A rare case of Differential Marking on S/A: the case of Coptic (oral)

Differential Case Marking (DCM), i.e. the phenomenon whereby some core NPs are marked by case in certain environments but not in others has attracted a great deal of attention in recent years (Bossong 1985, Comrie 1989, Aissen 2003, Malchukov 2007).

In this paper, we present the distribution of DCM in Coptic and we argue that Coptic presents a cross-linguistically rare, if not unique, type of DCM system, in that i) both Subject/Agent and Patient can receive DCM, which alternates with incorporation, and ii) the factors that govern the appearance of DCM are extremely rare cross-linguistically.

Grammatical relations in Coptic show a quite elaborate coding system. There is pragmatically determined word order, with the preverbal position used to accommodate both topic and focus in verbal clauses. S/A can be either incorporated (1, 3) or topicalised (2). When postverbal, S/A is encoded by the NOM marker *nci* (4), which is found only with full lexical NPs as opposed to pronouns. The picture is further complicated when the encoding of P is considered. P arguments can be incorporated, as in (1) and (2). If not incorporated, they receive overt accusative marking. This alternation is strictly regulated by referential factors in the imperfective tenses. In non-imperfective tenses, the factors regulating the selection of incorporation vs. accusative marking is still poorly understood.

In this presentation, we concentrate on the encoding of S/A in Coptic. Based on textual data, we show that the three different strategies employed to encode S/A respond to different information-structural statuses of the S/A referent.

While subject fronting is deployed both as a topicalization or focalization strategy, and subject incorporation typically occurs with frame-evoked referents, the most noteworthy strategy of Coptic is the overt encoding of postverbal S/A. It has been argued (Loprieno 2000, Shisha-Halevy 1986) that the main factor determining the choice of this construction with postverbal S/A is information structure.

However, unlike what is commonly found in information-structural based DCM with S/A, DCM is not triggered by focus (Fauconnier 2010, among others), but is rather a grammaticalized "antitopic" marker (Chafe 1994) used to re-introduce in the discourse identifiable S/A that are discourse-old or otherwise presupposed (Prince 1992).

There are further interesting details which set Coptic apart from other languages with DCM on S/A. First, the NOM marker sporadically spreads to non-nominative NPs, such as P or obliques and possessors. Second, though the above description fits all the Coptic dialects, in one dialect, we find a slightly different system where 1st/2nd person independent pronouns can also be marked as nominative unlike the other dialects where marking on postverbal pronouns is not allowed. Interestingly, a different marker is employed, giving thus rise to a tripartite DCM system for S/A.

(1)   Case-marking of lexical NPs -> NOM/ACC (S/A) topicalized
(a)   *a-f-nouje*   *ebol*   *n-ne-pn(eu)ma*   *n-akatharton*
        PST-3SGM-throw   out   ACC-ART.PL-spirit   of-impure
        'He cast out the impure spirits.'
(2)   Incorporation of lexical A/S
(a)   *a-**ke-aggelos**   *ei*   *ebol*
        PST-another-angel   come   out
        'Another angel came out'
(b)   *auO ntere-**pe-pn(eum)a**   *n-akatharton raht-f*   *e-p-kah*
        and temp-the-spirit   of-impure   throw-3SGM   to-the-ground
        'And when the impure spirit had thrown him to the ground...'
(3)   Incorporation of lexical P
(a)   *e-k-e-taie-pek-eiOt*   *mn-tek-maau*
        OPT1-2SGM-OPT2-honour-your-father   with-your-mother
        'You shall honour your father and your mother.'
(4)   Incorporation of both A and P
(a)   *a-SptOre take-mEESe*   *eusoutOn*
        PST-handshake destroy-crowd   upright:EPL
        'Handshakes have ruined multitudes who are upright.'
(5)   **Postverbal overt nominative**
(a)   *a-f-ei*   *nci-iEsus*
        PST-3SGM(S)-come   NOM-Jesus
        'Jesus came'
(b)   *a-f-jnou-f*   *nci-petros*
        PST-3SGM(A)-ask-3SGM(P)   NOM-Peter
        'Peter asked him'

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