

# Preface

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## **Non-canonical Marking of Subjects and Objects**

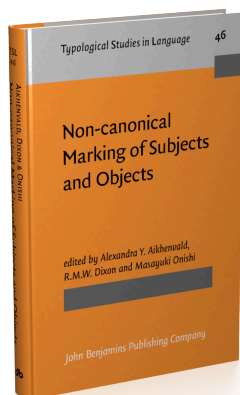
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Masayuki Onishi**

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## Preface

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In many languages the subject of an intransitive verb (S) is coded in the same way, for every intransitive verb. Similarly for the subject of a transitive verb (A) and the object of a transitive verb (O). However, there are a number of languages which employ a different strategy. For most intransitive verbs, S function is marked in a set way (called the canonical marking) whereas for a small set of verbs S is marked in one or more other ways — these are referred to as non-canonical marking. Similarly for A and O. For example, in a nominative–accusative language, S and A functions may be marked by nominative case for most verbs (the canonical marking) but by dative or genitive case for a small set of verbs (the non-canonical marking). In an absolutive–ergative language, A function will receive the canonical ergative marking with most transitive verbs, but may receive non-canonical locative or dative marking, with two small sets of verbs.

There have been a number of studies of non-canonical marking for subject and object in individual languages, but the present book is the first cross-linguistic study of the phenomenon. The Introduction sets out the theoretical questions which must be confronted in such a study. The first question concerns what are the defining properties of (intransitive and transitive) subject and of (transitive) object in each particular language, when these syntactic functions receive canonical marking. One then needs to investigate which of these properties apply to the various kinds of non-canonically marked subject and object. We here consider both morphological and syntactic properties of subjects and objects. These include case marking, verbal agreement, constituent order, constraints on coreferentiality, argument omission, relativisation, targets of valency-changing derivations, imperatives, pivot conditions and antecedent control over reflexive pronouns.

The second major question concerns the semantic basis for non-canonical marking. The verbs which receive a certain type of non-canonical marking tend to be semantically homogenous within a given language. Do these semantic classes, and kinds of non-canonical marking they relate to, correlate across languages? In the Introduction, Masayuki Onishi suggests that the types of verbs involved are, typically, those referring to physiological states or events, inner feelings (or psychological experiences); verbs of perception, cognition, liking, etc.; verbs with modal meanings of wanting, obligation, trying, etc.; predicates expressing happenings; and verbs of possession, existing and lacking.

Each of the eight individual contributors were sent an earlier draft of the Introduction, written by Masayuki Onishi on the basis of extended discussions with Alexandra Aikhenvald, R.M.W. Dixon and other colleagues in the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology. They followed the suggested guidelines, producing a homogenous volume in which a number of genetically and areally disparate languages are considered from a similar perspective. All of the chapters are in terms of basic linguistic theory, eschewing any of the formal theories which come and go with such frequency that anything cast in terms of them soon becomes antiquated. The final stage was for the Introduction to be revised in the light of results from the individual studies, setting out the conclusions that can presently be drawn, together with directions for further research on this topic. The tentative generalisations are significant. For example, if non-canonically marked subjects have grammatical property X then they will also show property Y; if verbs of semantic set A take non-canonical marking then so will verbs of semantic type B.

The contributors are leading specialists in their fields, each of whom has close knowledge of a particular language or linguistic area. We cover six language families or language isolates, picking out languages which are critically important for a cross-linguistic study of non-canonical marking. From the Indo-European family, Avery Andrews discusses Icelandic and Masayuki Onishi deals with Bengali (as an example of the kinds of non-canonical marking found in many languages from South Asia). Kristina Sands and Lyle Campbell discuss Finnish, while Martin Haspelmath presents a survey of what is found across the European linguistic area. There are two studies from different regions of South America—Gabriella Hermon deals with Imbabura Quechua from the Andes, while Alexandra Aikhenvald discusses Tariana from the lowlands of Amazonia. John Roberts discusses non-canonical marking in Amele, from New Guinea, and Masayoshi Shibatani deals with Japanese.

This is a pioneering study, dealing with a topic that is of prime theoretical importance and will be of interest to linguists of many persuasions. Typologists are likely to be fascinated by the parameters used, and will doubtless attempt alternative ways of interpreting them. The very fact of non-canonical marking, and its conditioning, poses a considerable challenge for formal theories, and linguists of these persuasions will need to study the volume, in order to account for the facts and generalisations presented. The cognitive implications of which types of verbs engender non-canonical marking (and how) calls out for study by psycholinguists.