

GRAMMATICAL FUNCTIONS IN GB

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0. INTRODUCTION

In the present paper, I am going to discuss the status of the grammatical functions subject and object within the Theory of Government and Binding (GB, henceforth), as outlined in Chomsky (1986). My aim is threefold: First, I want to examine the relation of these theory-internal concepts to the notions of subject and object found in traditional grammar. Secondly, I shall try to clarify the role that the concepts are intended to play within GB, and their relation to other theory-internal concepts such as argument, theta-role and (abstract) Case¹. Thirdly and finally, I am going to raise a few issues in relation to the definitions of subject and object formulated in Chomsky (1986).

By way of introduction I shall first consider briefly the notions of subject and object found in traditional grammar, turning subsequently to the corresponding concepts of GB. In section 2, I shall then try to clarify the relation of these grammatical functions to various subsystems of GB, such as theta theory and Case theory. In this way, I hope to be able to show, on the one hand, that the theory-internal notions of subject and object found in GB are rather different from the corresponding concepts of traditional grammar, and, on the other hand, that they occupy a central position within the theory, and that, consequently, their definition is a crucial problem. In the final section, I shall argue that the definitions proposed by Chomsky (1986) are not wholly adequate, and I shall also provide a sketch of an alternative proposal.

1. SUBJECT AND OBJECT

The distinctions between subject and predicate on the one hand, and between subject and object on the other, have a long history in the theory of grammar, and many attempts have been made to define these concepts in a more or less precise manner. I shall not discuss these attempts in any detail here, but before we turn to the theory-internal definitions found in GB, it may be useful to have at least a brief look at the traditional notions of subject and object.

1.1 *Traditional Grammar*

It is a fundamental principle of traditional grammar that every simple, declarative sentence consists of two obligatory major constituents, a subject and a predicate. Thus, in a sentence like 'John walks', the noun 'John' is the subject, whereas the verb 'walks' is the predicate. Several types of criteria, logical as well as grammatical, have been invoked in drawing the distinction between subject and predicate. Here it is sufficient to point out that the notion of subject is generally defined first with reference to simple sentences of minimal syntactic structure, consisting of a nominal and a verb, where the nominal is taken to be the subject. The notion is then extended to sentences of more complex structure, and in the course of this extension, a certain conflict may arise between various kinds of criteria for identifying the subject.

Let us consider now a sentence like 'John hits Bill'. According to the traditional view, the subject of this sentence is the noun 'John' and the predicate is the phrase 'hits Bill', composed of the verb 'hits' with the noun 'Bill' as its object. We noted earlier that the traditional distinction between subject and predicate is based on several kinds of criteria, and the same is true of the related distinction between subject and object. One kind of

criterion is found in such grammatical phenomena as verb agreement and morphological case-marking. Thus, in many languages where the verb agrees in number and person with the subject of an intransitive sentence, the same agreement is found in transitive sentences between the verb and the nominal assuming the same morphological case as the subject of an intransitive sentence. We can illustrate this with some examples from Latin:

¹ Following Chomsky (1986), I will henceforth capitalize 'Case' when the term is used in its technical sense.