Why ABS objects are exceptional in Inuktitut: Clitic doubling and cross-dialectal variation

It is often noted that ABS subjects and ABS objects in the Inuit languages pattern together in many ways beyond morphology, to the exclusion of antipassive (‘MOD’) objects. This talk presents a second distinct pattern: in the eastern Nunavut varieties—henceforth Inuktitut—ABS objects display contrasts with all other arguments, including ABS subjects. Crucially, the properties in question parallel similar phenomena in languages with pronominal object clitics, supporting a clitic doubling analysis for Inuktitut object agreement referencing ABS objects.

The co-existence of these two patterns across Inuit suggests that whether object agreement is true φ-agreement (Compton 2014) or object clitic doubling (Johns t.a.) is subject to cross-dialectal variation, bridging together these competing approaches; I speculate that this variation is related to the gradual decline of ergativity in the easternmost dialects (e.g. Johns 1999).

**INTERPRETATIONAL PROPERTIES:** While the Inuit literature often characterizes both ABS subjects and objects as obligatorily specific/wide scope, and antipassive (‘modalis’) objects as narrow scope/non-specific (e.g. Bittner 1994, Wharram 2003), novel data from Inuktitut display a markedly different pattern. The morpheme -luunniit ‘or’ is interpreted as a minimizer NPI under negation. As (1) shows, -luunniit may not modify a wh-indefinite in ABS object position, though it is licensed everywhere else. Moreover, the ill-formedness of (1a) is demonstrably due to the indefinite/non-specific nature of the ABS object, rather than ABS objects outscoping negation; -luunniit may modify a definite/specific ABS object, e.g. a proper name, (2).

(1) a. *taku-lau-ngit-tara kina-luunniit
   see-PST-NEG-TR.1S/3S who.ABS-or
   Intended: ‘I didn’t see even one person.’
   (ABS object)

   b. kina-luunniit ani-lau-ngit-tuq
   who.ABS-or leave-PST-NEG-INTR.3S
   ‘Not even one person left.’
   (ABS subject)

   c. kia-luunniit taku-lau-ngit-taanga
   who.ERG-or see-PST-NEG-TR.3S/1S
   ‘Not even one person saw me.’
   (ERG subject)

   d. taku-lau-ngit-tuq kisu-mi-luunniit
   see-PST-NEG-INTR.3S what-MOD-or
   ‘She didn’t see a single thing.’
   (MOD object)

(2) Tigumiar-luunniit taku-qqau-ngit-tara
   Tigumiaq.ABS-or see-REC.PST-NEG-TR.1S/3S
   ‘I didn’t even see Tigumiaq.’
   (ABS object)

Similarly, quantificational expressions (including wh-words) are obligatorily interpreted as contextually restricted in ABS object position, though this is not required for other positions (omitted). In (3), typically non-D-linked wh-words are translated as strongly D-linked in ABS object position. Thus: (only) Inuktitut ABS objects must be interpreted as referential/specific.

(3) a. kisu pi-juma-viuk
   what.ABS get-want-TR.2S/3S
   ‘Which one do you want?’

   b. qatsi sana-vigit
   how-many.ABS make-TR.2S/3P
   ‘How many of these did you make?’

**PRONOUNS:** Another asymmetry concerns the distribution of independent pronouns. While ERG and ABS subject pronouns may co-occur with subject agreement, ABS object pronouns are generally prohibited from appearing with object agreement, (4). Note, however, that ABS object pronouns may appear overtly in select contexts, e.g. when modified or coordinated, (5).
OBJECT CLITIC DOUBLING: I argue that these contrasts provide evidence for a pronominal clitic doubling analysis of Inuktitut object agreement (which, as seen above, appears as portmanteaux with subject agreement), building on Johns (t.a.). Doubled clitics are assumed here to be pronominal D0s, associated with a full nominal by movement (e.g. Nevins 2011, Harizanov 2014). Crucially, the phenomena seen in Inuktitut parallel cross-linguistic properties of object clitics. (i) Non-specific/non-referential quantificational elements (e.g. negative quantifiers) resist clitic doubling, while clitic doubling is required of specific/referential elements (Dobrovie-Sorin 1990, Gutierrez-Rexach 2000, Leonetti 2008). (ii) Pronominal objects are often realized as verb-adjoined clitics, though they must surface as independent pronouns in so-called strong pronoun contexts, e.g. when modified or coordinated (Cardinaletti & Starke 1999). The present analysis moreover captures why only ABS objects display these properties: only they undergo object clitic doubling (subject agreement encoding ERG and ABS subjects is true φ-agreement).

CROSS-DIALECTAL VARIATION: The Inuktitut data are at odds with the previous literature, which take ABS subjects and objects to behave uniformly. I propose that this contrast reflects two distinct syntactic processes underlying object agreement. In Inuktitut it is clitic doubling, but in other Inuit varieties (e.g. Western Inuit/West Greenlandic) it is genuine φ-agreement. That these processes co-exist unifies previously competing analyses (Compton 2014, Johns t.a.). I suggest that this dialectal split is rooted in language change: object agreement has shifted to clitic doubling in Inuktitut. This may be linked to another change led by the eastern Inuit dialects, the gradual loss of the ERG-ABS pattern (Johns 1999, et seq.). In the most innovative dialects, e.g. Labrador Inuttut, object agreement (surfacing within portmanteaux and co-occurring with ERG subjects) is only possible when encoding a pronominal object. The antipassive is otherwise used with full nominal objects, meaning ABS objects are absent in Labrador Inuttut (Johns t.a.). Combining these facts with the other Inuit facts discussed above, we find an inverse relationship between the decline of ergativity—indicated by the changing behaviour of ABS objects—and the pronominalization of object agreement, summarized below.

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