On the topic of subjects: composite Probes in Khanty
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Introduction: The relationship between subjects and topics has been a longstanding concern of linguistic theory. In this talk, based on original fieldwork, we examine movement to subject position (MSP) in the Kazym dialect of Khanty (Finno-Ugric, Uralic). We show that Khanty MSP is a 'mixed' movement, having both A-properties (case and agreement, variable binding) and A′-properties (locality, topic interpretation). We explain these properties in terms of a *composite Probe* on T, which searches for a Goal with both Topic and ϕ-features.

The phenomenon: A number of different arguments can undergo MSP in Khanty, where they receive nominative case and control subject agreement. The subject can be the Agent (1a), the Theme (1b), the Recipient (1c), or the Applicative argument.

(1)   a. $\boxed{\text{muŋ}_i}$ ńawrɛm-ɛm-a maw   mä-s-$\boxed{\text{əw}_i}$
we   kid-1sg-dat   candy give-pst-1pl

'We gave candy to my kid.'

b. $\boxed{\text{maw-λ-am}_i}$ maša-jen-ən   ńawrɛm-ɛm-a mä-s-$\boxed{\textbf{i}}$-$\boxed{\text{jət}_i}$
candy-pl-1sg Masha-2sg-loc kid-1sg-dat   give-pst-pass-3pl

'My candy was given by (your) Masha to my kid.'

c. $\boxed{\text{ńawrɛm-λ-aw}_i}$ maša-jen-ən   maw-ən   mä-s-$\boxed{\textbf{i}}$-$\boxed{\text{jət}_i}$
kid-pl-1pl   Masha-2sg-loc candy-loc give-pst-pass-3pl

'Our kids were given by (your) Masha by candy.'

When a non-Agent argument undergoes MSP, a morpheme *-a/-i* appears on the verb. If the Theme becomes the subject, the Agent is marked by locative (1b). If neither the Agent nor the Theme become the subject, both are marked by locative (1c). This has been traditionally analyzed as a passive morpheme, but there are several reasons not to do so: a) it appears linearly outside Tense, which would be unexpected for a passive morpheme, given the Mirror Principle (Baker 1985); b) it can 'demote' (to locative) more than just the external argument; and c) it promotes arguments other than the direct object.

The puzzle: Khanty MSP has **properties of both A and A′-movement.**

A-properties: MSP has an effect on both case and agreement, with the subject receiving nominative case and controlling subject agreement. Consequently, only nominals can undergo MSP in Khanty, another A-property. There is also an unusual effect on the case of non-subject arguments: descriptively speaking, any argument that is crossed by MSP receives locative case. Finally, MSP does not exhibit Weak Crossover effects, a signature property of A-movement. For example, a Theme that has undergone MSP can bind a variable inside the locative Agent (2).

(2) $\boxed{\text{kažəŋ ɛwi}_i}$ aŋk-əλ$_i$-ən   škola-ja   tɔs-$\boxed{\textbf{i}}$
every girl   mother-3sg-loc school-dat take-pass.3sg

'Every girl$_i$ was taken to school by her$_i$ own mother.'

A′-properties: MSP also displays A′-properties, in both its effect on information structure and its locality profile. In Khanty, subjects must be topics (Nikolaeva 1995, 1999). A signature property of topics is that they cannot be narrow-focused. Thus, (1b) may not be an answer to the question 'What did Masha give to my kid?'; and (1c) may not be an answer to the question 'Who did Masha give the candy to?'. We develop a semantic definition of topic, building on more basic notions of focus and givenness (see Rooth 1985 and Schwarzschild 1999 among others) with which we test the requirement of topicality on subjects. Because of the requirement that subjects be topics, MSP displays the locality profile of A′-movement, not A-movement. A′-movement, unlike A-movement, can 'skip' a DP in favour of a lower DP that has the requisite features. What (1b–1c) show is that MSP can skip intervening nominals, **when this satisfies the requirement that subjects be topics.**

This mixed A/A′ behavior presents several analytical challenges. The first is to explain the mixed behavior: how is it possible for MSP to have both A- and A′-properties simultaneously? Another is explaining the requirement that subjects be topics. Finally, there is the status of locative case and the 'passive' morpheme: how is locative assigned and what features is the 'passive' morpheme spelling out?

The solution: Our analysis has two crucial components. The first is the notion of a *composite Probe*, in which two Probes on a head can select and target a Goal together (Coon and Bale 2014). The second the 'featural approach' to the A/A′ distinction, according to which differences between A- and A′-movement are attributed to the properties of the attracting head. This leads to the prediction that when A and A′-features form a composite Probe, the resulting movement may have both A- and A′- properties (van Urk 2015).

We propose that T hosts a composite Probe, consisting of topic (Top) and ϕ-features. This composite Probe will attract the closest Goal bearing **both** Top and ϕ-features, which will receive nominative case, control subject agreement, and promote to subject position. In (3a), corresponding to (1a), the closest such Goal is the Agent. In (3b), corresponding to (1b), however, the Agent lacks Top. Because the composite Probe requires both Top and ϕ, it skips the Agent and attracts a lower argument.

(3) a.   b.
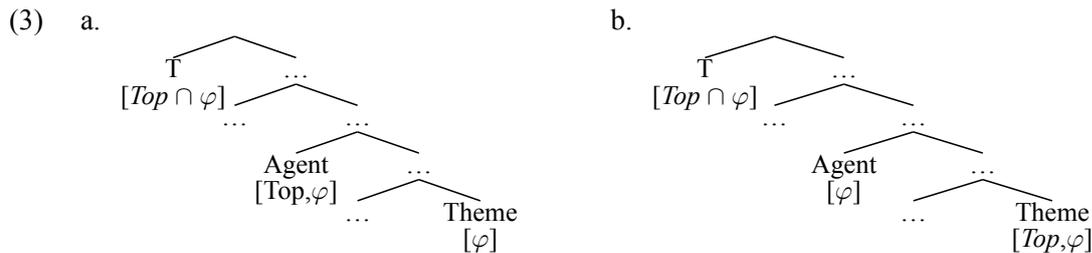
Mixed A/A′ behavior: This is a consequence of the composite nature of the Probe. The contribution of the ϕ-Probe: MSP is restricted to nominals, has consequences for case and agreement, and obviates Weak Crossover (see van Urk 2015 for a semantic explanation). But because ϕ must operate in unison with Top, MSP has the locality profile of A′, enabling it to skip a higher nominal in favor of a lower one.
The Topic/Subject Correlation: This falls out as a direct consequence of our approach, since T must be satisfied by an argument bearing both ϕ and Top, if present.
Locative case and the 'passive' morpheme: A clear generalization emerges from this approach: locative case appears on any nominal which is skipped over by the composite Probe on T. We therefore propose that locative case is the realization of partial/failed agreement, and the 'passive' morpheme is the reflex of this partial agreement on T.

Extensions and consequences: We explore the striking similarity between the Khanty passive and Austronesian voice marking, which also involves promotion of a range of internal arguments to a subject/pivot position, and related interactions with A′-features (see Rakowski and Richards 2005 for Tagalog). If the Khanty 'passive' morpheme behaves like a non-subject voice marker, it constitutes evidence against the ergative analysis of voice marking (Aldridge 2004, a.o.)—since Khanty is an accusative language—as Erlewine, Levin & van Urk (2017) argue for Dinka. It is also evidence for a composite Probe approach to voice marking, as suggested by van Urk (2015).

There are also other languages in which there is a close link between subject position and the topic. These include Romance languages, Finnish, mainland Scandinavian and Yiddish. For example, Diesing (1990) shows that Yiddish displays V2 in embedded clauses and argues that in this case the verb occupies T. She proposes that spec-TP is a mixed A/A′-position. In contrast to Khanty, however, nominative case and subject agreement is always with the external argument, dissociated from the movement to spec-TP, which has A′-properties: can target non-nominals and licenses parasitic gaps. This falls out straightforwardly if ϕ and Top are in T, as in Khanty, but Probe **separately**. Then ϕ will always find the highest nominal, and Top will find the highest topic, bu they do not need to be found on the same Goal. Thus, the typological picture looks as follows: Top is either on the same head as ϕ (in Khanty, Yiddish, Finnish, etc), or not (in English). In the latter case subjects and topics are dissociated. In the former case Top and ϕ may either be composite, or not. If they are, topics and subjects must always be the same (Khanty). If they are not, ϕ-agreement is always with the external argument, but movement to Spec,TP is driven by topicality (Yiddish, Finnish etc).

Selected references. Coon, J., Bale, A. (2014) The interaction of person and number in Mi'gmaq; Diesing, M. (1990) Verb movement and the subject position in Yiddish; Nikolaeva, I. (1999) Ostyak; van Urk, C. (2015) A uniform syntax for phrasal movement: A Dinka Bor case study.