

Matthias Gerner*

Differential subject marking in Azhee

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Abstract: Azhee (of the Tibeto-Burman family, spoken in China) uses differential subject marking (DSM) conditioned by animacy and the potential ambiguity of subject and object. It is shown that the Azhee *differential* subject marker is a highly *syncretic* case marker, which derived from a SOURCE case, and developed into a contrastive focus marker. DSM is presented as the diachronic source of focus, rather than the other way around. In a range of publications, topic and focus have been identified to be associate functions of case markers. Furthermore, the position of Azhee is described in a typology of differential case marking motivated by the principles of markedness, faithfulness and economy.

Keywords: Differential Subject Marking, syncretic case marker, focus, Azhee

1 Introduction

Differential Case Marking is variable marking of a case that depends on features of the noun phrase to be marked or on features of the clause. The Azhee¹ language which we analyze in this paper shows a rare type of differential subject marking. Azhee is the mirror image of the Lolo language (Gerner 2008), which has a rare type of differential object marking.

¹ Azhee is spoken by about 90,000 natives in Mile county of Yunnan Province (P.R. of China). The Azhee are a component of the Yi (彝) nationality. Their language is part of Burmese-Loloish, a language group in the Tibeto-Burman language family. The ethnic Yi and linguistic Loloish groups are not identical but greatly overlap. There are eight million native Yi in China speaking at least 100 Loloish languages. Syntactical sketches of several Loloish languages are available, in Lahu (Matisoff 1973), Nuosu (Gerner 2004) and Lolo (Gerner 2008). I have done research on the Azhee language for more than 15 years, traveled to Mile county and worked with two native Azhee speakers. The examples in this paper stem from discussions and folk stories.

*Corresponding author: Matthias Gerner, Department of Linguistics & Translation, City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon, Hong Kong, E-mail: mgerner@cityu.edu.hk

The factors that trigger differential subject marking (DSM) and differential object marking (DOM) can be classified into four categories.² One category comprises so-called phi-features, that is, properties of subject or object noun phrases: animacy, person, definiteness. A second category consists of the relative ranking of subject and object in phi-feature hierarchies; these triggers are relations between the subject and object. A third group are ambiguity relations between the subject, object and predicate that arise when the predicate does not univocally assign semantic roles to its arguments, as in [love, Mary, John]. Fourthly, differential case marking can be triggered by the clausal properties of tense, aspect and modality which are properties of the relation between subject, object and predicate.

(1) Four categories of DSM/DOM triggers

Category	Trigger
I. Property of subject or object	Phi-features of subject or object
II. Relation between subject and object	Their relative ranking in Phi-feature hierarchy
III. Relation between subject, object, predicate	Ambiguity of subject and object
IV. Property of relation between subject, object, predicate	Tense, aspect, mood

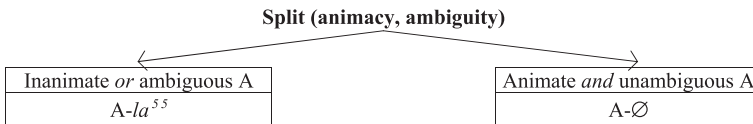
The categories I, II and IV were thoroughly investigated in typology and optimality theory (Bossong 1985, 1991; Aissen 1999; Malchukov and de Hoop 2011), but for category III there exists only one case study on DOM in Lolo (Gerner 2008), and a short survey of two or three languages in the world (Kittilä 2005). In this paper, we reconstruct the Azhee DSM marker la^{55} , which is a combination of types I and III. In transitive clauses, the morpheme la^{55} marks inanimate subjects or subjects that are ambiguous with objects.³ Other transitive

² We take the syntactic notion of *subject* and *object* as convenient but imprecise ways of talking about concepts for which no universal definition is accepted or, in the case of Azhee, no language-specific definition is available. We also use the terms “Agent” and “Patient” whenever a semantic perspective is adopted. (Azhee lacks grammatical relations for a similar reason grammatical relations are absent in the Lolo language, see Gerner 2008: 319–324).

³ The numbers ⁵⁵, ¹³ etc are tone markers and indicate relative pitch on a scale from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). The first number represents the beginning and the second number the end of the tonal contour.

subjects and intransitive subjects are unmarked. This “division of labor” is represented in diagram (2), where A is the agent of a transitive clause.

(2) DSM split in Azhee



Most of the paper deals with the grammaticalization path of *la*⁵⁵. In section 2, I discuss its DSM function and reconstruct a number of other case functions. In section 3, I argue for the further grammaticalization of *la*⁵⁵ as a contrastive focus marker. A number of additional cognate functions will be discussed in the Appendix.

The Azhee data are significant for markedness theory and for historical linguistics. Firstly, the data show that *differential case marking* (DCM) is always triggered by the principle of markedness/faithfulness or by the principle of economy (Section 4). Secondly, I argue that in Azhee the case function is the diachronic source of the focus function since the focus function represents a generalization of meaning – as we would expect in every unidirectional process of grammaticalization (Section 5).

2 DSM and case syncretism

Differential case marking (Bossong 1985, 1991) is *different* marking of the *same* syntactic relation, as opposed to *case syncretism* (Stolz 1996; Palancar 2002: 41), which is *identical* marking of *different* syntactic relations (McGregor 2010: 1613).

2.1 Overview

The Azhee marker *la** (*la*³³ or *la*⁵⁵) is both, a syncretic case marker and a differential case marker. To arrive at a situation like this is not that unusual if we consider that in order for both functions to develop, only one needs to be conditioned by an enabling context. Actually, the more extensive the case syncretism of a marker is, the higher the probability that one of the functions is a differential case marker. Since new functions spread according to a process of analogy which is irregular in nature, the probability that one of

the functions only partially affects its paradigm increases with every function (Craig 1991: 461–467).⁴

(3) The grammaticalization of ‘come’ in Azhee and other Loloish languages⁵

Section		Azhee <i>la³³/la⁵⁵</i>	Lolo <i>lu³³</i>	Lalo <i>la³³</i>	Nuosu <i>li³³</i>	Ni (Sani) <i>li³³</i>
2.2	Verb:	<i>li³³</i>	<i>lo³³</i>	<i>la⁵⁵</i>	<i>la³³</i>	<i>do³³li³³</i>
2.3	Case:	<i>la³³</i>	---	---	---	---
2.4		<i>la⁵⁵</i>	---	---	---	---
2.5		<i>la⁵⁵</i>	---	---	---	<i>li³³</i>
2.6		<i>la³³</i>	---	---	---	---
2.7		<i>la³³</i>	---	---	---	---
2.8		<i>la³³</i>	---	---	---	---
3	Focus:	<i>la⁵⁵</i>	---	---	---	---
3		<i>la⁵⁵</i>	---	---	---	---
Appendix	Cognate:	<i>la³³</i>	<i>lu³³</i>	<i>la³³</i>	---	---
Appendix		<i>la³³</i>	<i>lu³³</i>	<i>la³³</i>	---	---

The grammaticalization path of *la** is presented in (3), and will be described in the following sections. Besides DSM, *la** developed three case functions (locative, instrumental, causee), a focus function and two clausal functions (complementizer, perfect). The arrows in (3) show the direction of grammaticalization.

In East Asian languages, post/prepositions often develop from the first of two verbs in serial verb constructions (see, e. g., Bisang 1992; Aikhenvald 2006). The mechanism involves a *markedness shift* combined with semantic reanalysis. This process is described by Trask (1996: 142) in an exemplary fashion for the Chinese DOM preposition *bǎ* 把. The historical model for case syncretism of Azhee *la³³/la⁵⁵* is outlined in (4). For each case Y, there were two alternative constructions, an unmarked construction representing the old way Y was encoded and a new innovative construction with *la³³/la⁵⁵* in which Y was conceptualized as SOURCE. The new marked construction was sometimes restricted to a particular context such as to inanimate NPs. A markedness shift occurred when the innovative

⁴ About one hundred years ago, Sturtevant noted the contradictory effects of regular phonological changes and irregular analogical changes. His discovery was called the Paradox of Sturtevant (Trask 1996: 108). As an example of irregular analogical spreads, we can mention the polyfunctional *there is* constructions (Lakoff 1987) or French *voici/voilà* constructions (Bergen and Plauché 2005).

⁵ Azhee, Lolo (Yongren, Yunnan), Lalo (Weishan, Yunnan) and Ni (Shilin, Yunnan) are Central Loloish languages, Nuosu (Liangshan, Sichuan) is a Northern Loloish language. I quote data for Lolo from Gerner (2008), for Lalo from Björverud (1998) and for Nuosu from Gerner (2004). The Ni data are my own unpublished fieldnotes.