

METAMORPHOSES IN THE  
LINGUISTIC RELATIONSHIP SUBJECT-  
OBJECT: THE ERGATIVE CONCEPT

Οἶδά σου καὶ τὰ βαρβαρικά ὀνόματα... Ἐπικαλοῦμαι σε,  
τὸν πάντα περιέχοντα, πάσῃ φωνῇ καὶ πάσῃ διαλέκτῳ,  
ὡς πρῶτως ὕμνησέ σε ὁ ὑπὸ σου ταχθεὶς καὶ πάντα  
πιστευθεὶς τὰ ἀύθεντικά. *Papyri graecae magicae.\**

Let us enter linguistics by the “gateway of the senses.” The ambiguity of French itself, in which *sens* signifies both sensation and meaning, leads us to this Janus-portal, a place for elementary exchanges between the self and the world, where Saint Thomas stationed himself to work out a theory of the encounter between the philosophical subject and object or, rather, using his terms, between the *cognoscens* (active present participle) and *cognitum* (neuter nominative/accusative of a passive past participle...) The very heart of all diathesis.\*\*

Translated by Jeanne Ferguson

\* “I also know your barbarian names... I invoke you, you in whom all things are hidden, in every language and every dialect, so that you have been venerated since the beginning by the one who was placed by you and to whom all things deriving from you have been entrusted.”

\*\* We call *diathesis* the disposition of a verb to divide its forms into “voices”: active, passive, middle, reflexive, etc.

In French the expression of sensual perception is a model of polyvalence, if not of ambiguity. Let us first consider the verb *sentir*. The sensed object may be its “complement” just as easily as it may be its “subject”: “*je sens la rose*” (I smell the rose), “*ça sent la rose*” (that smells like a rose), “*la rose sent*” (the rose smells). The first of these three phrases has itself three meanings: 1) *Je perçois l’odeur de la rose* (I perceive the scent of the rose), which reaches my olfactory sense; 2) *Je fais l’acte volontaire de sentir (flairer) la rose* (I perform the voluntary act of smelling the rose); 3) *L’odeur de la rose émane de moi* (the scent of the rose emanates from me). The first meaning is etymological and comes from Latin. It is thus split into an “active” sense (1) and a “passive” sense (3), the latter not appearing in French until the fourteenth century. From the point of view of a grammatical subject, the three phrases quoted above imply three categories: the inanimate object (the rose); the animate (I); and an intermediary “that,” semi-active, semi-passive. The object, not present in the third (intransitive) example, belongs to two types: the absolute object, a flower that I can smell or touch, and the relative object, qualitatively identified as an odor, distinct from its source. This “rose-scent” is in fact only an attribute of the “that”; it makes of *sentir* a linking verb, a false transitive, admitting a qualitative predicate. In fact, some languages (Russian, for example) put the odor-attribute into the instrumental, the case for particular modes of being. However, the linking verb may have the rose as subject (*la rose sent bon* = the rose smells good), a rose to which I can, on occasion, give the status of animation, that “smells” just as it pricks or breathes (cf. *Heidenröslein*): the intransitive may be a category of the active.

Let us keep these variations in mind as we go on to other languages in the world. The English, “to smell”; the German, *riechen*, have an analogous polyvalence. The Czech *voněti* adds a particularly active nuance to it, since it may mean “to perfume.” Russian, although it lexicalizes nuances, nevertheless reminds us of the link between transitive and intransitive through the pair *vonjat’/ob(v)onjat’*. In Latin and Greek, the pair of verbs meaning “*sentir*” are evenly divided between the middle or deponent voice of *flair* (Lat. *odoror*, Gr. ὀσφραίνωμαι) and the active voice of the odor given off (Lat. *oleo*, Gr. ὀζω). Of course, the active

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no more excludes the idea of state than the middle voice does that of activity, but the ideo-syntactic impact of the diathesis is indisputable, and the middle voice is the voice of the metamorphoses.

In Greek and in Old Slavonic a certain number of verbs of sensation waver between transitive construction (+ accusative) and intransitive construction (+ genitive). By merely looking at a few verbal suffixes, we recognize in certain transitives former linking verbs: Lat. *videre* evokes *olere* as Old Slav. *viděti* (and \* *slykhěti* → *slyšati*) evokes *vonjati* (Czech *voněti*); if this “see, hear, smell” comes from “to be seeing, hearing, smelling,” how could there have been a direct object?

That sensation is first a state or condition of which the sentient being is not even necessarily the subject, is confirmed by an excursion outside the Indo-European circle. In Japanese, verbs such as *mieru* (to see) and *kikoeru* (to hear) have, alongside a “transitive” version (in which the subject is indicated by *ga*) an “intransitive” version in which the subject is followed by the dative sign *ni*, over against an “object” marked by *ga*. In Lezghé, as in many other languages of the Caucasus, one cannot say “I see that” but only “that is-sight for me.” In Darghe, this dative of the “I” that sees coexists with another case, to which we shall return, called ergative, indicating a more active nuance of vision: literary language prefers it to the dative. Elsewhere, as in Tsakhour, verbs of sensation are not used with the dative (proper to verbs of sentiment) and substitute for it a special case called affective. In Armenian, a language considered Indo-European but with a Caucasian substrate, vision separates its “subjective” and “objective” nuances according to verb tense: in the perfect, “he has seen” is represented by “of him is seen”. We may draw a parallel between this see-sawing within the verbal syntax and that of the subject and object in the genitive case, in noun syntax (“objective” and “subjective” genitives) at the level of sensation. The “vision of Tigranes” projected verbally is as ambiguous as “the murder of Caesar.” In addition, are there not languages such as Kanarese (India) in which there is only one verb for “to see” and “to appear, to be seen,” as the French have only one for “*sentir*”?

Our wandering afar in the linguistic field may give us a fresh

view of our own familiar horizons. If one says in French, “*on ne le voit guère, il fait de rares apparitions,*” (one rarely sees him, he makes rare appearances), one is playing at the same game of seesaw but in two successive sentences. The game may combine lexicon and morphology. Often sensation dominated by the action of the “subject” (to look at, to listen to, to perceive the scent of) stands out at the level of *vocabulary* from that which turns spontaneously toward its “object” (to see, to hear, to smell). Greek shows us how we go from meaning to *morphology* within the framework of “suppletism”: according to P. Chantraine, the main verb of sight (in Greek) opposes a sight centered on the activity of the subject (present ὁράω) to a vision centered on the object (aorist εἶδον), while the Indo-European noun for the organ of sight (the eye) furnishes the basis for the realization of the act in the future (ὄψομαι; see also pf. ὤπωπα). Spanish finds out by the mediation of *syntax* (to which we will return: it does not apply only to the verb “to see”) the possibility of dividing sight into two parts: an intransitive “sight” which is the concrete sight of a determined person (*veo a mi hermano cada día* = I see my brother every day) and a transitive “sight” that assumes indetermination or neutralization of the object, or an activity of the imagination (if I see my brother in my mind). In Russian “impersonal” sight with “seer” in the dative is frequent (*mne vidno*). With its object in the accusative, it occupies a position midway between the personal order (*ja vižu*) and the order that puts the object of sight in the position of subject (*ona mne ne vidna* = she is not visible, I do not see her). The latter phrase is also possible with a passive-reflexive, that places the passive vision midway along the road to dream. *Sredi nevernoj temmoty drugie milye mne videlis’ čerty...*

Let us close this first survey by a complete change of scene and act of sight very close to its embryonic linguistic nucleus, by visiting the Alutors of Kamchatka, where the relationship of subject to object is marked by indices of subject and object within the verb (thus the verb “to see” has forty-two forms—6 + + 12 + 12 + 12: there is a dual—corresponding to our six persons of the subject) or the Kètes near Turukhansk, whose verb reflects an analogous system. How does one say, in Kète, “the brother sees the sister”? In this language where there is

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only one inert case, acting as nominative/accusative, and no ergative, where moreover the same word means “brother” and “sister,” the “subject-object” relationship lies entirely within the verb and does not find its way into syntax: the verb bears a sign meaning “him → her,” while with another sign “her → him” is translated “the sister sees the brother.” Before the verb the double and inert noun “brother-sister” will show the nominal actualization of the indicated relationship present in the verb. But the syntactical dynamics arise when “sister” is no longer the object of *sight* but of an active *looking for*. Then the verb has no indices and “sister” becomes a locative of destination, carrier of the direction toward the object.

Let us move from the domain of the senses to that of illness, which tends likewise to couple object and subject, the “I” and the “that”: in French, *J'ai mal à la gorge; ça me fait mal (à la gorge)* (I have a sore throat; it hurts me = my throat hurts) or, *la gorge me fait mal*. To emphasize the condition (while Latin, Greek and Russian, for example, may use intransitives which can be paired with other intransitives stressing the fact of “becoming,” “to get sick”) we simply say, “I am ill,” with the help of the verb “to be” and a predicate adjective. The illness remains within the predicate in a nominal projection with the verb “to have” (“I have the flu”) or its equivalents (“to catch a cold”). However, it may replace the ill person as grammatical subject and put him in the position of object without a change in the verb: “the flu’s got me.” Long ago, the illness was more often the subject: it was often deified (“fever” had three temples in Rome) or at least demonized. The Gospels say that after Jesus touched Peter’s mother-in-law, “the fever left her” and “she rose”: the ill woman, cured, became the subject again. According to Erich Neu, Hittite, which has both types of sentences (ill persons-subject and illness-subject) gives evidence of an older stage in which the verb of illness is a middle verb *having no subject* and with an object in the accusative. The literal meaning would be, approximately, “it happened-illness relative to him” = “he fell ill.” When the ill person becomes the subject, the verb does not change and cannot be considered as passive. Another, stronger, Hittite verb, translated by “to be stricken by an illness sent *by* a god,” would seem not to be passive either. The

syntactic turnabout that moved the ill person over from the accusative to the nominative without changing the verb, if it is not the turnabout due to diathesis, is a phenomenon of "capture," of which we will see an entire series. Besides, the essential energy of the active sense may not reside in either the verb or the illness-subject but be concentrated in the syntax of the god and in the *instrumental* that re-presents it. The noun-subject (illness) is thus in an intermediate stage, in a middle position between a superior subject-function expressed by a complement of agent (the god) and a secondary subject-function (the patient) derived from a former object-accusative.

Let us try to move still further back in time. In Squam (an Amerindian language of British Columbia) the linguistic expression, in one word, of a convulsive type of illness, may be analyzed in the following way: an "intransitive" verb of sensation meaning "to writhe" (thus with a human "subject") is made "transitive" (passing to its causative) through means of a suffix (it takes on the meaning of "cause X to writhe": "subject," the illness). Afterwards, it undergoes a reduplication that, to adopt our categories, gives it a passive sense ("to be made to writhe": a return to the human subject), after which it must take on an "impersonal" sign. Thus the veil of impersonality covers the intraverbal sinuosity of the subject-object relationship. The modernity of the Hittite god of illness, with its visage of instrument-subject, is obvious...

If we move from illness to emotion, we observe the same metamorphoses in form for a given sense, the same exchanges between transitive and intransitive or impersonal structures, between the poles of diathesis, between the I-subject and the I-object. To the impersonal and transitive Latin *me miseret eorum* ("I have pity on them") respond the personals *miseret* (deponent) and *miseret*, both intransitive. The English verb "to pity" is transitive, as is the French *plaindre*, but of the English sort of transitivity that prefers passive forms ("he is to be pitied"). As was the case for the verb "to see" in Armenian, discussed above, the fracture zone of the diathesis may coincide with the perfect: the expression of joy in Latin, *gaudeo* in the present tense, requires *gavisus sum* in the perfect. The intransitive French *jouir*, from Latin, has been set aside in favor of a derived trans-

itive *réjouir*, which has furnished a reflexive. However, faced with human subjects that project obliquely the object of the joy (*se réjouir de*) the subject of the predicate nouns with the same meaning is equivocal, and we see the “I” admitting the switch-over with the nominal projection of its verb: *je suis dans la joie*, or *la joie est en moi*. Saint Luke’s shepherd, having found the lost sheep, says, “Rejoice with me”; but right after, this model of joy is transferred into the divine world in the form “joy shall be, in Heaven,” that is, *Le ciel sera dans la joie / il y aura de la joie dans le ciel*. In the presence of an emotion with a determined human subject, Heaven proposes the idea of a collective vague subject *which may alternate with its locative function*. And we can, without needing to leave the French language, be aware of the phenomenon of the locative-subject, which is more or less extensive in certain paleo-Siberian, Caucasian and Oceanic languages.

The place that emotions make up for man or that man represents for them may be directive and not locative (cf. French *être en colère* and *se mettre, entrer en colère*) which is a way to combine the state with its becoming. In this dialectic of orientation towards place, the passage of man into the subject position is modern. Hittite normally says, “*anger rises on me*” and French, “*la colère m’a pris*,” although “*j’ai pris une colère*” is frequent. We thus return to the problem of the relationship between the ill person and his illness, and to the “transfer” to syntax of a dynamic hidden in noun classes, in which, among the operative or magical forces, and patients or inanimates, man often occupies a middle position.

The verbs of desire, will, ability, could lead us to comparable structures. While in Irish the “I” is usually locative-origin of the desire (“a drink is from me” = “I want a drink”), Latin uses personals (*cupio, volo*, for example) as well as impersonals (transitive or not: *juvat, placet*) or noun expressions projecting the “I” to the dative: *Quod si tantus amor menti, si tanta cupido est*. This dative is the rule in Caucasian languages. Georgian says, “Something is to me object of want,” meaning, “I want something”; the specialty of this type of verb is to stress a line of fracture in the system of tenses. Their futures, their aorists and their perfects rest on “suppletive” forms, dominated by



passive structures or calling on a transitive. As in Caucasian languages the relation subject-object is reflected within the verb by indices of subject and direct or indirect object (indices of class, person, or both at once) the indices of a verb of will, with its human subject in the dative, may be complex. In Darghe, the verb agrees with this dative by means of its suffix, while in its prefix it agrees with the class of the object desired or loved (a class determined by the species: man, woman, animal-inanimate). Thus the dative construction of the verb meaning “to want, to love” bears the same index of “subject” in the verb as the ergative construction does. “To be able” in Georgian is stated as “to want” earlier: “*something is to me object of ability*” = “*I can do something.*” In some Caucasian languages, however, such as Agul, Cryse and Tsakhur, the idea of ability is tied to a locative or ablative “subject.” A “locative of the subject” construction, according to the traditional expression, evoking that of verbs of possession (“I had a horse” = “a horse was *chez moi*”) or of meeting. Japanese is midway in the Caucasian evolution, giving to “ability,” as to sight and hearing, two versions, one intransitive, with a human “subject” of the dative type, the other transitive, with a human subject of the nominative type.

At this point, how can we ignore the expression of “love”? It would be easy no doubt to renew from within the transitive banality of “I love you”; but first let us go to Ireland, where the autochthonous language with its bias towards the impersonal transfers the subject and the object of love to equally oblique positions. One must say, “There is love in you for me” (*tá grá agam di*)—and the formula is the same for pity or interest. As for Japanese, which restricts the privilege of the subject and has a mark for the “theme” (indicating especially the person who is primarily concerned), it suspends “love” between the mark for the theme (*wa*) and that of a “subject” (*ga*) in the “position” of an object: *watashi wa/anata ga/suki da*: “For me (theme) you (“subject-object”) love to be” = “I love you.” And what can be said about Chinese, in which one of the verbs meaning “to love” is only a variant of a qualitative verb meaning “(to be) good”? It is written the same but is distinguished by a descending tone, which has been described to be a causative sign...

In Armenian, where the verb “to love” is transitive, the ana-



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lytic perfect takes us back to the Caucasian substrate: the past participle being foreign to diathesis, *sireal em* means “I have loved” as well as “I am loved.” Georgian, of course, while saying “He is love for me,” multiplies, as we saw, the lines of fracture in the succession of the tenses: in the future, the aorist and the perfect, “to love” is conjugated with the help of “suppletive” forms borrowed from two types of passive and from a transitive emphasizing the voluntary nature of the finished act. The most interesting fractures, however, are found within the present. The verb cannot mechanically construct the subject-object relationship indicated for all persons. In its simple form (*uqvars* = “he is-love for him” = “he loves him”) it may combine a third person-subject with all the person-objects (“he is love for me,” “for you” = “I love him, you love him”). But the first and second person-subjects are rarely used and are replaced by compound forms which include the verb “to be.” This separation, whatever the apparent reasons may be, tends to force in the system of personal conjugation a sort of gap which serves as a reminder of its relativity and of the special nature of the third person.

Would we unduly stretch the French language if we were to look in it for another example of the structural gap separating the different persons? At Strasbourg, a lycée student scratched the following words on her desk: “*Je m’appelle: je t’aime, et toi: mon amour.*” (“My name is ‘I love you’ and yours is ‘my love’.”) Of course, this is literature and it is a game, but it means that between the mechanical succession of persons in the indifferent verb “*Je m’appelle/tu t’appelles*” and the conjugation of the highly subjective verb “*aimer*” there must be a rupture. The three persons (four or five or more in some languages) are only an abstraction that has unified the zones affected by the centrifugal dynamism issuing from the first person. Our *lycéenne* intuitively discovers other systems. She sees that the second person-object of love may be absorbed in the “intransitive” relationship of the first, and “*j’aime*,” coming from “*je (t’)aime*,” may be easily metamorphosed into its noun projection (“*mon amour*”), which contains an implicit direction toward the object. Now, what is literature in French may elsewhere be morphology and syntax. We can infer from numerous languages (especially Siberian) that there is practically no difference between “I love”

and “my love,” to the extent that possessive “pronoun” and personal “pronoun” are expressed by similar signs and that this phenomenon is inseparable from the similitude of the verb and the noun.

Thus the “sentimental” situation takes us deeply into the subjective-objective relationship, which we will now apply to intellectual activity. Knowledge, comprehension, memory, speech: all of these reveal a wavering in diathesis or syntax and at times unexpected metamorphoses.

Latin (or Greek, among others) has already taught us to distinguish the effort of the subject to know (present “inchoative” [co]gnosco) from the objective result of that effort (perfect, *novi*), beyond which the priority of the object belongs to the passive and dismisses the *cognoscens* to a position of agent or to the dative (*res nota omnibus*). The use of the impersonal multiplies this type of dismissal, for example, in Russian (*mne izvestno, mne ponjatno*), especially with a negation, which obviously tends to deprive the “I” of all active orientation toward the object: *mne neponjatno*. Of course, Irish uses this system with its favorite formula: “There is knowledge in me of him” = “I know him.” However, the use of a predicate noun is not necessary to designate the passage to the “objective conjugation.” In Japanese, the “I-subject” of the action of understanding is presented just as obliquely with its sign *ni* corresponding to a sign *ga* of the understood thing: “*sensei ni* (the professor) *eigo ga* (English) *wakaru* (understands).” In Georgian, the verb “to know” (*vici* = I know) is a form of aorist (and thus with an ergative construction) passed into the series of the present. But the verb has taken on “suppletive” forms: the perfect *mscodnia* is of intransitive origin. In Svanetian and Mingrelian the equivalent verbs are entirely intransitive.

Memory drifts between the subjective action of memorization and the priority given to its result and to the thing remembered. In Latin and Greek, vocabulary and morphology are combined or overlap to render, in the present and the perfect, either the medio-passivity of the action or the objectivity of its definitive content: to the Greek *μυμήσχω/μémνημαι* responds the Latin *recordor/memini*. Georgian renders “I remember that” by “For me that is-memory,” with—outside the present and imperfect—

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passive “suppletive” forms. And Irish “remembers” according to its preferred system of predicate nouns and prepositional obliqueness: *is cuimhin liom*. In Guarani, we find an “I remember” whose “I” is rendered by the same affix as the “me” in “He strikes me.” Kerek (in the Siberian Far East) illustrates our purposes even better: the verb “to recall,” which is transitive, takes the “intransitive” form in the second indefinite past by giving objective value to the same suffixes that indicate the subject in the present definitive (with the exception of the first person of the object—“you remembered *me*”—which does not exist in this system).

But in fact, how long has French been doing the same thing? “*Je me souviens*” was preceded for a long time by “*Il me souvient*”: an impersonal turn of phrase that places the “I” in an oblique, semi-passive position, different from what happens with “*je me rappelle*,” a more voluntary action. The construction “*il me souvient de*” placed object and subject of memory on two similarly indirect levels (cp. the nominative object of “*cela me revient*”), while in “*Je me rappelle cela*” the transitive relationship of the “I” to its object turned into a dative reflection of the subject (*me*). Between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries, however, the disappearance of many impersonals added to the development of reflexives came to modify the syntax of memory. “*Je me souviens*” (I remember) appeared, personalized by the influence of “*Je me rappelle*” (I recall). Henceforward, the reflexive category has changed the originally dative “*me*” into a sort of hybrid dative-accusative that is reminiscent of the mixture that gave birth to the reflexive in Russian. Only the object remains clear, in an oblique position (*je me souviens de*). The mediopassivity vaguely present in the expression spreads to the transitive “*se rappeler*” which loses its direct object, in spite of the purists, and tends to require in its turn “*se rappeler de*.”

The linguistic fractures at work in memorization terms could lead us to those in speech: this would mean opening a long chapter here, even a book... Let us only say that between the orientation of the verbs of speaking (at times passive) towards an object and their orientation towards action (revelation, public declaration, formulation or simple onomatopoeia—as in Slavic *gla/gol*—imitating the sonorous and murmuring production of

speech) as also towards the “speaking subject,” languages have invented different combinations, bringing in and combining vocabulary, syntax, morphology and “suppletive” forms (as in Greek). For the purposes of linguistic distancing, we could cite Nivkhe (a language spoken in the region of the lower Amor and at Sakhalin) in which the speaking subject is governed by a “post-position” bearing the sign of the locative-relative: thus “this man is speaking” must be understood as corresponding to something like “from that man there-is-speech (sent out)”: a structure that does not so much render the passive impersonality of the speech as it does the locative emergence of the subject, a case frequently found in languages of this type.

The excursion that has led us from feelings to intellectual activity and speech could take us farther, and it would doubtless be useful to prolong it in the direction of *faire* (to make or do). However, *homo faber* is no more the creator of his relationship to the thing made than the man who feels of his relationship to the thing felt. He willingly yields priority to the artefact, transforms himself into a more or less oblique, more or less optional agent of a passive. The “doing” is constantly being dissolved into the thing “done” or into “becoming”—this hybrid suspended between the act and the state, in which the verb is coupled in Greek with “to be” (εἶμι/ἐγενόμην) and in Latin with *facio* (*fio/factus sum*). On the other hand, the causative, which transforms being into “making be,” may be basic in some languages and transform the subject of a neuter verb into an object by using an agent of superior efficiency. For example, this system permits, on the basis of the same root, the distinguishing of “to be born” from “give birth” and “cause to give birth” (subject, the midwife). However we must remember that a language like Manchu mixes causative and passive indiscriminately, and the clarity of the statement comes not from the morphology of the verb but from vocabulary and noun referents.

In our languages, it is probably through the verbs “to be” and “to have” that the subject-object relationship exhibits its most common aspect, and its most ambiguous one. The distinction between Latin *est mihi liber* (Russian, *u menja est' kniga*; Irish, *tá leabhar agam*)—subject, the noun “book”—and French “*j'ai un livre* (I have a book), where “book” is the direct object, is

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classic, although French goes back to Latin structure in passing from possession to belonging (*ce livre est à moi* = this book is mine). Of course, Georgian renders “to have” by two verbs of the same type as the verbs of sensation discussed above (cp. those meaning *J’ai faim* “I am hungry,” *J’ai la fièvre* “I have a fever,” *Je dors* “I am sleeping”), having recourse in the future to the suppletism of active transitive forms. In Japanese, the two verbs meaning “to have” require the dative mark (*ni*) for the possessor and the “nominative” mark for the thing possessed, and they are at the same time verbs of existence.

We cannot consider here a general presentation of the interferences of syntax in vocabulary, word order or verbal indices, the feature “determined” or “non-determined,” the class of the noun indicating the possessed or the possessor. Any grammatical description runs the risk of using inadequate terms when it is transferred from one language to another. Let us simply say that it would be an error to believe that French, for example, can serve as a basis for definitions even for internal usage and for describing simple and clear relationships. Just as “to have” in Greek also means “to be” ( $\kappa\alpha\kappa\omega\varsigma \ \epsilon\chi\epsilon\iota\nu$ ) in French it is a false transitive, as was pointed out by E. Benveniste. It is the preferred auxiliary of predicate nouns designating condition or state (in French, “*j’ai faim, peur, froid*” = “I have hunger, fear, cold” = “I *am* hungry, afraid, cold”) which in other languages calls on “to be” or an intransitive verb. These fixed groups, in which the verbal sign for “having” is added to a noun, thus recalling the structure of languages that have not developed the verbs “to be” and “to have,” and replace them with a simple verbal projection, in an *intransitive* conjugation, of the noun-object. Thus it is that Youkagire says “I have (a)-reindeer,” as Blackfoot says, “I have (a)-son;” these “verbs” are comparable to those that in the same languages mean “I-am-father,” “It-is-winter,” and so on, but Youkagire opposes to them “I give (a)-reindeer,” which also comes from the verbal projection of the noun “reindeer,” but in a *transitive* structure. In French, the equivocal nature of transitivity is protracted with the impersonal phrase “*il y a*” (there is, are) that suppresses all reference of the object to a real subject—unless we admit that the locative referent “*y*” partially takes the place of one, an interesting hypothesis

given the role of “locative-subjects” in certain languages. In any case, the French order is reminiscent of the Chinese, still more at liberty to ignore the “subject” of “*yǒu*” (*y avoir, avoir*) since the phrase without subject (*yǒu jiu*—“there is some wine”) is primary.

No doubt, it is in their use as auxiliaries that “to have” and “to be” best show the structural effects of the subject-object relationship on verbal diathesis. For example, in French the parallelism between the auxiliary “*avoir*” of the past analytical active and the auxiliary “*être*” of the present passive is worthy of note, while, unchanged at the heart of the verbal binomial, the participle states the presence of the passive, its noun affinity and its orientation toward the object. *J’ai écrit une lettre* (“I have written a letter, I wrote a letter”). Active and passive, act and state, combine in this perfect, while syntax and morphology, through a bizarre but etymological combination continue to give the verb itself the possibility of stressing an orientation toward the object, since in “*je l’ai écrite, cette lettre,*” (“*la lettre que j’ai écrite*”) if I consider the verb as a whole, its double concord with subject and object is not so very different from what we find in Basque, Caucasian and other languages. As for the forms using the auxiliary “*être*” and the subjective orientation, which mix the active intransitive pasts (of the type “*il est venu*”) with the present passive, they, too, exhibit all the degrees of ambiguity and osmose between the act and the state (cp. “*il est sorti*” = “he is out,” and “*il est sorti à midi,*” “he went out at noon;” “*les lettres sont écrites,*” “the letters are written,” and “*les lettres sont écrites par ma secrétaire,*” “the letters were written by my secretary”; and the difference in French between “*il est rentré,*” “he is come in,” and “*il a rentré,*” (rec. fr. = “he has come in”), and that of “*il a fui*”/“*il s’est enfui*”—cp. German “*er ist ans Ufer geschwommen,*” “he swam to the shore,” “*er hat den ganzen Tag geschwommen,*” “he has swum all day”).

\* \* \*

The interferences of “to be” and “to have” together with their morphological and syntactical incidences thus open a central perspective in the direction of the linguistic concept of *transitivity*. It is by circumscribing this concept that we discern its limits and penetrate to the heart of the subject-object relationship.

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Therefore, let us attempt a global definition of this concept that arises from syntax, word order, vocabulary and diathesis at the same time, that may explode through the entire statement or affect only one part, that may indeed remain partially or totally within the verb in the form of “incorporated” objects, or indices of persons or class.

In the light of syntax, classical languages have taught us to go *stella duce* with the compass of the nominative/accusative relationship, which is satisfied with setting aside everything that distracts it. We know, for example, that in Russian as in Greek, “rock,” direct object of the verb “to throw,” may be projected to the dative-instrumental (βάλλειν λίθον and βάλλειν λίθῳ), while Russian transitivity tips the scales toward the accusative when the wind rocks the tree but toward the instrumental when the tree rocks the branch (*kačat' čto* and *kačat' čem*). Latin hesitates between *pluit sanguinem* and *pluit sanguine*. Within the province of the accusative itself, the object-relationship is mixed with other relationships, and the accusative of direction in the Latin *eo Romam* may join the other in a genetic perspective of the orientation toward the object. “Double” accusatives line up the patient and the object of the action (Latin *doceo pueros grammaticam*) over against a third person agent, while Japanese, according to some, has “double subjects” (marked by *ga*). A secondary transitivity develops due to the preverbal composition (cp. Latin *obsideo/obsido*, transitive, to *sedeo/sido*, intransitive, and Old Slavic *osěsti* to *sěsti*). The “internal object” (Gr. νοσεῖν νόσον, French *vivre sa vie*) brings the accusative or direct object into the intransitive field. Certain particularities of the subject and verb even bring this case over within the pole of the passive: thus for impersonal turns (from archaic Latin *vitam vivitur* to Medieval Latin *Matthaeum legitur*, from the Greek ἀσκητέον ἐστὶ τὴν ἀρετὴν, to French *il a été rendu compte* or to dialectic German *es wird nur noch einen Walzer getanzt*) or the personal turns whose subject is the passive metamorphosis of a receiver, aligned on the object by the active (Gr. διδάσκεται τὴν σοφίαν; English, “he was given a book”).

To the advances of the transitive into the intransitive correspond inverse advances. The use of a partitive (“genitive”) with a “transitive” verb is well known. Disguised in French by the



attribution of the partitive function to the article, which restores a surreptitious transitivity, (*boire l'eau/boire de l'eau* = to drink water/to drink some water) it is plainly seen in Slavic and even in Greek, in which, however, the old syntax of Riemann and Cucuel claimed to explain it by an implied accusative. Negation, which stresses the partial or indeterminate nature of the object (and in French even includes a partial idea: *ne... pas, point, goutte*) may require the partitive (French, *je ne veux pas de ça*) and, in Slavonic, the genitive. It is not a question in this case of a "rektion" of case, but of a mutation of the verbal category. Yukagir (northeast Siberia) may serve as a revealer here, since the negative form of the transitive verb causes a change in its conjugation and transfers it to the intransitive. French, with its compound negation, incorporates substantive ideas into the verbal field ("*pas*," etc.) that inflect the predicate toward nominalization. As a matter of fact, the negative genitive of Slavonic has been compared to the genitive that follows a noun of action and the pair affirmative/transitive, and its negation, to the Russian pairing *čitaju knigu/čtenie knigi*.

Another mutation in the transitive relationship affects in Slavonic the nouns of animated beings, that have developed from old Slavonic an object-function bearing the sign of the genitive (exception being the feminine singular): a need for clarity, it is sometimes said, born of the ambiguities inherent in the endings and a free word order. But the problem is not only that of the formation of a hybrid case called "genitive-accusative"; it is that of non-transitivity or detransitivation, which appears in other forms in Spanish, Rumanian, Armenian dialects and elsewhere. In Spanish, where, in the absence of case, the process is upheld by a preposition—*a*; in Rumanian it is *p(r)e*—the indirect object began to dislodge the other in the eleventh century. Proper nouns were the first to be affected, followed by personal nouns and personified nouns (*la madre ama a su hijo; amar a la patria; saludamos a la libertad.*)

The Armenian dialects of eastern Armenia and Anatolia put the object that designates a living being into the dative, while still being able, as in Spanish, to include within the limits of transitivity certain indeterminate personal nouns ("I saw a young girl/I saw the young girl": here we may also speak of Turkish

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influence, cf. below). It is quite certain that, by virtue of their important function as agents or subjects, personal nouns, and up to a point those of animate beings, may in certain cases appear incompatible with the servile function of the direct regime, as if they feared some “violation of the object,” to be disregarded only when it is a question of inanimate things, essential neuters, insensitive to nominative differentiation. But that is the same as positing the existence of *noun classes*, or constructing a bridge between Spain and the Caucasus—where this latter category plays an important role—and even beyond. The constraining nature of the objective case disturbs not only person-objects. We see the development in modern Russian—after verbs of speech or narration, knowledge, memory/forgetfulness—of an indirect object (with the preposition *o*) which tends to supersede the direct object, felt as curt and overdefinite (cp. *govorit'*, *rasskazat'*, *znat'*, *zabyt'*, *pomnit' čto* and *o čem*).

To the taboo and eclipsing of the direct object sometimes corresponds the taboo and eclipsing of the subject. There are classes of beings that we do not dare put as subjects of an active verb, so that we must have recourse to a *passive of respect*: this is what Abraham did when in the plain of Mambre he asked the angels of God to take water and wash their feet. In Swedish, where respect often forbids the use of the pronoun *Ni* (second person plural) as subject and calls for its replacement by a title for highly-placed persons, Eric Wistrand has pointed out a similar phenomenon when the title is unknown. The mutation into passive, across an invisible frontier, leads us from these taboos to ignorance of, absence and concealment of the agent which characterizes not only Semitic (Arabic, for example) but also French. The French passive with an agent belongs above all to descriptions of disasters, and juridical, administrative, historical contexts where the agentive reference tends to founder in the depersonalization of the act. It is a fundamentally binary structure, with only one noun referent (as in intransitive structures) that often tends to reject as an artificial invention of pedagogues the correlation in three terms “the teacher/praises/the student”—“the student/is praised/by the teacher.”

One of the languages in which the noun-object undergoes the most significant changes is Finnish, which manifests in this way—

—as shown by A. Sauvageot—the inadequacy of linguistic terminology and its categories of Western origin. There is no true accusative except for the personal pronoun and the singular personal interrogative. An object, in the genitive called *total object* (the action of which it is the object is considered as achieved: “the father makes an axe handle during the day”) is distinguished from a *partial object* in the partitive (when completion of the act is not considered relevant): negative verbs and verbs of hope or expectation are followed by this partitive, which recalls the similar Russian genitives. However, with an intransitive verb the same partitive may be conceived of (through “linguistic conscience” and grammatical teaching) as the “subject” of the verb. We also see the emergence in certain cases (with a third person singular of the active) of a function of “partial subject” assumed by the abessive (a sort of ablative from which the partitive comes). Finally, the second person singular of the *imperative* requires an object in the nominative case. Nentsi (a Samoyed language having an autonomous accusative) has a curious variant of this phenomenon: it replaces its accusative by a nominative *when the substantive bears determined signs* (for example, the possessive sign: “give them *their* wood.”) This sign is essential in Nentsi, which has—as do other Samoyed and Finno-Ugrian languages—both *subjective* and *objective* conjugations, the latter having indices for subject and object in the verb: their differentiation is only partially that of transitive and intransitive, since a *transitive verb passes over to the subjective conjugation when its object carries no specific accent or interest*. It can thus be understood that the accent put on the object is an important morphological and syntactical criterion that may separate not only two conjugations but a second person imperative from a third... In certain languages of Oceania, Gabelentz noted long ago, and interpreted in terms of diathesis, the difference between “kill a pig,” which would require the signs of the active, and “kill the pig,” (the same for “I have eaten it all”: determined object) which he said requires passive. Closer to us, Georgian opposes an “ergative” construction of the imperative, with the object in the nominative, and a non-ergative construction (object in the dative-accusative) reserved for absolute prohibitions. Who

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knows if the morphology of the verb (aoristic and optative in the first case, belonging to the series of the present in the second) gives a mechanical account for this phenomenon, or if it conceals deeper structures?

In many languages (Caucasian, Dravidian, African, Polynesian) the line of demarcation between transitive and intransitive is still more dubious. It is impossible to separate in them the twin ideas that we isolate by morphology or meaning: "to buy" and "to be bought," "to take a wife" and "to be taken as wife," "to pour" and "to flow," "to sow" and "to be sown," (Margi, northern Nigeria); "to know," and "to be known," "to see" and "to appear," "to heat," and "to be warm" (Kanarese, India); "to arrive" and "to bring," "to break" and "to be broken," "to come into the world (to be born)" and "to bring into the world (to bear)," "something cooks, dries, boils," and "(I) put something to cook, dry, boil" (Lezghe, Caucasus); and of course "to kill" and "to die" (Basque, *hil*). But is it not on occasion the same in Greek, English or French? There is no lack of verbs that may have the same noun as subject or as object (a subjective use and an objective use, so to speak) without a contradiction in their meaning: when I burn wood, break a dish, turn the key, bow my head, and so on, the wood burns, the dish breaks, the key turns, my head bows. "He grew tomatoes"/"Tomatoes grew (in his garden)."

We thus approach the structures called *ergative*, which it is time we should attempt to explain after having several times touched on them lightly. They are found in a wide variety of forms and with an extension that varies according to the language. Better known since to the knowledge of Caucasian and Basque languages has been added that of the American Indian, Siberia, Eskimo and Austronesia, they have become the object of a more precise definition. We call "ergative" the case of the "subject"-agent in a transitive sentence. In general, this case may be considered as "dynamic" and opposed to an "inert" case (or absolute or "zero-case") that characterizes the "direct object" in the same sentence but marks the function-"subject" in an intransitive sentence where it is alone with the verb. We also designate this inert case as "nominative," which is only halfway fitting. As for the overall definition, it is false because of its very

terminology, since it rests on a concept of transitivity/intransitivity just as arbitrary as those of subject, nominative, and so on. Let us consider the lines of demarcation of the ergative. First, they do not necessarily coincide with those of the transitive and intransitive. The ergative penetrates into the intransitive structure in Basque, where about forty verbs ("to last, boil, shine," among others) require it, while dialectical Lezgue opposes the ergative of "to run" to the nominative of "to leap." Conversely, in Aleut (a language with two cases in which the ergative structure is borne by a "relative-case" opposed to the absolute case), the ergative structure covers only a part of the "transitive" mass: "the boy is carrying an oar" receives the ergative mark (*boy* in the relative case, *oar* in the absolute case) only if the verb has an "objective-subjective" conjugation (which draws attention to the oar), but not if the verb has a subjective conjugation (cf. above) because then "boy" and "oar" are both in the absolute case, not differentiated (which distinguishes Aleut from Eskimo).<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, the limit of ergativity may appear under the concurrent action of oblique cases (genitive, dative, instrumental) or through other criteria (gender, number, class, determination or nondetermination of the noun, verb tense) that introduce different mechanisms or nuances. In Tsakhour the ergative, generalized in the plural, affects in the singular only nouns of human agents ("the mother struck the child"), while the animal agent ("the horse struck the child") is put into genitive (cf. the genitive "subject" of the reflexive impersonal in Komi-Zyriane).

Formerly, the affinities of the ergative with the instrumental and the traditional interpretation of the "nominative" that is paired with it suggested the interpretation of ergative structures as passive structures, and the "subject" in the ergative in a transitive sentence as an agent in disguise: "the hunter (erg.) killed the bear (nom.)" = "by the hunter has been killed (pass.) the bear (the true subject)." A convenient and reassuring interpretation with its implied Indo-Europeanism which left

<sup>1</sup> We may compare the French "transitive-transitive" of "*Je mange la pomme*," which answers the question, "*Qu'est-ce que tu manges?*" and draws attention to the apple, and the "transitive-intransitive" sense, "*Je mange-la-pomme*" which answers the question, "*Qu'est-ce que tu fais?*" (both separated by more or less subtle differences in intonation, equivalent to the difference in conjugation in Aleut). Cp. what is said above with regard to Nentsi conjugations.

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untouched the classic privilege of the nominative and restored the unity of intransitive and transitive. However, it is contrary to linguistic conscience and to common sense. A Lezghe who *goes out* with a young girl (it is then in the nominative: the verb is intransitive) remains (or even becomes highly) active when he *kisses* her (a transitive verb, it is the young girl who becomes nominative, whereas the young Lezghe becomes ergative), and even when he says that *he loves her*, which compels him to “descend” to the dative, the young girl remaining a nominative. The three statements are all the less felt as diathetically diverging because there is no passive in Lezghe. Why should there be? “My father was killed” only differs from “My father is dead” because of the presence of an *implied* ergative that may always be made explicit if necessary. However, granting the ergative sentence is not passive, what will its status be with regard to a sentence using the nominative/accusative relationship (or subject/object) of our familiar horizons?

We can try to achieve this by inverting the systems of reference and redefining, by reference to the ergative, the nominative/accusative structure so as to destabilize it and give it back its liberty, along with its contingency. A nominative/accusative relationship is one that develops, morphologizes (renders automatic, obligatory) a category of *subject* by making no distinction between the case of the agent of the transitive verb and that of the noun referent of the intransitive verb (nominative) while imposing on the transitive verb a special case of the object (accusative) and a diathetic movement characterized by a passive mutation. Indo-European neuters with their nominative similar to the accusative and their inertia or natural allergy as inanimates to function as agents may yet within this system stand for the last vestiges of ergativity. The zones of interference of diathesis, when the verb is neither active nor passive but middle or impersonal, might well stand for another. We thus arrive at the affirmation that in the end languages are a mixture of nominative/accusative structures (subject/object) and ergative structures, and an attempt has been made to classify them accordingly.

This classification brings up one or two fundamental principles. First, that of noun classes, already noticed in passing here. Some nouns are in some way agents or objects by their nature, and

from divinity down to inanimate objects, via man/woman, animal, plant, we may imagine a series of decreasingly effective agents, with widely varying limits. Hence, a number of morphological marks, abstraction, mechanization, transformation into phonetic residues; traces of this principle are to be found everywhere, and the noun gender itself may preserve its reflection. Thus we see Latin distinguish between *fulmen* and *fulgur*, *lumen* and *lux*, *sopor* and *somnus*. E. Laroche discovered in Hittite a series of objects-agents (water, building, furniture, speech, illness, season, parts of the body, urine) distinct from the plain object when they function as active principles (at times by virtue of magic beliefs). A genetic explanation of the morphological signs of the noun has been suggested on this basis: a noun of high "agentivity" need not carry a special mark insofar as its presence in the sentence corresponds to its natural function, while a noun of low agentivity must have one so as not to be confused with an object functioning as agent. Hence, the ergative mark, that might have *started from the lowest level of the hierarchy of classes* to become generalized later in various ways. If on the contrary we admit that the agentive function, being so obvious, had no need of being marked anywhere, a zero-sign of the subject may well be generalized (origin of the nominative) while the object function develops a special mark (accusative). Thus the accusative, reflection of a concept of subject dominated by the agent, would be *derived from the top of the hierarchy of classes*. This hypothesis, very concretely, was an attempt to account for the multiple overlappings of ergative and accusative structures, rarely present in the same language in its pure state. Sometimes pronouns, especially personal pronouns, are an exception to ergativity, whether they have a nominative and an accusative or whether they are free from any sign of agentivity, of subject and object. Sometimes they are alone in having an accusative structure, and then either the ergative sign does not appear (as in English) or it is reserved for non-intelligent animals and inanimates, while intelligent animals and humans show simultaneously the three marks of agent, subject and object. In certain Australian languages, if the agent is lower in the hierarchy than its object, the verb changes its nature.

Thus we touch on the second major phenomenon, inseparable



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from the first, that concerns the essence of the verb, because the “degeneration” of the ergative structure into an accusative structure is bound, as G. Klimov reminds us; to the development of diathesis. If the explanation of the ergative as a passive is not satisfactory, it is because it attracts the verb to one of the poles of diathesis that we conceive *a posteriori* in terms of specified polarity. The fluctuations of diathesis, that will after apply to the noun forms of the verb (the participle in Hittite and even in French: what is *une place* “*assise*”? *une rue* “*passante*”?<sup>2</sup>) are inextricably mixed with syntactic changes in noun referents. Let us use Georgian here as a guideline.

The Georgian ergative is the particular aspect of a multiform noun-verb relationship, combining three series of essential marks: case, tense and verbal indication. The “subject” of the “transitive” verb is ergative only in the aorist. In the series of present, it is in the “nominative” (as for “intransitives”), in the series of perfect it is in the dative. Thus again appears, based on tense, the syntactic division presented above, with regard to Lezghé, on a basis of meaning (to go out, to embrace, to love): a suggestive comparison. Let us clarify the system, beginning with the perfect. In the perfect, the “subject” in the dative is reflected with an indication of indirect *object* and the “object” in the nominative with an indication of *subject*! In other words, the perfect of transitives is a suppletive form borrowed from a factual *intransitive*. Furthermore, this latter is close to the passive with which it is sometimes confused, and it may carry a series of features that reveal this characteristic (suffixing of the verb “to be” and vowels of the “versional” type, for example). “Vakhtang has undoubtedly lost his horse,” is literally, “to Vakhtang (dative) the horse (nominative) it-to him-has-undoubtedly-been-lost.” But the active value of the sentence compels us to speak rather of a dative emergence of the subject, the nominative function of the horse being only in appearance: the act is considered in its

<sup>2</sup> To say nothing of “*J’ai vu manger les chiens*,” dear to L. Tesnière (*manger* or *être mangés*?), “*J’ai vu couler le navire*” (*coulé* = sunk by someone or *coulant* = sinking of itself), “*J’ai vu faire ça à* = (*par!*) *des enfants*,” and so on. “*Manger*” hovers between a subject which may be subject or object of “*voir*,” and an object which may be its subject.

exterior result (“undoubtedly”) and has no author, but Vakhtang is directly and principally concerned (cf. the dative in the Greek passive perfect and the nuance separating it from the complement of agent.)

But what do we have in the present? If we consider the nominative here as an equally inert case, the dative mark which the “direct object” then takes is the true bearer of the “transitive” structure, and its role is to emphasize the orientation of the verb toward the object (dative of direction). In the perspective of the present (and the future) there is a dynamic tension toward the object that contrasts with the static presence of this latter in the perfect. However, the parallel between the two *datives of emergence* is all the more remarkable: a directional emergence of the object in the present, an internal thematic emergence of the subject in the perfect. In front of these two essential orientations, the subject-function of the two nominatives is only a reflex appearance, as it is in intransitive structures, in which the “nominative-subject” actually shows a noun/verb relationship that has remained (or become) *neuter, alien to all tension specified by case*.

In the *aorist*, finally, the orientation is no longer that of the act towards the external object or the internal subject but one towards the author or agent, which assumes the ergative sign. It is in the “logic” of a “pure” temporality, in a state of equilibrium between the static perfect, dominated by the apparent result and the oblique relationship of its action to its subject, and the dynamic present, with its dative emergence of the object-end, already on the way to accusative immediacy. The aoristic sentence thus appears as a process in which the act-event grows clearer in the light of its point of origin (the author), where neither the effort of the present toward the end, nor the apparent and definitive result of the perfect, can conceal the highly important role of the agent in the act.

To what extent do the indices of “subject” and “object” present in the verb inflect the prospect suggested by syntax and tense? Do they not outline a prospect of a “transitive” type that is ahead of the other? It must be noted, however, that the criterion of indices does not permit the positing of a distinct object-function. Aside from the third person, which is an exception, *direct*

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*object and indirect object have the same indices.* In a parallel manner, aside from the verb, the first and second person pronouns do not have the nominative/ergative/dative distinction, reserved to the third person (which thus confirms its appartenance to the noun rather than to the pronoun). On the whole, transitivity in Georgian is only sketchy, despite appearances. More accurately, we have separate emergences of a “subjective” function (dative in the perfect); an instrumental function (ergatives of the aorist); and an “objective” function (datives in the present) on a background of mixtures and ambivalences carried by inert “nominatives,” common to “transitive” and “intransitive” structures.

Apart from the Caucasian horizons, the ergative suggests various comparisons. On the syntactic level, the group of *Turkish* languages specifies the accusative function in connection with the *determined* nature of the object, over against an inert nominative function, that defines the non-determined object and the subject at the same time. The determination of the noun thus serves as revealer in the Turkish “accusative”, just as the tense marks of the present in the case of Georgian “dative-accusative”; and Chuvash, which replaces the Turkish accusative with a dative-accusative, affords a remarkable parallel. The incidence of tense is shown at the same time in the Turkish past tense in —*miş*— which eclipses the agentive function of the subject, as in the Georgian perfect. *Elsewhere*, the incidence of tense appears by means of innumerable combinations of syntax and morphology or verbal diathesis. We have already mentioned the formation of the French present perfect to which we should add the passive transitive with an active sense, such as *Je me suis coupé (le main)* = “I cut my hand,” the fruit of a partial or total superposition of the subject and of the object in the reflexive voice. Greek has “second” perfects in an active form and passive sense (of the type ἔλωλα, cf. ἔλλυμαι and not ἔλλυμι)...

In a general way, in languages with an ergative structure the past is highly revealing. We can see its link with the ergative (for the past unreal) in certain Algonquin or Australian languages. In Basque, it is in the past, too (in the same way as the eventual mood and the third person of the imperative) that the indices of the verb are transformed. The prefix *-n* designating the *subject*

(first person singular) of the *intransitive verb* and the *object of the transitive* in the present (*n-ago* = “I stay;” *n-ahar* = “he brings me”) will designate the *subject of the transitive* in the imperfect (*n-eharren* = “I brought it”). R. Lafon has shown that there was a correspondence between this inversion and a passage from the “root” to a radical (*-e-bar-*, expanding into *-e* in the example given) having an *ambivalent* value. But the problem is greater, and we saw above how, in another language with an ergative (Kerek) the transitive verb takes on the intransitive form in the second past and reverses its suffixal indices, which then designate the object instead of the subject.

Throughout all these languages, the object-subject relationship seems to have originated in a global statement in which it appeared as indices. It became more definite and developed in various directions through the specification of the verb and the expansion of the statement into one or two noun referents.

We could risk genetic hypotheses, imagine a former syntax in which the subject-verb-object relationship came from a global statement having two terms (“intransitive” verb with only one noun referent) which “captured” and absorbed another juxtaposed global statement. Let the theoretical example be “The bear is dead (has been killed; a verb carrying an index of agent, but imprecise). (It is) the hunter (who) did it.” The passage from this paratax to a syntax involving “hunter” into the first statement and eventually providing it with a more and more abstract mark (ergative ending) cannot be dismissed; this would give the instrumental ergative a choice place in the genesis of declension. The simultaneousness of the two successive statements and of the integrated statement also seems to show through the fracture in the diathesis, in a language like Fulani in which, the passive with an agent being impossible, we must say, “The goat has been killed: it is the lion.”

Several Far Eastern languages allow of this or that calling into question of the subject-object relationship, different to be sure, but just as radical. In Japanese the verb is not personal, although its honorary forms posit definite relationships with the personal nouns in the utterance. The reading of a relationship of the object-subject type may be done simultaneously through the marks *ga* (nominative in appearance) and *o* (accusative or objective in

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appearance) of the syntax, and through the word order (the “object” is between the “subject” and the verb). However, on one hand a third mark, that of the “theme” (*wa*) may apply to a subject as well as to an object or a circumstance, if they are the prime concern of the statement. On the other hand, it is possible to perform “conversions” of different kinds of marks: the conversion *ga/ni* (for example, when the intransitive verb takes on a passive form—and then the mark *ga* is opposed to the mark of agent *ni* which emphasizes the opposing nature of the action; or when a verb has two versions, transitive and intransitive) and the conversion *ga/o* that may be added to the former and end in a doubling of *ga*, as in the potential sentence, *Taroo ga(ni)/eigo ga/hanaseru* = “Taro/English/can speak.” The same *ga* may also relay a genitive mark or alternate with *wa* (it gives an exclusive value to the noun it marks). This elasticity, so different from our rather rigid subject-object axis, may compensate for the absence of reference to the person of the subject in the verb, and gives to “linguistic existence” one of its living sources.

The destabilization of the subject gives plasticity even to a language like Tagal (Philippines) insofar as the sentence “Go look for the book in the room with this light” may, it seems, have three different “subjects,” according to need (the book, the room or the light), on the basis of three different “passive” structures of the verb.

Let us wind off our study with Chinese. It will help us to escape the morphological attraction that has weighed us down so far, blocking all perspectives. Here are problems floating around us in an enjoyable state of weightlessness. How can we lay hold on them? Let us try to serialize them and approach them as best we can, armed with our noun/verb distinction, beginning with the binary structure (verb and one sole noun referent) which more or less corresponds to our intransitive sentences. In *xia yǔ* (*il tombe de la pluie* = rain is falling) and *bù xia yǔ le* (it is no longer raining) the verb comes first and its noun referent (*yǔ*) follows. However, the inverse order is also possible (*yǔ bù xia le* = *the* rain is no longer falling). In the same way, *lái kèrén le* (*A* visitor is coming) may be inverted to *kèrén lái le* = “here is the guest” (the visitor, determined) or

“the guest has come.” The anteposition of the noun seems to suggest a *mark of determination* that may sketch a *subject-function*, as its postposition seems to suggest an absence of determination which may foreshadow an *object-function*. For at this level, the definition “subject/object” is no more “impertinent” than a definition in terms of subject/predicate relationship or even noun/verb (cf. the relationship between the two functions of *le*—verbal “suffix” and final “particle”). We may also say that the word order represents the succession of a determined *theme* (which may be the “verb” or the “noun”) and of an actualizer of the theme, rejected (passive) into the indeterminate, by the very fact that it *projects* (active) its partner into the determined field. Does not French, by opposing “*il tombe de la neige (de la pluie)*” (with an “*il*” which might be a sort of “determined article” of the verb) to “*la neige (la pluie) tombe*” in fact couple a verb *acting as theme* with an indetermined noun, itself standing in the *position of, if not acting as object* (“*de la neige*”) ? If not, how is it that you so seldom say in French “*de la neige (de la pluie) tombe*” ?

Let us go on to the ternary structure with two noun referents for the same verb—*xià* (to descend, to fall). May we, with *jī xià dàn* (“the hen lays eggs”) speak of a transitive statement? I can just as well understand something like “from the hen there drop eggs.” However, I have already given an agentive value to “hen” beyond its value as theme, due to its position (different from that of “eggs,” “rain,” “snow”) in the scale of beings, while at the same time “eggs” takes its place as object. It is of course more tricky to know if a Chinese person thinks, “The tree is losing its leaves” rather than “From the tree the leaves are falling,” but less difficult to make out an idea of transitivity when a person-agent intervenes: *wǎ dǎ to le* (I hit him). Thus there is a transitivity due to the hidden influence of noun classes on the interplay between the theme and its actualizers, in the framework of word order. But word order may be changed and not only bring the object closer to the theme but identify the two. Alongside the type *shu, wǒ mǎi le* (“*Les livres, je les ai achetés*” or “*Ils ont été achetés par moi*”) that sets off the theme-object, other types bring about a morphological emergence. The object advances, preceded by *ba* (the “handle” which permits

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us to grasp it in its *determined* form): *wǒ bǎ nēi-běn shū gei tā le* (“Je lui ai donné ce livre-là” = “I gave him that book”) or followed by special markers (*bèi*: *jào*, *ràng*) introducing the agentive function of the noun coupled with it (our subject): *tā ràng wǒ dǎ le*. The object is now in the lead and we translate it by a passive: “He has been beaten by me,” which is a simple equivalence (it is less erroneous to speak of a *Chinese ergative*, since *bǎ* may also figure in intransitive structures, and the equivalence of Chinese “prepositions” with ergative endings would be acceptable, although the tool called preposition here is very particular, and the role of word order makes the assimilation to ergative a postulate).

The “lexical” nature of transitivity creates the presence of objects independently of their mention (*wǒ chi* means “I eat it (them)” or “I eat some of it”) while maintaining “ghost objects” on the horizon of certain verbs. If in French one can say both “je mange” and “je mange du riz,” Chinese cannot render “I eat” unless it adds the noun for “cooked rice” (*wǒ chi fàn*) thus freeing it of any concrete meaning. It is the same with the word “man” (*rén*) which follows *mà* (to insult), the word “affair” (*dōngxi*) which follows *mǎi* (to buy), the word *shū* (book) which accompanies the act of reading or teaching.

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Let us close on these empty objects the perspectives of this study, both sketchy and often lost in the forest of problems. The reader will at least have glimpsed, in the thickets where word order and syntax, morphology and word meaning become tangled, the complex implications of a relationship placed under the signs of Janus and Proteus at the same time. Our terminology itself—that we have often put in quotation marks—is misleading us. Under the philosophical and Latin names (of Greek origin) “subject” and “object,” more than two thousand years old, the deep structures of speech appear somewhat disguised. But why change them? Names, like categories, are nothing but guides or signposts. We may lock ourselves up in the space they define or look for an opening. Is it not better to move on the frontiers where names *are lost* than to coin new ones? It is in *disappearing* that the goddesses of antiquity, disguised as mortals, took off their



disguises and laid bare their divine nudity: *pedes vestis defluxit ad imos/Et vera incessu patuit dea.*

Then our eyes disclose invisible structures under the veil of categories and isolated languages. Through the mist of “mixed” can be glimpsed the past and future sun of all possible specifications. Each particular language (even more so if we include the significant lapses of children and adults) discloses the complete model of the human language, which is not only a model of codes or laws, but of life.

The subject-object relationship is at the heart this revelation (together with the noun-verb relationship, the word order and tonal modulation itself, which are still more profound mutants of it). Its metamorphoses are a “verb alchemy” which it is the linguist’s duty to make accessible, not to make hermetic. This was the aim of the present article, remote as it is from the “great work.” At least, let us hope that we have helped amateurs to assess the weight and affinities of essential elements which are present in all speech: an assessment which lends itself to concrete and liberating effects,<sup>3</sup> even if it only succeeds in defining the weight which fastens any message to the cycles of the earth.

<sup>3</sup> A philosophical reflection on the word “civilization” might have been a fitting conclusion to this study. Everything that was written about its “change in meaning” in the eighteenth century (contemporary, furthermore, with the change in meaning of the word “object” in philosophy) comes to a game of seesaw in the balance of transitivity of the corresponding verb. The accent has thus passed from the “civilizing subject”—which called to mind the missionary civilizing the savages and collaborating in the long and difficult “work” of “civilizing a people” (Racine, seventeenth century)—to the “civilized object” (the people): “The civilization of a people” from then on changes into a noun group marked with the sign of *subjective genitive* and takes on the meaning of *state* proper to the object transformed into subject. Soon philosophers such as the English Buckle (nineteenth century) claimed, for example, that religion, like literature or the constitution of a political body, was the “effect,” and not the “cause,” of civilization. They thus discovered, unknowingly, in the light of the far-off sun of language... the moon of their thought... The word “organization” (as near to action as it is to state, to its “interior” verb as to its noun façade) and many others have analogous, very philosophical, balances. Do we not see *pollution* (in front of our eyes and under our noses in which the “it” is confirmed) lose its reference to the agent *polluter* in the same way to become the state of the *polluted*?