EXPERIENCER SUBJECT CONSTRUCTIONS AND GENITIVE CASE IN ASSAMESE

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ABSTRACT

Experiencer constructions, which often contains a phych verb gives an experiencer reading on one of their arguments or participants. These arguments, when realized as subjects, are structurally Case marked nominative by the INFL, as Chomsky (1981) claims. However, Experiencer Subject Constructions found in South Indian Languages (SLA) present a counter-example to Chomsky's claim in Case marking the subject with "quirky" dative Case. While the unmarked Case for quirky subjects across languages is dative (Landau 2010), and all the Dravidian, some Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman and Munda languages mark their experiencer subjects dative, Assamese is interesting in that the so-called Experiencer Subjects are found to be in genitive Case. Assamese, along with Bangla and Oria, is characterized by an extensive use of genitive subjects, not found so frequently in other Languages. This paper investigates the type of predicates which trigger genitive Case on the subject in Assamese and tries to give a precise characterization of these subjects within the Principle and Parameter Approach.

1 Introduction: Experiencer Subjects vs. Experiencer Objects

Experiencer constructions are those constructions which contain the semantic role of an experiencer, perceiving some kind of sensual impressions. They often contain a phych verb and the predicate often opts for an experiential reading on one of their arguments or participants. On the basis of experiential theta role attributed to the arguments, predicates have been broadly divided into two types – (a) Subject Experiential Verbs, whose subjects undergo a mental/psychological change as in (1), and (b) Object Experiential Verbs whose objects are the arguments to undergo the change of state as in (2) and (3):

(1)   She loved him enthusiastically and deliberately.
(2)   The alarm frightened the crowd in the hall.
(3)   Her accent amused the audience.

In (1), the subject, (i.e., She) undergoes a particular change in the emotional state, that of love and affection. In the examples (2) & (3), the objects, (i.e., the crowd and the audience) are the ones that undergo a particular change in the emotional state, that of fear and of amusement. Thus, (1) is an example of Experiencer Subject Construction while (2) and (3) are instances if Experiencer Object Constructions. However, as this focus of this paper is Experiencer Subjects in Assamese, we are not going to examine the Experiencer Objects. Instead, in the following few sections we will discuss the Experiencer Subjects with reference to the typical semantic role that these Subjects have and the Case associated with the Experiencer Subjects.

2 Experiencer Subjects and Quirky Case.
Sentential subjects generally bear the nominative Case. Chomsky (1981) claims that subjects are case marked nominative by an INFL which contains AGR. Such Case marking is called Structural Case, which is assigned in a structural configuration. If an INFL is infinitival and contains no AGR, the subject is not case marked. Any other Case checked on a particular argument of a particular head in conjunction with theta-role assignment by that head, regardless of its syntactic position, is called the "quirky" Case and is said to be assigned inherently. As seen in (1-3), the subjects in the Experiencer Constructions are Case marked nominative. In Chomsky (1981, 1986) the verb has no role in determining the subject's Case. However, the Experiencer Subject Constructions found in South Indian Languages (SLA) present a counter-example to Chomsky's claim and call for an explanation. According to the standard analysis of these constructions (Kachru (1970), Masica (1976) and Sridhar (1976)), verbs of certain (perhaps, semantically definable) classes mark their subjects dative in SLA. Dative subjects, in fact, are considered one of the features defining the South Asia as a Linguistic area (Emeneau 1956; Masica 19760). They are the most widespread in Dravidian and in some Indo-Aryan languages. Some Tibeto-Burman and Munda languages, too, share this feature. In these languages, the subject in the Experiencer Subject Constructions is case marked Dative. This is quite expected given that "the unmarked Case for quirky subjects across languages is dative (e.g., Russian, Polish, Georgian, Japanese, Korean.)" (Landau 2010: 84). However, in case of Assamese, the so-called Experiencer Subjects are found to be in genitive Case. Assamese, along with Bangla is characterized by an extensive use of genitive subjects, not found so frequently in other Languages. Consider the following sentences:

(4) (Hindi)   mujhe   bhukh lagii he
                   I-DAT   hunger feel aux
                   'I am hungry.'
(5) (Bangla)   aamaar   khide   peeche
(6) (Assamese) mor   bhok   laagise
                   I-GEN   hunger   feeling
                   'I am hungry.'

The phenomenon of Genitive Subject Constructions can in general be seen as attached to experiential predicates, i.e., all those predicates, which opt for an experiential reading on one of their arguments or participants. In this paper our focus will be on Experiencer Subjects, the typical semantic role and Case marking in Assamese.

3 Experiencer Subjects & Goal Theta Role

Some studies of Dative-Experiencer Subjects have defined the experience theta role as a typical example of a semantic role, which is an "amalgamation of two or more thematic meanings" (Mohanan & Mohanan (1988), Mohanan (1994)). The general conclusion of these studies is their analysis of the semantics of these specific subjects as aggregation of the two abstract notions of goal and possession. This can in general be extended to Genitive-Experiencer Subject also. Verma and Mohanan (1990) say: "Interestingly enough, both the goal subject and the possessor subject appear in the dative Case in Malayalam and both appear in genitive Case in Bangla as well as Bhojpuri." Here, Assamese is like Bangla. Consider the following sentences:

(7) Malayalam

      (a)   enikk*a*   panni va<u>nn</u>u
              I-DAT   fever   come
          'I have fever.'

      (b)   kutti*ḱḱa*   d^{h}aaralam panam unt*a*
              Child-DAT plenty   money have-PRES
          'The child has a plenty of money.'

(8) Bangla

      (a)   aamaar jOr   hoeche
              I-GEN fever has-been
          'I have fever.'

      (b)   cheleTaar   Onek   Taakaa aache
              Child-GEN plenty money have-PRES
          'The child has a plenty of money.'

(9) Assamese

      (a)   mor   jar   hOise
              I-GEN fever is-being
          'I have fever.'

      (b)   laraator   bahut takaa   aase
              Boy-GEN plenty   money   have
          'The boy has a plenty of money.'

     The subjects in (a) sentences have the goal theta role and in (b) sentences it has the possessor theta role. Notice that the subjects in the Malayalam sentences take dative Case to mark both the goal or possessor theta role whereas in Bangla and Assamese they take the genitive Case to mark the same.

     Mohanan (1994) claims that the 'amalgamation of the semantics' is a general process and that the other semantic role, as for instance the agent theta role, can be derived from the schematic representations of the action depicted by the predicates. Mohanan assumes the Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) framework. The essential idea of this particular grammatical theory is that lexical information is distributed at all the four levels, that of the Semantic Structure, Argument Structure, Grammatical Function Structure, and Grammatical Category Structure. The knowledge about each lexeme, which is acquired by the child exposed to the language, would consist of its idiosyncratic properties relating to phonetic, semantic, morphological and syntactic structure. According to this theory, the precise explanation for a sentence like (10) would be formulated on the basis of the general principle of the association of the thematic role and the

Case and the relation of the subject with specific Case, each relation corresponding to a separate level, shown in (11).

(10) (Hindi)   mujhe   bhukh   lagi: he
                           I DAT   hunger   feel   is
                           'I am hungry.'

(11)   GOAL   SEMANTIC STRUCTURE

                     ARGUMENT   ARGUMENT STRUCTURE

                     DATIVE   GRAMMATICAL FUNCTIONAL STRUCTURE

                                                                (Mohanan, 1994:114)

The argument with the semantic role of Goal (i.e., the entity towards whom the particular feeling/state is directed) indirectly corresponds to the dative Case in this specific grammatical framework. However, LGF differs from the Principles and Parameters (P&P) framework in that the former adopts a direct association between theta role and Case. In LFG, a nominal with a particular theta role at one level automatically receives a particular Case at another level showing one to one correspondence between the two modules in the grammar. The interaction between the components in the grammar takes place through the mapping of expressions from one level to another, where mapping is defined as translation of the lexeme's specific properties at each of the structures in (11). This view contradicts the P & P approach, where each component corresponds with the other component only through the structurally represented properties in the derivations. According to the P & P approach, there is no one to one correspondence between theta role and Case. If Monahan's assumptions were in the right direction, we would expect the experiencer/goal theta role to be assigned to the external argument of the constructions in (8) and (9). The respective nominals would have received a dative Case in a framework that subscribes to a strict mapping of Case and theta role. However, in the sentences, the nominals receive genitive Case. The LFG account of theta role and Case is unable to explain why the experiential subjects in these sentences do not receive dative Case. Thus the sentences reaffirm the P&P claim that Case Theory and Theta Theory are two different principles in the grammar and do not come as part of the lexical knowledge of the language.

Thus, it is reasonably clear that we cannot attain any success in understanding the semantics of the Experiencer Subject Constructions if we restrict ourselves to the traditional notions of theta role. However, irrespective of the theoretical assumptions, it is still possible to explore the kinds of predicate types that require a genitive NP, which may be perceived as a *subject* at some level. What follows here is a list of predicate types requiring genitive subjects in Assamese.

4 Predicate Types Requiring Genitive Subjects in Assamese

As stated earlier, researchers have identified a large class of meanings associated with the Experiencer Subject Constructions in various languages. Verma (1979) identify several basic predicate types associated with 'quirky' subjects. These include mental or physical experiences, non-volitionality, permission, ability, possession, subjectivity and obligation. The following are a few types of predicates requiring genitive subjects in Assamese:

(A) State of sickness

(12)   mor   kããh   hOise
                  I-GEN   cough   be-pre.
                  'I have a cold.'

(B) State of consciousness
(13)   mor   manat   aase   je ……
                  I-GEN   memory   be   COMP
                  'I remember that…'
(C) Physical state
(14)   mor   kasta   hOise
                  I-GEN   trouble   is-being
                  'I have got a trouble.'
(15)   mor   bhok   laagise
                  I-GEN   hunger   feeling
                  'I am feeling hungry.'
(D) Emotional state
(16)   tomaar   aananda   laagise
                  You-GEN   happiness   feeling
                  'You are feeling happy.'
(17)   teõr   dukh   laagise
                  S/he-GEN   sorrow   feeling
                  'S/he is feeling sorrow.'
(E) State of things in one's personal situation
(18)   mor   kaam   aase
                  I-GEN   work   is-being
                  'I have work.'
(19)   mor   xamai naai
                  I-GEN   time   not have
                  'I do not have time.'

All except (E) fit into the general designation of psychological predicates; (E) however seems to fit into the appellation "the state of things". Constructions of inalienable possession also fit into this type, such as (20-21):
(20)   mor   etaa lOraa aase
                  I-GEN   one boy   have
                  'I have a boy.'
(21)   aamaar   dukhan haat aase
                  We-GEN   two   hands have
                  'We have two hands.'

The type inalienable possession is interesting. Assamese uses the same construction for "alienable" possession as in (22)
(22)   teõr   ejan saakar aase
                  He-GEN   one   servant has
                  'He has a servant.'

However, like Hindi, a marked alienable construction is also available in Assamese. In such constructions, Assamese makes use of postpositions like "usarat" or "lagat" as in (23) & (24):

(23)   teõr   lagat ejan saakar aase
              He-GEN with one servant has
              'He has one servant.'
(24)   mor   lagat/usarat etaa kalam aase
              I-GEN   with   one pen   have
              'I have a pen.'

5 Subjecthood and Genitive Case

In the preceding discussion we assumed that the genitive NPs denoting the experiencer in an Experiencer Subject Construction is a subject. But what is the motivation or justification for considering the experiencer as subject? One flip answer is that they translate that way into English. And since English is the new Latin of grammatical standards, or analytical templates, we had better look very hard before denying it that status. Talking about the Experiencer Subjects presumes that we know what subject is, and that we want to talk about it because it is a special variety. But more seriously, what are the criteria that we could take into account in deciding on the subjecthood of these NPs? We bring in a variety of notions as they suit us, such as, deep subject, surface subject, logical subject, subject as the specifier node (Chomsky 1981, 1982), subject as the external argument or as element attributed to the verb's "external theta role", subject as the indexical relation, subject as a primitive notion in Relational Grammar, subject as the "derivative" notion of structural configuration, the big SUBJECT, AGR as subject, etc. etc. Subject is not a unified notion and it can be parameterized according to language. As pointed out by Verma (1976), for Nepali, we have to accept the notion of varying degree of subjecthood. The concept of 'subject' is best defined in purely structural terms, as the syntactically most prominent element in a sentence (Chomsky1981). Prominence here refers to certain syntactic properties such as agreement, binding, control and movement. The prototypical "nominative" subject obeys all these properties, thus in (24), it triggers subject-verb agreement, while in (25), it binds the reflexive:

(25)   mai/tumi   kitaap   parhi aasõ/aasaa
              I/You-NOM book-ACC read. be-pre-1p/2p.
              'I/you am/are reading books.'
(26)   raam-e$_i$ nijar$_i$ sabi   saai   aase
              Ram-NOM self   picture-ACC look-pre. be-pre-3p
              'Ram is looking at his own picture.'

Unlike nominative subjects, genitive subjects cannot trigger subject verb agreement:
(27)   mor/tomaar/teõr gharaloi manat par-is-e
              I/You/He-GEN   home-to remember
              'I/You/He remember(s) home.'

There are other inconsistencies in their behaviour. For instance, unlike constructions with nominative subjects, the Experiencer Subject Constructions cannot be passivised to allow the experiencer to change its grammatical role. Like Hindi dative subjects, genitive subjects also show conflicting behaviour in constructions where the "repeated subject NP" is deleted in the second clause, as in (28). A similar construction works perfectly with a nominative subject as in example (28).

(28)   *mor   tomaaloi manat paril   aaru # kaandiboloi dharilõ
              I-GEN you-to   remember-P and # weep-to   start-1p
              'I remembered you and started crying.'

(29)   mai   tomak   manat pelaalõ   aaru # kaandiboloi dharilõ
             I-NOM You-ACC remembered-1p and # weep-to   start
             'I remembered you and started crying.'

These inconsistencies of genitive subjects have led to the debate on the validity of the status of subjecthood given to the theme. However, genitive subjects, like nominative subjects, serve as antecedents of reflexcives as in (30).

(30)   mor$_i$ nijar$_i$ kathaa   manat paril
             I-GEN   self   story   remember
             'I remember myself.'

In view of the limited subject properties, one may question the subject status of these NPs. It seems, this is related to the notion of prominence in one way or another. As pointed out in Verma (1988), the notion of prominence gets into the definition of subject as well as topic. This would mean that we either abandon the notion of a strictly configurational subject or provide for a principled mechanism for the structural coding of thematic prominence, and thereby accord the experiencer the status of subject as necessary. One way to conceptualize this and then accomplish it in phrase structure terms could be as suggested below.
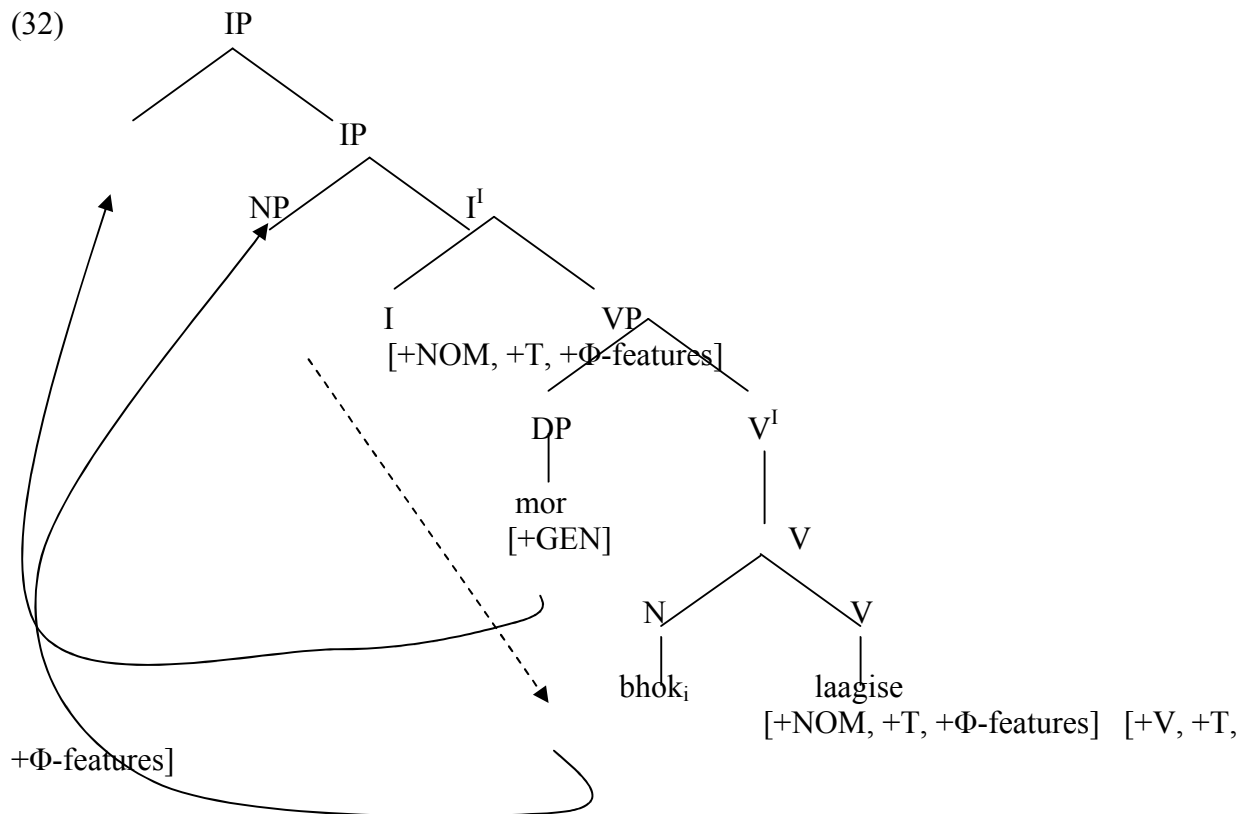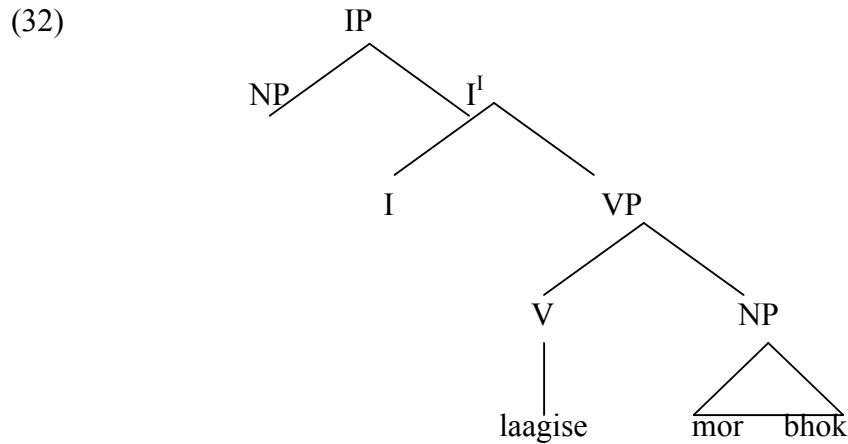
There is a hierarchy relation between arguments, 'Agent' is higher than "Experiencer", "Experiencer" is higher than 'Goal' and 'Goal' is higher than 'theme'. The highest argument is the "external" argument and becomes the subject. Therefore, in the absence of an Agent, the Experiencer becomes the subject. This is what underlies the notion of a logical subject. The noun, which shows up as the syntactic subject in such a construction, namely, the "theme", is one that is in fact lower in the argument hierarchy. All subjects start out as VP subjects [Spec, VP]. This then gets promoted at S-structure to the [Spec, IP] position to be the sentential subject. This applies quite naturally to the Agentive Subject, and also to the Experiencer or Logical Subject, unless it is inherently Case marked in the argument structure of the predicate. However, the Experiencer Subject of Assamese is inherently Case marked genitive (as many other South Asian languages Case mark their Experiencer Subjects dative) and so will not become the sentential subject. The theme, on the other hand, will. Since the experiencer is pre-associated (i.e., has a lexically marked Case), the theme becomes the most prominent argument, by default, and gets to be realized as the sentential subject. Since the 'theme' argument is not Case marked inherently, it has to move to the [Spec, IP] position to get/check its Case and be in agreement with INFL and be the sentential subject. The 'Experiencer' NP, then, is adjoined left to the I node, to act as the subject of the sentence or to perform various functions of the subject and still does not become a structural subject directly under the IP node requiring nominative Case. The theme NP can then move to the [Spec, IP] to get the nominative Case checked and be the structural subject in agreement with INFL.

6 Feature Checking in Genitive Subject Constructions in Assamese:
In the last section we outlined the possible phrase structural pattern of Genitive Subject Constructions in Assamese. In this section we shall see how the feature checking mechanism works in a sentence with genitive subject. Consider the following sentence:

(31)   mor   bhok   laagise
             I-GEN hunger-NOM   is-been
             'I am feeling hungry.'

According to our discussion in the previous subsection, *laag* is a non-agentive monadic unaccusative verb, and (31) will have the following structure as shown in Nath (2003):

(32)

(32)

Now in (32) the computation is driven by a *probe*. Notice that in (31) the V-complement bears the nominative Case feature. I locates the nominative Case on the V-complement NP and matches Case and Φ-features *in situ* and gets deleted. It now moves to the spec of IP to satisfy

the EPP. As we have noted in earlier the genitive NP bears an inherent Case feature, which is [+interpretable] and does not need to be checked and deleted. Now to get the desired word order the genitive NP has to come out of the VP internal position. Following Jayaseelan (1990) we assume that it moves out of the VP and left adjoins to the canonical subject position. Thus it accounts for both the prominence meaning as well as the syntactic properties.

7 Conclusion

In this paper we considered genitive subject constructions and found that the genitive subjects are experiencers or recipients, while nominative subjects are volitional agents or initiators of action. The person who experiences an emotion or feeling is expressed in the genitive Case when the person has no control over his emotions. If the emotion is expressed intentionally or voluntarily, the subject is assigned the nominative Case. We considered the subject properties of these NPs and in view of the limited subject properties, came to the conclusion that they are not structural subjects. The theme, on the other hand, is. Genitive subjects are inherently Case marked and is adjoined left to the I node [Spec, IP], to act as the subject of the sentence for various control functions. We found that genitive subjects occur with unaccusative verbs that incorporate the bare nominal to form a complex predicate, and this complex predicate triggers genitive subjects in Assamese. Finally we saw the feature checking mechanism of genitive subjects.

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