Argument suppression in Lakhota

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Split S languages like Lakota (Siouan language family) have been said to be more or less deficient in morphosyntactic devices by which pragmatic categories such as topic or focus can be shifted from one argument to another within clauses containing more than one argument (e.g. Van Valin 2001). In particular, such languages, by virtue of being role- rather than reference-dominated, can be expected to lack passive and antipassive constructions. This typological characteristic, however, does not preclude split S languages from having structural devices for backgrounding arguments, such as impersonalization strategies. This paper takes a fresh look at the inventory of potentially argument suppressing mechanisms such as passives and impersonals in Lakota. It turns out that in addition to hitherto somewhat under-described backgrounding mechanisms for transitive agents, transitive patients, and intransitive "subjects", Lakota also has a construction that, although structurally dissimilar to standard English style passives, is functionally equivalent to the latter to the extent that it serves to demote the transitive agent while optionally retaining it in the clause. This construction has, so far, not been dealt with in the literature on Lakota. Example:

(1)	*wicháša*	*ki*	*lé*	*mathó*	*kté-pi*
	man	the	this	bear	kill-PASS

'this man was killed by the/a bear/bears'

Although the passive marker *-pi* is homonymous with the animate plural agent marker it is derived from historically, *-pi* cannot be analyzed as a plural agent marker which is coreferential with the agent mathó 'bear(s)' in the above example because a singular translation is possible as well.

Lakota narrative structure and coreference phenomena provide further arguments in favor of an interpretation of *-pi* as a genuine passive. Clause initial position of an NP is associated with foregrounded status; since the patient in clauses of the above type is obligatorily fronted, it can be claimed to be as foregrounded as in a standard passive clause in which the agent is retained. Likewise, an interpretation of *-pi* as a plural agent marker is precluded in cases like

(2)	*a-ní-pha-pi*	*s'elé-ni-checa*
	[verb stem]-2SG.PAT-hit-PASS	[verb stem]-2SG.PAT-seem

'you seem to have been hit'

in which complement clause and matrix verb potentially share subject arguments (Rood and Taylor 1996:464).

REFERENCES

Rood, David and A. Taylor 1996. Sketch of Lakhota, a Siouan language. In: Sturtevant, William C. (ed.), *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 17, pp. 440-482. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.