



RESEARCH ARTICLE

ARGUMENT AGAINST UNIVERSALITY OF GRAMMATICAL FUNCTIONS

\*Nada Mohammed and Alhayiti

Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 14<sup>th</sup> April, 2016  
Received in revised form  
20<sup>th</sup> May, 2016  
Accepted 06<sup>th</sup> June, 2016  
Published online 16<sup>th</sup> July, 2016

Key words:

Grammatical functions,  
Language Universals,  
Language acquisition,  
Language diversity.

ABSTRACT

Grammatical functions can be defined as the functional relation between items that make up a clause and include notions such as the object and the subject. Grammatical functions form an important aspect of LFG and according to Keenan (1987), the study of LFG involves linguistic theories which explore the diverse linguistic structure aspects and their relations. Additionally, LFG analysis involves two syntactic structures; Constituent structure or the c-structure and the functional structure known or the f-structure. The debate on whether grammatical relation is universal or not has been on for quite some times now, some linguistics argue that grammatical relations are universal given that the subject-object notion apply to all languages (Dryer 1987: 121). This paper argues against this view and seeks to point out how the grammatical relation is not universal. In LFG analysis, the c-structure represents word order together with phrasal groupings while the f-structure while the f-structure relate to grammatical functions such as subject, as well as object. It should be noted that the mentioned structures entail significant separate representations, although they complement one another in logical aspects. Current LFG research incorporates examinations about argument structure and semantic structure, as well as other structures of linguistic along with their significant relation to c-structure in addition to f-structure. LFG presents a language structure theory and how different linguistic structures are interlinked. The LFG theory is significantly lexical, meaning that the lexicon is splendidly well thought-out, comprising lexical relations as opposed to transformations or phrase structure operations on trees in order to capture linguistic generalizations. Additionally, it is functional, meaning that grammatical functions such as subject as well as object are primitives and not described through configuration of phrase structure nor semantic roles. However, recent developments in LMT analyzes grammatical functions as no longer primitives but decomposable into primitive features of [+/-r] and [+/-o] (Closs and Trausdale 2008: 8). As earlier mentioned, the universality of grammatical functions has raised a heated debate. Linguistic organizations are diverse and the likelihood of all languages having the same structure is farfetched. Keenan (1987: 118) tries to give a universal definition of "subject of." His definition is quite complex but it succeeds in its attempt to show a general trend in the definition of the subject functions that would be accepted globally. He states that examining subjects across various languages clearly shows that the noun phrase containing the subject is unique to that particular language and that no universality is shown (Keenan 1987: 91).

Copyright©2016, Nada Mohammed and Alhayiti. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Citation: Nada Mohammed and Alhayiti, 2016. "Argument against universality of grammatical functions, *International Journal of Current Research*, 8, (07), 34499-34502.

INTRODUCTION

Grammatical functions can be defined as the functional relation between items that make up a clause and include notions such as the object and the subject. Grammatical functions form an important aspect of LFG and according to Keenan (1987), the study of LFG involves linguistic theories which explore the diverse linguistic structure aspects and their relations. Additionally, LFG analysis involves two syntactic structures;

Constituent structure or the c-structure and the functional structure known or the f-structure. The debate on whether grammatical relation is universal or not has been on for quite some times now, some linguistics argue that grammatical relations are universal given that the subject-object notion apply to all languages (Dryer 1987: 121). This paper argues against this view and seeks to point out how the grammatical relation is not universal. In LFG analysis, the c-structure represents word order together with phrasal groupings while the f-structure while the f-structure relate to grammatical functions such as subject, as well as object. It should be noted that the mentioned structures entail significant separate

\*Corresponding author: Nada Mohammed and Alhayiti,  
Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia.

representations, although they complement one another in logical aspects. Current LFG research incorporates examinations about argument structure and semantic structure, as well as other structures of linguistic along with their significant relation to c-structure in addition to f-structure. LFG presents a language structure theory and how different linguistic structures are interlinked. The LFG theory is significantly lexical, meaning that the lexicon is splendidly well thought-out, comprising lexical relations as opposed to transformations or phrase structure operations on trees in order to capture linguistic generalizations. Additionally, it is functional, meaning that grammatical functions such as subject as well as object are primitives and not described through configuration of phrase structure nor semantic roles. However, recent developments in LMT analyzes grammatical functions as no longer primitives but decomposable into primitive features of [+/-r] and [+/-o] (Closs and Trausdale 2008: 8). As earlier mentioned, the universality of grammatical functions has raised a heated debate. Linguistic organizations are diverse and the likelihood of all languages having the same structure is farfetched. Keenan (1987: 118) tries to give a universal definition of “subject of.” His definition is quite complex but it succeeds in its attempt to show a general trend in the definition of the subject functions that would be accepted globally. He states that examining subjects across various languages clearly shows that the noun phrase containing the subject is unique to that particular language and that no universality is shown (Keenan 1987: 91).

### Related studies

This sections looks at two opposite approaches to linguistic study as previously studied. The Chomskyan Linguistics proposes that all languages share a common underlying principle. With the universal grammar theory, it is stated that all languages share a common property in that they can manifest themselves without being taught. Generative grammar on the other hand tries to come up with a set of rules that would tell us which combination of words would form grammatical sentences in a given word. Chomskyan Linguistics is of the view that generative grammar arises from universal grammar. Generative grammar is a direct opposite of other linguistic theories such as, the functional theory and the cognitive theory in that it views communicative functions and the environment as having no role in grammar development. Non-Chomskyan linguistics on the other hand does not have the concept of language universality. Languages differ significantly in the order of words together with phrasal structures. Additionally, the constituent structure theory enables the above variation within some universally determined parameters. However, most languages show similar functional vocabulary with the other languages. According to LFG’s functional structure theory, each language theoretical syntactic structure is organized through the subject, object, along with other grammatical functions, which are significantly familiar from usual grammatical work. In addition to that, languages differ significantly in the indispensable expression of phrases expression in simple sentences.

### DISCUSSION

In this section, evidence that supports the argument against the universality of grammar is presented. Various structural,

morphological and behavioral properties will be used to show that the notion of universality of Subject is farfetched. Keenan (1987: 118) argues against the universal definition of “subject of.” He points out that the definition of the subject is quite diverse in all languages. He gives an example of the Latin language where noun phrases having the subject carry a unique case marking, the nominative, which is only unique to the language. Evans (2009) supports the argument that the notion of subject is not universal. Most languages, like English, have a direct mapping of the subject to the object but others follow a different path. In the sentence “Peter is trying to catch some fish” the subject Peter is an agent, topic and the pivot. In other languages such as Dyirbal the link between the subjects being a topic, an agent and a pivot is quite different from that in English. The language, just like English, has a pivot but the difference is that the pivot is linked to the patient rather than the agent (Evans 2009). It is important to note that, whenever an individual refers to grammar, he significantly thinks of either morphology or morphosyntax or both. This indicates case, as well as number with respect to noun, person marking, tense, and mode along with aspect as far as the verb is concerned; an individual thinks of the prepositions usage, pronouns, of the adverb formation from the adjective, of the conjunctions value, among others.

Certain categories of grammar and markings, which can easily take for granted, are not in any way universal. This is noticeable when an individual compares various languages, stages of language and types of language. Taking an example of the Chinese and Vietnamese languages, which are usually referred to as languages with no morphology, it can be noted that they utilize syntax to create relations in a sentence and they rarely utilize full words. Such languages in my opinion do not have profound grammatical rules. It thus follows that different languages differ greatly in terms of their morphological and structural properties. This difference clearly shows that there is no universality of grammar. The idea that certain grammatical functions such as the subject and the object being universal has been on for quite some time. Evans and Levinson (2009: 429) also argue that linguistic organizations are diverse in terms of structure. They argue against the notion that there exists uniformity in all languages. Despite supporting the fact that the subject-object relation in many languages is similar, they point out that the subject notion is not universal. Most linguistic experts who argue for the universality of grammar make an assumption that all languages are English like. This is not the case because most languages differ from each other in different ways starting from sounds, meaning, lexicon and even grammar. However, one can explore every existent language in order to establish whether each one has subjects, although there is another significant problem of establishing whether observable facts a certain language equals those observed in others. Consequently, for instance, if one considers the sentence in English such as *Alex noticed Charles*, and converts it into Hungarian *Alex látott charles*, can one reasonably postulate that since in English *Alex* is a subject, then in Hungarian *Alex* is a subject. Considerably, the debate remains on the grounds in which one allege that the concept subject is pertinent in both languages and these results to the delicate issue of how one can define it. It is worthwhile noting that there is inevitable

disagreement over the above issues, which makes responding the universality issue of the functions of grammar quite challenging. Additionally, one is also faced with the issue of whether to have a common definition for the notion in every language: it is likely that the notion is available significantly in every language, except that it relates to diverse occurrences in all such that since an individual defines a component as a subject in a sentence of a certain language does not essentially indicate that the resultant element must follow the same formula in equal sentences in any other language. At this juncture, it is important to note that the conclusion of the above debate does not adequately address the universality issue of functions of grammar as it would imply a completely steady observation to consider the notion universal, although it is absent in every language. For instance, an individual can identify that the (ph) sound is a constituent of the set of likely sounds employed in phonetic systems of humanity therefore it is among the components of human language. This notion is not applicable in every human language, or certainly that it is not employed in similarly each of them, cannot detract from the assertion that it is strange to individual language in a manner that other sounds are not. In the above sense there is universality in sound, such that it is a prospective fraction of a human language. Considerably, the same might apply in grammatical functions: significantly they are components of what defines the system of universal human linguistic, although may not constitute every characteristic example about human language. Significantly, the above task is evidently not a very empirically easy subject to respond, despite the fact that eventually it is a pragmatic question, along with one must consult certain developed theories to make available answers.

Despite the fact that one has a reason to consider that the grammatical functions concept is pertinent in a certain language, it is even contentious on the applicability of the grammatical functions' universality to every sentence of the respective language. Additionally, the subject notion is principally imperative since in certain languages, the subject is a compulsory component of every sentence. For instance, it has been identified that in English certain circumstances call for a grammatical subject despite the need for a semantic subject. This results into the manifestation of a pleonastic subject. It is important to note that the notion that empty elements that are significantly of phonological have been utilized in the above cases to uphold the assertion that every sentence entails subjects. Additionally, in the above example it comes out as reasonable, despite the fact that it would be possible for one to offer an analysis whereby no empty subject was anticipated in any of the above structures. However, not every language utilizes pleonastic subjects, although one believes that there is the existence of subjects in other clauses. Moreover, languages which are short of pleonastic subjects habitually express the discretionary apprehension of evocative pronominal subjects as well. Arguments similar to the ones used in favor of the PRO subject analysis in infinitive clauses of English can be employed to identify that there is also a null pronoun in such clauses, under which supposition might an individual argue that the sentences above also entail an unsound pronoun subject, even if of course there can merely be argument utilizing the existence of a meaning to maintain the supposition of the pronoun existence. Conversely, the existence

of the empty null pronoun relies on the supposition that as supplementary sentences can be said to entail subjects, therefore the same should apply to the above sentences. Nevertheless, this is rather spherical as it is precisely the supposition that all sentences entail subjects that one tries to determine their accuracy.

One should note that apart from the above issues, there is one extra concern openly debated on: whether grammatical functions are basic grammatical notions, definite and influenced by ordinary human grammars, or whether they result from significant notions and mere epiphenomena. The above question is autonomous from the universality question as an individual can believe in a consequent subject that is collective if the concept whereby the subject is consequent are significantly universal and constantly augment the apparent subject. Significantly, it is likewise feasible to believe in an essentially definite grammatical functions' notion that are absent in all likely human language. At this point one can identify from the above debate, the issue remains on how one can describe grammatical functions.

### Grammatical functions and Discourse functions

Since the traditional view relied on the exploration of conventional languages, there morphology permitted a significantly varied word order which is the case in languages like English and therefore the phrase was not poorly developed since grammatical functions are often associated with certain word groups especially nouns. Additionally, as was characteristic of traditional grammar, people put a profound dependence on meaning in the description of grammatical functions. Two critical ideas seem to manifest themselves relating to the description of the subject. Significantly, from one viewpoint, the subject refers to the element that addresses the sentence and is distinguished with the notion *predicate*, characteristically a verbal aspect, which implies the argument over the subject. Moreover, it is apparent that such a definition compares the subject notion with the topic's notion. It is significant noting that, although there is a definite association connecting subjects and topics, the assertion that the subject refers to the topic in reality cannot be sustained because the two notions are not connected but distinct, it being likely to get a non-subject topic and also getting a non-topic subject. Pronominalisation refers to the way that English and other languages display topic word. After its initial introduction, a topic is often maintained in succeeding sentences through the utilization of pronouns. It is often possible to position the pronoun in place of the object, as well as having a subject without pronoun, as shown above and this simply means that one cannot define the subject topically. Additionally, the idea that subjects can take the form of elements representing impossible topics implies that one cannot equate the two notions. For instance, an empty element perceptibly cannot stand for a topic because, it would lead to a case where the sentence addresses nothing. Furthermore, negative elements like *no one* do not come out as possible topics, because they are unpronominalisable in successive sentences: For example: no one attended the party. They only drank some beer but not the whole of it.

Both the word *frightens* and the word *fear* takes an experience and matter as arguments. Even one can make obvious a connection connecting thematic roles with grammatical function, the above relationship does not imply that one is described in terms with the other. Recent research holds that every syntactic-semantic relation is interpretative as opposed to being definitive; hence, one cannot anticipate that the traditional methodology would yield better results. Significantly, if one discards semantic based efforts to describe grammatical functions, the right way should entail an application of syntactic based functions. However, an individual will also notice that there is no clear cut that brings out the matter straightforward. Syntactically grammatical functions express quite diverse phenomena, together with Case morphology along with verb agreement. Additionally, a traditional observation would address the subject as the element linked with nominative situation and which comes into a conformity association with the verb, while an object refers to the element which entails accusative Case and lacks a conformity association with the verb. Nevertheless, one should identify that none of the above claims seem to appear problem free. Apart from that, even within a language which has to be simple from the above perspective, like English, which entail nominative subjects plus accusative objects, as well as insignificant subject-verb agreement, impossible things. For instance, English subjects merely entail nominative Case in limited clauses also in clauses that are non-finite, if they entail any overt subject; they may materialize in the accusative or else in the genitive. Considerably, due to the fact that certain subjects can come out in the accusative, it is apparent that one cannot consider the accusative as the ultimate objects' property. It is worthwhile noting that, even languages that entail overt Case, as well as agreement morphology can be difficult for the supposition that one can describe grammatical functions on the above bases. For instance, when one utilizes Case to establish grammatical function he significantly complicates the situation because human languages reveal diverse Case systems. As identified by linguists researching on linguistic typology, the utilization of terms like subject or object when addressing diverse Case systems is obstructive because it brings in unavoidable circularities. Different alignments systems particularly the ergative one poses a serious challenge for the conception of the universal subject. In Dyirbal, a language in Australia, the pronouns are discernible with respect to the nominative-accusative outline whereas other nouns are discernible with respect to the nominative pattern. If one identifies that the issue is to be described in nominative Case, sentences comprising a nominal pronoun along with an absolutive noun will have two subjects, while the corresponding sentence with the accusative pronoun, as well as an ergative noun will lack subject!.

It is important to note that the structural methodology used to describe grammatical functions arises from the thoughts of the American structuralists, despite the fact that they also discarded the initiative of universal grammatical functions.

Significantly the structuralist viewpoint, referred to as Linguistic Relativity, refutes the existence of any kind of linguistic universal. Apart from that, grammatical functions can be used to explain the Indo-European languages, although it was erroneous to inflict them on other languages, like the languages of Amerindian families. Additionally, the structuralist viewpoint switches from the traditional view by postulating that grammatical functions were linked with phrases as opposed to words. Concisely, from distributional examination, one can identify that grammatical functions are connected with structural positions, despite the fact that not essentially the similar position in every language. Nevertheless, one should identify that the language demonstrates Case, as well as agreement essentials which point out that diverse arguments are treated in a special way and therefore it is likely to recognize subjects along with objects on the above observations.

### Conclusion

Grammatical relations have a various things that exist in their domains. They include grammatical relations in specific languages, similarities among the language relations, cognitive, functional and semantic explanation of the similarities and a cross linguistic explanation of the grammatical relations (Dryer 1987: 121). Through representation of the f-structure we are able to encounter an argument and an adjunct in the same domain (Rakosi and Utrecht 2003: 1). This paper argued against the universality of grammar. It was noted there exist a diverse number of languages and that the languages differ from each other in terms of sound, structure and meaning. It was noted that certain similarities exist between languages but these similarities in the grammatical relations can be brought down to pragmatic facts such as the environment within which the language is in use and the factors that unite the language users.

### REFERENCES

- Dryer, G 1992. *Are Grammatical Relations Universal?* Arlington, VA: Voices of Rupert's Land.
- Evans, N. 2009. *The myth of language universals: Language diversity and its importance for cognitive science.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Keenan, J. 1987. *Towards a universal definition of 'subject of'.* Santiago. Servicio publishers
- Rakosi G and Utrecht U. 2003. On the need for a more redefined approach to the argument- adjunct distinction. Viewed 29 Oct, 2013 <[http://ling.uni-konstanz.de/pages/conferences/lfg06/abstracts/14Gyoergy\\_Rakosi.pdf](http://ling.uni-konstanz.de/pages/conferences/lfg06/abstracts/14Gyoergy_Rakosi.pdf)>
- Traugott E. C and Trousdale. G. 2008. Gradience, gradualness and grammaticalization: How do they intersect? Viewed 29 Oct, 2013 <<http://www.stanford.edu/~traugott/resources/TraugottTrousdaleProofs.pdf>>

\*\*\*\*\*