Semantic and pragmatic functions in Plains Cree syntax

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Chapter 3

Syntactic Functions and Pragmatic Discourse Status

In traditional Algonquianist terminology, the term “actor” has been used as virtually synonymous with “subject”, and the term “goal” has substituted for “object”, but the very fact that Bloomfield (1946) preferred these non-standard syntactic terms for Algonquian is indication that he was not necessarily convinced that they really were equivalent to subject and object as grammatical relations. In the current chapter, the status of the syntactic functions subject and object will be discussed. This will primarily consist of a review of the debates over the status of two constructions in particular, both introduced in the preceding chapter: the Inverse, and the Unspecified Actor. Both of these constructions have at various times been analyzed as active or passive. The current analysis will illustrate the problems of making a determination of syntactic function status for the participant(s) involved in these constructions.

3.1 Inverse

The inverse has been variously and contradictorily analyzed as an active (e.g. Dahlstrom 1991, Wolfart 1991, etc.) and a passive (e.g. Jolley 1982, Rhodes 1976 on Ojibwa, etc.). The passive analysis has often hinged at least in part on the identity of form of the person markers. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, the person markers are almost completely identical across all Cree paradigms of the same Order (i.e. Independent, Conjunct, Imperative), and this similarity of form has at times been taken to indicate a similarity of syntactic role (i.e. subject), necessitating the interpretation of the inverse as passive. In contrast, as Wolfart (1991) points out, the notion of a voice alternation between active and passive typically presupposes the presence of two semantically equivalent, though stylistically different alternative expressions. This criterion argues against the interpretation of the inverse as a passive since there are no stylistic alternatives to either the mixed set or

57 A considerable portion of the current chapter has been previously published as section 3 of Wolvengrey (2005:427-440).
local set direct and inverse forms. The only way to express a second person acting on first person, or a speech act participant acting on a third person is through a direct VTA form, as in (1), and the only way to express that a third person is acting on a speech act participant, or that a first person is acting on second person, is through an inverse construction as in (2).

(1)  a)  kiwīčihiṅ
    ki-  wićiḥ  -i   -n
    2   VTA  DIR  1/2
    help  2s-1s
    “You help me.”

    b)  kiwīčihiṅāwak
    ki-  wićiḥ  -ā   -wak
    2   VTA  DIR  3p
    help  2s-3p
    “You help them.”

(2)  a)  kiwīčihiṅiṅ
    ki-  wićiḥ  -iti  -n
    2   VTA  INV  1/2
    help  1s-2s
    “I help you.”

    b)  kiwīčihiṅikwak
    ki-  wićiḥ  -ikw  -wak
    2   VTA  INV  3p
    help  3p-2s
    “They help you.”

In order to interpret the examples in (2) as passive, we would have to acknowledge that it is not possible to create passives such as “I am helped by you,” or “They are helped by you,” but obligatory to produce passives equivalent to “You are helped by me,” and “You are helped by them.” The status of the (a) and (b) examples differ considerably in connection with the universal and Algonquian-specific person/topicality hierarchies. The (b) examples represent the universal hierarchy, following universal tendencies to topicalize speech act participants before third persons. As such, obligatory passivization in cases like (2b) might not be so unlikely as an extension of what will be a prototypical tendency in discourse across languages. The (a) examples, however, are from the Algonquian-specific local set with second
person outranking first. As discussed in Chapter 2, although motivation for this ranking does exist, it is on a completely different level to the mixed set relationships, such that an analysis of (2a) as obligatorily passive seems unwarranted at best, and no more likely cross-linguistically than if we were to suggest that (1a) is really an obligatory passive equivalent to “I am helped by you.”

In contrast to both of these sets, the third person set does seem to exhibit the possibility for a stylistic alternation depending on the potential to alter both proximate-obviative assignment and verbal direction. In the following examples beginning with (3a), shifting either the obviation (3b) or the direction (3c) has the effect of changing semantic role assignment, while shifting both (3d) will leave the semantic interpretation identical to (3a), but illustrate the pragmatic uses of these Algonquian grammatical devices.

3) a) \(cāniy \ kī-\ wīcihēw \ mērīwa\).
   \(cāniy \ \ kī-\ wīcih \ -ē \ -w \ mēriy \ -wa\)
   NA.3s  IPV  VTA  DIR  3s  NA  3’
   Johnny  PST  help  3s-3’  Mary
   “Johnny helped Mary.”

b) \(cānīwa \ kī-\ wīcihēw \ mēriy\).
   \(cāniy \ -wa \ kī-\ wīcih \ -ē \ -w \ mēriy\)
   NA  3’  IPV  VTA  DIR  3s  NA.3s
   Johnny  PST  help  3s-3’  Mary
   “Mary helped Johnny.”

c) \(cāniy \ kī-\ wīcihik \ mērīwa\).
   \(cāniy \ kī-\ wīcih \ -ikw \ (-w) \ mēriy \ -wa\)
   NA.3s  IPV  VTA  INV  3s  NA  3’
   Johnny  PST  help  3’-3s  Mary
   “Mary helped Johnny. / Johnny was helped by Mary.”

d) \(cānīwa \ kī-\ wīcihik \ mēriy\).
   \(cāniy \ -wa \ kī-\ wīcih \ -ikw \ (-w) \ mēriy\)
   NA  3’  IPV  VTA  INV  3s  NA.3s
   Johnny  PST  help  3’-3s  Mary
   “Johnny helped Mary. / Mary was helped by Johnny.”

In (3), the shift of obviation from \(mērīwa\) in (a) to \(cānīwa\) in (b) results in a reversal of semantic role interpretation. The difference between (a) and (c) is a shift in direction, but this similarly reverses the semantic role
interpretation, such that (b) and (c) are semantically equivalent. Only where both obviation and direction have been changed (as between (a) and (d)), does the semantic interpretation remain unchanged. The difference between (a) and (d) (or for that matter (b) and (c)) is purely a pragmatic one, based on the speaker’s choice of proximate / topic assignment.

Thus, the third person set differs from the mixed and local sets in allowing for situation-specific, speaker-determined assignment of relative topicality, and stylistic variation is allowed. The glosses of the inverse examples in (3c) and (3d) suggest this variation through the inclusion of passive variants, often (though not always) preferred by Cree speakers when translating into English. The passive is the English construction required to reflect the pragmatic status signalled by direction and proximate/obviative assignment in Cree. In English, the more topical patient is marked as more topical by assigning it the syntactic role of subject and placing it in preverbal position accordingly. The Cree construction also recognizes the higher topicality of the patient (i.e. through proximate status), but does not require that a specific word order position be associated with it. The really crucial difference is in how the less topical agents are dealt with. An English passive detransitivizes the verb and either demotes (to oblique status marked by “by”) or completely deletes the less topical agent. In contrast, the Plains Cree examples in (3) do not seem to indicate any detransitivization of the verb, with both participants capable of being fully lexicalized and participating in the clause. Furthermore, though the relative topicality of the participants is signalled through proximate / obviative assignment, the syntactic status of the participants is unclear and has been the subject of much debate.

Dahlstrom (1991) provides a couple of tests, to be discussed below, which lead her to conclude that the Plains Cree inverse is as fully active as the direct. Perlmutter and Rhodes (1988) argue that the inverse is passive in Ojibwa, reversing the syntactic status of the arguments, thus making the patient into a subject, but only demoting the agent to object status, not oblique as more common cross-linguistically. The observation of the apparent full syntactic valency of both highest-ranking participants has lead most analysts, regardless of which side of the active-passive fence they choose, to at least acknowledge that the inverse is somewhat different from a “normal” passive cross-linguistically. It has also lead some (quite appropriately I would argue) to perch directly on the fence and suggest that “the inverse construction … is ‘sort of’ a passive and ‘sort of’ not” (Dryer 1996:37) or that it is somehow both active and passive at the same time (Wolvengrey 1993). This latter viewpoint will be maintained here, where the differences of the inverse from both active and passive constructions are
attributed to the lack of grammaticalized syntactic functions in Cree.

3.1.1 A Test for Object

In Dahlstrom's (1991:61) analysis, she develops a chart, reproduced here as (4), based on third person set forms illustrating her conclusions that both the direct and inverse are active, while only “indefinite” (i.e. unspecified) actor paradigms can be analysed as passive. In the terms of the current analysis, Dahlstrom’s chart can be translated to introduce a level of Syntactic Functions between the Semantic Functions on the left and the Pragmatic ranking of topicality on the right. Her analysis stems from a number of tests for objecthood and subjecthood which will be examined below.

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<th>thematic roles</th>
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<tr>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>agent = subject = proximate</td>
<td>patient = object = obviative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inverse</td>
<td>agent = subject = obviative</td>
<td>patient = object = proximate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>patient = subject = proximate</td>
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One test for object status involves floating quantifiers. Dahlstrom (1991) argues that floated quantifiers cannot be construed with subjects in transitive structures.\(^58\) In the relevant construction, a quantifier appears in preverbal position, separated from the noun with which it is semantically linked (i.e. which it modifies), as illustrated in (5) (Dahlstrom 1991:83, cited following Bloomfield 1934:78).

(5)  
piyisk kahkiyaw mēstinam otayāna; ...
piyisk kahkiyaw mēstin -am -Ø ot- ayān -a
IPT QNT VTI TH 3s 3 NDI 0’p
finally all use.up 3s-0’ possession
“At last he had spent all his belongings;...”

\(^58\) This is interesting given Cirillo’s (2009:62, 261) observation that most floating quantifiers construe with subjects, and can only construe with objects in “scrambling” languages. Cree can certainly be included in the list of languages which permits “scrambling” or freer word order variation, but it would still be odd if floating quantifiers couldn’t construe with both subject and object, assuming for the moment that both syntactic roles exist in Cree.
In transitive structures, with two participants, the possibility for ambiguity exists if the quantifier might in fact be construed with either argument of the verb. However, Dahlstrom (1991:82) argues that such ambiguity does not exist because of a “constraint on the interpretation of the quantifier ... [which] cannot be construed as modifying the subject of a transitive verb.” In (5) above, and in most of the other examples offered by Dahlstrom, this ambiguity does not in fact exist, since the proximate subject is singular and cannot therefore be construed with the quantifier. However, Dahlstrom does include in her argument two examples in which the required ambiguity does exist (i.e. both participants are or are at least potentially plural). These are reproduced here as (6) and (7).

(6) *nisto nipahēwak maskwa nāpēwak.*

\begin{verbatim}
 nisto nipah -ē -wak maskw -a nāpēw -ak
 NUM VTA DIR 3p NA 3’ NA 3p
 three kill 3p-3’ bear man
“Three men killed three bears.”
*“Three men killed a bear/bears.” (adapted from Dahlstrom 1991:83)
\end{verbatim}

In (6), following the grammaticality judgements of Plains Cree speakers, since confirmed by my own informants, the numeral quantifier \(nisto\)

59 This example is identical to the one given in Dahlstrom (1991:83) except for the substitution of the obviative noun maskwa “bear(s)” for the original obviative noun mōswa “moose”. This change was made only to render some of the following examples more pragmatically acceptable to the judgements of speakers who see the killing of men by bears as more likely than the killing of men by moose. This substitution has no other bearing on the arguments put forth here.
“three”) can only be construed with the goal (maskwa “bear(s)”) despite the fact that the agent (nāpēwak “men”) is also plural. Furthermore, nipahēwak is a direct VTA unambiguously identified as an active verb in which the patient is then equated with “object” in Dahlstrom’s analysis. It is this identification of the patient with “object”, and the fact that the quantifier only construes with the patient, that allows Dahlstrom to extend the analysis of patient as object to the inverse. The example in (7) shows that the quantifier (kahkiyaw “all”) can only be construed with the inverse patient (iskwēwak “women”), again following confirmed native speaker grammaticality judgements. Thus, it appears from these two examples that a quantifier can only be associated with the patient of a monotransitive VTA, regardless of its status as obviative (maskwa) or proximate (iskwēwak) or of the status of the verb as direct or inverse. For Dahlstrom, then, this illustrates that the patient is the object in both direct and inverse VTA constructions. However, this can be disproven. A simple test exists which can illustrate that the interpretation of a floated quantifier has nothing whatsoever to do with a participant’s status as patient (or agent). This entails modifying the examples in (6) and (7) by reversing the direction markers on the VTA stems. Thus, in (8), for instance, the direct theme marker present in (6) has been changed to an inverse theme, with no other changes occurring between the two constructions. This has the effect of reversing the semantic roles of the participants, i.e. changing the assignment of agent and patient. If Dahlstrom’s analysis is correct, the quantifier must now construe with the new “object” or patient. This is not the case.

(8) nisto nipahikwak maskwa nāpēwak.

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<tr>
<td>nisto</td>
<td>nipah</td>
<td>-ikw</td>
<td>-wak</td>
<td>maskw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUM</td>
<td>VTA</td>
<td>INV</td>
<td>3p</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>three</td>
<td>kill</td>
<td>3’-3p</td>
<td>bear</td>
<td>man</td>
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“Three bears killed the men.”
(i.e. “The men were killed by three bears.”)
*“Bears killed three men.”

In (8), then, we have the exact opposite situation to that found by Dahlstrom with examples like (6). Similarly, if we modify the example in (7) by changing the direction marking, the result is as given in (9) where the quantifier must still construe with iskwēwak even though it is now the agent of the direct-marked verb.
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With data such as the examples in (6) and (7) alone, Dahlstrom concluded floating quantifiers associate only with patients and that the inverse is therefore active with a patient as object. However, if only examples such as (8) and (9) had been investigated, the conclusion would have been the opposite; that floating quantifiers provide a test for subjecthood rather than objecthood (and that, as a consequence, perhaps, the inverse would again have been analyzed as a passive of sorts).

The fact that all of these examples are grammatical in Plains Cree suggests that the status of a participant as agent or patient has no necessary bearing on the interpretation of a floating quantifier. Data such as this cannot be used as a test for subject or object at all. Floating quantifiers are construed with patients in (6) and (7), but with agents in (8) and (9). Floating quantifiers are construed with proximate participants in (7) and (9), but with obviative participants in (6) and (8). Additionally, word order also fails to have any bearing on interpretation. In (6) and (8), it is the participant immediately following the verb (and therefore closest to the floating quantifier), while in (7) and (9), it is the participant in sentence-final position (further away from the quantifier) that associates with the quantifier.

Further modifications of these important examples serve to reinforce the observation that word order appears irrelevant. Reversing the order of the two NPs in sentences (6) and (8) yields (10) and (11) respectively.

(10) nisto nipahēwak nāpēwak maskwa.

“The men killed three bears.”

*“Three men killed a bear/bears.” (adapted from Dahlstrom 1991:83)
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(11) *nisto nipahikwak nāpēwak maskwa.*

\[
\begin{array}{llllllll}
\text{nisto} & \text{nipah} & \text{-ikw} & \text{-wak} & \text{nāpēw} & \text{-ak} & \text{maskw} & \text{-a} \\
\text{NUM} & \text{VTA} & \text{INV} & \text{3p} & \text{NA} & \text{3p} & \text{NA} & \text{3'} \\
\text{three} & \text{kill} & \text{3'\text{-3p}} & \text{man} & \text{bear} \\
\end{array}
\]

“Three bears killed the men.”

(i.e. “The men were killed by three bears.”)

*“Bears killed three men.”

Changing the word order has no effect on the interpretation. (6) and (10) are interpreted identically, while (8) and (11) are similarly unchanged in meaning. In all four of these examples, regardless of semantic role and word order, the quantifier associates with maskwa. If neither word order nor semantic function can be used to predict this phenomenon, we must look elsewhere, particularly at pragmatic roles or pragmatic information status.

In each of the maskwa examples (6, 8, 10, 11), the only common denominator is the obviative status of the noun. As has already been observed, though, (7) shows that it is not always the obviative with which the quantifier is associated. However, I would like to suggest that the re is a fundamental difference in the information status of the obviative participant in (6) versus (7) and that this difference underlies the interpretation of floating quantifiers in the data.

In examples (6) and (8) we have already noted that the quantifier must be construed with the obviative participant. Why should this be? This is a difficult question to answer and one which might lead to many random hypotheses. Is it something specific to bears? Is there something in the difference between bears and men semantically (e.g. only men are +human)? The first thought was never to be taken seriously and is easily discarded since Dahlstrom’s original sentence included mōswa “moose” rather than maskwa, such that whatever holds for bears must also hold for moose. This still leaves the possibility that nāpēwak “men”, as a human referent, somehow outranks a non-human referent such as maskwa “bear(s)”. This possibility can also be rejected by observing the result of simply reversing the assignment of proximate and obviative in (6) versus (7) and that this difference underlies the interpretation of floating quantifiers in the data.

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(12) *nisto nipahēwak maskwak nāpēwa.*

\[
\begin{array}{llllllll}
\text{nisto} & \text{nipah} & \text{-ē} & \text{-wak} & \text{maskw} & \text{-ak} & \text{nāpēw} & \text{-a} \\
\text{NUM} & \text{VTA} & \text{DIR} & \text{3p} & \text{NA} & \text{3p} & \text{NA} & \text{3'} \\
\text{three} & \text{kill} & \text{3p\text{-3'}} & \text{bear} & \text{man} \\
\end{array}
\]

“The bears killed three men.”

*“Three bears killed a man/men.”
Once *maskwak* is marked as proximate, and *nāpēwa* is marked obviative, the quantifier continues to construe with the obviative participant. Thus, the notion that the semantic feature [+human] plays any role can be discounted as well. It is, for these examples, simply the obviative status of the noun which appears determinative. Hence, an explanation for this is still required.

I believe the answer is to be found in the pragmatic information status indicated in these examples by the choice of obviation. In each of the examples including *maskwa(k)*, the choice of obviative is not obligatory. The contrast between (14) and (15), for instance, shows that the same basic semantic proposition (that of men killing bears) can be imparted by two different structures, involving a shift of obviative assignment in conjunction with a change in direction marking. These examples mirror in structure the earlier examples (3a) and (3d), and are identical to (6) and (13) respectively, with the removal of the complicating quantifier.

Thus, the contrast between (6) and (14) is only that a quantifier has been included in (6), and must be associated with the obviative referent. Similarly, the contrast between (13) and (15) is only that (13) includes a quantifier which also must be construed with the referent assigned obviative status.
Without the quantifier, the underlying proposition is unaffected. However, the information status is certainly affected by the choice of the obviative. This is illustrated by the definite/indefinite contrast in the English glosses in (14) and (15). The obviative referent is given an indefinite reading, while the proximate is definite. This correlates with the information status of the obviative as less topical, more likely to be new information and quite possibly indefinite. In contrast, the proximate referent is most likely the sentence or discourse topic and, therefore, is much more likely to represent given, definite information. Even in contextless, “out-of-the-blue” sentences, informants will associate any possibly ambiguous descriptive information (such as quantifiers) as modifying the referent most in need of further specification. Salient, topical, proximate referents do not need further specification; they are known. Less topical, new and indefinite information coded as obviative participants, on the other hand, may well require further specification to establish proper reference. The result, as illustrated in all of the maskwa(k) examples, is that the quantifier is always interpreted as providing further specification of the obviative referent. Pragmatic factors dictate where neither syntactic word order nor semantic role plays a part.

Returning to example (7), repeated here as (16), we observe that it is the proximate patient, rather than the obviative agent with which the quantifier must construe.

(16) kahkiyaw sākihikwak otānisiwāwa iskwēwak.

kahkiyaw  sākih  -ikw  -wak  o-  tānis  -iwāw  -a
QNT          VTA     INV  3p   3    NDA     2p/3p  3’
all          love    3’-3p daughter

iskwēw   -ak
NA    3p
woman

“All their daughters love all women.”
(i.e. “All women are loved by their daughters.”)
*“All their daughters love the women.”

This would seem to parallel the maskwa example cited first as (6) in which the quantifier could only construe with the “object”, and contradict the analysis offered immediately above. Similarly, however, we have already seen how this example can be altered (as (9) above, repeated here as (17)) to reveal that it is not the patient which must be construed with the quantifier at all, but rather the proximate noun iskwēwak, regardless of its semantic role.
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(17) kahkiyaw sākihēwak otānisiwāwa iskwēwak.

kahkiyaw sākih -ē -wak o- tānis -iwāw -a
QNT VTA DIR 3p 3 NDA 2p/3p 3'
all love 3p- 3' daughter

iskwēw -ak
NA 3p woman

“All women love their daughters.”

*(The) women love all their daughters.”

Though iskwēwak “women” is now indisputably the actor of the direct VTA verb in (17), the quantifier must remain associated with this participant. While these examples together give further evidence against Dahlstrom’s analysis of the patient as object, they also present an obvious problem for the current analysis for, as already noted, the quantifier is always construed with the proximate participant, iskwēwak, not the obviative.

In these examples, however, the information status of proximate and obviative referents is not identical to that in the maskwa(k) examples. Here, because of the presence of a possessive relationship between the two referents, the assignment of obviation to the possessum is obligatory. It follows from the necessity of establishing the possessum’s reference via the possessor that the possessum is less salient in the discourse than the possessor. It therefore has a similar status to the obviative referents in the maskwa(k) examples; they represent new information. The real difference lies in the status of the proximate referents. Whereas the proximate referents in the maskwa(k) examples are interpreted as highly topical, the proximate participant in (16) and (17) need not be interpreted as being highly topical or given information at all. Instead, it may also be new (or re-introduced) information, and only marginally more topical than the possessum.

Faced with two referents low in topicality, the quantifier must be construed with one of them. The evidence from the iskwēwak examples indicates that it is the proximate referent, the referent through which the possessum must take its own reference. Thus, the quantifier is construed with the proximate in these examples in order to further establish the reference of the possessor, which is itself necessary to properly establish the reference of the possessum. This does not, however, explain why the quantifier cannot be construed with the obviative possessum, and this is a question which I leave for further investigation.

In conclusion, the test for objecthood suggested by Dahlstrom (1991) is
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not valid. Neither syntactic nor semantic roles play a part in establishing the association of floating quantifiers with nominals. In the additional absence of strict word order constraints on interpretation, the only available explanation for this phenomenon is that the pragmatic information status of the arguments contributes to or even dictates the disambiguation of reference of floating quantifiers. Thus, contrary to Dahlstrom’s conclusions, what the floating quantifier test really begins to suggest is that it may not make any sense at all to refer to the Plains Cree inverse (or the direct) as active or passive. Since both active and passive structures are defined cross-linguistically by the required assignment of syntactic roles, and nothing in our observations of this section suggests that syntactic functions are being assigned, the terms do not seem applicable. The underlying pragmatic factors that often lead to the grammaticalization of syntactic functions are, however, fully present, and this will be reinforced through a review of another test for grammatical functions. Though this also crucially involves the status of the inverse, another construction will prove even more important.

3.2 Unspecified Actor

3.2.1 A Test for Subject

A second test provided by Dahlstrom (1991), and complementary to the first in some ways, is the “copying-to-object” test for subject status. This test, which will be introduced below, is used to provide evidence not only of the active status of the inverse (as refuted above) but also of the passive status of the “indefinite” or unspecified actor. It is towards this latter construction that we will now turn.

The unspecified actor paradigms were introduced in Chapter 2 where it was noted that these constructions do not permit lexicalization of the agent, and verbal cross-reference is reduced by one animate participant. In the case of V1 paradigms (i.e. VAI and VTI), this will result in patterns identical to V0 (i.e. VII), while in the case of V2 paradigms (i.e. VTA), valence is reduced and the construction is marked in many ways like the V1 (i.e. VAI1 and VTI2&3) pattern. Also introduced was the morphological split between speech act participant and third person forms in the VTA unspecified actor, such that local participants appear to be marked similarly to inverse forms with the suffix -ikawi, while third persons seem to be marked by the direct theme -ā, at least in the Independent. This formal difference has lead to the suggested modification to the Algonquian Person Hierarchy, cited as (111) in Chapter 2 and repeated here as (18), including an abstract Unspecified
Actor (XAct or X) which takes its place between the local and third person referents (cf. Jolley 1982, Déchaîne and Reinoltz 1998).

Interestingly, though they both represent the APH as in (18), Jolley (1982) argues that “indefinite actors” are passives with promotion to subject, while Déchaîne and Reinoltz (1998) argue that promotion to subject does not occur. Ultimately, both positions hinge on one or the other possibility. Theoretically, both possibilities should not be substantiated in one and the same construction and we must therefore search for tests which illustrate which is the correct choice.

Dahlstrom (1991:76) discusses both inverse and unspecified actor data as part of her copying-to-object test for subject. In Cree, the verb in a main clause which takes a subordinate clause complement can occur as either a VTI or a VTA stem. In the former case, as in (19), the VTI stem takes the entire subordinate clause state of affairs as the inanimate complement.

However, it is also possible to include a VTA in the main clause, which then must agree not with the subordinate clause as complement, but with an animate participant in the subordinate clause. This is equivalent to the “raising-to-object” operation prevalent in the literature (cf. James 1984 on Moose Cree), but because the participant is then obligatorily marked in both clauses in Cree, Dahlstrom (1991) refers to this as “copying-to-object” in preference to “raising”. In such cases, the participant has not been raised out of the subordinate clause leaving the verb in infinitive form as might be done in a language like English. Example (20) illustrates this, with a main clause VTA co-referencing the same third person participant as the sole referent in the subordinate clause.
3. Syntactic Functions and Pragmatic Discourse Status

(20) nikiskēyimāwak ē-kī-sēkisicik.
    ni- kiskēyim -ā -wak ē- kī- sēkisi -cik
    1 VTA DIR 3p IPV IPV VAI 3p know 1s-3p CNJ PST be.scared
    “I know they were scared. / I know them to have been scared.”
    [lit: ‘I know (about) them that they were scared.’]

In (20), the lower clause consists of an intransitive (VAI) verb so that only the lone participant is possibly available to copy to object (or second argument) of the main clause. However, Dahlstrom (1991:67-73) applies this test to examples in which the subordinate clause includes a transitive VTA stem, in both the direct and inverse, and determines that, in either case, it is only the agent of the subordinate verb that can copy to object. She then turns to the example given here in (21), in which the subordinate clause consists of an unspecified actor VTA, to test whether the patient argument can copy to object (Dahlstrom 1991:74).

(21) nikiskēyimāwak ē-kī-sēkihicik.
    ni- kiskēyim -ā -wak ē- kī- sēkih -ih -cik
    1 VTA DIR 3p IPV IPV VTA XAct 3p know 1s-3p CNJ PST scare X-3p
    “I know they were scared.”
    [lit: ‘I know (about) them that they were scared.’]

The only difference between this example and the one immediately preceding is the replacement in the subordinate clause of an intransitive verb agreeing with one animate participant in (20) with a VTA unspecified actor form agreeing with one animate participant in (21). The morphological parallels are clear, as discussed in Chapter 2, but the grammatical roles or syntactic functions remained the question of Dahlstrom’s investigation. Since the unspecified actor form in (21) is based on a VTA, the question could be seen as whether the semantic agent would copy to object or at least block the patient from doing so. However, as we can see, it is indeed the patient of the lower clause which is coreferential with the second argument of the main clause. Since this shows that agents are not the only semantic role which can apparently copy to object, and that the unspecified actor or agent of the lower clause VTA does not play a role, Dahlstrom concludes that the patient of an unspecified actor form must be the subject. Hence, for Dahlstrom, the copying-to-object test points to the active status of both direct and inverse, and the passive status of the unspecified actor.

However, another interpretation of the data is again available. In direct
and inverse alike, the agent (i.e. the highest ranking semantic function present) must be the argument copied to object. With an unspecified actor form, the agent has been obligatorily demoted and cannot participate in the syntax, leaving the patient as the highest ranking participant on the Algonquian Semantic Function/Animacy Hierarchy (SF/AH). It is the only possible option, just as when an unquestionably intransitive verb occurs in the subordinate clause, as in (20) above and in (22) (cf. Dahlstrom 1991:67).

(22) *nikiskēyimāw ē-nōhtē-sipwēhtēt.*

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
ni- & kiskēyim & -ā & -w & ē- & nōhtē- & sipwēhtē & -t \\
1 & VTA & DIR & 3s & IPV & IPV & VTA & 3s \\
\end{array}
\]

“I know he wants to leave.”

[lit: ‘I know him (and) he wants to leave.’]  

Unless another test can confirm Dahlstrom’s hypothesis, control by the highest ranking role on the SF/AH is at least as plausible an analysis, and one that does not require recourse to a level of syntactic functions. In fact, additional data does exist which will confirm that the patient of an unspecified actor VTA cannot be equated with a “subject”.

The data in the following examples, (23-25), illustrate that pragmatic context dictates whether the agent or patient of an unspecified actor can exert control over a higher predicate (represented by the preverb *kakwē*). In one and the same construction, both are possible.

(23) *kakwē-wāpamikawi!*

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
kakwē- & wāpam & -ikawi & -Ø \\
IPV & VTA & XAct & 2s.IMP \\
\end{array}
\]

“Try to be seen!”

*? “Try for someone to see you.”

In (23), the verb is inflected as a second person singular imperative. The context for this example is that it is uttered as advice given to a dancer before entering the circle at a pow-wow. As such, the second person is expected to take volitional control of the event (i.e. to bring about the event of his/her being seen). The English translation indicates this with a passive construction. The examples in (24) and (25) stem from similar contexts in which the patient can be expected to take volitional control. Again, a passive translation is called for, consistent with a promotion of the unspecified actor verb’s patient to “subject” status.
3. Syntactic Functions and Pragmatic Discourse Status

(24) nikī-kakwē-wāpamikawīn ē-mēkwā-nīmihitoyān.
    ni-  kī-  kakwē-  wāpam  -ikawi  -n
    1  IPV  IPV  VTA  XAct  1/2
    PST  try  see  (X-)1s
    ē-  mēkwā-  nīmihito  -yān
    IPV  IPV  VAI  1s
    CNJ  while  dance
    “I tried to be seen while dancing.”

(25) ohcitaw ta-kakwē-wāpamikawīyan (nōhtē-otahowēyani).
    ohcitaw  ta-  kakwē-  wāpam  -ikawi  -yan
    IPC  IPV  IPV  VTA  XAct  2s
    necessary  CNJ  try  see  (X-)2s
    “You have to try to be seen (if you want to win).”

In (24), the unspecified actor verb is in the Independent Order, while in (25) the verb is in the Conjunct Order and therefore introduced by a complementizer (CNJ), but this difference does not appear to matter. In (24) and (25), the patient takes volitional control over the action meant to bring about the event. If this was always the case, the analyses of Dahlstrom (1991) and Jolley (1982), among others, would hold. However, the data in (26)-(28) show that pragmatic contexts also exist in which the unspecified actor retains volitional control, and the patient thus remains merely a patient.

(26) tahto-kīsikāw māna ē-kī-kakwē-wāpamikawīyan.
    tahto-kīsikāw māna  ē-  kī-  kakwē-  wāpam  -ikawi  -yān
    IPT  IPT  IPV  IPV  IPV  VTA  XAct  1s
    every.day  usually  CNJ  PST  try  see  (X-)1s
    “Someone’s always trying to see me every day.”

(27) māka mīna kapē-kīsik nikī-kakwē-wāpamikawīn. (mistahi nicanawīn.)
    māka mīna  kapē-kīsik  ni-  kī-  kakwē-  wāpam  -ikawi  -n
    IPH  IPT  1  IPV  IPV  VTA  XAct  1/2
    as.usual  all.day  PST  try  see  (X-)1s
    “As usual, someone tries to see me throughout the day. (I’m very busy.)”

(28) otākosīhk ēsa ōma ē-kī-kakwē-wāpamikawīyan, …
    otākosīhk  ēsa  ōma  ē-  kī-  kakwē-  wāpam  -ikawi  -yān
    IPT  IPC  IPC  IPV  IPV  IPV  VTA  XAct  1s
    yesterday  evidently  FOC  CNJ  PST  try  see  (X-)1s
“I understand someone tried to see me yesterday, …”
or “I understand there was an attempt to see me yesterday, …”
(…, māka anima mēkwāc ē-māmawapiyāhk ōta kā-pē-takohtēcik.)
(“…, but they arrived here while we were in a meeting.”)

We do not expect to find imperatives among these examples, but both Independent and Conjunct Order inflections are represented. The context for all three examples is similar, with some indication that an unspecified actor (whether definite or indefinite, specific or non-specific) has made an attempt or is constantly making attempts to see the first person goal. In (26) and (28), the verb occurs in the Conjunct Order, while in (27) the verb is Independent. Hence, neither interpretation is specifically associated with the Independent or the Conjunct. It is merely pragmatic context which determines the interpretation of control.

Finally, it can be noted that the exact same verb form occurs in both (24) and (27), repeated here as (29). Devoid of context, either interpretation is open to Plains Cree speakers, and either English translation is possible.

(29) nikī-kakwē-wāpamikawin.

ni- kī- kakwē- wāpam -ikawi -n
1 IPV IPV VTA XAct 1/2
PST try see (X-)1s

“Someone tried to see me. / I tried to be seen.”

What these examples have illustrated is that the VTA unspecified actor paradigm does not have a grammaticalized subject or object. The actor is unspecified, but not pragmatically absent, and may act as controller given an appropriate context (as in (36)-(38)). This could be interpreted as an example of the demotion of the agent without apparent promotion of a patient to subject status. In contrast, appropriate contexts can also be found which dictate that the patient will serve as a controller (as in (23)-(25)), in which case passivization including promotion to “subject” appears to occur. In this construction in Plains Cree, though, both options are possible, and the choice is not grammaticalized but remains open to determination by pragmatic context. The debate over whether unspecified actor forms are full passives or not has hinged entirely on the identification of the goal with either “subject” or “object” status. The debate has now been unhinged. There is no necessarily grammaticalized subject or object at all. The choice of controller is left entirely to pragmatics as one and the same construction serves the purpose for two distinct constructions, with two different grammaticalized subjects, in languages like English.
3.3 Conclusions

Ultimately, searching for tests for “subjecthood” and “objecthood” in Cree is futile, since the grammatical relations of “subject” and “object” are not important for this language. In Plains Cree, the interaction of pragmatic and semantic functions is enough to disambiguate all necessary interactions without recourse to a third level of grammatical or syntactic functions. In Chapter 2, we saw the vital interaction of the Algonquian Person/Topicality Hierarchy (AP/TH) and the Algonquian Semantic Function/Animacy Hierarchy (SF/AH) in establishing the direct-inverse system. There, it was the Semantic Function/Animacy Hierarchy which took pride of place in the morphosyntactic organization of verb stems. Here again it can be seen to play its part in limiting grammatical processes to the highest ranking semantic functions present. However, pragmatic discourse status also proves to be exceptionally important in allowing Plains Cree to do without the strict grammaticalization of syntactic functions common, but not universal, cross-linguistically. As such, the two-way voice division between active and passive that results from grammatical subject choice in languages like English is not found in Cree. Instead, we find both the direct and inverse functioning as partially equivalent to the active, and the inverse and unspecified actor forms as partially equivalent to the passive. These differences are represented in Figure 3.1, with Figure 3.2 providing examples of the main construction types.

Figure 3.1
English and Plains Cree Voice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Cree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active</strong></td>
<td>VTA Direct (and other Verb Classes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Passive</strong></td>
<td>VTA Inverse (and Inanimate Actor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by unspecified Actor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unspecified Actor
### Figure 3.2

**English and Cree Voice Examples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Cree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Active:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>John helped the child.</em></td>
<td><em>cān kī-wīcihēw awāsisa.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>A child helped John.</em></td>
<td><em>awāsisa anihi kī-wīcihēw cān.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Passive:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(+by-phrase)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>John was helped by a child.</em></td>
<td><em>cān kī-wīcihik awāsisa.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(–by-phrase)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>John was helped.</em></td>
<td><em>awāsisa anihi kī-wīcihik cān.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VTA Unspecified Actor:</td>
<td><em>cān kī-wīcihāw.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In English, the main grammatical distinction is between the Active and Passive. Either the agent (or other highest ranking semantic role; e.g. experiencer) is coded as a subject, with object status going to a lower-ranking participant, or the agent (experiencer, etc.) is demoted while a participant with another semantic role (commonly patient) is promoted into subject status. Regardless of whether the agent is demoted to oblique status (in a ‘by’ phrase) or completely omitted, it is the promotion of the patient (recipient, etc.) which dictates that a passive occurs. Subject assignment is vital to this division.

In contrast, no grammatical subject choice occurs in Cree. As such, both the Direct and Inverse, as with all other verb types, simply code the presence of the participants, and link them to their respective semantic functions via their relative topicality. The active has been described as “uncontroversially active” (Dahlstrom 1991:75), but this is simply because of the matching of highest semantic role with highest topicality, the same pragmatic situation that calls for an active in languages like English. The Inverse, on the other hand, as we have seen, occurs when the opposite is the case: the highest ranking semantic role is lower in topicality, and a lower semantic role is higher in topicality. In the former case, we might expect demotion of the
agent (experiencer, etc.), and in the latter, promotion of the patient (recipient, etc). This is precisely the pragmatic situation that calls for the passive in languages like English, albeit one with an obligatory agentive by-phrase. However, the inverse simply presents these pragmatic facts without forcing a syntactic choice of subject. In some cases, the highest ranking semantic role acts as syntactic pivot, while in others, pragmatic discourse status allows for the correct interpretation. Syntactic functions are unnecessary.

Finally, we have a fairly clear equivalence between the English-like passive without a by-phrase and the Cree unspecified actor paradigms. The difference here is merely in the optional presence of the oblique by-phrase in the passive structure versus the obligatory absence of the highest ranking semantic role in the unspecified actor paradigms. The only way in which a lower-ranking semantic function can take precedence over a higher-ranking one (e.g. patient over agent) is for the higher-ranking role to be completely removed syntactically (e.g. via unspecified actor marking). As we have seen, though, there is no necessary concomitant re-assignment of perspective (i.e. grammaticalization of syntactic functions) involved. Patients remain semantic patients and are only potentially raised in status through a particular pragmatic interpretation of the clause, not through a syntactic shift in perspective. Additionally, though some remnant of an older syntactically-based operation is still present in the VTA unspecified actor (at least in western dialects like Plains Cree), the VTI and VAI unspecified actor forms have been shifting towards derivational structures. This further removes any possibility that we can interpret the unspecified actor as fully equivalent to an English-like passive. There is no choice of subject involved and no demoted participant can optionally occur. The Direct-Inverse system in Cree makes this third level of perspectivizing functions or grammatical roles unnecessary.

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60 Recall the obligatory ranking of semantic functions in Cree ditransitive verbs, as discussed in section 2.2.3.2. An unspecified actor form of a ditransitive VTA only allows the recipient to act as the highest ranking semantic role. Again, no choice of subject is permitted.