

One of you is Lying: Conceptions of “subject” in the Ancient Greek and Latin Grammatical Traditions

In this paper, by way of entering the discussion on what a ‘subject’ is, I offer an appreciation of the insights to be gained from a consideration of the terminology for and notions of ‘subject’ in the Ancient Greek and the Roman grammatical traditions. It is instructive to see what the etymology of the terms is and how they came to have the grammatical meaning they did, as it offers a window into the conceptualization of the notion within these respective traditions; by extension, then, it affords a glimpse into the historical underpinnings of the problems faced by modern linguistic theory in wrestling with this notion, a struggle encapsulated so well in the classic 1976 paper by Edward Keenan where different kinds of properties could potentially give different kinds of answers to the question of what a ‘subject’ is.

In the Ancient Greek grammatical tradition, which emerged out of the realm of philosophy and philosophical discussions on the nature of meaning and on means for conveying meaning, two different terms were used to designate the “subject” of a sentence. One finds both ὄνομα and ὑποκείμενον. The former is one of the several words in Greek for ‘word’ but its more ordinary meaning is ‘name’, and in the philosophical/grammatical tradition, it came to be ‘noun’. Inasmuch as in this last sense it was typically opposed to ῥήμα ‘verb’, and ῥήμα came to refer to the ‘predicate’ of a sentence -- a natural shift in reference since the verb is so central to the sentence -- the element opposed to it, the ὄνομα, came to be a term for the ‘subject’. The other term, ὑποκείμενον, by contrast, is that which ‘lies’ (from the verb κείμαι ‘under’ (ὑπο-) the matter at hand, and cannot be divorced from the philosophical sense of “constitut[ing] the foundation of” something (Montanaro *The Brill dictionary of Ancient Greek*, s.v.), i.e. the matter under discussion or “subject matter”. It then comes to be “the logical subject to which attributes are ascribed” (Liddell-Scott-Jones *Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v.). Still, it can be argued that the notion of “subject” for the Greeks, while certainly real, offered considerable room for interpretation.

As for Latin, in post-Classical times, *subjectum* occurs for ‘topic, theme’ in philosophical use and in the grammatical tradition for the “part of a sentence of which the rest of the sentence is predicated” (OED, s.v.). This Latin form is apparently glossing (i.e., is a calque on) Greek ὑποκείμενον and thus is from *sub*, corresponding to Greek ὑπο-, plus the verb *iaceō* ‘lie’, corresponding to Greek κείμαι ‘lie’. Interestingly, the Latin seems to show some ambiguity of derivation in that most sources take it to be not from *sub-* + *iaceō*, but from *sub-* + *-iciō*, the form of *iaciō* ‘throw’ found in compounds, where the *-iō* inflection of the base verb argues for a derivation from *iaciō* rather than from the etymologically related but semantically differentiated verb *iaceō*.

This apparent connection, as expressed via the morphology, suggests perhaps a slightly different conceptualization of the notion of “subject” among Latin grammarians from that held by the Greeks. The “subject” for the Greeks was that which was underlying the discourse, an entity with a somewhat stative value (the middle voice inflection on κείμαι and ὑποκείμενον is telling here), whereas for the Romans it was that which more actively has been “cast” under the discourse, that is, cast by someone or something. The result is the same in each case but how that result arose differs in the different traditions.

From the very start, therefore, at least in the ancient western grammatical tradition that is the foundation for modern linguistic theory and modern linguistic thought, there has been a certain vagueness in the conceptualization of “subject”, so that current debates over the nature of “subjecthood” and the Keenan-ian approach with a multiplicity of potentially relevant identifying factors actually reflect the lack of precision that has accompanied this notion throughout its history.