A Study on the Nature of Subjects in Generative Grammar

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Abstract: The article delves into the multidimensional nature of the concept of subjects based on the theory of generative grammar, aiming to clarify the distinct manifestations and functions of subjects at the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels. This paper points out that the grammatical subject as defined by Lyons, being a pivotal element in the surface syntactic structure, maintains a morphological agreement with the predicate verb, serving as the central focus of syntactic analysis. In contrast, the logical subject originates from the external argument in the underlying structure, assuming the role of the agent and possessing explicit semantic attributes, thereby underscoring the significance of subjects at the semantic level. Furthermore, the paper explores the concept of thematic subjects, emphasizing their centrality at the pragmatic level, which is directly tied to the progression of discourse and the transmission of information, transcending the syntactic framework of "subjects" and highlighting the autonomy of pragmatic analysis. The article offers a novel perspective and pathway for a deeper understanding of the nature of subjects within the framework of generative grammar theory.

Keywords: Subject; Generative Grammar; Topic; Semantics

1. Issues with the Definition of Subject

The precise nature of the subject in Chinese remains undefined and unified to this day. In fact, ancient Chinese lacked the concept of subject as understood in modern linguistics. According to Modern Chinese, the definition of subject encompasses several aspects: Firstly, in a subject-predicate phrase, the subject is the object of the statement, placed before the predicate, answering questions such as "who" or "what"; secondly, noun phrases often function as subjects; thirdly, from the semantic relationship between the subject and predicate, subjects can be classified into three types: genitive subjects (indicating the actor of the action), patient subjects (indicating the recipient of the action), and neutral subjects, which do not represent either the agent or patient but rather the object of description, judgment, or explanation.

The first point, introducing the "subject-predicate phrase" before defining the subject, is inappropriate. How can one judge a subject-predicate phrase without a clear understanding of the subject? The subsequent statement that "the subject is the object of the statement, placed before the predicate, answering questions like 'who' or 'what'" is also vague, as "object of the statement" and "before the predicate" encompass broad concepts like topics. Thus, this definition fails to adequately define the subject. The second point, "noun phrases often function as subjects," is meaningless as it merely states a probability; other non-noun phrases can also function as subjects, and thus cannot serve as a criterion. Finally, the third point, analyzing subjects from semantic roles, is problematic because it only mentions patient roles, leaving the "neutral subject" undefined. This implies that subjects can have any semantic role or none at all, leading to the conclusion that subjects are unrelated to semantic roles. If so, what is the significance of mentioning semantic roles? Additionally, the "neutral subject" remains unclear.

Similarly, the definition of the subject in English is also ambiguous. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the subject as «the noun, noun phrase, or pronoun that performs the action of the verb in an active sentence or is affected by the action of the verb in a passive sentence.» Quirk (1972: 58-88) defines it as «the general relationship of the subject to the matter being discussed.» The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English states that the subject is «the noun, noun phrase, or pronoun that refers to the person or thing doing the action of the main verb or about whom or which the statement is made.» These definitions emphasize the semantic relationship between the verb and subject but neglect syntactic features, hindering accurate identification and judgment of subjects. For example:

(1) a. It is important for me to learn French

b. There is a mistake in your paper

According to the above definitions, only "me" in (1-a) qualifies as a subject. However, in English grammar, "it" in (1-a) and "there" in

(1-b) are subjects, and "to learn French" in (1-a) is also considered a subject, resulting in three different types of subjects. This multiple referentiality not only complicates the accurate definition of the English subject but also causes confusion about its grammatical nature.

2. The Debate Between Subject and Topic

Early Chinese research often confused subjects and topics without further distinction. Ma Jianzhong, the first Chinese linguist to adopt the concept of subject, based his terminology on Indo-European grammar, referring to the two main parts of a Chinese sentence. His description resembles the relationship between "topic" and "comment" rather than distinguishing between subject and topic. As Chinese syntax is less rigid than Indo-European languages, and the subject serves both syntactic and topic functions.

Similarly, English subjects also face similar issues. In different grammatical systems, the English subject has different labels. Traditional grammar refers to it as a "subject," while the Prague School founder Mathesius introduced the concept of "theme" to distinguish the initiating element of a sentence from the rest, called "rheme." Halliday (1975), the founder of Systemic Functional Grammar, views the theme as the starting point of information and the beginning of a clause. A thematic structure consists of a theme and rheme; when the subject coincides with the theme, it is unmarked; otherwise, it is marked.

From the surface level, the topic-comment relationship is often obscured by the subject-predicate relationship, with topics often coinciding with subjects. To refine syntactic analysis, it is necessary to distinguish between them. Li & Thompson (1976: 457-489) regard subject and topic as distinct concepts, highlighting three key differences: subjects are inherent in the event structure of a sentence, while topics are not; topics have textual properties, whereas subjects do not; and subjects have a noun-verb relationship with the predicate verb, while topics do not. English belongs to a ternary system ("subject-predicate-object/predicative/complement"), while Chinese belongs to a binary system ("theme-rheme"). A consensus emerges that topics and subjects belong to different grammatical planes: topics are discourse concepts referring to the entity to be explained, while subjects are syntactic and semantic concepts related to action performers. While this distinction clarifies the difference between subjects and topics, the relationship between subjects and semantic roles remains unresolved.

3. The Subject in Generative Grammar

3.1 The Subject as a Surface Syntactic Concept

According to generative grammar, Lyons' grammatical subject refers to syntactic components that agree with the predicate verb in the surface structure, while the logical subject is the external argument in the underlying structure, assigned the role of agent with semantic properties. The thematic subject, or topic, is a pragmatic concept directly referred to as "theme" or "topic," without the label "subject." These terms clearly distinguish syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic categories, enhancing clarity in grammatical analysis.

3.2 Discrimination of Subject, External Argument, and Topic

The aforementioned analysis demonstrates that external arguments, subjects, and topics belong to three distinct grammatical levels, with external arguments at the bottom, subjects in the middle, and topics at the surface. From a generative perspective, external arguments emerge first through semantic role assignment in the deep structure, followed by syntactic movement to form syntactic subjects in the surface structure. Finally, topics arise in discourse communication based on the need for information transition. Due to syntactic operations and pragmatic drives, external arguments, subjects, and topics may be distributed across different components or overlap on the same one:

(2) a. John, I love his smile

b. John, I haven't seen for ages

c. Bill was killed by an unknown assassin

d. The robber stole a radio

In (2-a), John serves as a topic, not an external argument or syntactic subject; I is the external argument functioning as the syntactic subject; his smile is an internal argument functioning as the syntactic object. In (2-b), John is an internal argument acting as a topic; I is the external argument and syntactic subject. In (2-c), Bill is an internal argument (patient) functioning as both the syntactic subject and topic; an

unknown assassin is the external argument (agent). In (2-d), the robber is the external argument, and simultaneously the syntactic subject and topic. This frequent overlap may create the misimpression that subjects and agents, or subjects and topics, are interchangeable, blurring the distinctions among syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic categories.

It must be emphasized that subjects and external arguments are fundamentally different in two key aspects: firstly, subjects are purely syntactic constructs, whereas external arguments possess both syntactic and semantic attributes; secondly, subjects belong to surface syntax, while external arguments reside in deep syntax. Subjects, unrelated to agent roles, are syntactic entities, whereas external arguments are syntactic components reflecting the syntactic manifestation of agent roles, i.e., the direct agents of the verb's action. People often associate sentence subjects with action performers but hesitate to equate them, recognizing that subjects can also be patients. Despite acknowledging the lack of absolute correspondence, there's an unconscious tendency to link subjects with agent roles. This stems from the structural proximity of subjects and external arguments in intransitive and transitive verb predicates, both preceding the verb and comprising a significant proportion of verbs, leading to the erroneous equation of subjects with external arguments and the labeling of subjects as agents.

Subjects are also frequently misconstrued as topics. In reality, subjects result from syntactic movement of external or internal arguments from deep to surface structures, a syntactic operation. Topics, on the other hand, are pragmatic manipulations of surface structures to facilitate new-old information transitions during communication, dynamic and contingent upon discourse needs. Thus, subjects and topics belong to different grammatical planes with no direct correlation.

4 The conclusion

The conclusion drawn from the above analysis is that subjects are syntactic concepts of surface structures. In generative grammar, analyzed primarily with English data, subjects are considered syntactic necessities unrelated to semantics. If a verb lacks an external argument as a subject, an internal argument is used. If neither is available, a "dummy subject" like "it" or "there" is employed. English syntax mandates subjects in declarative sentences to fulfill structural requirements. Since subjects are syntactic, they can be defined directly by syntactic formal features. While Chinese Subjects can not be defined as a grammatical subjects. The clear and effective definition avoids semantic role. Subjects are distinguished from topics.

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