

A Minimalist View on Differential Object Marking for Specificity*

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Introduction

Differential Object Marking (DOM) is the syntactic or morphological marking of direct objects only when high in animacy, definiteness or specificity. For example, only specific objects may be case marked (1) or trigger verbal agreement (2) in a particular language:

- (1) a. Ali bir kitap aldi. (Turkish)
Ali one book bought
'Ali bought some book or other.
- b. Ali bir kitab-**i** aldi.
Ali one book-**ACC** bought
'A book is such that Ali bought it.' (Enç 1991, p. 5)
- (2) a. U-me-leta kitabu? (Swahili)
2.SG-P-bring book
'Have you brought a book?'
- b. U-me-**ki**- leta kitabu?
2.SG-P-**3.SG**- bring book
'Have you brought the book?' (Croft 1988, p. 161)

A number of functional and typological studies (e.g. Givón (1984), Bossong, (1991)) show that DOM is very robust cross-linguistically. There have been some formal studies that attempt to account for the properties of DOM as a group, mainly from LFG-based OT-Syntax perspectives (e.g., Aissen (2003) and Morimoto (2002)).

Today's talk:

A unified account of four different types of definiteness or specificity DOM (movement, case marking, agreement and anti-passivisation), under a minimalist framework.²

- *Section 1*: a brief review of DOM crosslinguistically (suggesting that it probably has a wider distribution than the most often cited examples of DOM).
- *Section 2*: analysis proposing that the different types of DOM arise from the fact that direct objects raise out of their thematic position in order to be interpreted as specific.
- *Section 3*: summary and remaining problem.

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² *Motivational thoughts* ☺: Why is this interesting? Among other reasons: it is robust cross-linguistically, it involves a wide variety of effects (thus it provides insights on how different aspects of the grammar interact), it involves processes that are central to current P&P based/ minimalist syntactic theory: case, agreement, subject-object asymmetries (cf. Chomsky, 2005 on the latter).

1. Phenomena

Defining properties:

- Objects are differentiated in the grammar according to specificity, definiteness or animacy;
- Only objects (not subjects) are differentiated (cf. definite article).

1.1 “Classical” DOM

Differential case marking and agreement are typically the focus of the discussion DOM:

Case or prepositional marking:

Obligatory for definites (not specifics):³

- (3) a. Dan kara *(et) ha-sefer. (Hebrew)
Dan read *(et) the-book
'Dan read the book.'
- b. Dan kara (*et) sefer.
Dan read (*et) book
'Dan read a book.' (Danon, 2002: 1)

Differential case marking similar to the examples illustrated here also seems to occur in Romanian (Bossong 1991), Catalan, Engadinian (Bossong 1991), Hindi (Mohan and Mohanan 1994), Persian (Lambton 1993, pp. 131-132) and Armenian (Megerdumian, 1999), among many other languages.

Agreement

Optional with definites:

- (4) a. Te-'illebed-ii a bilis a rengalek. (Palauan)
3.PL-PERF.hit-3s dog children
'The kids hit the dog.'
- b. Te-'illebed a bilis a rengalek.
3.PL-PERF.hit dog children
'The kids hit a dog/the dogs/some dog(s).'
- (5) a. Lucy ggī dzut'ikw 'iweyusdle. (Babine-Witsuwit'en)
Lucy that vest 3.SG.3SG.shouldn't-make
'Lucy shouldn't make that vest.'
- b. Lucy dzut'ikw 'iwesdle.
Lucy vest 3.SG-shouldn't-make
'Lucy shouldn't make a vest.' (Gunlogson 1998, p. 30)

Some other languages showing differential object agreement are Kichaga, Kihung'an and Kiyaka (Morimoto (2002, pp. 296-297)).

³ Though Danon (2002) notes that there are dialects of Hebrew which are currently changing to mark specific indefinites as well.

1.2. Other possible cases (fitting the defining properties above)

Incorporation

In Kusaiean (Austronesian), nouns have an indefinite interpretation when incorporated and a definite interpretation when not incorporated:⁴

- (6) nga 'l-læ nuknuk ε (Kusaiean)
I wash-COMPLETIVE clothes the
I finished washing the clothes.

nga owo nuknuk læ
I wash clothes COMPLETIVE
I finish washing clothes. (Hopper and Thompson 1980, p. 259)

Definite and specific direct objects are much less likely to incorporate into the verb than non-specific indefinites cross-linguistically (Croft 1990, pp. 128-129). Other similar examples include Ute (Uto-Aztecan) (Givón 1984a, pp. 214-215), Iai (Oceanic) (Lazard 1984, p. 276; Pearce 2000) and Amwi (Austro-Asiatic) (Hopper and Thompson 1980, p.259).

Verb Transitivity

In Selayarese (Austronesian), verbs are prefixed with an intransitive marker when the object is indefinite:⁵

- (7) a. ku-alle-i doe?-iñjo (Selayarese)
1.SG-take-3 money-the
'I took the money.'

b. (a)ng-alle-kang doe?
INTR-take-1.PL money
'We took (some) money.'
(Finer 1997, pp. 679-680)

*Antipassivization*⁶

In Greenlandic Eskimo, transitive constructions are associated with a definite reading of its objects, whereas the antipassive construction yields an indefinite reading (Lazard 1984, p. 275; Hopper and Thompson 1980, p. 269; Givón 1984a, pp. 161-164):

- (8) a. inu-up qimmiq-∅ taku-v-a-a (Greenlandic Eskimo)
person-ERG dog-ABS see-INDIC-TRANS-3/3
'A/the person saw the dog.'

⁴ Hopper and Thompson (1980, p. 259) argue that the verb undergoes suppletion with the completive marker in (6), indicating that it is an affix. Thus the position of nuknuk ('clothes') relative to læ seems to indicate incorporation into the verb.

⁵ Muna (Austronesian) appears to display the opposite pattern: when a verb of the transitive verb class ae- has a definite object, its verb class changes to the a- class of intransitives. However, Van den Berg (1995, p. 169) argues that this 'anomaly' is due to a series of diachronic changes which led to homonymy of the verb marking with definite object markers (similar to the Swahili examples above) and the class prefix of intransitives.

⁶ The antipassive applies to transitive constructions in ergative languages, causing them to resemble intransitive constructions. When applied, subjects (which are otherwise marked ergative) receive absolutive case (mostly null), just as subjects of intransitive clauses do. Objects, which usually receive absolutive marking (null), are obliquely marked.

b. innuk-Ø qimmir-mik taku-v-uq-Ø
 person-ABS dog-OBLQ see-INDIC-INTR-3
 ‘The person saw a dog.’

(Givón 1984a, pp. 161-162)

Word Order (Movement)

In Yiddish, definites are preferably placed to the left and non-specific indefinites obligatory to the right of sentential adverbials (Diesing 1997, p. 390):

(9) a. Max hot dos bukh mistome/ nekhtn/ keyn mol nit geleyent. (Yiddish)
 Max has the book probably/ yesterday/ never read
 ‘Max has probably/ never read the book (/yesterday).’

b. *Maks hot a bukh mistome/ nekhtn/ keyn mol nit geleyent.
 Max has a book probably/ yesterday/ never read
 ‘Max has probably/never read a book (/yesterday).’ (Diesing 1997, pp. 389-390)

[See the Appendix for more phenomena]

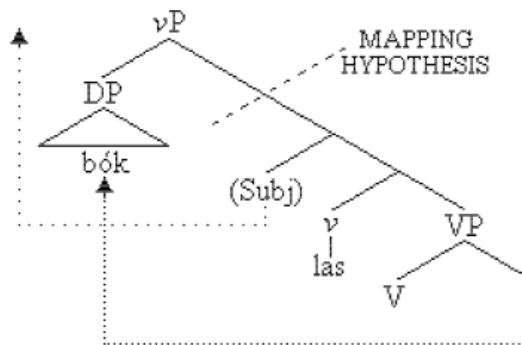
DOM seems to be manifested in a variety of aspects of grammar and may go beyond the classically described cases of differential case marking and agreement: its distribution seems to be wide and robust crosslinguistically.
 ⇒ Our theories of grammar should seek to account for its effects.

2. Analysis

2.1. Main idea:

DOM is a reflection of movement of the specific or definite object out of its base generated position when interpreted as specific or definite (following the main gist of Diesing (1992) Mapping Hypothesis: objects within the VP are interpreted as non-specific).⁷

- Adopting the Phase Impenetrability (Chomsky, 2001), the object needs to move through the edge of the vP phase, in order for it to be accessible in higher phases.
- Once in the edge of vP, it is possible for the object to move to higher functional projections, associated with definiteness or specificity, which I will call DefP.⁸



⁷ For a discussion on applying the details of Diesing’s account (as well as Diesing and Jelinek (1995) and Diesing (1997) to account for DOM in general, see Lima (2003: chapter 4). The main gist adopted here is that specificity licensing occurs outside the DP. This basic idea is not incompatible with proposals of indefinite interpretations alternative to Diesing, such as a choice function approach (Reinhart (1997)), as long as this main gist is adopted (e.g. one may propose that only objects outside of VP might be accessible to choice functions).

⁸ Other approaches have also proposed association between definite/specific interpretation and a peripheral (A-bar): position include Heim (1987), Beghelli and Stowell (1997), Diesing’s (1992) and Sportiche (1995).

Accounting for defining properties:

- ⇒ DOM differentiates specific from non-specific objects because non-specific indefinite objects do not raise for licensing of specificity (thus they will not show morphological or syntactic side-effects of movement specificity licensing)
- ⇒ DOM does not apply to subjects because it is linked to movement of objects out of VP to the edge of the *vP phase. Subjects do not have to go through this step: they are already merged out of VP, at the edge of the *vP phase

2.2 Differential Movement

Chomsky (2000, pp. 102-111) on OS:

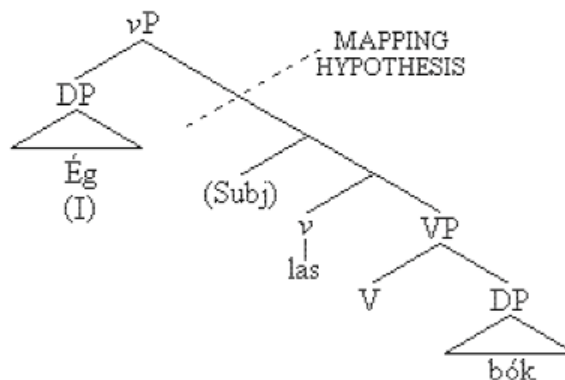
- [Syntactic] EPP Assignment: The head H of phase Ph may be assigned an EPP feature (once the subset of LA from which a phase is derived has been exhausted, but before the beginning of a new phase).
- In his discussion of Icelandic, Chomsky argues that Syntactic EPP Assignment is possibly restricted to cases in which it permits intermediate movement to higher peripheral positions, suggesting that this may be linked to the idea of economy in which operations can only apply if they have an effect on outcome (e.g. Fox's (1995) work on QR).

Account:

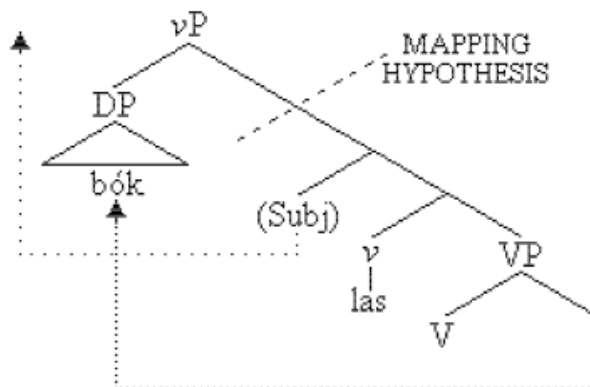
- Definite/Specific objects in differential movement cases may be assigned a Def-feature which is checked at DefP.
- If the phase contains a DefP feature The phase head v is assigned an EPP feature checked by movement of the object to the phase edge. EPP is only assigned to v in that case.

- (10) a. Hann las bækurnar ekki. (Icelandic)
 he read books-the not
 'He didn't read the books.'
- b. *Ég las bók ekki.
 I read book not
 'I didn't read a book.'
- c. Ég las ekki bók.
 I read not book
 'I didn't read a book.' (Diesing and Jelinek 1995, p. 150)

- (11) Objects without a Def-feature (EPP is not assigned):



(12) Objects with a Def-Feature:



Movement to a Peripheral position (DefP)

Sportiche (1995) shows that differential scrambling in Dutch has A-bar properties:

- (13) a. Pak dat boekje maar. (Dutch)
 take that book but
 ‘Go ahead and take that book.’
- b. ?*Pak maar dat boekje.
 take but that book
 ‘Go ahead and take that book.’
- c. Pak maar een boekje.
 take but a book
 ‘Go ahead and take a book.’
- d. *Pak een boekje maar.
 take a book but
 ‘Go ahead and take a book.’ (Sportiche 1995, p. 261)

Dutch scrambled objects license parasitic gaps, a property associated with A-bar positions:

- (14) dat ik deze boeken [zonder t in te kijken] aan Jan doorverkoop.
 that I these books [without in to look] to Jan sell
 That I sold these books to Jan without looking into (them). (Sportiche 1995, p. 263)

Scrambling versus object shift:

- object shift appears to be associated with short movement, to an A-bar position, whereas scrambling seems to be longer movement with mixed A/A-bar properties (see Thrainsson (2001)) for a review.
- Def may be a weak feature in OS and a strong feature in Scrambling (or, alternatively, checked only by agree in OS, but moved by an EPP feature in DefP in Scrambling).

2.3 Differential Case Marking

- (15) Ali bir piyano-yu kiralamak istiyor. (Turkish)
Ali one piano-ACC to-rent wants
Ali wants to rent a certain piano.
- (16) Ali bir piyano kiralamak istiyor.
Ali one piano to-rent wants
'Ali wants to rent a (non-specific) piano.' (Enç 1991, pp. 4-5)

Proposal:

- The “accusative case” -i is actually the overt manifestation of the Def feature which triggers movement to Spec vP.
- Unmarked objects (with no Def feature) are strained within the lower phase and cannot receive specific interpretation.

Coordination Evidence:

Coordination using the suffix –la:

- (17) Hasan-la Ali opera-ya git-ti-ler (Turkish)
Hasan-and Ali opera-DAT go-PAST-3.PL
'Hasan and Ali went to the opera.' (Kornfilt 1997, p. 115)

Coordinated DPs cannot be broken up by moving either of the conjuncts:

- (18) *Ali opera-ya Hasan-la git-ti-ler.
Ali opera-DAT Hasan-and go-PAST-3.PL
Ali and Hasan went to the opera. (Kornfilt 1997, p. 117)

If only specific objects move out of VP in Turkish, it is predicted that it is not possible to coordinate a specific with a non-specific DP, this is borne out:

- (19) Hasan dun aksam kitab-i ve gazate –yi oku-du.
Hasan yesterday evening book-ACC and newspaper-ACC read-PAST
'Hasan read a [specific] book and a (specific) newspaper yesterday.'
- (20) Hasan dun aksam kitap ve gazate oku-du
Hasan yesterday evening book and newspaper read-PAST
'Hasan read a book and a newspaper yesterday.'
- (21) *Hasan dun aksam kitab-i ve gazate oku-du.
Hasan yesterday evening book-ACC and newspaper read-PAST
'Hasan read a (specific) book and a/some newspaper.'

Adverbial Placement Evidence:

Non-specific indefinites are required to be immediately pre-verbal (Kornfilt 1997, p. 216), remaining in VP (Tossun 1999, p. 1), whereas the same requirement does not seem to hold for specific objects:

- (22) Ben hızlı kitap okurum. (Turkish)
I fast book read
'I read a (specific) book fast.'

- (23) *Ben kitap hızlı okurum.
I book fast read
'I read a/some book fast.'

- (24) Ben kitab-i hızlı okurum.
I book-ACC fast read
'I read a book fast.'

(Tossun 1999, p. 1)

Furthermore, it seems that movement of marked objects past adverbs such as hızlı ('fast') is not optional:

- (25) *Ben hızlı kitab-i okurum
I fast book-ACC read
'I read a book fast.'

(Turkish)

(Tossun 1999, p. 1)

Similar facts (correlating overt differential case marking with movement) have been argued to occur in Eastern Armenian (Megerdumian (1999)) and Persian (found that the objects which carry an accusative marker and Persian (Karimi (2003)).

What happens with the unmarked object?

We may have a linked explanation to another type of DOM: one possibility is that it is incorporated into the verb (as argued by Kornfilt, 2003).

(Another possible link to the transitivity marking seen in (7)?)

2.3 Differential Agreement

- (26) a. U-me-leta kitabu?
2.SG-P-bring book
'Have you brought a book?'

(Swahili)

- b. U-me- **ki**- leta kitabu?
2.SG-P-**3.SG**- bring book
'Have you brought the book?'

(Croft 1988, p. 161)

Account:

- Differential object agreement is Spec-Head Agreement between the object and the verb, triggered by the object as it moves through Spec-vP (cf. Participle object agreement in Kayne (1989))
- Indefinites do not move through that position, therefore do not trigger agreement.

2.4 Antipassivization

- (27) a. inu-up qimmiq- \emptyset taku-v-a-a
person-ERG dog-ABS see-INDIC-TRANS-3/3
'A/the person saw the dog.'

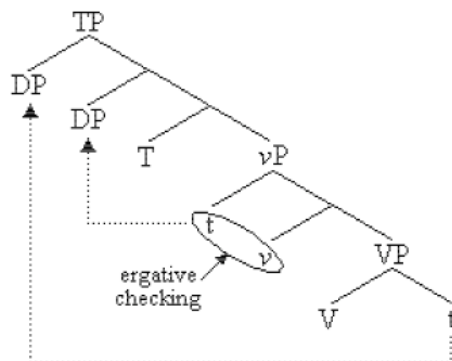
(Greenlandic Eskimo)

- b. innuk- \emptyset qimmir-mik taku-v-uq- \emptyset
person-ABS dog-OBLQ see-INDIC-INTR-3
'The person saw a dog.'

(Givón 1984a, pp. 161-162)

Ura (2001) on ergativity and anti-passivization:

- ergative languages are able to check case of the external arguments in their base generated position (spec vP)
- objects covertly check absolutive case in spec TP.
- Anti-passivization prevents the assignment of ergative case, forcing the subject to raise to spec TP and the object to receive oblique case marking lower in the VP.



(Ura 2001, p. 363)

Account:

- Anti-passive objects never move to Spec vP, hence would be unable to escape the lower phase in order to check a Def-feature.
- Objects in transitive constructions always escape the vP phase for case reasons, thus, similarly to subjects in Nominative-accusative languages, they are never stranded in the lower VP and are always able to receive definite interpretation.

3. Concluding Remarks

This talk proposed a unified account of four different types of DOM (movement, case marking, agreement and anti-passivization), suggesting a way in which DOM could be handled under a minimalist framework.

The account, based on the basic insights of Diesing (1992) was able to account for both the defining properties of specificity DOM: differentiation between specific and non-specific objects (due to the need for licensing outside VP) and the fact that differentiation only occurs for objects (due to the difference in initial position of subjects and objects).

One question that was not addressed here was the relationship between definiteness/ specificity DOM and animacy DOM. I suggest as a possible hypothesis the idea that all DOM has in common the need for licensing of the object outside of its base generated thematic position: animacy would trigger DOM due to the need of animacy licensing external to VP⁹. The investigation of this hypothesis, along with deeper investigation of specificity DOM, is left for further research.

⁹ As a point of departure for testing this hypothesis see, for example, Laughren and Eisenchlas (2004) (based on Cuervo (2005) proposal that animate objects need to be licensed by an applicative head in Spanish).

APPENDIX

More examples of Differential Case Marking

More “Classic” Examples:

Prepositional Marking

- (28) a. Koi kitab mez te rakkho. (Punjabi)
some book table on put
‘Put some book on the table.’
- b. Ó nili kitab **nũ** mez te rakkho.
that blue book to table on put
‘Put that blue book on the table.’ (Croft 1988, pp. 161-162)
- (29) a. Están buscando **a** la sirvienta. (Spanish)
be.PRES.3.PL seeking to the servant
‘They’re looking for the maid.’
- b. Están buscando **a** una sirvienta.
be.PRES.3.PL seeking to a servant
‘They’re looking for a maid.’
- c. Están buscando una sirvienta.
be.PRES.3.PL seeking a servant
They’re looking for a maid. (Blansitt 1984, p. 139)

Clitic doubling

Obligatory for definites, prohibited for indefinites:

- (30) a. Ja citam kniga-ta. (Macedonian)
it.F read.1.SG book.F-the
‘I am reading the book.’
- b. (*Ja) citam kniga.
it.F read.1.SG book.F
‘I am reading a book.’ (Haspelmath 2001, p. 57)

Optional for definites, prohibited for indefinites:

- (1) a. (**La**) vi a la mujer. (Spanish)
(3SG.FEM.ACC) saw to the woman
‘I saw the woman.’
- b. ***La** busco a una mujer que habla cien idiomas.
3SG.FEM.ACC seeked to a woman that speaks 100 languages
‘I’m looking for a woman who speaks one hundred languages.’
(Eisenclas and Laughren, 2004)

Other possible cases:

Overtness

Specific DOs in Brazilian Portuguese are preferably overt, but not non-specifics:

- (31) Eu não conheci o/ um professor semana passada, porque... (Brazilian Portuguese)
I not met the/ a professor week past because
'I didn't meet the/a professor last week because...'

a. ...ninguém encontrava ele/?*Ø.

nobody found him

'...nobody could find him.'

b. ...eles ainda não tinham contratado Ø.

they still not had hired

'...they hadn't hired one yet.'

(adapted from Schwenter and Silva (to appear, pp. 12-13))

Similarly, Keller and Lapata (1998) note that Greek and Bulgarian follow the opposite pattern in that indefinites are the elements which are preferably null.

Passivization

In Tagalog and other Austronesian languages, only definite objects can be passivised (i.e. passivised objects always have a definite reading):

- (32) a. Kumain ang bata ng isda. (Tagalog)
eat A child G fish
'The child ate (some) fish.'

b. K-in-ain ng bata ang isda.
eat(PASS) G child A fish
'The child ate the fish.'

(Lazard 1984, pp. 274-275)

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