG
 'I tell him a tale.'

In the (a) example of (16), a Northern Khanty minimal pair, both the caseless theme object and the lative-marked goal are part of the verb phrase. In (16b), the goal is promoted to object-topic; it bears no visible case (in this dialect, only pronouns have overt accusative marking); but it elicits verbal agreement. Northern Khanty has no instrumental/instructive-final case; the demoted theme bears locative case.

- (16) a. *ānt'e-l hāwrem-al-a hāñ ma-l.* (Khanty; F. Gulyás: 2015: (15), (16))
 mother-3SG⁸ child-3SG-LAT bread give-PRES.3SG
 'The mother gives bread to her child.'
- b. *ānt'e-l hāwrem-al hāñ-ən ma-l-li.*
 mother-3SG child-3SG bread-LOC give-PRES-SG<3SG
 'The mother gives her child some bread.'

In the Eastern Khanty sentence in (17a), the VP contains a dative-marked goal and a caseless theme. In (17b), the goal has become a secondary topic, bearing accusative case. It is a 1st person pronoun, hence the Inverse Topicality Constraint blocks verbal agreement with it.

- (17) a. *lüw mantem kat qulə-γən məj.* (Khanty; Sosa 2017: 118)
 (s)he I.DAT two fish-DU give-PAST.3SG
 'She gave two fish to me.'
- b. *lüw mant kat qulə-γən-at məj.*
 (s)he I.ACC two fish-DU-INS give-PAST.3SG
 'She provided me with 2 fish.'

A beneficiary or goal argument promoted to object tends to function as a secondary topic; but we also attest examples where it remains in the VP, eliciting no verbal agreement, e.g.:

- (18) *Nataša Ksuša nīpək-at məj.* (Khanty; F. Gulyás 2018: (39))
 Nataša Ksuša book-INS give.PAST.3SG
 'Natasa gave Ksuša a book.'

Though such examples are sporadic, they indicate that the secundative construction is not necessarily the result of a discourse-motivated movement rule. In fact, native speakers' explanations suggest that the theta roles in the directive and secundative construals of a verb phrase are not completely identical. In the directive variant, the target of the action is the theme,

⁸ The possessive suffix on *mother* can agree with a pro possessor coreferent with *her child*, but – as is common in the Uralic languages – it can also function as a (non-possessive) definiteness marker.

whereas in the secundative variant, the target of the action is the beneficiary, with the theme functioning as a means of providing for him/her. Therefore, I assume that the secundative construction is not a transformational derivative of the directive construction; the two constructions are the mappings of two different theta grids associated with ditransitive verbs.

2.4 Oblique subjects in active sentences

In Khanty, not only the demoted agent of passive sentences bears lative or locative case; the subject can bear the same oblique case in active sentences, as well. Oblique subjects are sporadic in Northern Khanty, occurring mainly in archaic folklore texts (19); they are rare in most parts of the Eastern Khanty area (20); but they are quite common in its easternmost Vasyugan subdialect (21).

(19) so:rñi-na pos-ij-əl (N Khanty; Nikolaeva 1999: 43)
 gold-LOC float-IMPF-PRES.3SG
 'The gold is floating down.'

(20) pan tom əj **poγ-əli-n** wu-λ-təγ. (E Khanty; Sosa 2017:189)
 and this one boy-DEM.LOC know-PRES-SG>3SG
 'And this little boy knows it'

(21) männ-nə əfo... joγo-ta əntə uspet wer-s-äm (Vasyugan K; Filchenko 2007: 413)
 I-LOC again shoot-INFNEG on.time do-PAST-1SG
 'I didn't do the shooting on time again.'

Gulya (1970), Honti (1971), Kulonen (1989), and tentatively Filchenko (2007), as well, analyzed the oblique-marked agents of active sentences as ergative subjects. There is, however, compelling evidence refuting the ergative analysis. First, subjects of unaccusatives also occur in the locative/lative case, as shown by example (19) above, or by example (22), containing an unaccusative verb of the goal-directed movement type:

(22) **ma-nə** nürəγət-əm tōm jänk pälək-a. (Khanty; Sosa 2017: 184)
 I-LOC run-PAST.1SG that small.lake side-LAT
 'I ran to the other side of the small lake.'

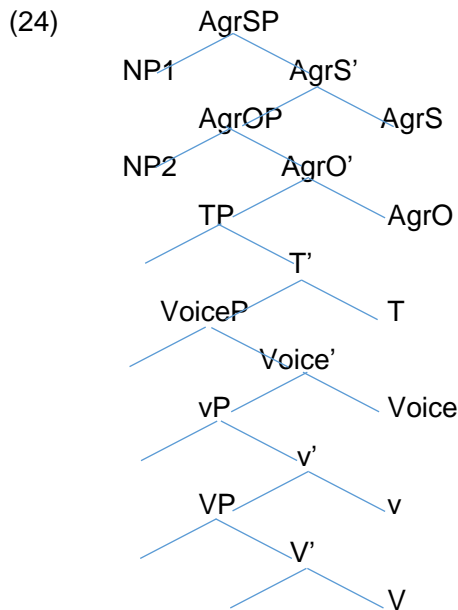
Second, locative subjects co-occur with an accusative object, as in (23):

(23) **Lüy-ən** lüy-ət wijnat il-wel-tə (Khanty; Honti 1971: 432)
 he-LOC he-ACC deliberately PRT-kill-PAST.SG<3SG
 'He killed him deliberately.'

The Ob-Ugric locative subject is not an Icelandic-type quirky subject, either – because it is not lexically selected; it can occur with any verb. The function of the locative case of active subjects has been clarified recently by Sosa (2017); it can be used to mark a subject functioning as an unexpected shifted topic.

3 Analysis

The facts surveyed in Section 2 suggest that the highest noun phrase in the Ob-Ugric sentence functions as both grammatical subject and primary topic. That is, the AgrSP phrase, whose specifier it occupies, is the projection of a head specified as both [+nominative] and [+topic]. AgrSP subsumes an AgrOP, the projection of a [+accusative, +topic] head. The specifier of AgrOP is the landing site of objects functioning as secondary topics. The AgrOP projection need not be activated in every transitive sentence, i.e., the object need not be topicalized. The projection and the filling of AgrSP, however, is obligatory – which is a manifestation of the EPP. The AgrS and AgrO heads are realized as subject agreement and object agreement suffixes. If the order of the suffixes on the Ob-Ugric verb mirrors the order of the functional projections headed by them, then in Mansi, AgrOP subsumes TenseP, VoiceP, vP and VP, as shown in (24). In Khanty, the order of VoiceP and TP is reversed; VoiceP dominates TP.



The noun phrase moved to Spec,AgrSP checks the phi-features of AgrS, which assigns nominative case to it, as usual; in addition, however, the noun phrase in Spec,AgrSP must also check the [+topic] feature of the AgrS head. (The [+topic] feature is essentially identical with the specificity feature proposed by Enç (1991), encoding that its carrier is identical with, or is a subset of, a previously established referent.) The constituent moved to Spec,AgrSP passes through Spec,VoiceP. The Voice head is either active or passive. An active Voice head selects a thematically complete verb phrase, whereas a passive Voice head selects a verbal projection (vP or VP) whose thematically highest argument is existentially bound but syntactically unrealized.⁹ The movement rule filling Spec,AgrSP targets the closest syntactically active constituent. If this argument has inherent case, its case is replaced by the phonetically null nominative assigned by AgrS.

AgrOP can be projected (or activated) in active transitive sentences; in other words, the AgrO head selects an active VoiceP subsuming a vP. If the directive and secundative constructions of ditransitive verbs discussed in Section 2.3 are indeed mappings of different theta grids, as suggested in Section 2.3, then movement to Spec,AgrO always targets the internal argument closest to the verb. The noun phrase in Spec,AgrOP checks the number feature of AgrO, and – at least in Mansi – AgrO assigns accusative case to it. Crucially, the filler of Spec,AgrOP must also check the [+topic] feature of AgrO.

The tense, voice, object agreement, and subject agreement suffixes realizing the T, Voice, AgrO and AgrS heads are bound morphemes spelled out suffixed to the verb, which apparently remains in situ in the verb phrase.

4 Theoretical implications

The Ob-Ugric facts surveyed above necessitate the rethinking of certain theoretical assumptions of generative linguistic theory. In standard generative theory, passive NP movement is case-driven; it is triggered by the NP's need of case. In Ob-Ugric, NP-movement can also target complements bearing an oblique case – which will be replaced by nominative case assigned by AgrS. Ob-Ugric NP movement is motivated by discourse requirements: Spec,AgrSP and Spec,AgrOP are to be filled by [+topic] constituents to check the [+topic] features AgrS and AgrO. AgrS also has an EPP feature, which makes movement to Spec,AgrSP obligatory (unless the verb has no complement other than a demoted subject).

⁹ A TP intervening between the Voice head and the vP or VP in Khanty is assumed to be transparent for selection.

The type of differential object marking attested most clearly in Eastern Mansi also raises questions concerning case theory. In Eastern Mansi, objects with no topic feature (i.e., non-referential objects and objects with unfamiliar referents), remaining in situ in the verb phrase, bear no visible case; objects extracted into Spec,AgrOP, however, are assigned an accusative case suffix – as was illustrated by (9a,b).

In the Khanty dialects, the accusative case ending has only been preserved on pronouns. In most Khanty dialects, 3rd person pronominal objects, practically always referring to previously introduced individuals, are always case-marked, whereas the case-marking of 1st and 2nd person pronominal objects is blocked by the Inverse Topicality Constraint.¹⁰ This is not the case in the Vasyugan dialect though; some data of Filchenko (2003) indicate that the accusative-marking of a 3rd person pronoun is not obligatory but depends on the [+topic] feature of the pronoun. In (25a,b), the object is non-topical (it is in the VP, following a VP-adjunct, eliciting no object-verb agreement); accordingly, it bears no accusative case in the Vasyugan example in (25a). (25b) illustrates the Surgut dialect, where accusative marking has been extended to [-topic] pronominal objects, as well.

(25) a. pəγ-əl-nə qoγ juγ wəγa-γən. (Vasyugan Khanty; Filchenko 2003: 113)
 son-3.SG-LOC long she call-PST.3SG
 'Her son called (for) her for a long time.'

b. ma lüw-at toγəmtə-λ-əm. (Surgut Khanty; Sosa 2017: 180)
 I he-ACC understand-PRES-1SG
 'I understand him.'

The Vasyugan example suggests that the discourse-motivated differential accusative marking preserved in Eastern Mansi may have been more general in Ob-Ugric.

The pattern attested in Eastern Mansi is problematic for case theory because it shows a dissociation of object licensing and accusative assignment. The default position of the object in the Mansi sentence (and in the Ob-Ugric sentence, in general) is the immediately preverbal position. In this position, however, the object is unmarked morphologically; it assumes accusative case if and only if it is raised to Spec,AgrOP, where it establishes an agreement relation with AgrO.

The easiest explanation of this situation would be to assume that the VP-internal object has no case because it is incorporated into the verb. However, a VP-internal object is often clearly referential; e.g., it can be a complex possessive construction as in (26):

(26) ton k°än-pöäl-nø seemøl-nyoxøs, sāj̄røng-nyoxøs jäl̄p-øng
 that up-side-LAT black-sable white-sable sacred-ADJ
 toāgl-äǟt nok-posyg-øs. (E Mansi; Virtanen 2014: (25))
 cloth-3SG up-pull-PAST.3SG
 'Upon that he put on his sacred costume of black sable, white sable.'

Another possibility would be to give up the Case Filter, requiring that every overt noun phrase have case, and to accept that an object in situ is caseless in Ob-Ugric. A third option is to divorce syntactic Case (the feature responsible for object licensing) and morphological case as proposed by Bobaljik (2008), and to assume that the object complement is licensed by the V under government, and its accusative case is assigned by AgrO in a specifier–head configuration.

The locative case appearing on the subjects of active sentences, too, presents a problem for standard case theory. As discussed in Section 2.4, a subject-topic in Spec,AgrSP can optionally bear the oblique case of subject candidates demoted to adjuncts – if the subject functions as a shifted, recurring topic. That is, the semantic case that marks agents and other demoted subject candidates can replace the phonetically null structural case of an active subject in order to make it more salient. This possibility does not seem to fit into the framework of generative case theory; it could, at best, be analyzed as a PF phenomenon, a kind of stylistic variation. It could most easily be accounted for by a *Case for Case* (Fillmore 1968) style approach, where thematic roles

¹⁰ Northern Khanty does not have the Inverse Topicality Constraint.

are encoded by different case endings and adpositions. The thematically determined cases and adpositions are neutralized in subject and object positions, but remain accessible, and can be put to use when e.g. a recurring subject-topic needs to be emphasized. This approach would also account for the disappearance, or neutralization, of the oblique case of locative, goal, and beneficiary arguments promoted to subject in passive constructions.

5 Summary

In the Ob-Ugric sentence, subject agreement and object agreement also encode the topic function of the subject and the object, respectively. The fusion of the subject and topic roles has far reaching consequences in Ob-Ugric grammar. The constituent in the specifier of AgrSP must have the feature [+topic], therefore, a [-topic] subject candidate has to be demoted, and – owing to the EPP feature of AgrS – a [+topic] internal argument must be promoted to subject. Subject demotion and internal argument promotion are realized via passivization. Subject demotion can involve subjects of transitive, unergative and unaccusative verbs alike, and internal argument promotion, i.e., NP movement, can target objects, oblique internal arguments, and even adjuncts. Consequently, NP-movement is not a case-driven operation; it is triggered by the interplay of the [+topic] feature of AgrS in need of checking, and the EPP.

In transitive clauses with a [+topic] subject and a [+topic] object, the object undergoes NP-movement to Spec,AgrOP, a secondary object position. In Eastern Mansi, the object moved to Spec,AgrO and entering an agreement relation with AgrO is also assigned accusative case by it. Focal objects remain in the VP caseless. These facts indicate that object licensing by the verb under government, and case assignment by AgrO via specifier–head agreement are separate processes – as suggested by such recent versions of case theory as Bobaljik (2008).

A further discourse-motivated property of Ob-Ugric is the optional replacement of the nominative case of subjects of active verbs functioning as recurring topics with an oblique case. This phenomenon – as well as the replacement of the oblique cases of internal arguments promoted to subject with nominative case – argues for a Fillmore (1968) style approach to case. Namely, every noun phrase has a thematically motivated case ending or adposition, which is neutralized in subject or object position, but is accessible if needed, e.g., for the encoding of some discourse feature.

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