Against affectedness

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In this short paper I will argue that affectedness is not a very useful notion to explain differential marking and interpretation of direct objects (proto-Patients) in languages. Affectedness is hard to define and degree of affectedness seems hard to measure. Moreover, analyses of differential object marking in terms of affectedness break down when it comes to explaining differential object marking on the basis of definiteness or specificity. I will argue that patterns of differential object marking reflect a shift in prominence rather than in affectedness.

Traditionally, patienthood is often defined in terms of affectedness. Dowty (1991) defines proto-Patients as undergoing a change of state and as being causally affected by another participant. Næss (2004) argues that in a prototypical transitive clause the two arguments must be maximally semantically distinct with respect to volitionality, instigation, and affectedness. Because an important part of her research focuses on affected Agents, she defines affectedness as follows:

**DEFINITION (Næss, 2004, p. 30)**

An argument is affected by the verbal action if it undergoes a change of state, external/physical or internal/mental, as a direct result of the verbal event, whether this event is initiated by the affected entity itself or an entity separate from the affected entity, or is not construed as being initiated by any specific entity.

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According to Næss (2004), affectedness of the object triggers formal encoding of (high) transitivity. As an example, she mentions that “Finnish encodes highly affected objects in fully transitive clauses with the accusative case, but less-affected objects take oblique case-marking, whether their reduced affectedness stems from the fact that only part of the object is affected (. . . ) or the nature of the verbal action is such that it impinges less strongly on the object” (Næss, 2004, p. 111). This influence of affectedness on Finnish object marking is shown in the following examples (Kittilä, 2002, pp. 62-63). Sentence (2) is meant to illustrate partial affectedness of the object compared to sentence (1).¹

(1) Ad jo-i maito-n
   Ad.NOM drink.PAST-3SG milk-ACC
   ‘Ad drank the milk (up)’

(2) Ad jo-i maito-a
   Ad.NOM drink.PAST-3SG milk-PART
   ‘Ad drank (some) milk’

(3) Ad viha-si maito-a /*maito-n
   Ad.NOM hate-PAST.3SG milk-PART milk-ACC
   ‘Ad hated milk’

But is the milk in (1) more affected than the milk in (2)?

Næss (2004) considers the object in (2) to be less affected than the object in (1), apparently because not all milk has been drunk in (2), although strictly speaking the sentence does not assert that not all milk has been drunk. Moreover, the milk that was drunk was as affected by the verbal action in (2) as in (1). Sentence (3) presents an example of a verbal action that “impinges less strongly on the object”. Indeed, the object of hate is not at all affected by the verbal action, which explains the use of partitive case, according to Næss (2004). Another example she discusses is the verb hit that in Finnish does not assign accusative case to its object. Clearly,

¹Abbreviations used in the glosses: ACC = accusative case; BA = object case marker in Mandarin Chinese; DET = determiner; INTR = intransitive; NOM = nominative case; ERG = ergative case; OBL = oblique case; PART = partitive case; PAST = past tense; PERF = perfective aspect; PRT = particle; SG = singular; TRANS = transitive.
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the objects of drink and kill are more affected by the verbal actions than the objects of hate and hit. However, as Kittilä (2002, p. 50) points out, this distinction is not always as clear-cut as it seems, since while hit assigns partitive case to its object (cf. (4)), see assigns accusative case (cf. (5)).

(4)  
Ad löw-i poika-a  
Ad.NOM hit.PAST-3SG boy-PART  
‘Ad hit the boy’

(5)  
Ad nāk-i talo-n  
Ad.NOM see.PAST-3SG house-ACC  
‘Ad saw the house’

But is the house in (5) more affected than the boy in (4)?

In fact, it is the other way around, since the object of hit will be more affected by the verbal action than the object of see. Hence, case marking cannot always be explained in terms of affectedness. A similar argument is put forward by Yang (2008) on differential object marking in Mandarin Chinese. According to traditional literature, ba-marking occurs on preverbal affected objects of transitive verbs. This is illustrated by the sentences in (6) and (7) Yang (2008, p. 72):

(6)  
Ad ba wo da le  
Ad BA 1SG hit PRT  
‘Ad hit me’

(7)  
*Ad ba wo kan le  
Ad BA 1SG look PRT  
‘Ad looked at me’

The object of hit is more affected than the object of look (at) which would explain the difference in case-marking. However, Yang (2008, p. 73) notes that verbs like wang ‘forget’ and diu ‘lose’ when combined with the aspectual particle le can also take a ba-marked object. She points out that “[i]t is hard to claim that the objects of these predicates in these cases are ‘affected’ at all”. Another problem is the pattern of ba-marking in (8)-(10) (Yang, 2008, pp. 87-88). Whereas marking the object in (8) is obligatory, it is optional for the objects in (9) and (10).
But is the apple in (8) more affected than the apples in (9) and (10)?

In fact, because in (9) and (10) it is explicitly stated that the apple has been eaten up completely, an account in terms of affectedness would predict obligatory \textit{ba}-marking on the objects in (9) and (10) rather than on the one in (8).

Across languages we find many instantiations of differential object marking along the lines of either animacy and/or definiteness, specificity or referentiality. As for animacy, it could be argued that animate objects are more affected by a verbal action than inanimate ones because they can actually suffer, feel pain, or experience emotion. De Swart (2014) discusses the animacy-related encoding alternation in Dutch that is found with verbs denoting physical contact such as \textit{schoppen} ‘kick’, \textit{slaan} ‘hit’, \textit{bijten} ‘bite’ etc. The animate patient of \textit{beet} ‘bit’ in (11) is encoded as a regular direct object, while the inanimate patient in (12) has the form of a prepositional phrase. De Swart (2014) argues that this difference between animate and inanimate patients of these verbs is linked to the property of sentience.

(11) \textit{Ad beet een vrouw}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Ad bit a woman}
  \item ‘Ad bit a woman’
\end{itemize}

(12) \textit{Ad beet in een appel}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textit{Ad bit in an apple}
  \item ‘Ad bit (into) an apple’
\end{itemize}
But is the woman in (11) more affected than the apple in (12)?

In terms of actual damage, the apple will probably be more affected than the woman, yet in terms of sentience we may say that the woman will be more affected, because she can physically and emotionally suffer. However, such an explanation does not apply to differential object marking on the basis of definiteness or specificity. Consider for example differential object marking in Hindi (Mohanan, 1990, p. 104). The difference between (13) and (14) is a difference in the absence or presence of accusative case marking on the direct object.

(13)  Ad-ne \_haar \_uTH\_aayaa
Ad-ERG necklace.NOM lift.PERF
‘Ad lifted a necklace’

(14)  Ad-ne \_haar-ko \_uTH\_aayaa
Ad-ERG necklace-ACC lift.PERF
‘Ad lifted the necklace’

But is the necklace in (14) more affected than the necklace in (13)?

Note that if the presence or absence of accusative case would correspond to a difference in affectedness, we would have to argue that the necklace that is picked up in (14) is more affected than the one in (13), which is of course not the case. Also in Spanish differential object marking is a matter of animacy and/or definiteness or specificity. Consider the example below from López (2012, p. 10). With the accusative case marker a, the object can get a specific reading (Ad is looking for a specific person), but without it, only a nonspecific reading is possible.

(15)  Ad busca (a) un traductor de alemán
Ad seeks ACC a translator of German
‘Ad is looking for a German translator’

But is a specific translator of German more affected than a nonspecific one in (15)?

It goes without saying that the answer to that question is ‘no’.

Antipassive constructions are cross-linguistically characterized as voice alternations in which the patient is demoted, but demotion does not
necessarily imply a lesser degree of affectedness. Consider for instance the alternation in Halkomelem (Wiltschko, 2006). The verb in (16) is marked as transitive and shows ergative agreement, whereas in (17) the verb is marked as intransitive and the object gets an oblique marker (Gerdts & Hukari, 2000).

(16) Q’ó:y-t-es te Ad te qwá:l
    kill-TRANS-3.ERG DET Ad DET mosquito
    ‘Ad killed the mosquito’

(17) Qwél-em e te sth’óqwi te Ad
    barbecue-INTR OBL DET fish DET Ad
    ‘Ad barbecued the fish’

But is the mosquito in (16) more affected than the fish in (17)?

Again, I do not think that the difference in object marking between (16) and (17) can be accounted for in terms of affectedness. Thus, we have seen that in many cases differential object marking cannot be attributed to differences in (degree of) affectedness of the object. The above examples do not provide an exhaustive list of differential object marking patterns. Object case marking alternations on the basis of a split between pronouns and nouns or between first and second versus third person pronouns cannot be accounted for in terms of affectedness either. The same holds for case marking alternations that are triggered by word order alternations (Yang & van Bergen, 2007). One factor that may be described in terms of affectedness is aspect (such as perfectivity, resultativity, cf. Malchukov & de Hoop, 2011). However, it has become clear by now that affectedness can at best play a minor role in explaining patterns of differential object marking.

This of course raises the question what to replace it with. However, I would like to emphasize that in my view there cannot be just one comprehensive factor that covers all instantiations of differential object marking. Still, something like ‘prominence’ seems a good candidate for covering a substantial part of differential object marking patterns (cf. a.o. Aissen, 2003; de Hoop & Narasimhan, 2005; de Swart, 2007; de Hoop & Malchukov, 2008; Dalrymple & Nikolaeva, 2011). Prominence is determined by a range
of different factors, including definiteness and/or referentiality, animacy, person, topichood, word order. An argument can be prominent due to its inherent properties or because of its status in the discourse (de Swart, 2007). Indeed, the milk in (1) above plays a more prominent role in the discourse than the milk in (2), and so does the necklace in (14) compared to the one in (13). A specific translator in (15) is clearly more prominent than just any translator, and the mosquito in (16) may also be more prominent than the fish in (17). Finally, the woman in (11) is definitely more prominent than the apple in (12).

To conclude, I have argued that affectedness is not a good factor to account for patterns of differential object marking in languages, while prominence, even though it may not be properly defined either and cannot explain all alternations either, does explain more of the relevant data and does so more convincingly.

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References


Against affectedness


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