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Canonical typology: the case of reflexivization

The Canonical Typology approach sets out to define a phenomenon in such a way that, taking the clearest, indisputable example of a phenomenon as a starting point, less ‘typical’ instances of the phenomenon can be properly chartered. Although there is substantial body of research on reflexives (for instance Faltz 1977), it is still not an easy task to define what is a prototypical case of reflexivization. We immediately recognize *John saw himself* as a typical instance of reflexivization, but *John washed* is an instantiation of reflexivization but, for English, peripheral.

We take reflexivization as an instantiation of an anaphoric dependency.¹ If we keep it as theory-neutral as possible, we can describe reflexivization as

(1) An identity relation between two co-arguments positions, a binder and bindee.

Since languages may use distinct expressions to refer to the same object, there are many ways to encode an identity relation. So we need to further restrict the identity relation, assuming that the relation is grammaticalised, a reflexivization strategy (Faltz 1977), or, in generative terms, morphosyntactically encoded. In the present context we interpret strategy as the use of a pronoun, noun, morpheme, change in verb form, or any other morphosyntactic means used by a language to carry out the reflexive function. In Everaert & Dimitriadis (2004) reflexivization strategies that have been uncovered in the Utrecht Anaphora project were summarized as in (1):²

(1) Reflexivization strategies, the morphosyntactic encoding:

- a. via reflexive marking of one of the arguments, through a special reflexive form (pronoun, noun) or another morphosyntactic encoding such as doubling, case agreement, etc.
- b. via reflexive marking of the predicate, through a morphosyntactic encoding of the verbal predicate itself (affix of some type) or the verbal cluster (clitic, auxiliary verb, etc.)
- c. via a combination of (a) and (b)

It is important to understand a language will most likely have more than one strategy to encode reflexivization. The case of Papiamentu described in (Muysken 1993, Muysken and Smith 1994) is illustrative in this respect:

- (2) a. pronoun: *Mi ta sinti mi un tiki tristo* ‘I feel a bit sad’
b. pronoun + intensifier *mes: Bo a yuda bo mes* ‘You have helped yourself’
c. possessive + intensifier *mes: Mi ta weta mi mes* ‘I look at myself’
d. possessive + body noun *kurpa : El a dal su kurpa na un palo* ‘He walked into a pole’
e. body noun *kurpa: Mi ta deskansá kurpa* ‘I rest myself’
f. body noun *pañã: Mi ta bisti pañã* ‘I dress myself’
g. zero-marking on the verb plus object drop: *El a peña* ‘She washes’

¹ Because we take reflexivization as an instantiation of anaphora, this would require us to define the ‘theoretical space’ of anaphora, but this a daunting task. So, for the moment we will leave that open, but will indicate where the two domains interact.

² (1) should not be taken as limiting the inventory of reflexivization. Other options are possible

The parameters for strategy choice in (2) are: person, number, verb class (The same holds for English, Dutch), but there are other parameters. It is well-known that apart from agreement factors the type of binder can make a difference in the choice of bindee. In some languages the bindee may vary because the binder is a generic pronoun (Norwegian, Hellan 1988) or a quantified NP (San Lucas Quiavini Zapote, Lee 2003)

The relation between binder and bindee is local, in (1) encoded through co-argumenthood of binder and bindee. The fact that a language like English seems to allow a ‘reflexive anaphor’ for a non-local identity relation as in (3) seems to be irrelevant because in all case other morphosyntactic choices are possible (for instance, pronouns) showing that the identity relation is not uniquely morphosyntactically encoded, while that is not the case in the local domain *John saw himself/*him*

(3) a. And that was exactly it, *he* thought. [*He* really didn’t care too much [what happened to *himself*]

b. There were five tourists in the room apart from *myself*

c. [Whom *he* [=Philip] was supposed to be fooling, *he* couldn’t imagine]. [Not the twins, surely, because Désirée, in the terrifying way of progressive American parents, believed in treating children like adults] and [had undoubtedly explained to them the precise nature of her relationship with *himself*].

And although the domain of the identity relation is most often local, there are languages allowing what seems to be the reflexive to take the sentence as the domain for the identity relation (Tamil, Annamalai 2000).

(4) *kamalaa avan tann-ai veru-kkir-aan en-ru ninai-tt-aa* ‘Kamala thought that he hated her’

Most scholars would be hesitant to call (4) an instance of reflexivization, but it is in principle not to be excluded that the domain for reflexivization is the sentence, and not the predicate, as it seems to be the case in most languages.

Inspired by the criteria in Corbett (2005) a very rough initial characterization of canonical reflexivization could thus be described as follows:

binder:

1. argument > non-argument

bindee:

2. argument > non-argument
3. morphosyntactically encoded > not morphosyntactically encoded
4. morphosyntactically encoded different from ‘anaphora’ > morphosyntactically encoded like ‘anaphora’
5. morphosyntactically encoded on the argument > morphosyntactically encoded on the predicate

binder-bindee relation:

- 6 binder more prominent than bindee

domain:

7. predicate > sentence

In the paper we will further reflect on these criteria. Clearly, one of the most important tasks is to define the space of the morphosyntactic means used for the identity relation, referred to in criteria 3-5.

References

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