Obliqueness and Diffuse Grammatical Relations in Baltic

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The prototypical nature of grammatical relations

- It has been widely recognised since Keenan 1975 that the notion of subject is prototypical: there are some undoubtful instances of subjecthood, on which we will base our definitions, and other less prototypical realisations lacking one or more essential features of subjects.
- Mutatis mutandis, this can also be said of objects.

Subjecthood

- The criteria for subjecthood have not been fundamentally revised since Keenan:
  - Functional (semantic) properties: agent, topic
  - Behavioural (syntactic) properties: control of reflexivisation, control properties in complex sentences etc.
  - Coding (morphosyntactic) properties: morphological features like nominative marking and verb agreement

Syntactic criteria

- Behavioural properties seem particularly valuable because they are syntactic in nature (whereas the other are semantic/pragmatic or morphosyntactic), and grammatical relations should probably, at least partly, be thought of as syntactic (not 'morphosemantic').

- In some languages, syntactic criteria (behavioural properties) yield remarkable results in establishing the subjecthood of non-nominative marked nominals.

The textbook case: Icelandic

- A large number of tests confirm that Icelandic has non-canonical subjects, functioning as subjects in every respect save case marking. Cf., e.g., the embedded non-nominative subjects controlled by matrix clause nominative subjects:

  Jóni   líkar   þessi bók.

  John:DAT please:PRS3 this book:NOM

  'John likes this book.'

  Jón   vonast   til að   líka   þessi bók.

  John:NOM   hope:PRS3   COMP   please:INF this book:NOM

  'John expects he will like this book.'

What about the non-textbook cases?

- In Baltic and Slavonic (and, for that matter, German), the syntactic tests yield considerable worse results:

  Lith.

  Jonui   prireikė   pinigų.

  John:DAT   be_needed:PRT   money:GEN

  'John found himself in need of money.'

  *Jonas   tikisi   prireikti   pinigų.

  John:NOM   expect:PRS   be_needed:INF money:GEN

  'John expects to find himself in need of money.'

What about the non-textbook cases?

- In a language like Lithuanian (Latvian, Russian...), the only test that works well is usually that of control of reflexivisation:

  Jonui　　　　　　*pagailo*　　　　　　*draugo.*
  John:DAT　　　　feel_sorry:PRT3　　friend:GEN
  'John felt sorry for his friend.'

  Jonui　　　　　　*pagailo*　　　　　　*savęs.*
  John:DAT　　　　feel_sorry:PRT3　　REFL:GEN
  John felt sorry for himself.'

Control of reflexivisation

- Is that enough, however? And is control of reflexivisation connected with subjecthood? Several explanations have been proposed:
  - Configurational (c-command in GB)
  - In terms of thematic hierarchy (Jackendoff 1972, presumably also adherents of Case Grammar)
  - In terms of obliqueness (o-command in HPSG)
- As syntactic (behavioural) criteria yield comparably little, the temptation arises, when operating with Slavonic or Baltic material, to concentrate on functional (semantic) criteria.

Semantics vs. morphosyntax

- This is risky because the reasoning is often circular: it is (correctly) assumed that subjecthood prototypically reflects the thematic role of agent/experiencer, and that this role is prototypically encoded as nominative, but in the lack of encoding properties, thematic role is used as a criterion for identifying the subject ('look for a nominative; if you don't find one, look for the agent/experiencer'). If the status of subject can additionally be proved by syntactic (behavioural) tests, there is no problem; if not, the reasoning becomes circular, because encoding (nominative) can then be associated directly with thematic role, and the notion of subject (tautological with respect to agent/experiencer) becomes superfluous.

Obliqueness

- To avoid circular reasonings, we must have some syntactic notions mediating between semantics/pragmatics (agent, topic…) and morphosyntax (nominative…).

- The most useful notion that has been proposed until now is that of obliqueness or noun phrase hierarchy (a notion that has grown out of Keenan & Comrie's (1977) Accessibility Hierarchy).

Obliqueness

- Obliqueness is a hierarchical ordering of the noun phrases in a sentence based on discourse saliency. It is reflected in syntactic accessibility (Keenan and Comrie's 'Accessibility hierarchy') as well as in the unmarked pattern of topic-comment structure and in the unmarked pattern of word order. The Obliqueness Hierachy is syntactic in nature but has its counterpart in morphosyntax, the Case Hierarchy.

- Noun Phrase Hierarchy: Subject > Direct Object > Indirect Oblect > Oblique

- Case Hierarchy: Nominative > Accusative > ...

Obliqueness

- The highest positions in the Obliqueness Hierarchy are usually grammaticalised as subject and object, and morphosyntactically encoded by the cases highest in the Case Hierarchy, nominative and accusative.

- However, the roles of subject and direct object, with their characteristic case forms, are not always assigned: there are many examples of constructions without clear subjects and direct objects.

- Still, within such constructions there are differences in relative obliqueness that allow us to describe one NP as 'more subjectlike' than other NPs; these will often be described as 'quasi-subjects', 'semi-subjects' etc.

Obliqueness

- Take Lithuanian:
  Jonui   reikia   pinigų.
  John:DAT be_needed:PRS   money:GEN
  'John needs money.'
- In this sentence there is a clear difference in relative obliqueness between the Dative and the Genitive. The Dative will normally be the topic and it will occur sentence-initially. This is the reason why we intuitively interpret it as a kind of subject. However, it lacks the typical encoding of a subject and acts as a surrogate subject at a lower level of the Obliqueness Hierarchy, the highest position (subject) not having been assigned.

Quasi-subjects

We can now define the notion of quasi-subject as:

- A NP lacking the morphosyntactic marking of a subject (nominative), and

- lacking many or most of the behavioural properties of subjects, but

- similar to subjects in being highest in the Obliqueness Hierarchy among the NPs occurring in the sentence.

Quasi-subjects

The notion of quasi-subject is not new. It is important to note, however, that

- The quasi-subject is not a subject that happens not to assume the prototypical morphosyntactic encoding of a subject: in a sentence with a quasi-subject, the status of subject is not assigned, and the term quasi-subject means just 'most subjectlike among the NPs of the sentence'; the sentence is subjectless (the oblique subjects of Icelandic, on the other hand, could be called real subjects).

- Sentences with quasi-subjects are always intransitive: transitive structures always have a subject proper (cf. Burzio's generalisation and many modifications that have been proposed).

Constructions with quasi-subjects

Given that *Jonui* in

    Jonui   *pagailo*   *draugo*.
    John:DAT   pity:PRT3   friend:GEN
    'John felt sorry for his friend.'

is a quasi-subject, what is *draugo*?

- Generally speaking, the Lithuanian genitive can encode
  - direct objects: *jis*   *pavalgė*   *duonos*
                           3SG   eat:PRT3   bread:GEN
                           'he ate some bread')
  - or intransitive subjects: *atėjo*   *svečių*
                           come:PRT3   guest:GEN.PL
                           'some guests came')

Constructions with quasi-subjects

- In this particular case, nothing seems to confirm the interpretation of *draugo* as an object.
- There is, for instance, no passivisation:

  Karalius   *pasigailėjo*   *Jono*.
  King   pity:PRT3   John:GEN
  Jonas   *buvo*   *karaliaus*   *pasigailėtas*.
  John:NOM   be:PRT3   king:GEN   pity:PART.PRT.PASS
  Karaliui   *pagailo*   *Jono*.
  King:DAT   pity:PRT3   John:GEN
  *Jonas buvo karaliaus pagailtas.

- If the verbs in question have passive-like participles, these are actually indifferent with respect to voice and completely lexicalised: *reikiamas* (from *reikėti*) is 'necessary'.

Case marking of the second argument in constructions with quasi-subjects

- What if instead of the genitive a structural case usually indicative of grammatical status, more specifically an accusative, appears?

  Latv.   *Jānim*   *vajag*   *naudu*.

  John:DAT   be_needed:PRS   money:ACC

  'John needs money.'

- At a first glance, such constructions would seem to reflect a shift of the second argument to the status of objecthood; and the whole construction would seem to be transitive. This, however, is doubtful.

Pain constructions

- A revealing example is that of the Lithuanian verbs of pain, which show alternative ways of marking the second argument:

  Man   *skauda*   *galvą.*
  1SG:DAT   ache:PRS   head:ACC

  Man   *skauda*   *galva.*
  1SG:DAT   ache:PRS   head:NOM

  'I've got a headache.'

- Which is original? Latvian has only the nominative, which would point to the nominative as being older, and the accusative as being a Lithuanian innovation.

Pain constructions

- How should we interpret the accusative *galvą* with *skaudėti*? Is it an object? This would imply that *skaudėti* is transitive ('something hurts my head'); it would also imply that there is a fundamental difference in syntactic structure between the constructions with nominative and accusative

- If *skaudėti* is transitive, it should have a subject – at least a null subject.

- The evidence is, however, that *skaudėti* is not transitive.

The syntactic properties of *skaudėti*

- For the expression of pain, Lithuanian also has constructions arguably containing null subjects:

Man	*šiandien*	*plėšia*	*galvą.*
1SG	today	rend:PRS.3SG	head:ACC

  'I've got a rending headache'

Skausmas	*man*	*plėšia*	*krūtinę.*
pain:NOM	1SG:DAT	rend:PRS3	chest:ACC

  'pain is rending my chest'

- No overt subject denoting the causator of pain can be used with *skaudėti.*

The syntactic properties of Latvian *sāpēt*, Lith. *skaudėti*

- A causator subject can occur only with Latvian *sāpēt*:

  Man sāp viņa izturēšanās. 'His behaviour hurts me.'

- Latvian *sāpēt* opens a position for a nominative subject denoting either (a) a causator (b) a body part conceptualised as a causator of pain;

- In some Lithuanian dialects, Lithuanian *sopėti*, *skaudėti* open a position for nominative marked NP denoting a body part described as the location / causator of pain, but not for other causators;

- In other Lithuanian dialects *sopėti*, *skaudėti* do not open a position for an overt nominative subject at all; they also do not open a position for a null subject.

The syntactic properties of *skaudėti*

- Therefore the accusative with *skaudėti* is probably not an object, because the property of governing an object seems to be connected with transitivity, which also implies the presence of a subject.

- At best, this could be qualified as an isolated instance of split subject-marking (stative-active marking), with an intransitive subject assuming object marking because of its patient-like thematic role (S_O marked as O)

Intransitive subjects alongside experiencer datives

- We conclude that there is no fundamental difference in syntactic structure between *Man skauda galvà* and *Man skauda gálvą*: in both cases we have, alongside an experiencer dative, an intransitive subject than can receive A or O marking

- When we consider these constructions in the broader context of constructions with subject-like experiencer datives, we observe a lot of variety accross languages with respect to the marking of the second argument – with A marking, O marking or competition between both:

Intransitive subjects alongside experiencer datives

- DAT + NOM
  Lith.   *Man patinka*   *šis filmas*.
                 1SG   please:PRS.3   this film:NOM

- DAT + ACC
  Faroese   *Mær   líkar*   *henda filmin.*
               1SG   please:PRS.3   this film:ACC
  Latv.   *Man   vajag*   *naudu.*
               1SG   be_needed:PRS3   money:ACC

- DAT + NOM/ACC
  Lith.   *Man   skauda galva / galvą.*
               1SG   hurt:PRS.3   head:NOM/ACC
  Latv.   *Man   jānopērk maize / !maizi*.
               1SG   buy:DEB.PRS   bread:NOM/!ACC

Diffusion

- We therefore posit diffusion of subject properties:
  - we have a quasi-subject outranking the second argument in the Obliqueness Hierarchy; normally it will be the topic (in the unmarked pattern of topic-comment structure), and it will occur sentence-initially
  - We have a second argument often, though inconsistently, displaying the coding properties of intransitive subject (nominative, but with competing accusative)

Intransitive subjects alongside experiencer datives

- Positing an intransitive subject next to a (dative-marked) nominal with certain subject properties may seem paradoxical...

- But usually nobody objects to positing a direct object next to a dative-marked indirect object

- Between these two phenomena there is a clear parallelism.

Datival quasi-subjects and indirect objects I

- Datival indirect objects and datival quasi-subjects are higher in saliency compared to the intransitive subject or object respectively (which is partly due to their inherent topicworthiness connected with animacy etc.); this is reflected in the unmarked word order:

  TĖVUI   *reikia*   *tavo* **pagalbos**.

  Father:DAT   be_needed:PRS   your help:GEN

  'Father needs your help.'

  Tėvas   *padovanojo*   **JONUI**   **dviratį**.

  Father:NOM   present:PRT   John:DAT   bicycle:ACC

  'Father bought John a bicycle as a present.'

Datival quasi-subjects and indirect objects II

- Both syntactic positions are available for the expression of external possession: if the possessum is DO, then the external possessor will be formally indistinguishable from an indirect object; if the possessum is subject, it will become a "quasi-subject":

Jonui	*sušalo*	*rankos*.
John:DAT	grow_cold:PRT	hand:NOM.PL

'John's hands grew cold.'

Peter	*Jonui*	*paspaudė*	*ranką*.
Peter:NOM	John:DAT	squeeze:PRT	hand:ACC

'Peter squeezed John's hand.'

Datival quasi-subjects and indirect objects II

- The relationship between direct and indirect object is replicated, in a higher region of the Obliqueness Hierarchy, by the relationship between an intransitive object and an oblique (e.g., dative-marked) quasi-subject.

Ditransitivity and di-intransitivity

- The notion of ditransitivity implies that both the indirect object and the direct object have their share in the transitivity of the predicate, i. e., that there is a certain degree of diffusion of objecthood;

- This is replicated, in a higher region of the Obliqueness Hierarchy, by diffusion of intransitivity (i.e. diffusion of the properties of the intransitive subject).

The notion of ditransitivity

- The notion of transitivity strictly requires only a subject and an object, with characteristic, language-specific alignment features (i.e., with either A or O assuming the same marking as the intransitive subject), and the notion of ditransitivity can be motivated only to the extent that two arguments compete for the status of object, i. e., there is a degree of diffusion of objecthood.
- That this is actually the case is shown by the evidence of many languages.

Ditransitivity as diffuse objecthood I

- The most familar example is English, where the 'indirect object' (*John gave Mary some flowers*) is actually a direct object (in many varieties of English it is the only object to be promoted to subject in the passive), while the traditional 'direct object' is actually a demoted direct object (a *chômeur* in Relational Grammar)
- With other verbs that could be described as ditransitive, e. g., verbs of asking, we often observe double accusatives :

  otium diuos rogat in patente / prensus Aegaeo

  'For ease, in wide Aegean caught, the sailor prays' (Horace, *Carmina* II.16);

Ditransitivity as diffuse objecthood II

- In similar instances, Lithuanian has double genitives:

  Jonas prašė tėvo pinigų.

  'John asked his father (GEN) for money (GEN)'

- Constructions with external possessors, usually formally identified with the ditransitive construction if the possessum is DO, also occasionally show a double accusative, e.g. in Classical Greek:

  ἥ   σε   πόδας   νίψει
  3SG.NOM.F   2SG.ACC   foot:ACC.PL   wash:FUT3

  'she will wash your feet' (*Odyssey*, τ 356)

Diffusion and diachronic stability

- Whereas the configuration DAT – ACC (indirect object – direct object) is quite stable (English has lost it because of the loss of case), the configuration DAT – NOM is less stable because it shows an obliqueness conflict: the nominative is higher in the Case Hierarchy than the dative, whereas the case which it marks is actually lower in the noun phrase hierarchy than the dative-marked nominal.

But must they be unstable?

- On the other hand, there is no inherent necessity for non-prototypical nominative subjects to be unstable: they may be stable over centuries.

  English: *Me like pears* → *I like pears*.

  but

  Lithuanian *Man patinka kriaušės*. (No change in sight)

What about diffuse constructions?

- Elimination of non-prototypical subjects (with only subject encoding) may lead to constructions which are less deviant in terms of case marking but still diffuse in terms of grammatical relations: neither does the second argument become a real object, nor does the quasi-subject become a fully fledged subject:

    Icelandic *Jóno líkar þessi bók* (NOM).

    Faroese *Mær líkar henda filmin* (ACC).

    Latvian *Man sāp galva* (NOM).

    Lithuanian *Man skauda galvą* (ACC).

    Latvian *Man jānopērk maize.* (NOM)

    Latvian (substandard) *Man jānopērk maizi.* (ACC)

Noun phrase hierarchy and case hierarchy

- What is altered when such changes in case marking occur is not the assignment of grammatical relations, but their marking in terms of relative obliqueness. The pattern DAT – NOM is deviant because – the nominative being higher in the Case Hierarchy than the dative – it contradicts the pattern of relative obliqueness of the nominals involved in terms of grammatical relations.

- The pattern DAT – ACC is less deviant: though the accusative ranks second to the nominative in the Case Hierarchy, its relationship to the dative in the ditransitive construction appears to be a local exception to this general principle.

Diffusion as a stable type

- Such diffuse constructions may be thought of as inherently unstable, but must they necessarily be?
- In Baltic and Slavonic, there is a large array of diffuse constructions with usual datival quasi-subjects;
- They appear to be quite stable despite the fact that there is some variety in the morphosyntactic marking of the second argument;
- Alongside the dative, other types of marking may occur (cf. Russian *u* + Genitive), but this does not alter the general observations made here;
- These constructions seem to occur naturally in the domain of argument structures involving experiencers (and external possessors identified with experiencers).

Degrees of diffusion

- Though the notion of quasi-subject was introduced above to distinguish the Balto-Slavonic datival quasi-subjects from the Icelandic non-canonical subjects proper, a certain amount of diffusion is obviously involved in the Icelandic constructions *Jóni líkar þessi bók* as well.

- Perhaps, then, the difference between Icelandic and Balto-Slavic is one of degree.

Thank you for your attention!

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