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What ABOUT Lisu?

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1. Introduction

It is presumably uncontroversial that linguistic theory should enable us to analyze individual languages, and to state how they differ from—or resemble—each other. These questions are interrelated, of course, and, in particular, they both require a typology powerful enough to allow accurate description of disparate languages and subtle enough to do so without forcing them into Procrustean categories. In this paper I am concerned with the taxonomy proposed by Li and Thompson (1976), which defines four linguistic types: topic-prominent, subject-prominent, topic- and subject-prominent, and neither subject- nor topic-prominent. This work, I will argue, fails in a particularly illuminating way to achieve the goals I have outlined.

I will be concentrating on the topic-prominent category, which is instantiated in Li and Thompson's sample by Chinese, Lahu, and Lisu. These are supposed to be languages whose syntax makes little or, in the case of Lisu, no reference to the category of subject, and revolves around the category of topic instead. In fact, Li and Thompson devote a lot of effort to showing that Lisu is a language in which topic-comment sentences are the basic sentence type, "grammatical relations such as Agent and Patient cannot be identified [and t]hus, there is no way to identify the notion of subject". This analysis of Lisu syntax is based on Hope (1974) and additional data supplied by him to Li and Thompson. However, my reading of Hope does not confirm the claims made by Li and Thompson, and suggests instead that this analysis rests on their misinterpretation of what was already an incomplete and unreliable description of the language. This undermines their case about Lisu, which I will argue is a rather ordinary-looking language, with respect to the phenomena at issue. Given the importance that Li and Thompson attach to Lisu and also simply because their whole theory seems to ride on the claim that some languages (notably Lisu) give the same kind of prominence to topics that the Western Indo-European languages do to subjects, this conclusion poses a direct challenge to the entire typology.

For one thing, Hope's work—unlike Li and Thompson's—was written in the case grammar framework, and they fail to take the resulting terminological and conceptual discrepancies into account. Thus, Li and Thompson equate Hope's topic with their own, and identify his agentive and objective cases with their agent and patient. Yet, in his system, the term topic covers both their topic and subject, although two different processes of topicalization are countenanced, one of which in effect defines subjects and the other true topics. However, Li and Thompson, while accepting the letter of Hope's rules, employ *a priori* assumptions about expected frequencies of sentences generated by one or the other rule, to trivialize the subject rule, and build their whole case on virtually ignoring it. Likewise, the case distinctions are quite different in the two systems, and in the resulting confusion Li and Thompson make crucial claims about Lisu case marking which are simply false.

Second, Hope's whole analysis comes straight out of Fillmore's (1968) description of English case grammar, without any attempt being made to show that this is valid for Lisu. As a result, many of Hope's statements are totally unsupported by evidence internal to the language, and in some cases the data he cites in fact do not fit in this framework. It may be that Lisu is quite different from English in various ways, but the fact remains that Li and Thompson derive all their claims from a description copied from one that was tailored to English.

Third, Li and Thompson base much of their case on the apparent scarcity of explicit references to certain grammatical categories (especially, subject) in Hope's rules. Yet Hope's analysis is a rather brief and very incomplete syntax of the language. Many issues are simply not mentioned or get only cursory treatment, and most rules are stated without the precision that would be required to answer crucial questions about reference to categories like topic, subject, agent, or patient. Indeed, it is not usual to find such information in case grammar works, even when they are detailed and in-depth, which is not the case here.

Finally, it is easy to find numerous contradictions between Hope's description and the data he cites. Thus, no special knowledge of Lisu is required to see that his analysis is questionable on a number of points. Yet Li and Thompson accept Hope's claims of fact without any reservations. We will see that this is not a good idea.

2. Subjects and Topics

According to Hope, topics in Lisu are derived by two distinct processes which have the same structural effect of creating a binary topic-predicate structure out of one where all the arguments are co-equal sisters of the verb, and marking the topic with the postposition *nya* (and in certain cases *xə*). The two processes are referred to as primary and secondary topicalization. Secondary topicalization applies in sentences with presupposed arguments, and makes all of the latter into topics with no reference to their case roles. Primary topicalization, which takes place when no argument is presupposed, does refer to the system of cases. The choice of which argument to make into a topic is determined in this situation by the following hierarchy: time/place < agentive < dative < objective < instrumental. Thus, for Hope, the central rule of Lisu syntax distinguishes cases like agentive, dative, and objective.

Li and Thompson were aware of the primary topicalization rule and admit that in this case "we might say that this function of *nya* is a subject-marking function since some noun phrase is being singled out not according to its case role, but according to a hierarchy that is typically invoked for subject-prominent languages". However, they only mention this fact at the tail end of their presentation, which is organized around Hope's secondary topicalization instead. Furthermore, they do not make it clear that these are supposed to be two distinct grammatical processes, in effect treating primary topicalization as a special case of secondary topicalization.

Even then they try to finesse the issue by claiming that sentences with no presupposed arguments are uncommon, and argue that "[s]ince this subject-marking function of *nya* occurs only in this relatively rare sentence type, and since the notion of subject seems to play no other role in the grammar of Lisu, then we claim that the basic sentence structure is topic-comment . . .". However, Hope's description, both because of its limited scope and depth and because of its theoretical orientation cannot be expected to provide many examples of explicit reference to categories like subject, no matter what the facts of the language might be. An argument *e silentio* is not appropriate under the circumstances.

Furthermore, Li and Thompson do not show that sentences without secondary topicalization are actually rare in Lisu. Rather, they seem to be taking Hope's analysis of secondary topicalization as applying to any and all presupposed arguments quite literally, and then reasoning *a priori* that in a text most sentences will contain reference to something already mentioned and hence presupposed. However, none of this needs to be the case, and indeed even a cursory look at the brief Lisu text appended to Hope's work shows that it is not true that every argument that has been mentioned earlier gets topic marking. The story begins as follows:

(1) nɔ́ anyí thì ma dyu-a̲.
there last-year one one have-DEC
'There is a story of long ago.'

nyí syí.
two siblings
'The two brothers.'

yíwà nyì syí áŋa̲ amyâ ma dyu-a̲.
they two siblings buffalo many ones have-DEC
'The two of them had many buffalo.'

These examples further show that Lisu sentences need not contain any NP with topic marking at all. Moreover, this does not necessarily mean that there is an implicit topic, since there does not appear be anything omitted in these sentences. In fact, in this story, the marker *nya* is used only sporadically on NPs. In certain cases, the marker *xə* is used (a possibility noted by Hope), primarily or exclusively to mark topic shift. However, most sentences have no NP marked with either postposition. On the other hand, most sentences begin with a *nya*-marked subordinate clause, which recapitulates what was said immediately before. This either takes the apparently fixed form *áthe ŋu ba̲-a̲ nya* 'this being the case' or else repeats the whole or part of the previous sentence. Such an introductory clause may be analyzed as a topic, though presumably in a special sense (since normally one is concerned with a topic within a single clause). It is clear that Hope's rules do not account for these facts. However, precisely because there are few examples of NP topics, it is difficult to come up with a precise alternative.

But a couple of generalizations suggest themselves. First, the clausal topics are presumably always secondary topics. Second, they seem to always take the *nya*, which suggests that for secondary topics such marking is obligatory. Third, this would mean that secondary topicalization is not triggered by mere presupposition, for in that case we would find many more NPs marked with *nya* than we do. Rather, this process must express some much more specific set of meanings (such as contrast, emphasis, etc.). Fourth, in most sentences there is no NP explicitly marked as topic, which means either that a primary topic is also relatively rare or else that it need not take any postposition. The second alternative seems more plausible to me. This would imply that primary topics could be assumed for all clauses (provided we also allow ellipsis or zero anaphora). All this adds up to a tentative, but plausible, case that primary topics really are primary, and secondary ones, secondary. It may be that this proposal will not stand up to additional data, of course, but for the moment it accounts for much more of the scant corpus available than Li and Thompson's redoing of Hope or even than Hope's original proposal.

Moreover, even if Li and Thompson's assumptions about frequencies were valid, that would not prevent us from taking sentences without secondary topicalization as the syntactically basic pattern. Analogously, in many languages, including Lisu, it is normal for presupposed arguments to be missing altogether, yet we usually take sentences with expressed arguments as basic. Even more important, anyone who has read Fillmore (1968) will have realized that primary topicalization is the term he introduces about halfway through his article for subjectivalization, whereas secondary topicalization is his term for "stylistic changes involving stress assignment, late word-order changes, and possibly the 'cleft-sentence construction'". In other words, Hope's primary topicalization is intended to refer to subjects, and secondary topicalization to topics. Nor was this fact missed by Hope: "The base rules posited above are supplemented by a set of rules which achieve such things as 'primary topicalization' (which is subjectivalization in English)". It may be that Fillmore's analysis of English does not extend to "topic-prominent" Lisu. However, the simple fact is that Li and Thompson are basing their claims about Lisu on an analysis of that language which explicitly refers to subjects (even if it does so by talking about "primary topicalization").

Thus, the primary topic seems by its very existence—no matter how precarious—to contradict Li and Thompson's central claim that "there is no way identify the notion of subject in Lisu". As a matter of fact, additional instances of probable reference to subject are implied by Hope's description and/or his data. One of these is obscured by the fact that Hope often fails to indicate which of the two kinds of topics is involved in a particular example. Since the outputs of both of his proposed topicalization processes often look the same, it is usually impossible to tell which is involved in a given sentence (especially out of context). Li and Thompson, too, state most of their argument in terms of claims about topics *tout court*. These claims would seem to be intended to cover both primary and secondary topics, since they never acknowledge the existence of the former as a separate grammatical category. However, Li and Thompson require topics to be definite in all cases, but in Lisu the existential verb *dyu* normally takes an indefinite topic, e.g.:

(2) áŋà nya dyu-a
Buffalo TOP be-DEC
'There was a buffalo/There are (such things as) buffaloes.'

Other examples of indefinite topics are not also not hard to find, e.g.

(3) yítywé nya ɣe-a
crack TOP form-DEC
'A crack is forming.'

(4) swu nya áthà dè-a
people TOP knife forge-DEC
'Someone is forging a knife.'

This would not be surprising if were dealing with subjects, of course, and indeed these are presumably instances of primary topicalization. But this means, again, that Lisu does distinguish primary and secondary topics (or, in other words, subjects and topics) in a second way: the former may be indefinite, and the latter presumably cannot.[1] One more case of apparent reference to subject in Lisu syntax will be discussed in section 5, since it presupposes some results about agents which have yet to be established.

3. Patients

When we turn to the case distinctions, we see that Hope's system is again based on Fillmore's analysis of English and is quite different from Li and Thompson's. Hope operates, inter alia, with the following case notions:

> Dative (D) The case of the animate being affected by the state or action identified by the verb.
>
> Objective (O) . . . the case of anything representable by a noun whose role in the action or state identified by the verb is identified by the semantic interpretation of the verb itself.

It might seem that O can be anything, including D, but in fact Hope uses it essentially as an inanimate analogue of D. The connection is in fact apparently palpable to Hope himself since he

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[1]Of course, it is conjectural that secondary topics cannot be indefinite, but, of course, if they can, then so much the worse for Li and Thompson's whole system, since for them the obligatory definiteness of topics is one of the main ways these differ from subjects.

comments that "conceivably the concept [of O] should be limited to things which are affected by the action or state identified by the verb", almost the same words as those used to define D except for the crucial change of "animate being" in the case of D to "things" in the case of O.

Now, the result of this is that transitive verbs are divided into two classes. One comprises those verbs which take an agentive (A) and an O: "This class is one of the largest, and includes all transitive verbs which can take inanimate objects". The other contains those verbs which take an A and a D: "These are verbs requiring both an animate subject and an animate object". Moreover, as Hope notes, some verbs in the A,O class "may obviously take a Dative instead of an Objective . . . Thus a verb such as *dɔ̀* 'beat' may have an animate or an inanimate object . . .". It is thus clear to Hope that what he calls object—and what Li and Thompson evidently mean by patient—corresponds to both D and O, depending on whether the referent is animate or inanimate.

This, incidentally, is a good example of Hope's failure to alter the Fillmorean framework to deal with the facts of the language. He has noticed that the distinction between D and O cannot be made, at least in Lisu, in the way proposed, yet does nothing about producing a better analysis. In the same way, he fails to justify his identification of animate patients with true datives (recipients), which are also treated as D.

As for Li and Thompson's claim that Lisu fails to distinguish agent and patient, it is evidently based on Hope's statement that "[t]he Agentive, Objective, Instrumental, Factitive, and Translative have no overt postpositions associated with them in Lisu", and their misidentification of his objective with object (as used in Hope's quotation above). However, while Hope's object seems to equal Li and Thompson's patient, his objective covers only inanimate patients. It is his dative which includes animate patients (as well as recipients) and "[t]he Dative has the postposition *lɛ́* . . .". Some examples are:

(5) ása nya zànwe̱ lɛ́ pwě-a̱
Asa TOP child DAT scold-DEC
'Asa scolded the child.'

(6) ása nya zànwe̱ lɛ́ syí-a̱
Asa TOP child DAT put-to-sleep-DEC
'Asa put the child to sleep.'

These are examples with verbs that require animate objects (Hope's A,D verbs), but he also has at least one such example with the verb *ká* 'prick', which is explicitly identified as A,O/D (i.e. taking both animate and inanimate objects):

(7) ása nya alě lɛ́ áthà ká-a̱
Asa TOP Ale DAT knife prick-DEC
'Asa stabbed Ale with a knife.'

However, Hope also gives examples with animate objects that take no postposition of any kind, e.g.:

(8) làma nya ánà khù-a̱
tiger TOP dog bite-DEC
'Tigers, they bite dogs.' *or* 'Tigers, dogs bite them.'

The possibility of the first reading, where *ánà* 'dog' is object, contradicts Hope's rules because in that case it is a dative and should be marked with *lɛ́*. It would seem that Hope's rule is in fact in error and that case marking with patients in not obligatory in Lisu. But it is still the case that under some conditions, which remain undescribed, Lisu explicitly marks animate (and perhaps

also some inanimate) patients with *lɛ́*, and this is enough to establish that patients are a distinguished case category in this language.

4. Agents and Subjects

If patients are distinguished from agents by taking the postposition *lɛ́*, then, of course, agents are distinguished from patients by taking no postposition. Moreover, Li and Thompson themselves refer to two additional facts which suggest that agent is an important category in Lisu. First, they present some examples with reflexives, though they say little about them. These examples, like those in Hope, all conform, however, to the generalization that the agent is the antecedent and the patient is the reflexivized argument in sentences like 'The tiger bit himself (his real body)' and 'Himself (his real body), the tiger bit'. Hope analyzes such sentences not as reflexive but as literally meaning 'The tiger bit his real body', and as a result he does not provide any special rules for these constructions. However, when we see examples like:

(9) ásа nya yí tsítshɨ kudwè lɛ́ tú ɣɔ̀-a̲
Asa TOP his real body DAT poison give-DEC
'Asa poisoned himself.'

we are entitled to wonder. Hope's analysis here would only be acceptable if Lisu also said 'Ale poisoned Asa's real body'. Although not stated explicitly, the implication is that this is not the case. But if Lisu says 'Ale poisoned Asa' instead, then in examples like (9) we are dealing with an idiomatic way of expressing reflexivity, comparable to the use of words literally meaning 'soul' (*nafs*) in Arabic, 'bone' (*ecem*) in Hebrew, or indeed 'body' (*-sin* in *zisin*) in Sino-Japanese reflexive constructions.

Second, in conjoined NPs, both conjuncts are interpreted as agents or both as patients. It is impossible to interpret a conjoined NP as involving an agent and a patient. Of this, Li and Thompson say that it "indicate[s] that co-ordination in Lisu follows the general constraint that the conjoined constituents should be semantically and syntactically parallel". This, of course, amounts to admitting that the agent/patient distinction is relevant to the grammar of Lisu after all. Li and Thompson apparently want to restrict this relevance to the semantics and keep it out of the syntax, but, if it this is semantics, then there is no reason why all of syntax should not be subsumed under semantics. It may be that agent is a semantic category but the fact that this category is relevant to the rules that determine what can be conjoined with what is a fact of syntax. There is obviously no *a priori* reason why it should be semantically incoherent to conjoin an agent with a patient, since English allows constructions like *John and Mary came in and got carried in, respectively.*

Finally, it appears from Hope's description that verbs like *kwu* 'mentally able' require a subordinate clause with a missing agent, which is understood as being identical to some argument of the higher verb. Hope treats this as equi NP deletion, but is not explicit about the condition that this rule applies specifically to agents, which, however, seems to be the case.

It will be noted that both in the case of reflexives and in that of equi, I have suggested certain generalizations about Lisu which Hope does not say anything about. I am not claiming any private knowledge of the language, of course, but am merely making observations about the examples cited. To be sure, these observations may not be valid for the language as a whole, but the unfortunate fact is that Hope simply does not give *any* rules for these—and many other—cases. His work is sketchy in the extreme, and, as we have already seen, by no means free of quite obvious discrepancies between the data cited and the rules proposed to account for them. As

a result, it seems to me legitimate to attempt to ferret out from the data patterns which Hope did not comment on.

We have so far assumed that the relevant category with respect to the rules of postpositional marking, reflexivization, coordination, and equi is agent. However, given the available data, we might as well have said subject. We have not yet shown that agents and subjects can be distinguished in Lisu. And after we do, in the next section, we will still not be able to say which of the two categories is involved in these four rules, since there are no crucial examples that would bear on these points. Although it would be nice to know which one is referred in any given rule, the important thing is that between them they are involved in much of Lisu syntax. Furthermore, as we will see, they are distinct categories.

5. Agents vs. Subjects

So far, I have not made a sharp distinction between Hope's agentive and Li and Thompson's agent. However, there is again a discrepancy between case grammar's agentive and the rest of the world's notion of agent. Thus, Hope provides for various cases other than agentive as primary topics, but what he calls objective, instrumental, etc., will usually be analyzed as agents in other frameworks in precisely those situations where these function as primary topics (subjects). For example, in a sentence like:

(3) yítywé nya ɔə̲-a̲
'A crack is forming.'

Hope would analyze the topic as an objective, yet he provides no evidence that there is any difference between such an objective and an agentive. In particular, just as in the case of dative and objective, case grammar makes a distinction between animate and inanimate, requiring agentives to be animate. And again, Hope does not justify the contrast. In all these cases, we are dealing with *a priori* distinctions carried over from the case grammar literature on other languages, without specific evidence for such analyses in Lisu. As a result, I would argue that most of the primary topics in Lisu are simply agents.

This analysis clearly does not extend to sentences that begin with *nya*-marked adverbs of time or place, which Hope treats as primary topics, but which presumably are not agents. However, I am skeptical of these adverbs being true subjects. Hope gives no evidence that they are indeed syntactically to be identified with the agentive primary topics. I suspect that things are much as in Chinese, and that Hope has fallen prey to the same illusion as Chao (1968) did when he claimed that whatever appears sentence-initially in Chinese is the subject, again without citing any real evidence. Recall that primary and secondary topics are sometimes alike in form, so it is entirely possible, from the available data, that the adverbs are really to be identified with the secondary topics instead.[2] This would mean that subjects (i.e., primary topics) might in general be analyzed as agents, and there would be no need for a rule of primary topicalization.

This might seem to mean that we cannot distinguish subject and agent. However, there appears to be a phenomenon in Lisu, which is somewhat analogous to voice and resembles the English constructions which in the days of transformational grammar were sometimes analyzed in

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[2]It is not clear whether the adverbial topics are always presupposed or not. If not, this would mean that the conditions on Hope's secondary topicalization would have to be revised, but this is required in any case, given the fact already noted that not all presupposed arguments are topic-marked.

terms of tough-movement. This construction provides putative evidence of a distinction between the category of agent, identified as an argument type of lexical verbs, and the category of subject.

(10) dza nya nyíme dzà mi-a̲
rice TOP today eat tasty-DEC
'Today the rice is tasty (to eat).'

(11) dza nya nyíme dzà fwu̲-a̲
rice TOP today eat take-time-DEC
'Today the rice is taking a long time to eat.'

(12) ánà xwà nya ŋwa dzà mi-a̲ . . .
dog meat TOP I eat tasty-DEC
'I find dog meat tasty to eat. . . .'

As Hope points out, examples like (12) are unproblematical in his system, and are analyzed as involving equi deletion of the objective of *dzà* 'eat'. However, the more typical[3] examples like (10) and (11) have no agentive for that verb, either. Hope suggests that empty agentives are otherwise allowed in Lisu only when a specific referent is intended to be identifiable from the context, whereas in these examples an unspecified, generic agent is involved. If the possibility of such a "dummy" agent is indeed restricted to this construction (or to some set of related constructions), then we would indeed be dealing with an analogue to English constructions such as *Today the rice is good to eat*, which likewise require some special rule to account for the absence of a subject of the verb *eat*. We would analyze the sequences *dzà mi*, *dzà fwu̲*, and the like as forming compound predicates. The agent (subject) of the second, or higher, verb, which equals the patient of the first, or lower, verb, is the subject of the whole complex. Crucially, the agent of the lower verb has some kind of non-subject status, which is what enables it to be omitted on a generic interpretation. Thus, we obtain the argument that was wanted for a difference between subjects and agents in Lisu. However, as noted at the end of section 4, it is impossible at present to tell whether it is subject or agent that is involved in the rules of postpositional marking, coordination, equi, and reflexivization, since crucial examples are not available.

Furthermore, we might even want to argue that the very fact that agents cannot normally be omitted in this way argues for their subject status. That is, one might want to say that this is not a property of agents *per se*, but rather of subjects, since it would be natural for the subject to be required in every clause.[4] This implies that it would be possible to distinguish the *categories* of agent and subject, even if subjects were *always* agents. Obviously, even if two categories are extensionally equal, that does not mean that they are the same intensionally. One could then argue that the restricted conditions under which agents are omitted have nothing to do with the agent category but are rather a property of the intensionally distinct subject category. To be sure, we do seem to find crucial cases where these two categories are extensionally distinguished, but it is nice to know that, even if that were not so, we might still be able to justify a subject category for this language.

6. Conclusion

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[3]As noted by Hope, according to Roop (1970:50), examples with an expressed agent are not possible at all, which I take as an indication of their rarity.

[4]Of course, in a topic-prominent language we would expect such a constraint to apply to topics instead.

There is thus no question that subject, agent, and patient are distinguished in Lisu. Moreover, numerous rules of syntax must refer to these categories, especially to subject and/or agent. Lisu thus fails to stand up as the crucial example of a purely topic-prominent language. But does anybody still care, after a dozen years? Perhaps not, but Li and Thompson's work has entered the canon of linguistic knowledge and has continued in recent years to serve as a source of inspiration for numerous studies on a variety of languages. I would argue that all such work should now be rechecked to make sure that it does not suffer from the problems mentioned here or analogous difficulties with the analysis of the relevant languages.

I have proposed what I consider a plausible analysis of the Lisu facts, which in a number of respects agrees more closely with Hope's data than does his own description and which attempts to address issues he left untouched. However, all of this is based on Hope's examples and textual material—and to some extent on his generalizations about them. Yet the amount of data (especially connected discourse) that he provides is not enough to justify a high degree of confidence in these conclusions. As a result, to a large extent it must be an open question just how Lisu differs from, or resembles, any other language, whether English or Chinese or even the closely related Lahu. This will remain so unless and until we have a better description of the language. And even then a meaningful comparison with the other languages will only be possible if and when we develop a theory which allows us to describe each language in its own terms but also to relate those terms systematically to each other. Much current work in syntax seems bent on reducing the world's languages to a small number of types: configurational vs. nonconfigurational, VO vs. OV, topic-prominent vs. subject-prominent, . . . And perhaps ultimately A-N vs. O-Z, based on the first letters of the language names?

In criticizing these simple classifications, I do not mean to imply that all languages are basically the same, or that they are all basically different (though these are common enough positions in the field). When using the terms topic, subject, agent, and patient in my proposals about Lisu, I am conscious of the fact that I run the risk of suggesting that Lisu is just like English (if the terms are used precisely) or else saying very little (if the terms are used loosely). In fact, I would like to argue that Lisu is like English in certain well-defined respects, some of which are implicit in the analysis proposed, e.g., the fact that clauses in general are required to have a subject. But there are no less numerous differences, which have also been alluded to, e.g., the lack of a passive construction in Lisu. To be sure, the differences between English and Lisu are, on my view, much more subtle than is implied by Li and Thompson's tantalizingly simple typology. Yet, when all is said and done, it may turn out that these differences are cumulatively more important than those claimed by Li and Thompson. But it is too early to decide such issues.

For, in order to achieve any kind of precise results, I would need a taxonomy and a terminology which do not exist. Yet, how can we arrive at such schemes except on the basis of descriptions of many individual languages? But, while many languages have been better described than Lisu, the problem of comparability of descriptions, which was so acute in the case of Li and Thompson's vs. Hope's systems of grammatical analysis, usually remains even so. *Everybody* faces the problem of using an overly restrictive set of putatively cross-linguistic categories to describe linguistic systems which may be grossly, or—what is worse—subtly, different. Simple schemes involving one or two unbridgeable distinctions (e.g., ±subject-prominent and ±topic-prominent) seem to me to make matter worse, for how do we compare subjects to topics? How to break this vicious circle is perhaps the foremost problem in natural language syntax. I have argued (in Manaster-Ramer, to appear) that phonology may hold part of the answer. We must realize sooner or later that grammatical categories (like phonemes) are highly variable from language to language, but that they must be underlain by a set of invariants (like distinctive features). When we use traditional terms like subject (as old-fashioned grammars of languages like Lisu do), we are doing essentially the same thing as the grammarians of old did when they spoke of *b* in different languages, treating, say, the implosive character of the Vietnamese ɓ as an incidental feature of a universal type. This is a bad habit, but it is far preferable to introducing a

new-fangled taxonomy, which obscures certain differences, while magnifying others, and in general threatens to make different languages incomparable, as if we were to use a different phonetic alphabet for each language. I thus believe that we must begin with the traditional system of grammatical categories, paying careful attention to any and all discrepancies and distinctions, refining and reorganizing our taxonomy as more and more languages are studied in depth. In this way, we will develop a general theory of grammatical categories, without creating straw men for subsequent syntacticians to contend with.

And we need not begin entirely at the beginning. Although poorly known, the chapters of Bloomfield (1933) dealing with the theory of constructions and Whorf's (1945) paper on grammatical categories seem to me to offer a solid point of departure. Bloomfield, in fact, lays the foundations of a system of grammatical analysis parallel to that of phonology and contributes, in particular, the notion of taxeme, a minimum unit of arrangement which can distinguish one grammatical construction from another in a given language (parallel to the phoneme as a minimum unit of sound capable of carrying lexical distinctions). Whorf provides a number of other conceptual tools needed to analyze languages of different types, notably the indispensible notion of covert category (or, cryptotype). Perhaps most important, both insist that grammatical categories (like lexical items) must be classified both according to their meaning and according to their form.

All this makes it possible—and necessary—to compare the categories of different languages in a much finer way than is customary. For example, we realize that the different formal attributes of "subjects" in a given language are individual taxemes, and that there is no reason to expect them all to cluster together in another language. At the same time, it is possible to compare the different possible clusterings and reason about, for example, the way they evolve one from another. Thus, English and Lisu "subjects" may not have all the same formal properties, much as the individual phonemes of the two languages may not have all the same features, yet they can be systematically related by a cross-linguistic theory if they are partially alike taxemically.

By looking at covert categories, we can pursue analyses, like that distinguishing Lisu subjects and topics, and agents and patients, even in cases where there are no clear outward markings. The fact that agents and patients cannot be conjoined together in Lisu is a good example of a cryptotypic distinction: even if the categories were otherwise indistinguishable, this fact alone would suffice to establish that they are separate. All too often, radical differences between languages have been posited, based on purely overt distinctions, especially when one or more of the languages involved are "exotic". In such cases, a study of covert categories may uncover surprising similarities. Likewise, in the case of clause-initial time and place adverbs of Lisu (and Chinese), which may look like subjects but probably are not. Of course, it also possible for languages look alike, but be quite different cryptotypically, and that perhaps is the more significant possibility, but it is not our concern here.

The insistence on keeping formal and semantic criteria straight makes it possible to compare the formally different ways that different languages have of carrying out the same grammatical functions, as well as the formally identical categories with distinct functions. For example, it must be that the Lisu "subject" is functionally to be distinguished (in part) from the English, if for no other reason than that English has a passive construction, which appears to have no analogue in Lisu. Thus, there will be cases when an English subject will not come as out as the subject in a Lisu translation. However, it may well turn out that the Lisu and English categories are quite similar (even if not identical) taxemically, in terms of their role in several important grammatical processes, such as reflexivization.

There is a limit—and it is rapidly reached—to what can be done with a brief and incomplete description and a miniscule corpus of a language one does not know. Even so, I am looking forward without dread to the day when, with a fuller and deeper description of Lisu, it will be

possible to settle definitively the issues raised here. With the currently available techniques of analysis, I cannot see how anyone could fail to draw most of the same conclusions that I have from the facts presented. With more data and, what is at least as important, with more powerful tools, it will certainly be possible to do much better. The data are available so long as there are speakers. And the more sophisticated systems of grammatical analysis can be developed along the lines drawn by Bloomfield and Whorf. But one has to start somewhere.

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