The Siona tripartite DOM system

The proposed talk presents original field data from an understudied language from the Western Tucanoan family, Ecuadorian Siona, with the aim of unpacking the morphology and semantics of its unusually complex differential object marking (DOM) system. We discuss the position of the Siona DOM system in the context of the better understood languages that exhibit such case-marking variation, consider its apparent tripartite nature, and provide a preliminary descriptive overview of the system, and a direction for a semantic analysis. Examples (1)-(2) and Table 1 reveal the DOM paradigm for Siona:

(1) hueco -{re, ni, ∅} ña-hüë.
    parrot       see-past.
    I saw a parrot.

(2) sãquëñë -{re, ∅} ña-hüë.
    tree        see-past.
    I saw a tree.

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<th>[-marked]</th>
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<td>[+animate]</td>
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Table 1: The Siona DOM paradigm

To characterize this paradigm, we reconsider the functionalist principle of **iconicity**, which has been argued to underlie DOM systems (Aissen 2003, *inter alia*). Put simply, iconicity refers to the correlation between overt encoding of arguments and their corresponding pragmatic-semantic markedness. Here, markedness refers to a state or entity that stands out as compared with a more common or expected counterpart, which, for our purposes, is modeled as a deviation from the established prototype of a given argument – here, the object in the transitive construction. Dowty (1991, *et seq.*). profiles the prototypical object as being inanimate, non-specific and individuated; for example, 'The man eats some toast'. As per the notion of iconicity, an object that fits this profile is predicted to be morphologically unmarked (or zero-marked), whereas one that diverges from the prototype ought to surface as morphologically marked. Although this general principle does hold in the case of Siona, certain complexities also arise. According to de Hoop & Malchukov (2008), DOM systems either (i) alternate between two (or more) overt case-markers in the relevant syntagmatic position (so-called symmetrical systems), or (ii) between the presence and absence of overt case-markers (asymmetrical systems). Put simply, Siona exhibits both alternations rendering it a tripartite marking split as shown in Table 1.

Siona objects do not simply alternate as in an asymmetrical system on the basis of divergence from the prototype; instead it appears that there is also symmetrical alternation in the case of animate objects. We suggest that -ni marking on unmarked animate objects represents the fact that these arguments are in fact partially marked (they deviate from the prototype strictly on the basis of animacy) as compared with -re marked objects. This is indicative of Siona presenting what we label gradient iconicity: marked object (-re) > unmarked animate object (-ni) > unmarked inanimate object (-∅); which has not been discussed in the literature as far as we can tell.

Turning to semantics, DOM have been argued to be sensitive to either the "animacy scale" or the "definiteness scale" (Aissen 2003). Siona DOMs appear to be sensitive to at
least two scales, including the animacy one. However, the \{-/+marked\} divide does not seem to be sensitive to the definiteness scale, as -re can be present or absent on objects at either extreme of this scale, i.e. proper names and non-specific indefinites.

The -re markers exhibit a complex distribution, a glimpse of which we show below. First, there appears to be a sensitivity between immediate past (3), and further past (4), where -re can only apply in sentences in the non-immediate past; this sensitivity arises only for animate objects.

(3) a. jure yai -ni ŋa-huë. now panther -OBJ saw-PAST.
I just now saw a panther.  
b. #jure yai -re ŋa-huë. now panther -RE saw-PAST.
int. I just now saw a panther.

(4) a. #cojemuse yai -ni ŋa-huë. yesterday panther -OBJ see-PAST.
yesterday I saw a panther.

This observation is replicable for the non-immediate future. In the immediate future, we observe a sensitivity (at least) to the knowledge of the location of the object.

(5) jure hueco -ni ŋa-siyë. now parrot -OBJ see-FUT
I am about to see a parrot (I know where it is).

(6) jure hueco -re ŋa-siyë. now parrot -RE see-FUT
I am about to see a parrot (I don’t know where it is).

In contrast, for inanimates, -re appears sensitive to plurality.

(7) Yë’ë ajñe yëyë noca -∅.
I want to eat a banana (one).

(8) Yë’ë ajñe yëyë noca -re.
I want to eat bananas (2 or more).

This leads us to posit a split in the semantics for the [+marked] feature. More specifically, for animate objects, the individual is intensionalized, i.e. shifted to a world or time different from the actual world or time of utterance, as shown in (9). For inanimate objects, the individual is pluralized, as in (10).

(9) \( [DP^{[animate][+marked]}]^{<w_0,t_0>} = \exists x. [x = [DP]^{<w_1,t_1>}, \text{for } w_1,t_1 \neq w_0,t_0] \)
(10) \( [DP^{[-animate][+marked]}]^{<w_0,t_0>} = \exists x. [x = [DP]^{<w_0,t_0>} \text{ and } x \text{ is a non-atomic individual}] \)

Further work lies in the question of whether the semantics of [+marked] can be unified or not, i.e. whether difference in the distribution of re between animates and inanimates is arbitrary, or depends on characteristics correlating with animacy.

**References**

