

## **Subject, Topic and Perspective in Functional Grammar and in Philippine Missionary Grammar**

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### **Introduction**

In a previous article<sup>1</sup> I have shown that missionary linguists working in the Philippine area used a functional or pragmatic method in explaining linguistic phenomena, a method very similar to the modern method that goes by the name of Functional Grammar (FG). They used the term nominative in the meaning of Topic and Focus (without systematically making a distinction between these notions) and used other Latin case names (accusative, dative, etc.) predominantly to refer to semantic roles (Agent, Patient, Beneficiary, etc.) and not for describing morphosyntactic aspects.

It seems obvious to assume, as I in fact have done until now, that these missionaries had retained, within their pragmatic concept of nominative, the syntactic notion of Subject as well. For instance because the constituent that is Topic/Focus very often also is Subject, and because the term Subject was quite well established in these days as being the constituent to which the predicate refers. This assumption, however, appears to be false. In fact, they used the term Subject only with 'existential' sentences (with the verb 'to be', as in: 'An oak is a tree', etc.), but didn't use it when explaining sentences in which there is an animate Agent involved.

### **Questions**

The questions dealt with in this paper are:

- 1 Why did they not introduce new terms instead of the Latin case names, since the definitions and concepts that they use the case names for are so different from the traditional ones.
- 2 Why did they not use the term Subject when the subject functioned as Agent?

### **Conclusions**

In trying to find answers to these questions I have come to the following conclusions:

- 1 The traditional Latin case names didn't have to be replaced by new ones because the missionaries went back to the original perspectival meanings of these case

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<sup>1</sup> The Birth of Functional Grammar in the 'Austronesian school' of missionary linguistics, in: Otto Zwartjes e.a. (ed.), *Missionary Linguistics III*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam 2007

names (e.g. accusative as the case of direction/movement), and by doing so made them applicable within their pragmalinguistic analyses.

- 2 In Philippine Missionary Grammar (PMG) perspective is used as a central pragmatic linguistic concept, reflecting the way a speaker wants to present a State of Affairs in terms of backgrounding, foregrounding, topic, focus, direction, contrast, etc.
- 3 Phillipine Missionaries did not use Nebrija's 'introductiones latinae' as a reference model regarding the use of case names. In fact, what we can see here is a breach in the history of linguistics, the start of a new linguistic approach. They developed their own method of explaining linguistic phenomena and defined cases differently from that found in Nebrija or other grammars that were used at that time. In doing so, they developed a surprisingly modern method very much comparable with modern Functional (Discourse) Grammar (FG).
- 4 The method of PMG is not only comparable with that of FG. In fact, regarding the decision of these missionaries to leave out the notion of Subject in their analyses, they may even be considered to be a step ahead of modern pragmalinguistics. In FG, Subject (together with Object) is considered as a distinct level in the linguistic process of creating a sentence or utterance. In PMG, however, the syntactic notion of Subject is considered unapplicable in sentences where there is an actor involved, because the missionaries rightly saw that this level does not in any way contribute to the pragmatic presentation of these States of Affairs. Therefore, in FG the level of Subject (and Object) should be dismissed as well.