

Verbal semantics and subject case marking in Early Germanic

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The goal of the present paper is to compare the semantic fields occupied by argument structure constructions, in particular the oblique-subject construction, in the early Germanic languages, particularly Gothic, Old Saxon, Old English, and Old Icelandic. It has been categorically assumed in the literature that non-canonical subject marking is associated with experiencer predicates. The goal of the present study is to investigate this claim and document the semantic fields found with predicates selecting for non-canonical subjects (cf. Barðdal 2004), to document examples in which non-canonical subject marking is possible with predicate types other than the experiencer. Therefore, a systematic investigation of the semantic scope of the oblique-subject construction in each of these early Germanic languages will be carried out, as a part of a larger Indo-European comparison (cf. Barðdal et al. 2010). The study aims at casting light on the relation between verbal semantics and noncanonical case marking. A secondary goal is to study the development of the obliquesubject construction in Germanic and whether the construction can be reconstructed for Proto-Germanic (and further for Proto-Indo-European).

This paper demonstrates how constructional meaning may be studied historically (cf. Barðdal 2010), utilizing the framework of Construction Grammar. The investigation is based on a diachronic study of the lexical semantics of the predicates instantiating an oblique-subject argument structure construction, in combination with the semantic map model. Hence, we will extend the usage of the semantic map model from lexical items to grammatical items, as such contributing to the renewal of the representational framework of lexical typology (Barðdal, Kristoffersen & Sveen 2009).

It has often been assumed that while the oblique-subject construction was widespread in Old Icelandic (and continues to be robust in Modern Icelandic), it was either absent or extremely rare in the other Germanic languages. To investigate the accuracy of this assumption, we examined the argument structure

of every predicate in Gothic (Snædal 1998) and Old Saxon (Sehrt 1925, and the digitized version of the *Heliand*). Old English and Old Icelandic data were extracted from dictionaries and digital corpora. Verbal predicates that are listed as “impersonal” in traditional grammars, dictionaries, and concordances were further examined in context to determine whether these verbs are truly “impersonal”, or rather examples of the oblique-subject construction. Our findings indicate that contrary to the traditional assumption, the oblique-subject construction was robust throughout the early Germanic languages.

The Old Saxon data yield 47 predicates for which a non-canonical argument structure occurs. These predicates include (but are not limited to) dative and accusative reflexives, and dative and accusative subjects, both with and without a nominative present in the retrievable context. Some examples are expected under traditional assumptions about the semantics of the oblique-subject construction, such as *langôn* ‘to desire’, in which the dative subject is an experiencer. Other examples, such as the verbs of motion *faran* ‘to travel’, *gangan* ‘to walk’, *cuman* ‘to come’, and *giuuitan* ‘to depart’, have not traditionally been analyzed as oblique-subject constructions. However, our investigation reveals that in many instances a nominative subject is not retrievable in the immediate context of the predicate, suggesting that the “dative reflexive” is in fact a subject.

The Gothic data confirm the findings for Old Saxon, Old Icelandic, and Old English, in that the predicates include dative, accusative, and genitive subject-like reflexives and subjects, both with and without context-retrievable nominatives. Unlike Old Saxon and Old English, but like Old Icelandic, the genitive as a noncanonical subject marker is particularly robust in Gothic. Like Old Saxon, the dative may occur with a verb of motion in Gothic (*gaggan* ‘to go’), in some instances without a context-retrievable nominative.

The findings of this paper point to a robust system of semantic case assignment for subjects in the older Germanic languages. The oblique arguments in question behave syntactically as subjects (e.g., in terms of linear placement), leading to their analysis as subjects despite their non-nominative case marking. The fact that cases other than the dative are used, and that thematic roles other than the Experiencer are attested, provides evidence that the oblique-subject construction was more widespread than previous research has assumed. This has

wider implications for a reconceptualization of subjecthood in the modern Germanic languages.

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