Obliqueness
and
grammatical relations

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Grammatical relations
The universality of grammatical relations has been an object of controversy for a long time.
Reasons for doubting the validity of notions like 'subject' and 'object' have been manifold.
– a typological reason is the existence of languages where some of the defining properties
associated with subjecthood etc., e. g., case marking, are absent whereas others, such as word
order, could more reasonably be connected with topichood (cf. Li and Thompson's notion of
topic-prominent languages)
– another typological reason might be the realisation that the grouping of agent and intransitive
subject defining the subject in languages with nominative alignment need not be universal
(what is a subject in an ergative language?)
– the reasons may be theory-internal. In grammatical theory grammatical relations may be
primitive and therefore universal (Relational Grammar)
derivative but universal (Generative Grammar)
derivative and not universal (Case Grammar)
Typological research that attempts to steer clear of theoretical bias adopts a view close to that of
type 3: the levels of semantic roles and topic-comment structure are functional and therefore
universal, that of grammatical relations could well prove to be language-specific but empirical
evidence to the contrary might in principle be found.

The universality of grammatical relations may be understood in a second, intralinguistic rather than
cross-linguistic sense. Given that the notion of subject is valid in a given language, must every
sentence have a subject? The answer may be threefold:
– Yes, for structural reasons (Generative Grammar: there is a dedicated subject position but it may,
of course, stay empty)
– Yes for semantic reasons (this reasoning tends to be circular as the semantic properties of
subjecthood assumed to be necessarily present in every clause may as well be associated with
agency or topicality)
– Not necessarily, unless empirical evidence should compel us to believe it (here the answer will
depend on the criteria)

Prototypical and canonical subjecthood
To Keenan (1975) we owe the useful notion of prototypical subjecthood (which can be extended to
other grammatical relations such as objecthood). Subjects are, on this view, clusters of
properties prototypically co-occurring but able to occur separately as well.
Keenan's list of subject properties includes:
– coding properties, e. g., case marking;
– semantic properties, e. g., topic & agent;
– behavioural properties, e. g., control of relexivisation:
John admires himself.
*Himself is admired by John.

In more recent publications the notion of prototypical subjecthood seems to have been superseded by that of canonical subjecthood (cf. Aikhenvald, Dixon & Onishi, eds., 2001).

Although the notion of canonicity is in many respects related to that of prototypicality, there are some practical differences: non-canonical is often understood as 'not canonically marked'.

Jonui would arguably be a non-canonical subject in

    Jonui   *reikia*   *pinigų*.
    John:DAT   be.needed.PRS3   money:GEN
    'John needs money.'

The assumption is that *Jonui* is really a subject but its marking is non-canonical.

But on Keenan's view encoding is also a defining property. Cf.

    Jānim   *jāpelna*   *nauda.*
    John:DAT   DEB-earn   money:NOM
    'John must earn money.'

On the prototypicality view, both *Jānim* and *nauda* would be non-prototypical subjects, one having the semantic but not the coding properties, the other *vice versa*.

On the canonicity view *Jānim* would arguably be a non-canonical subject (that is, there must be a possibility of establishing on independent grounds that it is a subject) whereas *nauda* would probably just be a nominative-marked NP, but not a subject of any kind.

Why this dissociation of grammatical function from case marking?

Probably because of the increasing realisation of the importance of purely syntactic criteria.

A notion of subjecthood based on case marking is vacuous: there is no need to speak of subjects where one can say 'nominative marked NP'.

A semantic definition is circular: if one identifies an NP (e. g., an NP lacking typical subject encoding, i. e., nominative) as a subject because it is an agent/experiencer or a topic, one may as well dispense with subjecthood in favour of the notions that can *a priori* be regarded as universal – agency and topicality.

Syntactic criteria have the advantage of being neither vacuous nor circular.

Icelandic datival quasi-subjects have an impressive list of syntactic subject properties. Their subjectlike status is confirmed by a number of tests, e.g., involving control properties:

    Jóni   *líkar*   *þessi bók*.
    John:DAT   please:PRS3   this book:NOM
    'John likes this book.'
    Jón   *vonast*   *til að* [PRO   *líka*   *þessi bók*.]
    John:NOM   hope:PRS3   COMP [PRO   please:INF   this   book:NOM]

    'John expects he will like this book.' (literally: expects to please this book')

Syntactic tests with divergent results

Slavonic, Baltic and German datival quasi-subjects do not pass these tests, cf.

    Jonas   *rado*   *lobj*.   Lithuanian
    John:NOM   find:PST.3   treasury:ACC
    'John found a treasury.'
    Jonas   *tikisi*   [PRO   *rasti*   *lobj*.]
    John:NOM   expect:PRS.3   find:INF   treasury:ACC
    'John is expecting to find a treasury.'

Jonui	*patinka*	*ši knyga.*
John:DAT	please:PRS.3	this book:NOM

'John likes this book.'

*Jonas	*tikisi*	[PRO	*patikti*	*ši knyga*]
John:NOM	expect:PRS.3		please:INF	this book:NOM

intended meaning 'John is expecting to like this book.'

A test for subjecthood which the Baltic and Slavonic datival quasi-subjects do pass is control of reflexivisation:

Jonui	*pagailo*	*savęs.*	Lithuanian
John:DAT	be_sorry:PST3	RFL:GEN	

'John felt sorry for himself.'

(cf. Russian *Ему стало жалко себя*)

But is this a test for subjecthood? Many explanations have been proposed as to what determines control of reflexivisation:
– *c*-command (GB)
– thematic hierarchy, i. e., hierarchy of semantic roles (Jackendoff)
– *o*-command, i. e., obliqueness (HPSG)
Many authors do not recognise the reflexivisation criterion.

Datival quasi-subjects
Many IE languages have clauses with datival NPs regarded as candidates for the status of 'non-canonical subject' ('quasi-subject'):
– they occur in sentences without a canonical nominative subject
– they are experiencers (sometimes recipients), which (in the lack of an agent) makes them, semantically, the most plausible candidates for subjecthood in terms of a thematic hierarchy;
– they are the unmarked topics, usually occurring clause-initially;
– their behavioural properties vary considerably: from a broad range of control properties shared with nominative subjects (Icelandic) to a very small number of subject properties (Baltic, Slavonic, German).
E.g.

Jonui	*reikia*	*pinigų.*	Lithuanian
John:DAT	be_needed:PRS.3	money:GEN	

'John needs money.'

Obliqueness and degrees of subjecthood
If we accept that subjecthood is a prototypical property (Keenan 1975), we must be prepared to find not only more and less prototypical instances of subjects (and, for that matter, objects), but also instances of diffusion, i.e, spread of subject and object properties over several NPs. This is especially so if we recognise case marking (Nominative) as a subject property.
I will discuss a few interesting cases from Baltic and Slavonic.

Obliqueness
The main notion I will be invoking is that of obliqueness (Keenan & Comrie 1977), i. e., a hierarchic ordering of NPs that:
– reflects differences in discourse saliency that determine the neutral (unmarked) pattern of topic-comment structure (the subject will normally be the unmarked topic, objects represent

unmarked subordinate topics etc.),
– is reflected in the neutral pattern of word order,
– is grammaticalised in the system of grammatical relations (SUBJECT > DIRECT OBJECT > INDIRECT OBJECT > OBLIQUE in Keenan and Comrie's formulation; this will be qualified further on),
– manifests itself (and can therefore be empirically tested) through syntactic accessibility (Keenan and Comrie's accessibility hierarchy),
– has its morphosyntactic correlate in the case hierarchy (NOM > ACC > DAT/GEN > OTHER); the least oblique case (nominative) encodes the least oblique NP etc.

In spite of its explanatory power the obliqueness hierarchy has not been widely adopted in theoretical models of grammar, the one notable exception being HPSG (Pollard & Sag 1994).

Obliqueness is a relative property, i.e. a NP may outrank other NPs in the obliqueness hierarchy and therefore become eligible for selection to subjecthood etc.

The NP that ranks highest in the obliqueness hierarchy is usually associated with the case that ranks highest in the case hierachy; this yields the nominative subject.

It is the pairing of certain degrees of obliqueness with certain forms of encoding that underlies grammatical relations. There is no absolute value in the obliqueness scale that corresponds to subjecthood, so that there is always a means of establishing the least oblique NP but there will not always be a subject (a least oblique NP that also gets the corresponding marking).

Some experiencer NPs outranking all other NPs in the clause are not marked with the nominative, but with the dative; they occur sentence-initially (unmarked topics) and may share a number of other features with fully-fledged (nominative) subjects; they are intuitively felt to be subjects of some kind and therefore referred to as quasi-subject, non-canonically marked subjects etc.

Quasi-subjects

Quasi-subjects are often understood as non-canonically marked subjects. In fact, they are quasi-subjects not in the sense of being subjects without the typical subject marking, but in the sense of being less subjectlike. All other things being equal, a non-nominative marked NP is less subjectlike than a nominative marked NP.

But differences in obliqueness being relative, it is not obvious why experiencer arguments like the datival NP with *reikėti*, *pagailti*, even though being least oblique, do not have access to nominative marking.

One could argue that this is an anomaly that tends to be eliminated. A famous case is English:
the King (DAT) like pears (NOM)
--> the King likes pears
This English example can be explained as the elimination of obliqueness mismatches.

Obliqueness mismatches

It involves a number of adjustments resolving obliqueness conflicts at different places: The dative is replaced with a nominative and the nominative is replaced with the accusative. Each of these steps can also be conceived as a separate process serving the purpose of lessening the obliqueness conflicts in the clause. The use of the dative for an NP that outranks another NP marked with the nominative is an anomaly, as syntactic and morphosyntactic obliqueness should coincide; this involves two obliqueness adjustments – the substitution of the accusative for the nominative and the nominative for the dative.

But in some languages such obliqueness mismatches appear to be quite stable.

In Russian, for instance, the construction
Mne nravitsja krasnyj cvet.

has existed for about a thousand years, and still there is no sign of people starting to say things like
Ja nravlju krasnyj cvet.

What is the reason for this stability? I propose it is to be sought in 'local exceptions' to the obliqueness hierarchy.

Local exceptions in the obliqueness hierarchy

The most notable example of a local exception to the obliqueness hierarchy is the double object construction.

Normally, direct objects are next only to subjects and outrank all other objects.

On	*sunul*	*den'gi*	*v*	*karman*.
3SG.M.NOM	put:PST.M	money:ACC	into	pocket

However, in the special configuration comprising a direct object and a dative recipient or experiencer object, the dative object ranks higher, as shown by neutral word order:

Ona	*dala*	*rebenku*	*podarok*.	Russian
3SG.F.NOM	give:PST.F	child:DAT	present:ACC	

'She gave the child a present.'

Ditransitive structures

The ditransitive structure, characterised by the co-occurrence of a direct object and a recipient or experiencer (datival) object is an area of indeterminacy of object assignment, creating typological differences that have been described in terms of 'alignment', either the 'direct' or the 'indirect' object being selected as the second-ranking NP next to the subject.

Blansitt (1984) introduces the notions of 'dative' vs. 'dechticaetiative' constructions; Malchukov, Haspelmath & Comrie (2007): directive vs. indirective alignment.

These differences in alignment are caused by the fact that the recipient/experiencer object and the inanimate (patient) object are equal candidates for the status of second-ranking NP next to the subject; hence the possibility of selecting either as a direct object or giving them almost equal treatment (as in the English construction *John gave Mary the flowers*, called 'neutral' by Malchukov, Haspelmath & Comrie.

Diffusion in intransitive constructions

An analogon to 'datives' outranking direct objects in the ditransitive construction is datives outranking the intransitive subject in the intransitive construction.

This may seem paradoxical because the intransitive subject is defined as the 'unique argument' of intransitive predicates. If, however, we accept the notion of diffusion, then we must accommodate the notion of an intransitive subject co-occurring with, and sharing part of its subject properties with, another NP that is not necessarily and adverbial or an optional argument (e.g., a free dative).

More specifically, intransitive subjects share part of their subject properties with experiencer/recipient datival NPs.

The parallelism with indirect and direct objects can most easily, and most frequently, be seen in constructions with datives encoding 'external possessors'.

Alignment differences in constructions with external possessions

Though differing from objects proper in not being arguments, they are assimilated to objects in virtually every other respect. In traditional grammars of many languages they may, for instance, not be distinguished from indirect objects. With regard to obliqueness they outrank the subject

in intransitive constructions and the direct object in transitive constructions.

Vaikui	*sušalo*	*rankos*.		Lith.
child:DAT	get_cold:PST.3	hand:NOM.PL		

'The child got cold hands.'

Chirurgas	*išoperavo*	*pacientui*	*ranką*.	Lith.
surgeon:NOM	operate:PST.3SG	patient:DAT	hand:ACC	

'The surgeon operated the patient's hand.'

Ditransitive constructions show alignment differences. Transitive constructions with external possessors (assimilated in every respect, except for the non-argumenthood of the external possessor, to the ditransitive construction) also show alignment differences, though rarely: in Classical Greek, for instance, they may appear as ditransitive, with the animate object as the prime direct object and the inanimate object as a kind of demoted object (in Greek school grammar it is not recognised as an object but described as an 'accusative of respect'):

Hē	*se*	*pódas*	*nípsei*	Homeric Greek
3SG.F.NOM	2SG.ACC	foot:ACC.PL	wash:FUT.3SG	

'She will wash your feet' (Homer, *Od.* τ 356)

(On this type of constructions as instances of constructions with external possessors cf. Koenig & Haspelmath 1998: 561–564)

Lithuanian has similar alignment differences in the corresponding intransitive constructions as well, with the external possessor appearing as the subject and the intransitive subject in the accusative:

Vaikui	*sušlapo*	*kojos*.	Lithuanian
child:DAT	get_wet:PST3	feet:NOM	

Vaikas	*sušlapo*	*kojas*.	
child:NOM	get_wet:PST3	feet:ACC	

'The child got wet feet.'

There is no semantic difference between these constructions. The second construction is formally similar to a transitive structure, but the subject is perceived as agentive only if the corresponding causative is used:

Vaikas	*sušlap-in-o*	*kojas*.	Lithuanian
child:NOM	get_wet-CAUS-PST3	feet:ACC	

'The child wet its feet.'

Lithuanian constructions like *Vaikas sušlapo kojas* are obviously not motivated by transitivity (otherwise we would expect a meaning difference); they result from obliqueness adjustment. In the case of external possessors, these adjustments are exceptional because external possessors are, after all, optional expansions of simpler constructions.

If, with regard to obliqueness, the dative of the external possessor in the transitive structure is similar to an indirect object, in the intransitive structure it is reminiscent of a 'non-canonically marked' (datival) subject.

In structures like *Vaikui sušalo rankos* the nominative NP is interpreted as an intransitive subject; the dative does not lay claim to argument status. But if, in a superficially similar structure, a dative NP with argument status appears, the qualification of the second-ranking argument becomes unclear. In the absence of a dative NP, we would unhesitatingly qualify it as an intransitive subject.

In structures with a datival quasi-subject the second-ranking NP could be described as a demoted intransitive object (an analogon to the demoted indirect object in some varieties of the ditransitive construction, such as English *gave Mary the flowers*).

It continues, however, to be an intransitive subject (sharing subject properties with the dative NP), and the construction is still intransitive.

Further instances of elimination of obliqueness mismatches

Changes in case marking of the second-ranking NP do occur, with accusatives replacing the nominative, but these are alternative ways of encoding the demoted intransitive subject in the configuration comprising a datival quasi-subject. In other words, they are obliqueness adjustments analogous to the replacement of the external possessor dative with the nominative in Lithuanian; just like the former, this obliqueness adjustment is not associated with transitivity.

An alternative type of obliqueness adjustment in constructions with diffuse subjecthood is replacement of the nominative with the accusative:

Man	*skauda*	*dantis.*	Lithuanian
1SG:DAT	ache:PRS3	tooth:NOM	

→

Man	*skauda*	*dantį.*
1SG:DAT	ache:PRS3	tooth:ACC

'I've got a toothache.'

Here the anomaly consisting in a dative NP outranking a nominative NP is replaced with a lesser anomaly – a dative NP outranking an accusative NP (a 'lesser' anomaly also observed in the ditransitive construction with a datival recipient NP)

(In the above example, the nominative is here assumed to be older than the accusative as it is shared with Latvian.)

Jóni	*líkar*	*þessi bók.*	Icelandic
John:NOM	please:PRS.3	this book:NOM	

'John likes this book'

Mær	*líkar*	*henda filmin.*	Faroese
1SG:DAT	please:PRS.3	this film:ACC	

'I like this film.'

Jonui	*reikia*	*pinigų.*	Lithuanian
John:DAT	be_needed:PRS3	money:GEN	
Jānim	*vajag*	*naudu.*	Latvian
John:DAT	be_needed:PRS.3	money:ACC	

'John needs money.'

The lack of connection between the introduction of accusatives alongside datival quasi-subjects can be illustrated from Baltic verbs of pain. Lithuanian verbs of pain show alternative ways of marking the second argument:

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

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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. It is probably not motivated by the
         verb suddenly becoming transitive from having been intransitive; it results from an
         obliqueness adjustment.

Not all NPs marked with the accusative are objects, and the constructions in which they mark
         arguments are not all transitive.
Normally the accusative is not used to mark intransitive subjects: such marking requires the
         presence of an agentive subject.
In specific circumstances, however, accusative marking without the presence of an agent does
         occur. Constructions with datival quasi-subjects are an instance of this. In this specific
         configuration the nominative and the accusative are alternative ways of marking the second-
         ranking NP, without any difference in transitivity. In such cases the nominative proves to be the
         original case marking, and the accusative is introduced in its place as a result of obliqueness
         adjustment.

Conclusions
There are, in Baltic and Slavonic, no non-canonical subjects in the sense of subjects that are
         marked in a non-canonical way. Even NPs lacking only nominative marking are just
         approximations of full subjecthood. Among subjectlike NPs the degree of subjecthood may
         vary.
Subjecthood is a pairing of the status of least oblique NP with a matching case form, the
         nominative. The status of subject is not observed in every sentence, that of least oblique NP
         (argument or non-argument) must occur everywhere if there is more than one NP.
Mutatis mutandis, objects can be defined along similar lines.

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