



## LINGUIST List 30.3270

Thu Aug 29 2019

Review: Morphology; Semantics; Syntax: Barðdal, Pat-El, Carey (2018)

Editor for this issue: Jeremy Coburn &lt;jecoburn@linguistlist.org&gt;

**Date:** 06-Jun-2019**From:** Sune Gregersen <s.h.g.rygard@uva.nl>**Subject:** Non-Canonically Case-Marked Subjects [E-mail this message to a friend](#) [Discuss this message](#)Book announced at <https://linguistlist.org/issues/30/30-453.html>

EDITOR: Jóhanna Barðdal

EDITOR: Na'ama Pat-El

EDITOR: Stephen Mark Carey

TITLE: Non-Canonically Case-Marked Subjects

SUBTITLE: The Reykjavík-Eyjafjallajökull papers

SERIES TITLE: Studies in Language Companion Series 200

PUBLISHER: John Benjamins

YEAR: 2018

REVIEWER: Sune Gregersen, University of Amsterdam

## SUMMARY

The ten papers collected in 'Non-Canonically Case-Marked Subjects: The Reykjavík-Eyjafjallajökull Papers' are the product of a conference held at the University of Iceland in 2012. The contributions concern various aspects of non-canonical subject constructions in a number of different languages, both ancient and modern. The language families represented are Semitic, Nakh-Daghestanian, and several branches of Indo-European. The volume consists of an introduction, three main parts, and an 'Afterword'. The introductory Chapter 1 by Jóhanna Barðdal (1–19) summarises the contents of the book and briefly outlines some of the open questions and unresolved debates in the study of non-canonical subjects. The three main parts contain papers devoted to areal and genealogical investigations (Chapters 2 and 3), synchronic investigations of a more theoretical nature (Chapters 4 and 5), and four investigations of historical languages (Chapters 6–9). The two chapters in the final section (Chapters 10 and 11) make a number of theoretical points about subjecthood and subject tests.

In the first contribution (Chapter 2), Victor A. Friedman and Brian D. Joseph provide a survey of 'Non-nominative and depersonalized subjects in the Balkans: Areality vs. genealogy' (23–53). The languages investigated include Albanian, Romani, Greek, and a number of Romance and Slavic languages of the Balkans. As the title indicates, the authors have cast the net widely and included not just non-nominative subjects, but a range of 'impersonal' constructions, such as weather verbs and other natural phenomena, impersonal passives, and 'narrative imperatives' where the subject is a canonical nominative argument but an imperative is used instead of the usual verb form. A number of areal patterns are identified involving these constructions. In a core area in the central Balkans (present-day Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and adjacent areas) all of the constructions are found, whereas some of them are absent in more peripheral languages. For instance, the narrative imperative is not found in Greek, and both Greek and Romanian lack the 'internal disposition' impersonal found in other languages (such as Macedonian 'mi se jade' [me.DAT REFL eat.PRS.3SG] 'I feel like eating', p. 40).

Chapter 3, by Bernard Comrie, Diana Porker, and Zaira Khalilova, investigates 'Affective constructions in Tsezic languages' (55–82). The five Tsezic languages – Bezhta, Hinuq, Hunzib, Khwarshi, and Tsez – belong to the Nakh-Daghestanian (or East Caucasian) language family and are spoken in the highlands of southwestern Daghestan. They all have a number of 'affective' transitive predicates, such as verbs meaning 'like', 'see', 'know', and 'forget', where the most prominent argument is in the dative or one of the local cases rather than the canonical ergative. The authors survey the morphosyntactic behaviour of such affective predicates across the five languages, pointing out differences and similarities between these and canonical ergative-absolutive predicates. They conclude that the dative (or local case) arguments in affective constructions share more properties with canonical A and S arguments than with P arguments, such as their behaviour with respect to valency change, relative clauses, and reciprocals, and can thus reasonably be considered syntactic subjects.

The two chapters in the 'Synchronic' part are both devoted to the analysis of non-canonical subject-like arguments within Role and Reference Grammar (RRG). In Chapter 4, Patrick Farrell and Beatriz Willgoths propose 'A macrorole approach to dative subjects' (83–113), specifically experienter arguments in Spanish marked with the dative preposition "a". The authors note that while such arguments pattern with canonical nominative arguments in many ways, there are also important differences, e.g. in passive and control constructions. They propose a revised version of RRG which recognises three rather than two macroroles: In addition to the established RRG macroroles Actor and Undergoer (the prototypical agent-like and patient-like arguments), Farrell & Willgoths propose a third macrorole, which they term 'Receptor'. This covers both the recipient argument of ditransitive predicates, the causee in causative constructions, and dative experienter arguments marked with "a". In this way the notion of 'non-canonical subject' in Spanish can be done away with, and all dative arguments are recognised as belonging to the same semantic macro-category. Interestingly, the other contribution on RRG, 'Dative case and oblique subjects' by Robert D. Van Valin, Jr. (Chapter 5; 115–131), reaches a very different conclusion on the same topic. Based on a survey of the functions of dative cases in a number of languages, Van Valin argues that the dative is better analysed as a 'default' case without any semantic content of its own, which is assigned when an argument does not belong to either of the two macroroles Actor and Undergoer. In other words, the various functions of datives across languages do not reflect a common semantic core (such as Farrell & Willgoths's 'Receptor' macrorole), but are related only by virtue of not being Actors and Undergoers.

'Word order as a subject test in Old Icelandic' (135–154) by Jóhannes G. Jónsson is the sixth chapter and the first contribution to the 'Diachronic' part. The paper investigates the word order properties of subjects and objects in Old Icelandic prose. While it is generally agreed that oblique subjects in Modern Icelandic are indeed subjects (cf. e.g. Thráinsson 2007, ch. 4; Barðdal & Eythórsson, this volume), there is less agreement about the Old Icelandic situation. Jónsson shows that while the word order of Old Icelandic is flexible in some respects, it is possible to use it as a diagnostic for subjecthood when the arguments of a transitive predicate occur postverbally. With a few principled exceptions, the word order in such cases is always VSO. Jónsson concludes that dative-nominative predicates such as the verb "líka" 'like' have dative subjects, since the postverbal order is dative before nominative: "Eigi líkaði honum það vel" [NEG liked he.DAT that.NOM well] 'He did not like that very much' (p. 149, cited from Egil's Saga). Thus, according to Jónsson's analysis the dative argument "honum" is the subject, and nominative "það" the object.

In Chapter 7, Na'ama Pat-El studies 'The diachrony of non-canonical subjects in Northwest Semitic' (155–180). The languages under investigation here are Aramaic and Hebrew, two languages with relatively long written traditions and a history of extensive contact both with unrelated languages and other members of the Semitic family. However, since the non-canonical subject construction in question seems to be a comparatively recent Northwest Semitic innovation which cannot be reconstructed for Proto-Semitic, this allows Pat-El to trace its development in the Hebrew and (to a lesser extent) Aramaic sources. The predicates occurring in the construction are adjectives or stative verbs such as Biblical Hebrew "tób" '(be) good', "hārā" 'burn', and "noāh" '(be) comfortable'. (Curiously, all the Aramaic predicates seem to express modal meanings, but one gets the impression that this may have to do with the surviving texts, cf. p. 160.) The non-canonical subject argument is marked with the morpheme "l(e)-", which has a number of different functions. Pat-El argues that the one that gave rise to the non-canonical subject construction was the use of "l(e)-" to mark non-obligatory 'free datives', usually with human referents, which were reinterpreted as subjects because of their high prominence. She goes on to discuss the possible role of contact with European languages in the maintenance and spread of the construction in Modern Hebrew.

Chapter 8, by Serena Danesi and Jóhanna Barðdal, is entitled 'Case marking of predicative possession in Vedic: The genitive, the dative, the locative' (181–212). This contribution looks at the various ways of expressing possession in one of the oldest surviving texts in an Indo-European language, the Rígvēda (2nd millennium BC). Vedic Sanskrit does not have a 'have' verb, but instead expresses possession by means of a copular construction with the possessed in the nominative case and the possessor in the genitive, dative, or locative (thus, e.g., 'He has supremacy' is "asmai kṣatráṃ" [3SG.DAT supremacy.NOM], p. 194). Danesi & Barðdal analyse the use of these constructions in the Rígvēda and find clear functional differences between them: Whereas the genitive construction is always used with an identifiable possessed argument (e.g. a speech act participant or a definite noun phrase like 'the kingdom' or 'the guardians of the universe'), the dative construction is typically used when the possessed argument is unidentifiable and non-specific (e.g. 'treasures', 'greatness', 'any desirable good'). The locative construction is marginal and restricted to cases where the possessor can be conceptualised as the metaphorical location of the possessed argument. On the basis of these findings the authors argue against claims in the literature that the dative construction was the original predicate possession construction in Indo-European and instead classify it as an experienter construction which had 'abstract possession' as one of its (secondary) uses.

In Chapter 9, Tonya Kim Dewey and Stephen Mark Carey diagnose a case of 'Accusative sickness? A brief epidemic in the history of German' (213–237). The topic here is a small group of predicates in Old and Middle High German where the experienter argument appears to have changed from dative to accusative. This is unexpected in light of the findings reported by Dunn et al. (2017), who observe a strong cross-Germanic tendency for the change accusative > dative ('dative sickness') in non-canonical subjects, not dative > accusative. Dewey & Carey give an overview of the predicates found with unexpected accusative subjects in the Old and Middle High German sources, which include verbs meaning 'think', 'fear', 'be well', and 'feel nausea'. They argue that the variation between accusative and dative subjects was not random but meaningful, the accusative being preferred for subjects with a higher degree of affectedness. Some of the predicates investigated survive with the dative subject construction in Modern German, the verb "dünken" 'think' also with the accusative. The modern variation in this verb, however, is dialectal or idiolectal, and hence has nothing to do with the affectedness of the experienter argument.

Chapter 10, the first contribution to the 'Afterword', is Andrej Malchukov's 'Forty years in the search of a/the subject' (241–256). Malchukov gives a concise summary of some of the main thoughts and debates about the notion of 'subject' since the recognition of ergativity in the 1970s and the challenges this phenomenon posed to traditional assumptions about subjecthood. The first section deals with the various approaches to the identification or definition of subject properties, such as Keenan's (1976) 'multifactorial' approach, Croft's (2001) 'Subject Construction Hierarchy', and Lazard's (1998) distinction between 'predication subjects' and 'reference subjects'. The second section concerns the diachronic development of non-canonical subjects, in particular how 'transimpersonal' constructions where the object is more prominent than the subject may come to be reanalysed as intransitives with a non-canonical subject (e.g. a Ket example meaning 'I spin around', lit. 'it spins me'). Finally, the third section provides some thoughts on the notion of 'oblique' subject, including Barðdal & Eythórsson's suggestions in Chapter 11, and notes a few remaining challenges for typologists in dealing with these issues.

In Chapter 11, the last paper, Jóhanna Barðdal and Þórhallur Eythórsson ask the question 'What is a subject' and critically examine 'The nature and validity of subject tests' (257–273). In particular, Barðdal & Eythórsson question approaches which define subjecthood with reference to (one or more) behavioural tests and a number of more recent works which take 'subject' to be a gradient notion. On the one hand, there is no general agreement about which behavioural tests are necessary and sufficient, making comparison of different analyses difficult and potentially involving 'methodological opportunism' (Croft 2001) where the criteria used are those confirming the linguist's a priori assumptions. On the other hand, gradient notions are criticised for not tackling the issue properly but instead setting up poorly defined intermediate categories ('semi-subject', 'pseudo-subject', etc.). The authors' own proposal is to define 'subject' as "the first argument of the argument structure" (263), which in turn depends on the semantics of the predicate. They illustrate this by examining the behaviour of non-nominative subjects in Icelandic and German, such as Icelandic "mér varð óglatt" and German "mir wurde übel" [me.DAT became queasy] 'I felt queasy'. On the basis of two subject tests, involving conjunction reduction and control, it has been argued that the dative argument is a subject in Icelandic but not in German. Under Barðdal & Eythórsson's definition, both are clearly subjects. Their different syntactic properties may be used to describe the differences between Icelandic and German subjects, but should not be used to define these categories.

## EVALUATION

This is a fine volume with many excellent and well-written contributions. The authors' arguments and the evidence from the various languages are presented in a clear and readable manner, making it easy to follow the discussion even if the language(s) under investigation is/are unfamiliar to the reader; cf., for instance, the exemplary chapter on Tsezic affective constructions by Comrie, Forker & Khalilova (Chapter 3), or Danesi & Barðdal's illuminating study of possessive constructions in Vedic Sanskrit (Chapter 8). The volume as a whole is coherent insofar as all contributions concern some aspect of non-canonical subjects, but it would have been interesting to have some of the authors respond directly to each other's contributions, in particular those with different positions on the notion of (non-canonical) subject. (This could, for instance, be done in the form of short reply articles, as in Penke & Rosenbach 2007.) Having a head-on discussion about the necessity of the subject category might also have made the more theoretical contributions by Farrell & Willgoths and Van Valin (Chapters 4 and 5) fit somewhat less uncomfortably in the volume, which is otherwise devoted primarily to empirical investigations. These two papers, which both argue against the value of the subject notion from a RRG perspective, depart from the received opinion and that of most of the other contributions, where 'subject' is clearly considered a necessary (or at least very useful) cross-linguistic concept; see e.g. the contributions by Jónsson (Chapter 6), Pat-El (Chapter 7), or Comrie, Forker & Khalilova. Most explicit is Barðdal & Eythórsson's position in their concluding discussion; they argue that a cross-linguistically applicable subject notion "can be defined in terms of argument structure and the relation between the arguments" and "prompts us to delve deeper and search for explanations for why a specific category of subjects shows deviant behavior" (268). I find their arguments quite convincing, but it would have been interesting to hear what Farrell & Willgoths or Van Valin would make of them.

I am rather less convinced by Dewey & Carey's account of accusative subjects in earlier High German. While their hypothesis that the observed accusative/dative variation was principled is reasonable enough, I do not think their paper presents sufficient evidence for it. For two of the six Old High German predicates discussed ("angusten" 'fear' and "(un)juuillon" 'feel nausea'), a semantic and pragmatic comparison proves impossible because the examples of accusative subjects are not attested in running text. For two other verbs ("ginnenn" 'lack' and "glimphan" 'be obliged'), they give only a single example of an accusative subject, and the one cited for "glimphan" is from a notoriously slavish translation, the Old High German Tatian. In the relevant clause the Vulgate has an accusative argument as well ("oportebat autem eum transire"; John 4:4), but the authors no not at all discuss the possibility of Latin influence on the Old High German text. In general, the sources do not appear to have been scrutinised very carefully. The two examples of "angusten" are said to have no source in Hennig (1957), but one merely has to look up the verb in the standard dictionary (AWb, s.v. angusten, sense 3) to find the reference. Incidentally, the two examples, one with a dative and one with an accusative subject, are from different glosses to the same passage (1 Kings [1 Samuel] 28; Steinmeyer & Sievers 1879: 405), suggesting that the variation may not be as principled as the authors would have. In any event, what is clear from their contribution is that there are still many unanswered questions about non-canonical subjects in the early Germanic languages.

The linguistic examples are generally transparent and easy to follow throughout the volume, but it would have been convenient for the reader if the contributors either adhered to the same glossing principles, or at least put their abbreviations in the same place so that one does not have to search for them; some authors give the glossing abbreviations in an appendix, some in a footnote, others in the acknowledgements or not at all. Even more inconvenient is when contributors state that they follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules, but then do not adhere to them. In Pat-El's chapter I noted about ten abbreviations which are not in the Leipzig conventions. To be sure, one can usually guess what the abbreviations are supposed to mean (e.g. 'DO' and 'ACT'), but the point of the conventions, after all, is to make guessing unnecessary. And not all of the glosses are self-explanatory. I was not able to decipher 'CP' and 'DUBJ', and it required some deliberation to decide whether 'PART' meant 'partitive' or 'particle'. 'P' means 'patient' in the Leipzig rules but is evidently used for 'plural' here, and the distinction between - for affixes and = for clitics is not observed.

Otherwise the editing is well done and there are relatively few typos in the volume, but a number of inconsistencies may prove distracting to the reader. In the introduction, the reference to canonical subjects in Tsezic should be to 'ergative', not 'nominative', subjects (p. 10). A rather confusing passage in the chapter on Vedic Sanskrit mentions a feature [±specific] which is not found in the table referred to (Table 2, p. 189); the passage appears to have been copied from the description of Table 3, which does include the feature [±specific], but one only realises this on p. 196. There are also a few repetitive passages in the literature review on Icelandic and German on pp. 261–262. And, lastly, to give credit where it is due: The editors of the volume are of course Barðdal, Pat-El & Carey – not Barðdal & Eythórsson, as suggested on p. 251.

## REFERENCES

AWb = Althochdeutsches Wörterbuch. 1952–. Published by the Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig.  
<http://awb.saw-leipzig.de/> (1 Jun 2019).

Croft, William. 2001. Radical Construction Grammar: Syntactic theory in typological perspective. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dunn, Michael, Tonya Kim Dewey, Carlee Arnett, Þórhallur Eythórsson & Jóhanna Barðdal. 2017. Dative sickness: A phylogenetic analysis of argument structure evolution in Germanic. Language 93(1). e1–e22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511619441>.

Hennig, Joachim Dieter. 1957. Studien zum Subjekt impersonal gebrauchter Verben im Althochdeutschen und Altniederdeutschen unter Berücksichtigung gotischer und altwestnordischer Zeugnisse. Göttingen: Georg-August-Universität Göttingen dissertation.

Keenan, Edward L. 1976. Towards a universal definition of subject. In Charles N. Li (ed.), Subject and topic, 303–333. New York: Academic Press.

Lazard, Gilbert. 1998. Actancy (Empirical Approaches to Language Typology 19). Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110808100>.

Penke, Martina & Anette Rosenbach (eds.). 2007. What counts as evidence in linguistics: The case of innateness (Benjamins Current Topics 7). Amsterdam: John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/bct.7>.

Steinmeyer, Elias & Eduard Sievers. 1879. Die althochdeutschen Glossen. Erster Band: Glossen zu biblischen Schriften. Berlin: Weidmann. <http://digital.ub.uni-duesseldorf.de/content/titleinfo/289355> (1 Jun 2019).

Thráinsson, Höskuldur. 2007. The syntax of Icelandic (Cambridge Syntax Guides). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511619441>.

## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Sune Gregersen is a PhD student at the Amsterdam Center for Language and Communication (University of Amsterdam), working on modality in the older Germanic languages. His other interests include the early history of linguistic description, tense–mood–aspect across languages, and the diachrony of (non-canonical) argument marking.