
Towards functional motivation for the reduced third person indexing

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Intro. Personal indexes are sometimes coded asymmetrically. In this case, more frequently it is the third person that is coded with less material (or zero) than other person indexes (Bybee 1985: 53; Siewierska 2013). Reduced third person indexing has been devoted much attention in the literature (Ariel 2000; Siewirska 2010; Bickel et al. 2015). The aim of the paper is to explore some of the mechanisms that might be responsible for this asymmetry. I examine a small set of frequency data to detect usage asymmetries which correlate with this coding asymmetry and, hence, might motivate the coding asymmetry.

The diachronic development of pronominal indexes into a full-fledged agreement may be schematically described as proceeding along three stages described by Creissels (2006) for Bantu languages: Stage I (the pronominal markers are in complementary distribution with full NPs), Stage II (pronominal markers are obligatory even with full NPs but still constitute referring expressions) and Stage III (pronominal markers are obligatory but are no longer referring and need a full NP for a reference = agreement) (Creissels 2006: 44-45).

Data. I use a small collection of texts from Lithuanian (Baltic, Indo-European) which – while not having achieved Creissels’ Stage III – exhibits strong reduction of the third person indexes (diachronically and synchronically). This data shows asymmetry in usage preferences: the 1st & 2nd person subject indexes occur much more frequently with “pro-drop” than the 3rd person index when referring to a continuous topic. What is more, when referring to a shifted topic, the 3rd person index with “pro-drop” is extremely rare (3 out of 36 instances of 3rd p. topic shift) while 1st and 2nd person indexes are as frequent with the “pro-drop” as with independent pronouns.

Discussion. Thus, 1st & 2nd indexes unequivocally pertain to Stage II while the 3rd person index can be characterized as predominantly Stage III; the 3rd person is one stage ahead here. The reason for this is that 1st & 2nd are complete expressions with no need of supporting information (such as previous discourse or a full NP) as regards reference tracking. The range of possible supporting information is very limited with 1st & 2nd indexes – in fact, only

independent personal pronouns usually can co-occur with the 1st & 2nd person indexes; these are, however, semantically co-referential and may provide only some emphatic effect or serve as foci (in an argument-focus). In turn, the potential range of possible meanings and referents of the third person is too broad to be coherently interpreted and thus is likely to rely on some additional contextual support: either on the preceding discourse or, crucially, on a full NP in the same clause. Semantically, the third person index is much weaker a statement than 1st & 2nd person indexes: it is referentially a variable that is assigned a referent situationally while the first and second person indexes represent solid, individual reference. This asymmetry is somewhat reminiscent of the difference between nouns (\approx 3rd person indexes) vs. proper names (\approx 1st & 2nd indexes): while the former are not lexically referring and often have some referential support (such as articles, classifiers, modifiers, etc.) the latter are rather used barely and have lexically unique reference.

Preliminary claim. This functional asymmetry contributes to the frequency asymmetry: third person index is expected to co-occur with full NPs much more frequently than would the 1st and 2nd person indexes at Stage I and II. Hence, the occurrences in which the third person index repeats the information already contained in the full NP should be much more frequent than the occurrences of “redundantly” used 1st and 2nd person indexes. In turn, the over-use of the 3rd p. index with an overt subject NP in contrast to the 1st & 2nd p. indexes leads to the “de-emphasizing” and “de-stressing” of its original meaning (cf. Givón 2001: 421) and, finally, to its redundancy. This expectation is indeed confirmed by the Lithuanian data. Redundant markers are more likely to be dropped or shortened than the non-redundant ones due to economy; hence, the asymmetric coding.

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