

THE ORIGIN OF THE OBLIQUE-SUBJECT CONSTRUCTION:
AN INDO-EUROPEAN COMPARISON

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1. INTRODUCTION

Recent research on subject-like obliques in Germanic suggests that non-canonically-case-marked subject-like arguments behave syntactically as subjects not only in Modern Icelandic and Modern Faroese, but also in Modern German, Old Norse-Icelandic, Old Swedish and Early Middle English. This research calls into question the hypothesis that oblique or non-nominative subjects have developed from objects, as it suggests that they have been subjects from at least the beginning of the Germanic period. In this paper we will examine six different hypotheses on the possible origin of the oblique-subject construction in the Indo-European languages. We conclude that five of these hypotheses are inadequate while arguing for the superiority of the sixth hypothesis, namely that Proto-Indo-European was a stative–active language, either a split-S or a fluid-S language, in which a subset of syntactic subjects is case marked in the same way as objects. On such an account, oblique subjects are a natural part of the alignment system and need not be postulated as having developed from objects.

2. THE SUBJECT BEHAVIOR OF SUBJECT-LIKE OBLIQUES

Several of the world’s languages exhibit structures where the subject-like argument is not in the nominative case, but in the accusative, dative, genitive, instrumental, etc. Four such examples are given below, (1a) and (2a) from Modern Icelandic, and (1b) and (2b) from Modern German:

- | | | |
|--------|--|-----------|
| (1) a. | Mér er illt.
me-DAT is sick | Icelandic |
| b. | Mir ist übel.
me-DAT is sick
‘I feel sick.’ | German |
| (2) a. | Mér líkar þessi tilgáta.
me-DAT likes this hypothesis | Icelandic |
| b. | Mir gefällt diese Hypothese.
me-DAT likes this hypothesis
‘I like this hypothesis.’ | German |

Traditionally, in the linguistic literature it has been assumed that oblique or non-nominative subjects in the world’s languages have developed from objects to subjects, hence their non-canonical case marking (cf. Cole et al. 1980, Haspelmath 2001). In a recent paper, however, we have argued that such subject-like arguments in Germanic, at least, were syntactic subjects all along (Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003, Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005). We base that argument on a host of syntactic tests of subjecthood of which the most conclusive one are control infinitives (cf. also Barðdal & Eythórsson 2006, Barðdal 2006). In the following examples the subject-like dative of the infinitive *líka* ‘like’ from (2a) is left unexpressed on identity with the nominative subject of the Icelandic matrix clause in (3), and the subject-like dative of the infinitive *übel sein* ‘feel

sick' from (1b) is left unexpressed on identity with the nominative indefinite subject *man* 'one' of the German matrix clause in (4):

Icelandic:

- (3) a. ... hún þótti góð eftirherma og var þekkt fyrir að
 she was-considered good impersonator and was known for to
 ____ líka kaldhæðinn húnor.
 PRO-DAT like ironic humor
 '... she was considered a good impersonator and was known to appreciate
 irony.' (is.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anastasia)

German:

- b. ... das ist so verächtlich, daß man das Auge davon abwenden muß,
 ... this is so disgusting that one the eye away turn must
um ____ **nicht übel zu werden.**
 in-order PRO-DAT not sick to become
 '... this is so disgusting that one has to turn away in order not to feel
 sick.' (home.t-online.de/home/dr.erich.mertens/STILLIN2.htm, 1789)

It has been established that subject-like datives pass all of the subject tests in Icelandic and German (for a comprehensive comparison of the behavior of subject-like obliques with regard to the subject tests in both languages, cf. Barðdal 2006). It should be pointed out that morphosyntactic properties such as nominative case and agreement are not included in the subject tests, since these properties are clearly irrelevant for subject-like obliques. However, the only really uncontroversial subject test that is generally agreed upon in the literature is the control test above, as objects do not have the ability to be left unexpressed in control infinitives on identity with a preceding subject, like subjects do:

- (4) He promised not to ____ **cut** *(himself) when shaving.

The star in front of *himself* in (4) is intended to show that this reflexive object cannot be left unexpressed on identity with the subject *he* in the matrix clause, in spite of the fact that *he* and the reflexive object have the same external reference. Therefore, examples like (3a–b) clearly show that subject-like datives behave as ordinary subjects in that they can be left unexpressed in control infinitives, and the example in (4) shows that objects do not share this property.

Similar examples of subject-like obliques being left unexpressed in control constructions have been documented in Old Norse-Icelandic (Rögnvaldsson 1995, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003), Old Swedish (Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003, cf. Falk 1997), Early Middle English (Seeffranz-Montag 1983, Allen 1995), and most recently in Old French. The following example, from an Old French text dating from 1179 AD, is reported by Mathieu (2006: 291):

- (5) A ce ne pueent il ____ **faillir.**
 to this not can they PRO-DAT fail
 'In this respect they cannot fail.'

The infinitive *faillir* 'fail' selects for a subject-like oblique, which in this example is left unexpressed on identity with the nominative subject *il* 'they' of the matrix verb *pouvoir*

‘can’. Mathieu presents examples showing that *pouvoir* clearly selected for control infinitives in Old French and not raising infinitives. If *pouvoir* had been a raising verb, it should have occurred with a subject-like oblique in (5) above rather than the nominative *il* ‘they. This shows without a doubt that the subject-like oblique of *faillir* ‘fail’ has been left unexpressed in the example in (5), which is a typical subject behavior. Hence, oblique subjects must be assumed to have existed not only in Old Germanic but also in Old Romance.

However, predicates selecting for subject-like obliques are not confined to Germanic and Old French, but exist in all the archaic and ancient Indo-European languages. The following examples from Latin, Greek, Lithuanian and Russian (Bauer 2000) suffice to illustrate this point:

- | | | |
|--------|---|------------|
| (6) a. | fratris me pudet
brother.GEN me.ACC is-ashamed
‘I am ashamed of my brother’ | Latin |
| b. | melei moi tinos
cares me.DAT something.GEN
‘I care for something’ | Greek |
| c. | mán nēzti
me.DAT itches
‘I itch’ | Lithuanian |
| d. | mne žal’ vašu sestru
me.DAT feel-sorry your sister.ACC
‘I am sorry for your sister.’ | Russian |

These facts demand a reevaluation of the status of oblique-subject constructions in the Indo-European languages in general. In the remainder of this paper, we discuss and reject several possible hypothesis on the origin and development of the oblique-subject construction. We conclude that the linguistic data speak for a reconstruction of the alignment system of Proto-Indo-European as a stative–active, or a split- or fluid-S, language, and hence that oblique subjects have not developed from objects.

3. THE ORIGIN OF THE OBLIQUE-SUBJECT CONSTRUCTION

3.1 THE TOPICALITY HYPOTHESIS

In an attempt to account for the non-canonical case marking of subject-like obliques Haspelmath (2001) suggests that the dative experiencer of Nom-Dat constructions was frequently topicalized to initial position because of its animacy and high topicality. Therefore, Haspelmath argues, the dative experiencer gradually acquired subject properties over time. The problem with this explanation, however, is that it does not hold for non-canonically case marked argument structures where there is no nominative. So for example, Old Norse-Icelandic exhibited several argument structure constructions where no nominative is found.

As evident from Table 1, argument structure constructions with Acc-Acc, Acc-Gen and Dat-Gen, for instance, constitute a problem for the Topicality Hypothesis. Obviously, no swapping of arguments within the argument structure can be assumed to have taken place for argument structure constructions where there is no nominative. Hence, an explanation that covers all the relevant data is preferable over an explanation that only covers a subset of the data.

Table 1. Case constructions in Old Norse-Icelandic (Barðdal 2008).

Nom	Acc	Dat	Gen
Nom-only	Acc-only	Dat-only	Gen-only
Nom-Acc	Acc-Nom	Dat-Nom	Gen-Nom
Nom-Dat	Acc-Acc	Dat-Gen	Gen-PP
Nom-Gen	Acc-Gen	Dat-PP	Gen-S
Nom-PP	Acc-PP	Dat-S	
Nom-S	Acc-S		

3.2 THE NULL SUBJECT HYPOTHESIS

Another hypothesis found in the literature, proposed by, for instance, Falk (1997), assumes that the subject-like-oblique construction originally contained an invisible null subject and therefore that the subject-like oblique was an object. This hypothesis is problematic for at least two reasons. First, as mentioned above, subject-like obliques in German exhibit actual subject behavior. In the example in (3b) above it is clearly the subject-like dative of *übel werden* ‘become sick’ that is being left unexpressed in the control infinitive. Second, on this hypothesis it must be assumed that the null subject disappeared, and that the subject-like oblique became a subject in Icelandic and Faroese, eventually changing into a nominative subject in all the Germanic languages. Consider, however, the following German example:

- (7) *Es ist nicht gut ___ **mir** übel zu sein.
 It is not good PRO-NOM me.DAT sick to be
 Intended meaning: ‘It is not good to feel sick.’

If there were an invisible subject with verbs selecting for subject-like obliques, this invisible subject should have the ability to be left unexpressed in control infinitives, and if the subject-like oblique were a syntactic object, it should be obligatory expressed, exactly like the reflexive object in (4) above. However, the example in (7) shows that neither *es* in *Es ist mir kalt* nor an invisible null subject in *Mir ist kalt* can be left unexpressed in control infinitives in German. Compare (7) with (8) below, where weather-*es* in German can be left unexpressed in a control infinitive on identity with another weather-*es*:

- (8) Es donnert ohne ___ zu regnen.¹
 it.EXPL thunders without PRO.EXPL to rain
 ‘It thunders without raining.’

The grammaticality of (8), as opposed to (7), shows that the postulated null subject behaves differently from *es*, which is supposed to be its overt counterpart. The example in (7) also shows that the subject-like dative *mir* cannot be expressed in control infinitives in German, and thus that it does not behave as an object. It is therefore doubtful whether the postulation of an invisible null subject can be maintained.

3.3 THE SEMANTIC DEVELOPMENT HYPOTHESIS

Yet another possibility is that modern oblique subjects were objects at an earlier stage and that they became subjects through a semantic shift of the verb or predicate (Andrew Garrett, p.c.). The verb *like*, for instance, is assumed to have developed from the adjective *like* selecting for a dative object. This object is still tracable through the

¹ We thank Martin Haspelmath for providing us with this example.

etymological, and hence semantic, development of the lexeme. Consider the following etymological entry for *like*:

like (v.)

... from *liko- “body,” originally “appearance, form.” The basic meaning seems to be “to be like” (see like (adj.)), thus, “to be suitable.” (www.etymonline.com)

This would mean that originally the verb *like* was construed with a nominative subject and a dative object, and through the change in meaning from ‘X is like Y’ via ‘X is pleasing to Y’ to ‘Y likes X’ the arguments swap their positions and the dative experiencer becomes a syntactic subject (cf. Jespersen 1927, Lightfoot 1979, inter alia).

The problem with this explanation is that it is not a given that a dative experiencer object is a part of the argument structure of the etyma of all the relevant modern predicates which select for oblique subjects. Compare, for instance, OE *lystan* ‘want, lust’:

lust (n.)

O.E. *lust* “desire, pleasure,” from P.Gmc. **lustuz* ..., from PIE **las-* “to be eager, wanton, or unruly” ... In M.E., “any source of pleasure or delight,” also “an appetite,” also “a liking for a person,” also “fertility” (of soil) ... The verb is first attested c.1230, “to please, delight;” (www.etymonline.com)

This verb is derived from the noun *lust* and seems always to have occurred with the Acc-Gen case frame (cf. also the Acc-Gen frame in Icelandic *Mig lystir þess*). Hence, as *lystan* did not exist as a verb, no potential accusative object changing into an accusative subject was a part of its argument structure when it “changed its meaning”. It is therefore clear that swapping of arguments in the argument structure, related to a change in the meaning of a verb, cannot be assumed to have taken place for all the oblique-subject predicates involved.

Moreover, a particularly striking counterargument against the Semantic Development Hypothesis comes from Indo-Aryan. In Modern Marathi a number of predicates taking a Dat-Nom case frame correspond to Nom-Acc predicates in Sanskrit (see Deo 2003). Evidently, the Dat-Nom frames started to occur with some of the predicates in question in Old Marathi, with the result that they either co-occur with the Nom-Acc frames in the modern language, or have replaced them altogether. This is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Nom-Acc verbs in Sanskrit → Dat-Nom verbs in Marathi (see Deo 2003: 6).

SANSKRIT			OLD MARATHI			MODERN MARATHI		
ROOT	ARG-ST	CASE	ROOT	ARG-ST	CASE	ROOT	ARG-ST	CASE
smṛ	recall	<exp,th> N-A	smar	recall	<exp,th> N-A	smar	remember	<exp,th> N-A, D-N
ut-kal	expel	<ag,th> N-A	ukal	solve	<exp,th> N-A	ukal	solve	<exp,th> N-A, D-N
sādh	obtain	<go,th> N-A	sādh	obtain	<go,th> N-A	sādh	obtain	<go,th> N-A, D-N
pra-ir	propel	<ag,th> N-A	pel	direct	<ag,th> N-A	pel	bear	<exp,th> N-A, D-N
sam-jñā	know	<exp,th> N-A	samaj	understand	<exp,th> N-A, D-N	samaj	understand	<exp,th> N-A, D-N
budh	perceive	<exp,th> N-A	bujh	realize	<exp,th> N-A, D-N	bujh	realize	<exp,th> N-A, D-N
sūc	reveal	<exp,th> N-A	suc	reveal	<exp,th> N-A, D-N	suc	occur to	<exp,th> D-N
kal	perceive	<exp,th> N-A	kaḷ	realize	<exp,th> N-A, D-N	kaḷ	realize	<exp,th> D-N
bhāv-aya	imagine	<exp,th> N-A	bhāv	appear	<exp,th> N-A, D-N	bhāv	appear	<exp,th> D-N
mānaya	think	<exp,th> N-A	mānav	suit	<exp,th> N-A, D-N	mānav	suit	<exp,th> D-N

We give one such example in (9) below, which shows that the verb *sam-jñā* ‘know’ selected for Nom-Acc in Sanskrit, while its Modern Marathi counterpart, *samaj* ‘understand’ may occur with the Dat-Nom case frame.

- (9)a. kanyā pāṭham saṁjānāti. Sanskrit
 girl.NOM lesson.ACC knows
 ‘The girl knows the lesson.’
- b. mulīlā abhyās samajto. Marathi
 girl.DAT lesson.NOM understands
 ‘The girl understands the lesson.’ (Deo 2003: 5)

Thus, the Dat-Nom predicates in Modern Marathi cannot be taken to indicate an earlier stage with a dative object since no dative experiencer existed in these predicates’ argument structure in Sanskrit.

3.4 THE FREE-DATIVE HYPOTHESIS

The “free dative construction” can be found in various Indo-European languages, and occurs for example in Modern German. This construction is readily available to all predicates where a beneficiary could be construed, as shown in (10b). It might be proposed that the dative experiencer (subject) has its origin in this construction.

- (10)a. Das ist eine grosse Freude. German
 this is a great pleasure
 ‘This is great pleasure.’
- b. Das is **mir** eine grosse Freude
 this is me.DAT a great pleasure
 ‘This is a great pleasure for me.’

This may indeed be a plausible explanation for the existence of some subject-like datives. It does, however, not capture the existence of subject-like accusatives, as with *lustan* above, since no “free accusatives” have been documented in the literature.

3.5 THE ANTI-CAUSATIVE HYPOTHESIS

Most subject-like obliques are experiencers. In Icelandic, however, a significant number have the thematic role of theme/patient. It is a common pattern that the theme/patient object of a transitive verb occurs as the oblique subject of the intransitive pendant in what can be regarded as an anti-causative derivation. Thus, it might be suggested that oblique-subjects originated as objects of causative transitive predicates.

- (11)a. Fólk skaut **henni** upp á stjörnuhimininn á einni nóttu.
 people shot her.DAT up on star-heaven on one night
 ‘People made her into a star overnight.’
- b. **Henni** skaut upp á stjörnuhimininn á einni nóttu.
 her.DAT shot up on star-heaven on one night
 ‘She became a star overnight.’

However, this hypothesis is not feasible since only some oblique-subject predicates show signs of having been subject to anti-causative derivation. The great majority of oblique subjects involve experiencers that do not figure in such derivation, like *bjóða við* ‘disgust’ in (12) below.

- (12)a. *Fólk bauð **honum** við hákarlinum.
 people disgusted him.DAT with shark-the
 Intended meaning: ‘People made him feel disgusted by the shark meat.’

- b. **Honum** bauð við hákarlinum.
 him.DAT disgusted with shark-the
 ‘He felt disgusted by the shark meat.’

3.6 SUMMARY

The existing, or possible, hypotheses on the origin of the oblique-subject construction reported on above do not hold for all the data. Some of the proposed hypothesis – the Topicality Hypothesis, the Semantic Development Hypothesis, the Free Dative Hypothesis, and the Anti-Causative Hypothesis – can hold for a subset of the data at issue, but not all of the data.

4. OBLIQUE SUBJECTS AS A CHARACTERISTIC OF STATIVE–ACTIVE ALIGNMENT

The final hypothesis that we consider assumes that oblique subjects are linked to a particular alignment typology. It has been argued that Proto-Indo-European was a stative–active language where the case marking of subjects of intransitive predicates was semantically motivated (Klimov 1973, Schmidt 1979, Gamkrelidze & Ivanov 1995[1984], Lehmann 1989 and Bauer 2000, cf. also Drinka 1999 for further references). Accordingly, the subjects of active intransitives were case marked in the same way as subjects of transitive predicates, whereas subjects of stative intransitives were case marked in the oblique. This is different from nominative-accusative languages and ergative languages. The former type of language treats subjects of transitives and intransitives alike whereas objects are distinct; in the latter type the case marking of subjects of transitives (ergative) is different from that of intransitives and objects (absolutive). In a further type of language, involving “tripartite” case marking, transitive and intransitive subjects and objects all have distinct case marking. This alignment typology is illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Alignment typology.

	Transitive subjects	Intransitive subjects		Objects
		Active	Inactive	
Accusative	A	A	A	B
Ergative	A	B	B	B
Tripartite	A	B	B	C
Active	A	A	B	B

Earlier approaches to stative–active languages assumed that they came with several ancillary properties such as the following ones (cf. Drinka 1999: 469):

- (13)a. lack of passive
 b. lack of possessive ‘have’
 c. lack of feminine gender
 d. distinction between alienable and inalienable possession
 e. the meagerness of nominal inflection in the earliest layers
 f. the presence of lexical doublets with active/stative orientation

However, Harris (1985, 1990) and Dixon (1994) have argued against the necessary co-occurrence of ancillary properties when establishing the alignment type of a given language and have shown that there exist stative–active languages without these. In this light, the possible reconstruction of a proto-language exhibiting the ancillary properties is not an issue anymore (cf. Wichmann 2008). In other words, Proto-Indo-European

could have been a stative–active language even though it did not have all, or even any, of the ancillary properties.

Evaluating the pros and the cons for the hypothesis that Proto-Indo-European was a stative–active language, it is clear that the oblique subject construction is a major argument for assuming a split- or fluid-S system in Proto-Indo-European. Several different case and argument structure constructions exist in the ancient/archaic languages, as in Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Hittite, Gothic, Early Germanic, Slavic and Baltic (cf. the case constructions listed in Table 1 above).

This raises the question of whether the oblique subject construction qualifies as “semantic alignment,” or whether this family of constructions should be regarded as marginal within the alignment system and non-pervasive. One argument against the view that the oblique subject construction is marginal comes from frequency and pervasiveness. For example, Modern Icelandic exhibits around 700 dative subject predicates, 200 accusative subject predicates and approximately ten genitive subject predicates (cf. Barðdal 2004: 109, based in part on a list compiled by Jónsson 1998). The oblique subject construction can therefore not be regarded as a marginal phenomenon, but is clearly a substantial part of the core grammar of Icelandic.

Another argument comes from the lack of productivity of the oblique subject construction in the history of Icelandic. A textual comparison between Old and Modern Icelandic (Barðdal 2001) reveals that 72 types occurred in a text of 20,000 running words, consisting of four different genres, while only 48 types were found in a compatible corpus of Modern Icelandic texts (Barðdal 2008: 19). Hence, the oblique subject construction cannot be assumed to have gained in productivity from Old to Modern Icelandic. Similar type frequencies can presumably be obtained from, for instance, Russian and the Modern Indo-Aryan languages, although we concentrate on Icelandic as the statistics for Icelandic is readily available.

Finally, it should be emphasized that all the predicates instantiating the oblique subject construction in the Indo-European languages are low on the transitivity scale, which is highly compatible with a Split- or a Fluid-S system.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

We have, in this article, presented syntactic arguments for analyzing subject-like obliques as syntactic subjects in Modern and Old Germanic, as well as in Old Romance. This analysis is based on a host of subject properties of which control infinitives are regarded as the most conclusive one. This analysis calls into question the axiomatic assumption found in the literature that oblique subjects must have developed from objects. We have reviewed five existing or possible hypotheses on the emergence of oblique subjects, none of which could be shown to hold for the whole array of data relevant for this issue, but only a subset of it. It is, however, clear that structures containing subject-like obliques exist in all the ancient and archaic Indo-European languages. Given the archaic nature of the syntax of oblique subject constructions, it follows that they should be reconstructed for the proto-language. The question, then, arises whether Proto-Indo-European was an accusative language “with ergative structures”, or whether it was a Split- or Fluid-S (stative–active) language. The pervasiveness and high type frequency of the oblique subject construction in some of the daughter languages, for instance Old and Modern Icelandic, speaks for a Split- or Fluid-S system as against an accusative system “with ergative structures.” Oblique subjects are a natural part of a Split- or Fluid-S system and need not to be postulated to have developed from objects.

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