

Dative experiencers in Basque

In the research on psych verbs, much attention has been given to the alternation between stimulus and experiencer subjects (OE [1a] and SE [1b] verbs), and the problems they raise for theories of linking (e.g. Belletti & Rizzi 1988; Grimshaw 1990; Dowty 1991).

- (1) a. Object Experiencer (OE): e.g. ‘Kim_{stim} angers Sandy_{exp}.’
b. Subject Experiencer (SE): e.g. ‘Sandy_{exp} fears Kim_{stim}.’

Recent work has proposed solutions to the modelling issues by suggesting OE verbs have a different thematic role (source, not theme) and relate the different role pairs to different syntactic configurations (e.g. Cheung & Larson 2014). However, the syntactic quirks of psych verbs are not the same across languages, and focussing on explaining subject/object alternations is not always key to understanding these verbs. Basque is a case in point here. In Basque, Psych verbs have either the canonical case marking (ERG-ABS), or dative-marked experiencers (DAT-ABS), and occasionally there are alternations between the two types. However, in Basque, experiencers are always subjects. So rather than grammatical function alignment, the quirkiness of psych verbs is expressed in the case marking options. In this presentation I will address the question of when and why experiencers are marked with the dative case in Basque.

I present data from Basque that shows that dative experiencer subjects (i) have a lack of agentivity, (ii) are only stative in their aspectual reading, (iii) do not participate in a causative-inchoative alternation, (iv) have different nominalization referents to those derived from ergative experiencer subjects, and (v) have different argument structure alternations. The data suggest that the event structure is what is relevant to explaining the case assignment. I propose a model within Lexical Decomposition Grammar, where the theta roles are assigned directly from the lexical semantics of the predicates and not based on syntactic configurations of the arguments (e.g. Kiparsky 1997; Wunderlich 1997). The different classes of psych verbs, distinguished by their case options, are explained by the predicate argument structure. Essentially, adapting an earlier analysis by Pesteksy (1995), I assume that the dative-experiencer psych verbs have the stimulus simultaneously a causer (2a), while the argument bears the ergative case when it is both the causer and the experiencer (2b) as shown below.

- (2) a. DAT-ABS: [y (ACT) CAUSE [x VERB y]]
b. ERG-ABS: [x (ACT) CAUSE [x VERB y]]

I show that this accounts for the observed syntactic differences between dative-experiencer and ergative experiencer psych verbs in Basque and discuss the analysis to show how it can also extend to other languages where the dative experiencer can be the grammatical object.

References

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