Inverse marking without hierarchical agreement

The prototypical inverse construction is marked by two morphosyntactic phenomena: the verb indexes the Patient or “notional object” rather than the Agent or “notional subject” argument, and the verb has extra morphological marking. This is exemplified in the Nocte data (1), with 1st person A and 3rd person O, and (2), with 3rd person A and 1st person O. In both examples the 1st person argument is indexed; (2) is marked as inverse by the $h$- morpheme.

Hierarchical agreement can occur in languages without overt inverse marking, as in the Jinghpaw examples (3-4). As in the Nocte examples, both of these have 1st person agreement, indexing the A argument in (3), but the O in (4). This appears to be essentially the same phenomenon as we see in Nocte, so that we could interpret overt inverse marking in languages which have it as simply serving a disambiguating function, marking a verb form as indexing an argument other than the A.

However, there are also languages where we find inverse marking, or something very like it, without hierarchical agreement. Consider the Sizang Chin data (5). The morpheme $(h)ong$, originally a cislocative, marks all transitive verbs with 1st or 2nd person O argument, as in (5a-b). But in both examples the verb has zero indexation, agreeing with the 3rd person A, not with the SAP O argument. We find the same phenomenon in the Dravidian languages Pengo and Kui; in example (6), the indexation shows that the subject A argument is 3rd person, while the inverse –d suffix indicates, without need of further specification, that the O argument is a SAP.

Givon and others have interpreted the inverse as motivated purely by the relative discourse-pragmatic prominence of the A and O arguments: inverse is the marked configuration where the O is more prominent than the A. In this view the classic inverse system, which primarily or exclusively marks the relative position of A and O on a hierarchy of person, is only a special case (the “semantic inverse”) of the discourse-pragmatic inverse. But the fact that inverse marking, sensitive only to the person hierarchy, can occur with subject (rather than hierarchical) agreement, shows that there are two distinct factors involved. If we interpret subject agreement as reflecting discourse prominence, inverse marking must reflect only the deictic category of person – an interpretation which is consistent with the association of inverse forms with cislocative marking in a number of languages.

This line of argument suggests that hierarchical agreement is likewise a grammaticalization of person as a deictic category, not simply a special case of verbal indexation of the most discourse-prominent argument.
Nocte (Tibeto-Burman)

(1) \( ^{1}{\eta}_{aa-1}m{\epsilon}^{1}{7}{\eta}_{te-2}n{\eta} \) \( ^{1}{\eta}_{aa-2}n{\eta} \) vaat \( \Lambda{\eta} \)
\( I-ERG \) s/he-OBJ beat 1sg
‘I beat him.’

(2) \( ^{1}{7}{\eta}_{te-1}m{\epsilon}^{1}{\eta}_{aa-2}n{\eta} \) vaat \( h-\Lambda{\eta} \)
\( s/he-ERG I-OBJ \) beat INV-1sg
‘He beat me.’

Jinghpaw (Tibeto-Burman)

(3) ngai MaNaw hpe gumhpraw jaw n-i? ai
\( I \) PN OBJ money give n-1st
‘I gave MaNaw money.’

(4) MaNaw ngai hpe gumhpraw jaw n-i? ai
\( PN \) I OBJ money give
‘MaNaw gave me money.’

Sizang Chin (Tibeto-Burman)

(5a) hong-sâ:t thê:i lê:
CIS-beat ever INTER
‘Do [they] ever beat you?’

(b) hong-sâ:t lê: kâ-pe:ng tâl do*ng kâ-ta:i tû:
CIS-beat if 1st-leg break until 1st-flee FUT
‘If [they] beat me I'll run till my legs break.’

Pengo (Dravidian)

(6) huR-d-av-at-an
see-INV-NEG-PAST-3m.s.
‘He did not see (me/you/us).’