

Topicality and nonsubject marking

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Conditions on grammatical marking (agreement and case marking) are often assumed to be definable in purely syntactic terms. In some languages, however, marking patterns depend on information structure role: topical elements are grammatically marked, while non topics are unmarked. Though the correlation between topicality and grammatical marking has been well studied for subjects, which are often primary topics, it is less well studied for nonsubject topics (secondary topics). But languages tend to treat nonsubject topical arguments specially in terms of grammatical marking. In some languages, any of a number of grammatical roles can participate in marking of nonsubject topics; in others, only topical objects are marked. The distinction between marked and unmarked objects can go beyond grammatical marking and correlate with a syntactic distinction between two kinds of objects, primary and secondary object, with topical, grammatically marked, primary objects showing more characteristics of core grammatical functions than nontopical secondary objects.

These observations lead to a new theory of differential object marking which emphasizes the role of information structure in the marking patterns of objects. First, they suggest that differential object marking is motivated by the need to highlight similarities between subjects and topical objects, both of which tend to be grammatically marked. Second, they emphasize the role of information structure in the marking patterns of objects, in contrast to many semantically-driven accounts. The relevance for differential object marking of semantic features of such as animacy and definiteness, typical of topics, is explained by historical patterns of grammaticization: typical features of topics come to be required or sufficient for secondary topic marking.