Floating towards focus – differential subject indexing in Gutob

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Differential subject indexing, as opposed to differential object indexing (cf. e.g. IEMMOLO 2011) or differential subject flagging (cf. DE HOOP and DE SWART 2008, MALCHUKOV 2008, FAUCONNIER 2011 inter alia), has been a Cinderella subject in the study of differential marking. It has been reported for some languages that the absence of a subject index can be triggered by certain focus constructions (cf. SIEWIERSKA 2004 on Konjo, Yagua and Chalcatongo Mixtec, or CULBERTSON 2010 on colloquial French).

In Gutob (Munda, gbj), bound person forms carrying the features of person and number of the subject can attach to different hosts apart from the verb. This is similar to the closely related languages Kharia and Santali, where the enclitic subject indexes can be placed postverbally or preverbally. What is exceptional about subject indexing in Gutob is the fact that person forms can also attach to hosts at greater distance to the verb and that their placement is largely unpredictable. In Kharia, the subject index is enclitic to the verb in affirmative clauses and attaches to the negative particle in negative clauses (PETERSON 2010), and its placement is therefore rule governed. In Gutob this is not the case and the high degree of variability in placement has puzzled linguists before (cf. e.g. ZIDE 1997, ANDERSON 2007).

We argue here that the placement of the index is conditioned by information structure, or more specifically by the focal status of the host of the index, a phenomenon called floating agreement by FORKER (2016) for Nakh-Daghestanian languages. The index leaves its postverbal position and floats off to constituents which are focal or contribute new information. (1) and (2) show indexing in the verb phrase, with and without free subject pronoun. Example (3) is a minimal pair from a conversation and shows how the index attaches to focal constituents: the object noun specifying what was brought by the guests in the first sentence, and the amount in the third sentence.

(1) \[ \text{nīŋ \ ar-gōŋ-a=nīŋ=be} \]
\[ \text{1SG NEG-be.able-NEG.MID.FUT=1SG=HON} \]
‘I can’t do this any longer.’

(2) \[ \text{mapru=lai dubbungia \ beq-o=nīŋ} \]
\[ \text{god=OBJ incense.stick give-ACT.PST=1SG} \]
‘I offered an incense stick to the god.’

(3a) \[ \text{s: \ iŋqî? solop=nen gor-ek riŋ-o? dugu} \]
\[ \text{HES palm.wine=3PL goria-one bring-ACT.CV be.PST} \]
‘Eh, they had brought one goria of palm wine.’
Our study is based on a corpus of ca. 14.5 h of natural speech from personal narratives, conversations, interviews and fictional stories. Elicited data was not included in this study. Our analysis contributes to the discussion about the driving factors behind differential indexing, and present an example where it is not the presence vs. the absence of the index that constitutes the differential coding pattern, but rather the placement of the index.

References


