

Alignment, Subjecthood, and Transitivity Prominence in Indo-European

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This paper presents preliminary results of a project exploring the relationship between alignment, subjecthood features and transitivity prominence in the different branches of the Indo-European family. Alignment refers to the morphosyntactic realization of core arguments. Subjecthood is a cover term for the morphosyntactic properties of the argument referred to as subject, which in this context is defined as the generalized syntactically privileged argument. Transitivity prominence is understood as the degree to which predicates in a language select the pattern characteristic of core transitive verbs. These three morphosyntactic dimensions are taken to constitute the argument realization system of a language. The empirical data are drawn from the oldest attested stages of representative languages of each of the branches by means of a three-tiered typological questionnaire, which is designed to capture fine-grained differences in each of the three dimensions, as outlined in Tables 1-3. The subjecthood properties represent a subset of the ones identified by Falk (2006). Relative transitivity prominence is measured by means of the predicate list in Creissels (2018b). Taken together, this questionnaire enables a multivariate comparative analysis of the argument realization systems in the languages under scrutiny (e.g., Bickel 2015).

While all the languages in the survey share a basic nominative-accusative alignment pattern, they show considerable variation when examined in more detail (cf. also Dahl 2022). This is partly due to developments observable in the historically attested stages of the languages (cf. e.g., Dahl 2021) and partly to prehistorical developments. Cotticelli and Dahl (2022) argue that there is a correlation between consistent accusative morphosyntax and a complex inventory of subjecthood properties across the Indo-European languages, a fact they interpret as a generalization of basic alignment (cf. also Creissels 2018a). On the other hand, they also note that languages with a rich notion of subjecthood also seem to be more permissive regarding non-canonical subjects. This raises the question whether the three morphosyntactic dimensions of interest are diachronically interrelated, so that changes in one dimension may cause changes in another dimension, or not.

This paper explores these and related problems. Preliminary findings indicate that the different branches show variation along all three dimensions, but no clear correlation patterns appear in the data. This finding in turn suggests that the three dimensions of argument morphosyntax are independent and develop separately.

Table 1.

ALIGNMENT VARIABLES	VALUES
NP-based split alignment	yes, no
TAM-based split alignment	yes, no
Mixed alignment	yes, no
Accusative alignment: case	yes, no
Accusative alignment: agreement	yes, no
Ergative alignment: case	yes, no
Ergative alignment: agreement	yes, no
Semantic alignment: case	yes, no

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Semantic alignment: agreement	yes, no
Neutral alignment: case	yes, no
Neutral alignment: agreement	yes, no
Distributional restrictions	yes, no

Table 2.

SUBJECTHOOD VARIABLES	VALUES
Anaphoric prominence	yes, no
Controlled argument (PRO)	yes, no
Discourse topic	yes, no
Shared argument in coordinated clauses	yes, no
Raising	yes, no
Extraction properties (antecedent to relative)	yes, no
«External» structural position	yes, no
Definiteness or wide scope	yes, no
(...)	

Table 3.

TRANSITIVITY VARIABLES	VALUES
Unmarked voice	yes, no
Canonically case-marked first argument	yes, no
Canonically case-marked second argument	yes, no

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