

On the universality of reflexive strategies

oral/poster

It is a long-standing observation that languages employ special strategies to express reflexivity (see, for instance, Jespersen 1933). And despite occasional prima facie exceptions, there appears to be a common view among language typologists that the use of special strategies is the ‘norm’ (Schladt 2000, Moysse-Faurie 2008, Heine & Miyashita 2008). That is, as a rule, one doesn’t find the configuration in (1) with a reflexive interpretation.

(1) **Subject verb pronominal*

There is, however, an influential view that, nevertheless, the employment of special strategies is just a tendency, reflecting pragmatic preferences, where some languages simply have not yet developed the tools to express these preferences (Levinson 2000, Evans and Levinson 2009). The alternative is to derive the need for special marking of reflexivity from fundamental properties of the computational system (Reuland 2011). The latter type of approach raises a question of whether the employment of special strategies to express reflexivity is truly universal. To resolve this issue, it is important to focus attention on those languages that – at least prima facie – don’t have dedicated reflexives, and determine whether they actually do, or don’t employ special strategies to express reflexivity.

One such language is Khanty (Nikolaeva 1995, 1999). According to Nikolaeva (1995), Khanty has no dedicated reflexive pronouns; instead, personal pronouns are used.

- (2) a. UtltiteXo_i luvel_{i/k} išək-s-əlle.
teacher he.ACC praise-PST-SG.3SG *The teacher praised him(self).*
b. NemXojat_i luvel_{i/k} ānt išək-s-əlle.
no.one he.ACC NEG praise-PST-SG.3SG *No one praised him(self).*

luvel in object position can be bound by a co-argument subject. It can also receive a value from discourse, showing that *luvel* is a true pronominal (2a). (2b) with a quantificational antecedent shows that the local dependency is one of binding, not coreference.

The question is, then, how Khanty uses its pronouns to express reflexivity, just by ‘brute force’ binding (which could support the ‘tendency’ view), or does it have structural properties that independently license reflexivity? In this talk we review data collected on a field trip in July 2012, and show that these support the latter option.

Khanty has two types of verbal agreement: obligatory subject agreement and optional object agreement (OAgr), as illustrated in (3).

- (3) UtltiteXo poXlen’ki išək-s-əlle / išək-s.
teacher boy praise-PST-SG.3SG / praise-PST.3SG *The teacher praised the boy.*

The following condition applies: a personal pronoun can be locally bound – yielding a reflexive predicate – only if the verb carries object agreement, cf. the ill-formedness of (4).

- (4) *UtltiteXo_i luvel_i išək-s.
teacher he.ACC praise-PST.3SG *The teacher praised him / *himself.*

The presence of object agreement facilitates object drop, as in (5).

- (5) TāmXātł ma c’āta van-s-em.
today I there see-PST-SG.1SG

{LC: Yesterday my son went to Beryozovo.} *Today I saw (him / *myself) there.*

But a zero object is incompatible with local binding. The predicate in (5) cannot be interpreted as reflexive. In order to avoid the configuration in (1), the object argument should be complex. It is, since OAgr licenses a null object. Overt *luvel* forms a constituent with the null object. This analysis is further supported since *luvel* is also used as an intensifier (note that in this capacity it cannot be null).

These facts provide an argument against the ‘tendency’ approach to reflexivity and add new data to the typology of reflexive strategies.