

Information structure in the Uralic languages is grounded in the lexicon and constructions

Certain grammatical categories of the Uralic languages are sensitive to information structure or information status, cf. conjugation and passive in Ob-Ugric (Kulonen 1989, Nikolaeva 2001, Filchenko 2012, Virtanen 2015, É. Kiss 2019, Muravyev 2023), conjugation in Northern Samoyedic (Dalrymple, Nikolaeva 2007, Däbritz 2020, Khanina, Shluinsky 2024), differential object marking in various Finno-Ugric (Serdobol'skaja, Toldova 2012, Klumpp 2014, Klumpp 2023). However, existing descriptions of IS only partially account for the usage of these categories, cf. examples from Kazym Khanty (> Northern Khanty > Ob-Ugric) below where the choice of subjective (1) and objective (2) conjugation does not seem to depend on the IS properties of the direct object.

{Then the guy grabbed his beaver coat and left through the upper hole of the chum}

- (1) mǎn-əs λəxs-əλ xuśa, λəxs-əλ **wox-əs**
go-PST[3SG] friend-POSS.3SG to friend-POSS.3SG ask-PST[3SG]
'He went to a friend's house and invited his friend with him.' (NKh corpus: Hojtonkistan, 72)

{A stupid man went to the river bank to build a house.}

- (2) xot wər-t-aλ sǎxət λajm-əλ jɪŋk-a **tǎrəpt-əs-λe**
house make-NFIN.NPST-3SG when axe-POSS.3SG water-DAT drop-PST-3SG>SG
'While building a house, he dropped his axe into the water.' (NKh corpus: Golden Axe, 2)

In (1), the verb 'ask' takes subjective conjugation despite its object 'friend' being given. In (2), on the contrary, the verb 'press' takes objective conjugation despite its object 'axe' being new or at best semi-active. Both cases are frequently found in texts, e. g. Kazym Khanty corpus shows 21% of given non-indexed and 25% of indexed new objects, which calls for an alternative explanatory model.

Drawing on the observations in (Nikolaeva 2001; Dalrymple, Nikolaeva 2007) on the role of lexicon in object indexing and following the relatively recent tradition of lexical approaches to morphosyntax, e.g. ValPal (Hartmann et al. 2013), BivalTyp (Say 2020) databases, I approach the IS-sensitive categories in the Uralic languages from a lexicalist perspective using the framework of Construction Semantics (CxS). CxS is a recently developed model by (Willich 2022) that integrates Frame semantics (Fillmore, Baker. 2010) and Construction grammar (Goldberg 1995). More specifically I argue that IS information relevant for morphosyntactic coding is present at the lexical level in form of fore- or backgroundedness of the participant in the sense of (Talmy 2000) with respect to the frame evoked by a particular predicate or construction.

This proposal naturally accounts for problematic examples, such as (1) and (2). In (1), the given object 'friend' is not indexed on the verb because the request frame requires its theme argument to be in the foreground irrespective of its information-structural properties. Similarly in (2), the new direct object 'axe' is indexed on the verb because the caused motion frame backgrounds the theme and foregrounds the direction of motion (here the indirect object 'water'). Assignment of the background/foreground status to the direct object and the respective conjugation choice turn out to be strikingly consistent within most of the lexical and constructional frames with few exceptions.

The study compares manually annotated corpus data from several Northern Khanty dialects (online Obdorsk Khanty corpus available at <https://siberianlanguages.surrey.ac.uk/>, unpublished Northern Khanty corpus, unpublished Kazym Khanty field corpus) and Nganasan (unpublished INEL-corpus of Nganasan) and provides an overview of the relevant categories in other Uralic languages.

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Abbreviations

DAT — dative, NFIN — non-finite, NPST — non-past, POSS — possessive, PST — past, SG — singular.