

IS THERE CASE IN HEAD-MARKING LANGUAGES?

Andrej A. Kibrik (Institute of Linguistics, Russian Academy of Sciences)

kibrik@comtv.ru

1. The problem

(1) Karachay-Balkar (Turkic; a standard average LENCA)

‘He was striking matches and throwing them at (*lit.* to) the wolves’

	ol	sirnik-le-ni	zandır-ıp,	börü-le-ge	at-a	e-di
	he:Nom	match-Pl-Acc	light-Conv	wolf-Pl-Dat	throw-Conv	Cop-Past
<i>sem. role</i>	<i>Agent</i>	<i>Patient</i>		<i>Recipient</i>		
<i>synt. status</i>	<i>subject</i>	<i>direct object</i>		<i>oblique</i>		
<i>case</i>	<i>Nom</i>	<i>Acc</i>		<i>Dat</i>		

Standard view of clause structure:

- i. Participants (both arguments and non-arguments) bear semantic roles
- ii. Participants are coded by nominals
- iii. Nominals have *syntactic statuses* (grammatical relations): subject, object, oblique... established by behavioral properties
- iv. Semantic roles are marked/coded (in some theories – via the mediation of syntactic statuses) by the inflectional category known as *case* that modifies nominals

- Thus syntactic statuses and case are:
 - both characteristic of nominals
 - are in direct correspondence (at least in the prototypical instances)
 - still are **notionally clearly distinct**
- All this has been developed and works fine for most LENCA. But not all languages are necessarily like this – cf.:
 - ii. “pronominal argument languages” (Van Valin, Mithun, Jelinek, among others)
 - iii. languages without syntactic statuses (A.E.Kibrik, among others)
 - iv. role coding (marking) may appear on the verb (Nichols, among others)
- Here I mostly address issue (iv), and partly (ii) and (iii).
- Head-marking languages – mostly outside the LENCA area, but some are inside: Abkhaz-Adyghean, many Paleoasiatic, some Uralic.

(2) Abkhaz (Abkhaz-Adyghean; highly polysynthetic and head-marking)

i-u-s-te-jt’ ‘I gave it to you’
 it-to.you-I-give-Indic

- Morphological positions in the verb wherein personal affixes appear are customarily understood (and glossed) in terms of syntactic statuses: subject position, object position ...
- **Main claim:** linear morphological positions in the verb of Abkhaz-type languages are functionally equivalent to Karachay-Balkar case endings, and not to syntactic statuses, and should be termed accordingly

2. Athabaskan languages (N. America):

- constitute the core of the Na-Dene phylum that also comprises Eyak and Tlingit
- include three areal groups: Northern (Alaska and Western Canada), Southern, or Apachean (Southwest of the U.S.), and Pacific (U.S. Pacific coast)
- as is typical of North American languages, are highly head-marking and polysynthetic
- are almost exclusively prefixal

3. Role coding technique in Athabaskan

- 1st and 2nd person arguments: coded only as personal affixes on the verb
- 3rd person:
 - of course, independent NPs can be used but they appear bare, without case markers
 - personal affixes within the verb which in certain cases are null
- Personal affixes occupy certain positions in the morphological template of the verb
- Many have proposed that personal (pronominal) affixes are genuine arguments of the clause while full NPs (when present) are referential supplements to morphologically coded arguments; a radical formulation of this approach encounters some problems
- But this is not at issue here: we discuss not the coding of participants but the coding of their roles – this distinction must be kept very clear
- Morphological positions are arranged according to the accusative pattern:
 - arguments of one-place verbs align with agentives (= agents or agent-like arguments) of two-place verbs and engage position #2 or #5 (depending on individual personal affix)
 - they are contrasted to patientives (= patients or patient-like arguments) of two-place verbs that engage morphological position #6
- The following examples are from Navajo (the Apachean branch of Athabaskan), mostly p.c. Bernice Casaus. Morphological positions are counted from right to left

(3) One-place verb with an agentive argument: dahnishjí ǵ d ‘I jump’

	dah--	ni-	sh-	jǵ ǵ d
<i>Morph. position #</i>		3	2	0
	upward--	Impf-	1Sg.Nom-	jump

(4) One-place verb with a patientive argument: ǵ inishgai ‘I am white, I whitened’

	ǵ ini-	sh-	gai
<i>Morph. position #</i>		2	0
	Pref-	1Sg.Nom-	white

(5) Two-place verb, agentive monitored: nishteeh ‘I carry him (here)’

	∅-	ni-	sh-	ǵ - teeh
<i>Morph. position #</i>		3	2	1 0
	3.Acc-	Impf-	1Sg.Nom-	TI- handle.AnO

(6) Two-place verb, patientive monitored:

[ʔákóǵʔ] shí ǵ teeh ‘He carries me (over there) [e.g. an invalid speaking]’

	shi-	∅-	ni-	ǵ - teeh
<i>Morph. position #</i>	6		3	1 0
[to.there]	1Sg.Acc-	3.Nom-	Impf-	TI- handle.AnO

4. Morphological positions in the verb are not about syntactic statuses

- Traditionally, in Athabaskan studies morphological positions are dubbed: positions #2 (for some affixes, #5) – the “subject position”, position #6 the “object position”
- Similar terminology is used overwhelmingly in the analyses of head-marking languages
- Such extension of the notions “subject” and “object” is misguided: Navajo verbal positions #2/5 and #6 are functionally very different from syntactic statuses “subject” and “object”, and this kind of extension of the syntactic statuses terms is notionally flawed
- Calling Navajo verbal positions “subject position” and “object position” is identical to calling Latin *-∅* and *-m* in *Puer-∅ puella-m amat* ‘The boy loves the girl’ the markers of the

subject and the object cases, respectively.

- In Latin, the presence of nominal case marking and of syntactic statuses is established independently; the syntactic statuses are postulated because they have a range of stable behavioral properties, such as formation of participial constructions, passive, etc.
- Incidentally, Navajo displays neither clause-internal (voice alternation) nor interclausal grammatical rules (relativization, complementation, coordination) that require syntactic statuses. Thus it is particularly inept to apply these notions to the language
- Even in those head-marking languages that do display evidence of syntactic statuses, the interpretation of verb-internal morphological positions in these terms is inadequate

5. What are the morphological positions about, then? About role coding

- If the function of verbal positions in which personal affixes are inserted can be compared with anything in standard LENCA, it should be with case markers
- Linear morphological positions are a role coding technique; they allow language users to tell clause participants apart due to the affixes' relative order
- Just as Karachay-Balkar codes the patientive argument in (1) by means of an Accusative affix, Navajo codes one in (6) by locating the personal affix into position #6.

Navajo	Karachay-Balkar analogy	English analogy
Position #2/5	Nominative case	Pre-VP syntactic position
Position #6	Accusative case	Post-verbal syntactic position
Position #6/9	Dative case	Preposition <i>to</i>
Preverbs (position #11a)	Oblique cases and postpositions	Various prepositions

Table 1: *Three techniques of role coding: linear morphological positions in the verb (Navajo, head-marking), nominal case markers (Karachay-Balkar, dependent-marking) and syntactic positions (English, null-marking)*

- Thus morphological positions in Navajo verb are direct analogs of Karachay-Balkar (Latin, Russian) case desinences – Nominative, Accusative, etc.
- I propose to call them “Nominative position”, “Accusative position”, etc. – see (3)-(6)
- Irrespective of extending the case terminology to verbal morphological positions, one must recognize that these two types of role coding are functionally equivalent
- English: the third type of coding technique, also order-based (word order)
- Sergej Jaxontov used to describe analytic languages of East Asia, that are typologically similar to English in this respect, in terms of “syntactic cases”; note that in English, it is also necessary to clearly distinguish between the coding technique and syntactic statuses

6. Dative

(7) béésh bi-náá-ø-di-ni-tsi
 knife 3.Dat-Rep-3.Acc-Pref-2Sg.Nom-point
 ‘You gently pointed a knife at him again’

- 3rd person Accusative personal affix is zero – see (5)
- Non-zero 3rd personal affix *b(i)-* is the Dative affix; pos. #9 in (7)
- It may also appear in the same position #6 as the Accusative personal affix, but the shape of the personal morpheme itself is always *b(i)-*; thus Navajo employs a mixed role coding technique: position plus shape of the personal affix
- NB: those linguists who use the notions “subject” and “object” indiscriminately, often supplement this series of notions with the “dative”, as if it were also a syntactic status. This is another illustration of the confusion of coding techniques and behavioral statuses.

7. Oblique

(8) [hastiin ʔasdzáá łííʔ] y-e-i-ø-ní -lóóz
man_i woman_j horse_k 3.Obl_j-to-3.Acc_k-3.Nom_i-Pf-lead
‘The man brought/led the horse to the woman [He brought/led it to her]’

- In addition to the arguments, Navajo allows for many peripheral clause participants to also be coded on the verb
- The pronominal element corresponding to such a participant occurs at the farthest left end of the verb (position #11b), and is followed by a preverb specifying the participant’s semantic role (position #11a), such as *-aa-* ‘to’ (surfacing as *-e-*) in example above.
- The example in (8) is a three-place clause, and the verb displays three distinct case positions: counting from right to left, Nominative, Accusative, and Oblique.

8. Conclusions

- There are many confusions in the realm of clause structure, including:
 - the well-known misconception of the elementary and universal character of syntactic statuses
 - the euro-centric underestimation of pronominal arguments
- Here I point to one more misconception: the popular glossing of verbal morphological positions in head-marking languages in terms of syntactic statuses
- The distinction of role coding and syntactic statuses is kept clear with respect to standard LENCA, but becomes blurred in the accounts of head-marking languages – perhaps because:
 - In familiar LENCA, the coding of both the participants and their roles is performed by means of morphemes, while in head-marking languages the coding of roles is performed via a different kind of device, that is, the relative linear morphological positions
 - linguists are used to the association between linear positions and syntactic statuses
 - linguists tend to view syntactic statuses as more cross-linguistically applicable notions than case marking, which is certainly not correct
- **Main conclusions:**
 - *linear positions make as good devices of role coding as case markers*
 - *syntactic statuses and role coding techniques must be very clearly distinguished, both in the thinking of linguists and in linguistic terminology*
- Note that these conclusions are independent of the pronominal argument character of Navajo and from the irrelevance of syntactic statuses in Navajo
- Accepting these conclusion is a necessary prerequisite for a cross-linguistically meaningful understanding of clause structure, syntactic statuses, and role coding techniques.
- In Eurasia, this problem is relevant not only for generally recognized polysynthetic languages, such as Abkhaz, but also for those Romance and Slavic languages that extensively employ pronominal clitics, thus approaching the polysynthetic type
- Moreover, it is also relevant for languages like English that also used the order-based role coding technique, even though it is not affix order but word order

LESS THAN OBVIOUS ABBREVIATIONS IN GLOSSES

Pf – perfective
Impf – imperfective
Rep – repetitive

Conv – converb
Cop – copular verb
Indic – indicative

AnO – Animate object
TI – transitivity indicator
Pref – prefix of irrelevant function