1-1-2005

Non-canonical agent-marking in Eastern Khanty: A functional-pragmatic perspective

A. FILTCHENKO

Non-canonical agent-marking in Eastern Khanty: A functional-pragmatic perspective

Non-Canonical Agent-Marking in Eastern Khanty: A Functional-Pragmatic Perspective

A. Filtchenko

1 Introduction

This paper examines the instances of the Eastern Khanty non-canonical agent marking constructions in their narrative discourse environment, identifying their unifying and differentiating features in an attempt to obtain an insight into functional motivation.

1.1 Language

Khanty is one of the Finno-Ugric languages of indigenous hunter-gatherer communities of north-western Siberia.
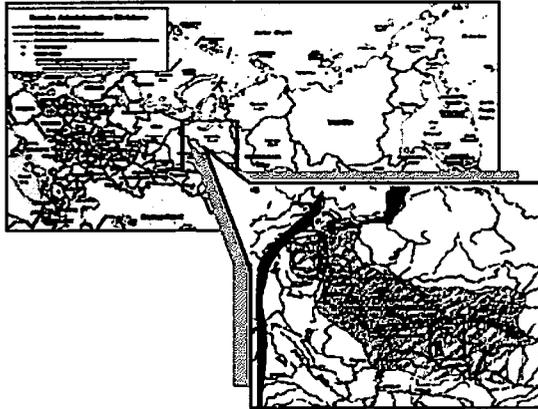

Figure 1: North-western Siberia, Eastern Khanty dialectal area.

The dialects of interest in this study are related river dialects of Vasyugan, Alexandrovo, Vakh, and Yugan Khanty that total under 500 fluent speakers, most over 50 years of age.

1.2 Data

The basis for the discussion is a corpus of eastern Khanty narratives, predominantly Vasyugan and Yugan, collected and transcribed between 2000-

2003. This corpus was supplemented by some Eastern Khanty texts published in 1900-1995.

1.3 Preliminaries. Canonical Clause

Typical Eastern Khanty simple clause shows general correlation to SOV pattern. It has the role of Agent typically mapped to A[1] role, the role mapped onto O is typically *Target*, that saliently affected in the event. The role mapped to S is understood as that of a single core NP of an intransitive verb.
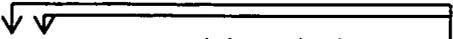
(1)   ma ämp-äm   tiγl-a   kari-mta-s-im
       1sg dog-PX1sg/sg Dem-Lat pull-Intens-PRF-1sg/sg
       'I pulled my dog closer'

The referent with the semantic role of Agent appears clause-initially, expressed by S/A argument in Nom. case, that controls S/A-V agreement inflection on the predicate. The S argument normally has all the traditional subjecthood properties, such as control over referential relations clause-internally and externally: control over embedded non-finite clauses; control over zero anaphora across conjoined clauses; control over reflexivization; control over participle in the embedded participial clause; control over quantifier movement.

Transitive predicates may also have agreement with the O argument, expressing pragmatic identifiability and activation of the referent in the interlocutors' discourse universe. Absence of O-V agreement manifests pragmatic unidentifiability of the O referent, introduced into the discourse in the part of the proposition that asserts new information.

With regard to the information structure, a new referent is introduced or reactivated by a full NP or a free pronoun as the S/A. Once the referent is identifiable as topic (Lambrecht, 1994), its continuation in this function is expressed by elision and by verbal agreement — a preferred topic expression.

There is a strong correlation: Topic - Agent - S/A, obligatory S/A-V agreement, and sentence-initial position. This generally reconfirms universal

---

[1]After Dixon (1994) we shall indicate the grammatical roles as follows:
    S - intransitive subject
    A - transitive subject
    O - transitive non subject

formal correlates of the referent's pragmatic status to its formal characteristics (Lambrecht 1994).

NP(+agreement) ⟶ pronoun(+agreement) ⟶ zero argument(+agreement)
(-) ⟵————topical/active ————⟶ (+)

2 Contradictions to the Pattern: Non-canonical Argument Marking

2.1 Ergative Clause

Khanty *ergative* construction displays structural similarity to the canonical active-direct clause type, with an important exception: the S/A argument is always overt and inflected for Loc. case. The more complete list of formal properties of this construction type is as follows:
- Agent is mapped to S/A grammatical role controlling co-referential verbal agreement on the predicate.
- Matrix predicate is a transitive verb in active morphological form, normally expressing a perfective action.
- When present, the second core argument with the semantic role of Target, is expressed by a full Ø-marked NP.
- Prosodically, the Loc-marked S/A agent of ergative constructions, particularly pronominal, does not carry the sentence stress, whereas the active-direct S/A arguments normally have sentence accent of some kind.

Superficially, nothing in the structure/grammar of these clauses, and their immediate discourse environment, precludes the use of the canonical active-direct construction type to express the same content.

(2) a. mä sar wel-s-əm, ɔ̈llɔ̈
      1sg pike kill-PRF-1sg big
      'I caught A PIKE fish, BIG ONE'
   b. ɔ̈llɔ̈ sar ratʃ   man-nə öyö-li-s-im
      big pike old.man 1sg-Loc get ready-Intr-PRF-1sg/sg
      'I GOT the big PIKE READY'
   c. terka-s-im   iwes-nɔ
      fry-PRF-1sg/sg stick-Loc
      'I FRIED it ON STICKS'

In (2) the O position, preceding the S/A agentive argument, is an extra evidence of the increased pragmatic status. The referent "pike", introduced in (a), is identifiable/accessible textually and promoted pragmatically in (b), manifested by the O-V agreement on the predicate and clause initial position. Counter to the canonical preferred topic expression pattern, the topical referent ('I') appears in (b) as a free Loc-marked pronoun in S/A and verbal inflection. The intransitive/anticausative verbal affix on the predicate 'get ready' contributes to the distinctness of the proposition affecting the sense of transitivity/agentivity of the event. The narrative resumes *canonically* in the immediately following active-direct (c), where the topical status of the 1sg referent has the *canonical* preferred topic expression by elision and co-reference on the predicate. These features correlate to general pragmatics of Topic-comment (a) vs. marked predicate-focus (b) with de-emphasized Loc-marked S/A pronoun.

Other ergative examples display similar pattern:

(2) d. tʃilaɣt-ət-əm rut   saɣi : "medwed !"
       cry-IP-1sg   "Russian manner "bear""
       'I CRIED in Russian "BEAR!"'
    e. moʒet   jiɣi-nə kol-waɣta-l(il)
       "maybe" 3Pl-Loc hear-Attenuat-IMPRF(3Pl)sg
       'Maybe they WOULD HEAR it'
    f. nu jemak'i, | jiɣat'a-l-im,   b) aɣa, wajaɣ
          Good | look-IMPRF-1sg/sg   OK, animal
       'OK, I LOOK, | there it is, the BEAR'

In (d) the canonical active-direct clause with the elided 1sg. topic is followed by the ergative (e) with a new referent "they", expressed by a Loc-marked pronominal Agent as the S/A and S-V agreement. The Message (Bear!) now has high activation in the discourse, marked in (e) by 3sg co-reference O-V agreement on the predicate. However, the demoted 1sg. topic referent of (d) reappears in (f) in preferred topic expression - elision and 1sg. verbal inflection.

Contextually, these *ergative* events appear parenthetical, consequential, reactive in their nature, representing a cause-effect or action-consequence dependence upon the event in the preceding active-direct clause, that is (d) implies the projected consequence of (e).

Thus, the Loc-marked ergative S/A referents, although mainly inherently agentive (definite human/animate), are deprived, at least in part, of some of the subjecthood properties: control/volition, which correlates with the fact of oblique case marking of the Agent.

Generalization of the use of "ergative" in the narrative:

- The Agent referent is mapped to S/A controlling S/A-V agreement, always overt and marked for Loc case, indicating a shift in the pragmatic status of the participants;
- Morphologically active predicate normally expresses perfective action with low surface transitivity (take aim, shoot at, body part manipulation) and uncertain Target affectedness.
- Target is expressed by an identifiable full Ø-marked NP.
- Ergative marks temporary alteration of the discourse center, parenthetically establishing another topical referent expressed by the Loc-marked S/A argument, also viewed as temporary foregrounding of a referent other than the current topic.
- The topic preceding the ergative clause, reappears in preferred topic expression by elision and verbal inflection, thus maintaining its topicality status.
- Free ergative Loc-marked S/A agent, particularly pronominal, does not carry sentence stress.
- Ergative express events in reactive, 'effect' semantic relation to the preceding active clause.
- Overall type frequency: average 10%.

Well documented variety of manifestations of *ergativity* introduces less discreteness to the category, allowing for observations of "ergative-like" behaviour in otherwise prototypically nominative languages, making it less a category, but a scalar language organisation pattern, a dynamic prototype of structuring grammatical relations, which can be present to a varying extent at different levels of a language system.

Among the essential factors that underlie attested ergative, nominative or split systems, it is often suspected that the information structure - larger discourse pragmatic and/or semantic considerations might be the key conditioning factors, particularly the degree of referentiality/volition/control of the agent may affect either ergativity or nominativity of the grammatical relations. A general claim holds that, for nominative languages differentiation is made by prototypically making P more morphologically complex than A, and, conversely, for ergative - making A more complex than P.

Morphological complexity of the S argument of the Eastern Khanty *ergatives* quite consistently correlates with prototypical *ergative* continuity between S and P at the deeper level, i.e. S of the *ergative* approximates the O of the active in its semantic/pragmatic features: decreased agentivity/control/ volition, approaching thus, the semantics of experiencer/ undergoer of the event, where affectedness of the O, if present in the proposition, is unspecified.

2.2 Passive Clauses

Among various Khanty passive constructions, the one relevant for this dis-
cussion will be the type with overt agent referent marked with Loc case,
which would normally have such features as:
- overall type frequency in the narrative of 10%;
- express events where the agent referent is of high relevance (important
    for unambiguous interpretation of the event).
- Agent is Loc-marked;
- target - a full NP in the S role, controlling verbal agreement

These Eastern Khanty passives with overt Agent appear to resonate
with the general fundamental function of passives "having to do with defo-
cusing of agents" (Shibatani, 1985).

The referent mapped to non-S role may have various degree of inherent
agentivity/animacy (3a vs. b):

(3) a.Ø   sav rut wer-əm   notn-nə   weta-jən,
    (2sg) Russian make-PP arrow-Loc kill-PS.2sg

    rut   wer-əm oŋtən-nə weta-jən
    Russian make-PP spear-Loc kill-PS 2sg
    'You were killed by Russian-made arrow, Russian-made spear.'

In (3a) the inanimate agent is expressed by the full NP in the non-S role,
marked by Loc, while the topical Target referent, a 2sg participant, appears
as the S controlling agreement inflection on the predicate, but, typically for
topic, omitted from the overt expression. Here the instrument referents 'ar-
row' and 'spear' are referred to as agents, dictated by the pragmatic necessity
to disguise the true agents. Since these are now perceived as agents, they are
demoted to a non-S role marked for Loc case. This type of constructions is
typical of ritualistic texts, the so-called "bear songs".

Passive constructions with *communication verbs* (b) have similar char-
acteristics. The 'message', is essentially equated to Target and promoted to S
in the passive, whereas the Recipient-Addressee of the Message may be
omitted:

(3) b. min-nə tu   tayi   jöy-ä   eryəl-s-i
    2Du-Loc Dem everything 3sg-Lat tell-PRF-PS.3sg
    'We TOLD HIM ALL this.'

In narratives, in passive (4a) the Target is the S, unmarked for case, controlling verbal agreement. The agentive referent, pragmatically identifiable (possession and context), is demoted to non-S, marked with the Loc case. In adjoined active-direct (b), the agentive referent appears in canonical topic expression, elision controlling 3sg zero verbal agreement. In (c), according to the pattern, the new agentive referent 'I' is activated, expressed by a free pronoun and verbal inflection.

(4) a. ej pixr -əm-nə   puran nöxt-i panə
       one man-PX1sg-Loc skidoo pull-PS/3sg and

    b. sar-nam   mən,
       ahead-Lat1 go.3sg
       'My man TURNED the skidoo ON and WENT ON FORWARD, ...

    c. os ma   avet- a   əntə imł- əṁ
       but 1sg sled- Lat3 NEG sit- 1sg

    d. aj amp- əli   ma- nə   kur-xət-i   katł-i
       small   dog- Dim1sg- Loc   leg-Du-Lathold-PS/3sg

    e. panə   puran   pir- i   ti   quxt-əm,
       and   skidoo back-Lat Dem   trod- PP
       '...but I DID NOT SIT into the sled and HELD THE SMALL DOG by its
       LEGS, while RUNNING behind THE SKIDOO.'

The newly established referent, 1sg agentive, is demoted to non-S in the passive (d), expressed by the Loc-inflected free pronoun, while a lower agentivity referent 'dog', is pragmatically foregrounded, appearing as S controlling verbal agreement. The demoted 1sg. agent, however, still controls the participial clause (e).

With regard to information structure, the correlation of [pragmatic function – to semantic role – to grammatical relation] (TOPIC=Agent=S/A) translates in passive into (TOPIC = Target = S). However, the referent with the role of Agent, demoted in passive from A to O, appears to retain some pragmatic properties that allow it to emerge as topic in the immediately subsequent discourse without any special topic promotion means, i.e. just expressed by elision and verbal inflection - the preferred topic expression.

Having identified such properties as control over co-referential agreement in conjoined or adjoined clauses and control over embedded non-finite clauses as pertaining to subjecthood, we can then observe, that in the Eastern Khanty agented passive clauses (4, 5), these properties characterise the demoted Loc-marked agent as well as the Target referent in S.

(5) a. tü   lat-nə   amp-əli ma-nə iłə-ti   asł-i

   Dem time-Loc dog-Dim 1sg-Loc down-Lat let go-PS.3sg

   'AT THIS time I LET GO OF THE DOG.'

   b. puran pir-i   qot-m-am-nə   njaxt-əm, otʲ łixpil

   skidoo back-Lat tread-PP-1sg-Loc laugh-1sg yard inside

   łixpil łaŋ-m-*am*-a   imat sar-nam njax-ta   jəx-*əm*

   inside enter-PP-*1sg*-Lat more ahead-Lat laugh-INF become-*1sg*

   'While running behind THE SKIDOO, I was LAUGHING, and once in the

   FRONT YARD, I LAUGHED even MORE.'

In (5a) the demoted Loc-marked agent 'I' controls the 1sg S/A co-reference agreement on the matrix predicate in (b). Also, both participles 'running' and 'entering' are controlled by the 1sg agent of the passive, rather than the promoted Target as S.

Thus, in Eastern Khanty passive constructions there is a distribution of grammatical and pragmatic properties, commonly assigned to subject and topic, between the demoted oblique-marked agent and the promoted unmarked target arguments in S role.

Discourse-pragmatic generalizations on the eastern Khanty passive usage:

(i)   Target is mapped to Loc-marked S, controlling the S-V agreement;

(ii)   the passive predicates are prototypically transitive verbs, implying
       two core arguments, one of which is high in agentivity status, volition
       and control properties, and the other lacking in such properties being af-
       fected in the event;

(iii) the agentivity/animacy status of the passive S argument is always rela-
       tively lower than that of the demoted O argument;

(iv)   pragmatically, there is a change in the degree of topicality of the refer-
       ents, temporarily foregrounding the non-agent referent, rendering it in S;
       and demoting the status of the agent referent, rendering it in O;

(v)   while at the clausal level the pragmatic status of the referents is altered
       by the passive, at the level of overall discourse the agent, temporary de-
       moted in passive, maintains high activation status, which follows from
       its canonical preferred topic expression by elision and verbal inflection
       in consequent discourse;

(vi)   passive manifests the Eastern Khanty tendency for the Topic initiality.
       Alignment <pragmatic function=grammatical relation> appears the
       strongest, overriding <pragmatic function=semantic role> or <semantic
       role=grammatical relation>.

I propose that pragmatically, a continuum of topicality, a fore-ground/background dynamics can be posited for passive, where Target in S role may be temporarily foregrounded against primary discourse-topic, while the Agent is backgrounded, manifested by increased morphological complexity (Loc case).

The pragmatic and semantic context for passivization appears to resonate with typologically common passive features. Some features, such as: agent-unknown, agent obvious, tact/delicacy, spontaneity of the event, adverse context connotation for agent, etc. (Jespersen, 1924; Shibatani, 1985; Givon, 2001), appear to apply, to a greater extent to Khanty agented passive constructions, rather than the impersonal passives. Agented passives appear to describe events where the agent referent is of high relevance and importance for unambiguous interpretation of the proposition and these appear to imply more spontaneity and affectedness of the Target, than those described by the agentless passives. That is, a more prominent/new agentive referent of the agented passive implies change/dynamicity/affectedness of the Target referent, whose perspective, according to common interpretations, is dominant in the passive arrangement, whereas a known agent of the agentless passive is less probable to imply spontaneity. This is consistent with the information structure pattern established at the onset: elision corresponds to presupposition/topic, whereas overt expression - to assertion/change.

3 Generalisations, discussion and conclusions

My observations of eastern Khanty Loc-agent constructions widely correlate with the cross-linguistic features of non-canonical agent-marking, i.e. with the fact that among the predicates requiring the non-canonical S/A marking, those expressing uncontrollable activities are numerous to the extent that the non-control vs. control may be a generally applicable distinguishing semantic feature. Generally, oblique case marking of the core arguments reflects low transitivity status of the whole clause owing to a set of multilevel factors, such as: valency; referential status of NPs; clause TAM, polarity, genericity, etc. in their integration.

This tendency for Khanty non-canonical clauses to manifest the reduced control of the agent finds resonance with the early descriptions in some Finno-Ugric languages. Similar constructions were said to represent a "logically impersonal sentence with a covert subject", where events were conceptualized as caused by other (mystical) forces – "true agents". In such cases human, an apparent agent of change, is not granted agentive status, merely representing a locus of an event, whereas the causative effect of outside

forces is revealed, and the agent appears in essence a mere semi-responsible performer of an act (Emelianov, 1939; Bubrix and Balandin, 1946).

(+) agent's subjecthood.	(-) agent's subjecthood
(+) control/volition	(-) control/volition
(+) Clause/event transitivity	(-) Clause/event transitivity
Nominative	*Locative*

◄───►

◄─── canonical ───►   ◄─── non-canonical ───►

Extra-linguistically this approach finds strong standing in case of the eastern Khanty. It is noted, that bear is a frequent participant in the events described by the non-canonical constructions. Concurrently, there are strongly observed conventionalized behavioral patterns, rituals & taboos (identity concealment, etc) associated with bears. In this light, a tendency to demote/'deagentivize'/desubjectivize the agent appears well grounded culturally.

In course of this discussion, I pursued the question of whether an insight into possible types of discourse-pragmatic functions and kinds of propositional-semantic content associated with the non-canonical construction types in the Eastern Khanty may shed light on their functional motivation and etymology. Based on the analysis of modern Eastern Khanty narratives, I sought to support the hypothesis, that the choice of these constructions is motivated by pragmatic pressures in the discourse. The need to identify, maintain or change pragmatic functions and interrelations of the referents in the discourse applies the structural means, available in the Eastern Khanty system, finding formal expression by Loc. Agent-marking constructions. The holistic, monostratal analysis of the host of the pragmatic-functional, semantic and structural properties of all the participants in their interaction in the discourse, aided by insights into cultural context, is found particularly revealing.

The prototypical unifying features of the Eastern Khanty non-canonical clauses are as follows:

(i)   in ergative clauses, the overt Loc-marked S of the human/animate Agent, low transitivity of the morphologically active verbal predicate, S-V agreement, parenthetical character (1 clause-length followed by canonical active-direct clause with continuing topic expressed by elision) - correlate to temporary pragmatic prominence of the low control/volition of the Agent in the consequential/reactive event, where the agentive/causer nature of the agent referent is de-emphasised;

(ii) in the agented passive clauses, the overt Loc-marked Agent in the non-S role, high semantic transitivity of the morphologically passive verb, S role of the less animate Ø-marked Target, S-V agreement, parenthetical character (1-2 clause length followed by canonical an active-direct clause with continuing topic expressed by elision) - correlate to temporary prominence of the Target in the spontaneous/dependent event, where the agentive/causer nature of the agent is de-emphasised, but whose identity is relevant in the event.

Thus, Eastern Khanty non-canonical constructions, can be likened in that, they manifest a foregrounding of a secondary topical referent, whose activation status is competing with that of the primary discourse topical referent. This is expressed by temporary promotion of such referent to S, a Loc-marked full NP or a free pronoun, which is not a preferred (primary) topic expression in the Eastern Khanty.

These non-canonical Loc-agent constructions differ in the semantic properties of the referents promoted to S. In the agented passive clauses this referent is always lower in the animacy/agentivity hierarchy and has semantic properties of the Target, whereas in the case of the ergative clause, the animacy/agentivity status of the referent is normally high.

It is thus this study's prediction that all instances of the non-canonical constructions are highly probable to associate with the mentioned pragmatic-functional environments.

The dynamics of assignment of the subjecthood properties, low morphological complexity of Acc. NP compared to other cases, concurrent with multifaceted similarities between NPs in passive and ergative constructions, can be viewed as supporting the hypothesis of the process of "gradual evolution" of Khanty nominative-accusative to ergative organization via switch of subjecthood properties from morphologically simple O/P of passive to morphologically complex A of ergative (Comrie, 1978; Haspelmath, 1990).

ABBREVIATIONS

Acc - Accusative case
DET - Determiner
Dim - Diminutive
IMPP-imperfective participle
Intr – Intransitiver/Anticausative
Lat - Lative case
Loc - Locative case
PL/3sg - agreement with the number
of the O = Pl and person/number of
the S/A =3sg referents.

IMPRF - Imperfective
IMPP - imperfective participle
PP - perfective participle
PRF - Perfect
PXlsg - lsg Possessor
PS - Passive
TR - Transitivizer

References

Aikhenvald, Alexandra, Dixon Robert, and Onishi Masayuki. 2001. Non-canonical marking of subjects and objects. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Balandin, A.N. 1967. Obsko-Ugorskie konstruktsii glagolnogo predlozenia so "skritim subjektom". In: Zhirmunski, *Ergativnaya konstruktsia predlozenia v jazikax razlicnix tipov*. Moscow.

Comrie, Bernard. 1975. Su and DO in Uralic languages.

Comrie, Bernard. 1977. In difference of spontaneous demotion: The impersonal passive.

Comrie, Bernard. 1978. Ergativity. In "Syntactic Typology" ed. W.P.Lehmann. UT Austin Press.

Dixon, Robert. 1979. Ergativity. Language V-55, #1.

Dixon, Robert. 1994. Ergativity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Givon, Talmi. 2001. Syntax. An Introduction. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Gulya, Janos. 1970. Aktiv, Ergative und Passiv im Vakh-Ostjakischen.

Kholodovitch, A. A. 1974. Tipologia passivnix konstruktsii. Diatezi i zalogi. Leningrad.

Klimov, G. 1984. Nominativnoe i ergativnoe predlozhenia. Moscow.

Kulonen, Ullo-Maya. 1989. The Passive in Ob-Ugrian. Helsinki.

Lambrecht, Knud. 1994. Information Structure and Sentence From. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nikolaeva, Irina. 1999. Ostyak. Lankom Europa.

Shibatani, Masayoshi. 1985. Passives and related constructions. *Languag.* 61, 4:821-848.

Solovar, Valentina. 1991. Structurno-semanticeskie tipi prostogo predlozenia v xatiiskom jazike. "Kandidatskaja Diss." Novosibirsk.

Li, C (ed.). 1977. *Subject and Topic*. London: Academic Press.

Trask, R.L. 1979. On the origins of ergativity. In: Plank, F. (ed.), *Ergativity. Towards a theory of grammatical relations*. London/New-York.

van Valin, Robert and Randy J. Lapolla. 1997. *Syntax. Structure, meaning, and function*. Cambridge: CUP.

6100 Main, MS23
Linguistics Department
Houston, TX 77005
andreif@rice.edu