Three more subjecthood features in Pāṇini’s tradition

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Pāṇini and his school

- **Pāṇini**, around 500 BC (date uncertain)

- Pāṇini’s *Aṣṭādhyāyī*: most influential grammar in Ancient India
  - powerful, anticipating and refined
  - dealing with **Sanskrit** (mostly morphology)
  - descriptive but also prescriptive and contrastive
Pāṇini and his school

- Dealing with the Aṣṭādhyāyī we must consider three languages:
  - **object** language = Sanskrit (perhaps Late Vedic)
  - **description** language = special algebraic code
  - **audience’s** language = mother tongue of the grammar’s users

...perhaps a Middle Indo-Aryan variety
Pāṇini and his school

• Is object language unnatural Sanskrit?
  – some call it grammarians’ Sanskrit

• Did the audience speak Sanskrit?
  – only as L2 (whence the grammar is needed)
  – their mother tongue is visible contrastively in the grammar and in the examples
Pāṇini and his school

• Commentators of the Aṣṭādhyāyī
  – Kātyāyana (III c. BC): *varttikas* ‘glosses’
  – Patañjali (II c. BC): *bhāsyas* ‘explanations’
  – Kātyāyana + Patañjali form the *Mahābhāṣya*

• Later commentators to Aṣṭādhyāyī or Mahābhāṣya
  – most important: Bhartṛhari (V c. AD)
Subject in Sanskrit

• Sanskrit, as many ancient IE languages, had a subject with just a few features

• Common opinion on Pāṇini’s grammar:
  – there is no subject here
    ...because it had kārakas ‘semantic roles’
    ...because subject is not very pivotal in Sanskrit
Subject in Sanskrit

• J. S. Speijer, *Sanskrit Syntax*, 1886

«Vernacular grammar has no term to name the subject of the sentence or grammatical subject»

• G. Cardona, “Pāṇini’s kārakas: agency, animation, and identity”, *J. Ind. Phil.*, 1974

«Pāṇini’s grammar is characterized by an important absence: the notion of grammatical subject is absent»
but

• Scholars do not always understand Pāṇini
  – no semantic roles in the West until Fillmore

• No good definition of subject was at hand
  – Speijer refers to the loose “subject” of the grammar school
  – Cardona refers to Chomsky’s “external argument”
My suggestion

• Let’s seek for Keenan’s features in:
  – the grammatical rules of the *Aṣṭādhyāyī*
  – the commentators’ innovations
  – the linguistic examples discussed by them

• Let’s consider the audience’s language, rather than Sanskrit
Pāṇini’s syntax

- Semantic roles vs. morphological forms

- Semantic roles (kāraka):
  - apādāna ‘source’
  - sampradāna ‘goal’
  - adhikaraṇa ‘locus’
  - karaṇa ‘instrument’
  - karman ‘patient’
  - kartr ‘agent’
Pāṇini’s syntax

- *Kārakas* are explicitly defined in six *definitional sūtras*
  - etymology of *kāraka* terms plays no role
  - definitions are semantic, but more abstract and explicit
Pāṇini’s syntax

• Morphological realisations of kārakas:
  – finite verbal endings
  – case endings

• The two options are mutually exclusive
  – no idea of agreement (in Pāṇini)
Pāṇini’s syntax

- Considering the case-forms expression of kārakas
  - no one-to-one relation, in both ways
  - case-forms are semantically blind
  - one canonical realisation + some optional ones
Pāṇini’s syntax

karman ‘patient’

canonically

karaṇa ‘instrument’

optionally

karto ‘agent’

canonically

Accusative

pitrā samjānīte ‘he acknowledges his father’

Instrumental
Pāṇini’s syntax

• Let’s consider *kartṛ* ‘agent’
  – etymologically ‘the doer’, but this is ignored
  – no semantic specialization: *macrorole*?
  – *svatantra* ‘independent’

• Canonically expressed by the Instrumental
Pāṇini’s syntax

• Additional *sūtras* where *kāraka* roles are *amended*
  – amendments less elegant than the definitions
  – based on the confusion between cases and roles

• Most scholars consider them together with definitions
  – resulting categories are odd
Excursus 1: example of a kāraka amendment

• semantic role named karāṇa ‘instrument’ is defined as “the most effective means”

• its canonical case-form realisation is the Instrumental

• with the verb div ‘to play dice’ the instrument is coded with the Accusative

• here the “most effective means” corresponds to karman ‘patient’

• therefore, karman is patient + whatever goes in Accusative
Pāṇini’s syntax

• Considering *kāraka* definitions only
  – is more consistent
  – avoids postulating mixed categories

• Good evidence that the amendments are spurious
  – let’s ignore them
Pāṇini’s syntax

a. \textit{pacaty} \textit{odanaḥ} Devadattaḥ  
\textit{cook:3sg.ACT} \textit{rice:ACC} \textit{D.:NOM}  
\textit{KARTṛ} \textit{KARMAN} \{\textit{NO KĀRAKA}\}  
‘Devadatta is cooking rice’

b. \textit{odanaḥ} \textit{pacyate} Devadattena  
\textit{rice:NOM} \textit{cook:PASS:3sg.MID} \textit{D.:INSTR}  
\{\textit{NO KĀRAKA}\} \textit{KARMAN} \textit{KARTṛ}  
‘Rice is being cooked by Devadatta’

Obviously, the \textit{karaka}/\textit{vibhakti} device accounts very well for both active and passive sentences. As we can see from the functional labelling, while the semantic roles remain unchanged, their morphological encoding changes. Three descriptive oddities can be highlighted here.

i. Only single exponence is admitted: Pāṇini «(…) adopts the one-to-one correspondence between morphological elements and morphosyntactic features» (Kiparsky 2002:45), i.e. there appears to be no idea of anaphora or agreement.

ii. One of the morphological means of expressing the arguments’ semantic roles is the verbal endings, which is quite unusual — not to say inconsistent — with how we normally describe the morphology of the ancient IE languages.

iii. No precedence is reserved for the active voice over the passive: both are just two equiprobable distributions of \textit{kartṛ} and \textit{karman} within sentence morphology, in no any way ‘derived’ from each other, see Cardona (1974:286, fn.36).
Pāṇini’s syntax

• This example is inferable from the grammar
  – we can consider it “pāṇinian”

• No preference for either active or passive voice
  – both constructions are equally likely
  – *vivakṣā* ‘communicative intention’ is the guiding principle here
Pāṇini’s syntax

a. asinā chinatti devadattah
   axe:INSTR cut:3sg.ACT D.:NOM
   KARAṆA KARTṛ
   ‘Devadatta is cutting [stuff] with an axe’

b. asiś chinatti
   axe:NOM cut:3sg.ACT
   {NO KĀRAKA} KARTṛ
   ‘The axe cuts [by itself]’
Pāṇini’s syntax

• This example is added by Patañjali
  – let’s consider it “post-pāṇinian”

• Unmarked actancy derivation
  – derived construction is less likely
  – vivakṣā ‘communicative intention’ is still relevant
Is *kartṛ* a subject?

- Modern scholars have considered *kārakas* to be
  - equivalent to cases (Whitney)
  - equivalent to semantic roles (after Fillmore)
  - some “syntacto-semantic” categories (Cardona)
Is kartṛ a subject?

- Commentators: every kāraka can “become kartṛ”
  - literally: every semantic role can become agent
  - better interpretation: every semantic role can be raised to the subject position

- Therefore, kartṛ is the target of topicality-driven transformations
Is *karty* a subject?

- Another consequence: *karty* is always present
  - always expressed, either by a case-form or by a finite verb termination

- Therefore, *karty* is an *obligatory* argument
  - this is another subjecthood feature
Excursus 2: middle terminations

- Active terminations express the *kartṛ*
- Middle terminations express the *karman*
- But in non-passive verbs middle terminations express *kartṛ* instead
  - *karmavat kartṛ* ‘patient-like agent’
  - this saves the obligatoriness of *kartṛ*
Conclusions

- *Kartṛ* has at least three subjecthood features:
  - semantically non specific (macrorole?)
  - obligatorily present in every sentence
  - target of topic-driven transformations
- Should we conclude that *kartṛ* is subject?
Conclusions

• *Kartṛ* is subject in case we consider:
  – post-pāṇinian evolution of the grammar
  – definitions without amendments
  – audience’s language, rather than object language
  – example sentences, besides grammatical rules
References


• Cardona, G. 1976b. “Subject in Sanskrit”. In The Notion of Subject in South Asian Languages, ed. by M. K. Verma, 1–38.


