УДК 811.11'367-112

THE SYNTACTIC STATUS OF OBLIQUE SUBJECT IN GERMANIC LANGUAGES

H. Zinchenko,
Kyiv National Linguistic University,
73, Velyka Vasylkivska St., Kyiv, 03150, Ukraine
annazinchenko@bigmir.net
ORCID iD 0000-0002-4730-2933

The article focuses on the approaches to defining and analysing the syntactic properties of oblique noun phrases in Germanic languages. Two contrasting viewpoints on the syntactic status of oblique subject-like NPs have been presented, and the following set of subjecthood tests that aim at distinguishing oblique subjects and objects has been reviewed: syntactic position, conjunction reduction, reflexivisation, raising, and pro-infinitive. Subjecthood tests do not prove to be utterly conclusive, which is determined by the language or the stage of its development.

Key words: *oblique subject, case marking, subjecthood, Germanic languages.*

Зінченко Г.Є.

Синтаксичний статус підмета у непрямому відмінку в германських мовах

Статтю присвячено висвітленню підходів до визначення синтаксичного статусу іменної фрази у непрямому відмінку як суб'єкта / підмета речення. Розглянуто методологію визначення синтаксичних функцій цих іменних фраз шляхом проведення набору відповідних тестів на суб'єктність конституента речення. З'ясовано, що для германських мов тести на виявлення суб'єктних в активостей реченнєвих складників відрізняються ступенем достовірності залежно від мови або етапу її розвитку.

Ключові слова: *підмет у непрямому відмінку, призначення відмінка, суб'єктність, германські мови.*

Зинченко А.Е.

Синтаксический статус подлежащего в косвенном падеже в германских языках

В статье представлены подходы к определению синтаксического статуса именной фразы в косвенном падеже как субъекта / подлежащего предложения. Рассмотрена методология определения синтаксических функций этих именных фраз путем проведения набора соответствующих тестов на субъектность конституента предложения. Выяснено, что для германских языков тесты на выявление субъектных свойств составляющих предложения отличаются степенью достоверности в зависимости от языка или этапа его развития.

Ключевые слова: *подлежащее в косвенном падеже, назначение падежа, субъектность, германские языки*

Introduction

Subject is one of numerous grammatical terms and concepts applied in structural description of a language. Being a fundamental notion, it creates considerable controversy concerning its definition and properties [9, 28]. Traditionally, Subject is defined as the clause constituent that has Nominative case and agreement with the verb [1, 141]. Cognitively, the prototypical Subject represents the primary participant in the clause and has the highest claim to the status of Topic [5, 42].

The aim of this article is to give a brief outline of existing approaches to defining and analysing Oblique Subjects in Germanic languages. It is also necessary to give an overview of disputable issues concerning the syntactic status of subject-like NPs.

Theoretical Background

In terms of the layered clause structure analysis within the framework of Role and Reference Grammar, the distinction is made between predicating elements and non-predicating elements, on the one hand, and between those NPs and adpositional phrases (prepositional or postpositional phrases) which are arguments of the predicate and those which are not [12, 25]. The predicating element (normally a verb) defines a syntactic unit in the structure of the clause, *the nucleus*, and forms *the core* of a clause together with its arguments. Non-arguments, referred to as adjuncts, occur in a position outside of the core and constitute *the periphery* of a clause. They function as secondary participants or modifiers of the core. Therefore, the clause is a syntactic unit composed of the core and periphery [12, 25–31]. Subject is one

of the *core arguments*, which are part of the semantic representation of the verb, and it is marked as 'privileged syntactic argument' — a self-standing syntactic function assigned by the speaker to the central constituent of a clause [12, 352–353; 1, 142].

In the various versions of Generative Syntax, Subject is treated as a 'deep' syntactic position, on which different constituents may land via the application of transformational rules that are subsumed under the single rule of Move α in current theory. In the phrase structure tree, the subject phrasal category is immediately dominated by the Sentence (S) node and is a sister to the verb phrase (VP) node, thus occupying [NP, S] position. The development of the IP-model of sentence structure in the X-Bar framework provided the new notion of subject position, that is, specifier of the inflectional projection [Spec, IP]. It determines the assignment of certain semantic roles (notably the Agent role), validates morphosyntactic features associated with subjecthood (nominative case on the subject, agreement morphology on the main inflectional element — finite verb, and the specification of finiteness for the clause) and becomes a target for movement. Due to such a wide range of different functions and relationships, the idea of a unitary subject position has been deconstructed, and subjecthood becomes reconceived as inhering not in a single syntactic position, but rather in a sequence of distinct but derivationally linked positions [12, 19; 10, 198–203]. This led to formulating the *VP-internal subject hypothesis* which postulates that the subject originates in [Spec, VP] and usually then moves to [Spec, IP]. The specifier position of the inflectional projection is thus a derived subject position only, and most clauses will contain not a unique subject position but rather at least a pair of derivationally linked positions, each associated with distinct subsets of the set of subject properties [10, 204].

Although Subject is traditionally associated with nominative case [11, 204], NPs that behave syntactically like subjects are not always canonically case-marked, i. e. they occur in accusative, dative or genitive. In particular, this phenomenon is observed in Germanic languages at different stages of their development. Such non-nominative arguments have been labeled as **oblique / quirky / logical subjects** in the literature [2; 7; 8]. Consider the examples from Old English and Modern Icelandic [8, 124; 11, 209].

OE *and him ðæs sceamode*
and to-them DAT of-that GEN shamed
'And they were ashamed of that'
(ÆCHom I, 1 18.10).

MIc *Mig vantaði hnífinn*
Me ACC needed knife-the NOM
'I needed the knife'.

Methods

At least two contrasting viewpoints on the syntactic status of oblique subject-like NPs are presented by scholars; hence, the issue is still under debate [3; 7]. On the one hand, it has been argued that Old Germanic languages, namely Old Icelandic, do not provide data to support an oblique subject analysis [7], so non-nominative logical subject arguments should be regarded as syntactic objects. Over the course of time, non-subject arguments may have acquired subject properties and become the structures that justify an oblique subject analysis of Modern Icelandic. This diachronic process is defined as reanalysis leading to a change in the possible content of the Specifier position of IP, whereby it has become an exclusive subject position. Non-nominative NPs in that position may have kept their oblique case, and become oblique subjects [6, 825; 7, 99–110].

The reanalysis takes place in three stages in a specific order. At the first stage, subjects can be oblique (dative) and objects can be nominative. At the second stage, subjects can still be dative but objects that were nominative at stage one have been replaced by accusative objects. At stage three, subjects that were dative at stages one and two have been replaced by nominative subjects and objects are accusative as at stage two. Consider the following examples from Old Icelandic, Middle English, and Faroese [8, 49–55]:

OIc *likaðe yðr vel fínn finnskattrīn*
liked 3SG you DAT PL well fine NOM SG finntax NOM SG
'Did you like the fine tribute paid by the Finns?' (1300, Egils saga).

ME *þonne soðlice Gode licað ure drohtnunge*
then truly God DAT SG likes 3SG our living ACC PL
'Then truly, God likes our way of life'.

Fa *Eg dámi væl hasa bókina*
I NOM like 1SG well this ACC book ACC
'I really like the book over there'.

On the other hand, the supporters of the oblique subject hypothesis claim that the syntactic status of non-nominative subject-like NPs has not changed at all from object status to subject status: it was a change from non-canonical to canonical case marking, so-called 'Nominative Sickness', that has affected all the Germanic languages to a varying degree [3, 439]. According to this analysis, no change has taken place in Icelandic, Faroese, and German, where oblique subjects have been preserved. In the remaining Germanic languages, oblique subjects have changed into nominative subjects [6, p. 873].

The following tests have been applied to determine prototypical subject properties and, thus, prove the oblique subject hypothesis:

(a) syntactic position;
(b) conjunction reduction;
(c) clause-bounded reflexivisation;
(d) long distance reflexivisation;
(e) subject-to-object raising;
(f) subject-to-subject raising;
(g) pro-infinitives (control infinitives) [2; 3, 441–463; 8, 60–68].

The conclusiveness of subjecthood tests varies depending on the language and the stage of its development.

Results and Discussion

In order to confirm the subjecthood of certain sentence constituents and distinguish them from other types of constituents, normally objects, the specific distributional properties have been used as criteria. In particular, subjects typically occur in initial position in declarative main clauses and following the complementiser in embedded clauses; also, they invert with the finite verb in questions and topicalisations [3, 444], as illustrated in the following examples from Old Swedish and Old Danish [4, 31–32]:

OSw ***honom*** *drømde een drøm om ena nat*
he OBL dreamt a dream one night
'he had a dream one night'.

OD *tha gruede tegh ath ...*
then feared you OBL that ...
'then you were afraid that ... '

The occurrence in first position in main clauses and inverted position when something else is topicalised are regarded as unmarked word order properties of subjects, that is, the subject is most normally situated in these positions. It is undeniable, however, that objects may demonstrate the same distribution within a sentence. Jan Terje Faarlund claims that a canonical subject position, Spec IP, for modern Germanic languages was not restricted to subjects at the earlier stages, given the occurrence of objects between the finite verb and the subject in main clauses. This argument makes syntactic position test somewhat inconclusive, and interpreting oblique subject-like NPs as objects remains an alternative, for example [4, 32; 3, 443–445]:

OIc *Þá skal* ***sínum húsum*** *hver ráða*
then shall self's houses DAT each NOM rule
'Then each shall decide over his own house.'
(The Law of Magnús lagabætir)

In Conjunction Reduction, the subject of a coordinated clause can be omitted if it is coindexed with the subject of the main clause. In Modern Icelandic, this occurs independently of the morphological case of the main clause subject and of the morphological case of the subject of the coordinated clause [4, 29–30]:

MIc ***Hann***$_i$ *elskar bækur og (***honum***$_i$) finnst þær skemmtilegar.*
'He$_i$ *NOM loves books and (he*$_i$*) DAT finds them entertaining.'*

MIc *Honum*$_i$ *leiðast bækur og (hann*$_i$*) hatar að lesa þær*
'He$_i$ *DAT is bored by books and (he*$_i$*) NOM hates reading them.'*

In long distance reflexivisation a reflexive pronoun refers back to an antecedent in a preceding clause. Since it is the subject that is the antecedent, and not the object, this test is considered a diagnostic for subjecthood in Modern Icelandic [3, 448]. In Clause-bounded reflexivisation, the reflexives are obligatory when referring to the subject of the clause, be it nominative or oblique:

MIc ***Hann***$_i$ *elskar bókina sína*$_i$
'He$_i$ *NOM loves his*$_i$ *book.'*

MIc *Honum*$_i$ *finnst bókin sín*$_i$ *skemmtileg.*
'He$_i$ *DAT is amused by his*$_i$ *book.'*

When it comes to Old Icelandic, however, Conjunction Reduction and Clause-bounded reflexivisation subjecthood tests are questionable, since not only subjects trigger reflexivization, but objects do so too. In coordinated clauses, subjects can be omitted either when they are coreferential with the subject or the object of the preceding clause. Nevertheless, the supporters of oblique subject analysis point out, even though the results of these tests do not prove the subjecthood of oblique subject-like NPs, they do not speak against it either. As for Old English, the situation is different, as oblique NPs pass Conjunction Reduction test [4, 29–31]:

OE *ac* ***gode*** *ne licode na heora geleafleast…*
but God DAT not liked not their faithlessness NOM
ac__ asende him to fyr of heofonum
but __ send them to fire of heaven
'But God didn't like their faithlessness, but __ sent them fire from heaven.

In Subject-to-object Raising Constructions, the subject of the subordinate predicate behaves as the object of the matrix clause. Where the lower verb selects a nominative subject, its morphological case is changed from nominative to accusative,

which is assigned by the higher verb. When the verb in the subordinate predicate selects a lexically case-marked subject, this subject keeps its lexically inherent case. Hence oblique subject-like NPs maintain their oblique case in subject-to-object raising constructions. Consider the following examples from Old and Modern Icelandic [4, 33–35; 3, 449]:

MIc *Ég tel [**Þig** elska bókina]*
'I assume [you ACC love the book].'
OIc *Þórður … kvað **Þorgeiri** mjög missýnast.*
Thórður NOM said Thorgeir DAT much see-wrongly
'Thróður said that Thorgeir was much mistaken.'

(Ljósvetninga saga, p. 1657)

In Subject-to-subject Raising Constructions, the subject of the subordinate (infinitival, lower) clause is raised to the subject position of the matrix clause, independently of its morphological case [4, 33–36]:

MIc ***Sveinn** virðist þola illa hávaðann.*
Sveinn NOM seems tolerate INF badly noise-the ACC
'Sveinn seems to tolerate the noise badly.'
MIc ***Sveini** virðist leiðast hávaðinn.*
Sveinn DAT seems be-bored INF noise-the NOM
'Sveinn seems to be annoyed by the noise.'

The nominative argument of *þola ' tolerate'* occurs as the subject of *virðast 'seem'*, and the same is true of the dative argument of *leiðast 'be bored'*. The object of the lower verb, however, cannot occur as the subject of *virðast 'seem'*. Therefore, the property of occurring as the subject of such a raising verb is confined to the subject of the lower clause and does not apply to the object [3, 452].

Subject-to-subject Raising Constructions with oblique subject-like NPs are also found in Old Icelandic, Old Swedish, Old Danish, and Old English. Since a raising rule only applies to subjects, such examples strongly suggest the presence of Oblique subjects in these languages [4, 36–38].

OIc ***Árna** kvaðst það illt þykja.*
Árni DAT said REFL it badly feel INF
'Arni said that he felt that it was bad.'
OSw ***them** matte förtryta at the ...*
they OBL should be sorry that they ...
'they should be sorry that they ... '
OD ***hanum** kwnne æy rodh tiil ryndhe.*
he OBL knew not advice to run.
'he could not think of any solution'.
OE *pa ongan hine eft langian on his cyþþe.*
'then started he ACC to long for his kid. '

The ability to be realised as the unexpressed argument (PRO) of infinitives is a property confined to subjects. In the following sentence from Modern Icelandic, the control verb *vonast til 'hope, expect'* takes an infinitival clause introduced by *að 'to'* with the verb *leiðast 'be bored, annoyed'*, which selects for a dative subject [3, 456–457].

MIc *Sveinn vonast til að — leiðast ekki krakkarnir.*
Sveinn NOM hopes for to PRO DAT be-bored INF not kids-the NOM
'Sveinn hopes not to be annoyed by the kids.'

Conclusions

The fact that oblique subject-like NPs participate in the outlined constructions is considered an indication of their subjecthood. The subjecthood property here is not merely being in certain positions but rather that being there is the unmarked alternative for subjects. Considerable research has been done on subject-like NPs, especially in Old and Modern Icelandic, in the attempt to prove and illustrate the existence of Oblique subjects in this language. Yet, certain doubts have been expressed as to how convincingly the tests prove subjecthood of oblique NPs, for it is still not entirely clear whether subjecthood tests reveal the properties of syntactic or semantic (logical) subject. Another question arises concerning the reasons for preserving or eliminating oblique subjects from different modern Germanic languages, which definitely calls for further research.

REFERENCES

1. Bakker, D., Siewierska, A. (2007). Another Take on the Notion Subject. Structural-Functional Studies in English Grammar: in honour of Lachlan Mackenzie [ed. by M. Hannay and G. J. Steen]. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, pp. 141–158.
2. Barðdal, J. (2013). Bottom-up and Top-down Approaches to Subjecthood. Subject: Cognitive, Typological and Functional Approaches. Book of Abstracts, Helsinki: Linguistic Association of Finland, p. 4.
3. Barðdal, J., Eythórsson, T. (2003). The Change that Never Happened: the Story of Oblique Subjects. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, *Journal of Linguistics*, Vol. 39, pp. 439–472. DOI: 10.1017/S002222670300207X.

4. Barðdal, J. (2000). Oblique Subjects in Old Scandinavian. Odense: University Press, *Nowele: North-Western European Language Evolution,* Vol. 37, 25–51. DOI: 37.10.1075/nowele.37.02bar.
5. Downing, A., Locke, Ph. (2006). English Grammar: A University Course [2nd ed.], London, New York: Routledge, 610 p.
6. Eythórsson, T., Barðdal, J. (2005). Oblique Subjects: A Common Germanic Inheritance. Linguistic Society of America: Johns Hopkins University Press, Language, Vol. 81, No. 4, pp. 824–881.
7. Faarlund, J. T. (2001). The Notion of Oblique Subject and Its Status in the History of Icelandic. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, *Grammatical Relations in Change*, pp. 99–135. DOI.org/10.1075/slcs.56.05faa.
https://benjamins.com/catalog/slcs.56
8. Hrafnbjargarson, G. H. (2004). Oblique Subjects and Stylistic Fronting in the History of Scandinavian and English. The Role of IP-Spec: PhD dissertation [Electronic Resource]. Scandinavian Institute, University of Aarhus, 270 p. http://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/000123/current.pdf
9. Huddleston, R. D., Pullum, G. K. (2002). The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1842 p.
10. McCloskey, J. (1997). Subjecthood and Subject Positions. Elements of Grammar. Handbook in Generative Syntax [ed. by L. Haegeman], Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp. 197–235.
11. Traugott, E. C. (1992). Syntax. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, The *Cambridge History of the English Language* [ed. by R. M. Hogg], Vol. 1: The Beginning till 1066, pp. 168–289.
12. Van Valin Jr., R. D., LaPolla, R. J. (1997). Syntax. Structure, Meaning and Function. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 713 p. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9781139166799.