

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

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EVALISA Keenan Fest
Ghent 8 September 2016

Etymology of the word *etymology*

- **from Ancient Greek adjective *étumos* (ἔτυμος) ‘true’, thus (as substantivized neuter) ‘*the true sense of a word according to its origin*’**
- ***Oxford English Dictionary*:**

***etymology* = the “interpretation and explanation of a word on the basis of its origin” (said to be from Hellenistic Greek *ἐτυμολογία*, likely a derivative of *ἐτυμολόγος* (although this seems to be first attested later (in Byzantine Greek))**

Thus, in its etymological sense, and in the practice of ἔτυμολογία itself for the ancient Greeks, the term referred not so much to getting at the origin of a word as rather getting at the original – and therefore the *true* -- meaning of a word (its ἔτυμον).

Proposal for today:

- **examine etymology of words for «subject» in the Graeco-Roman grammatical traditions to see what light they might shed on original conceptualizations of the term for the Greeks and the Romans.**
- **this is different from (and in a sense, preliminary to) a textually based consideration of what the ancient Greeks and Romans thought about this grammatical notion, but it is a useful intellectual exercise**

- **it will turn out that the same sorts of problems of identification of “subject” that have driven the EVALISA project can be found in the coinage of terminology that was used some 2000 years ago in earlier grammatical traditions**

Ancient Greek words for *subject*: *onoma* (ὄνομα) and *hupokeimenon* (ὑποκείμενον)

***onoma* (ὄνομα): one of the several words in Greek for ‘word’, but its more ordinary meaning is ‘name’**

- in the philosophical/grammatical tradition, it came to be ‘noun’ (essentially, ‘that which has a name’), as a part of speech and thus a basic part of the sentence (so Plato and later Aristotle)**
- in its ‘noun’ sense, it was typically opposed to *rhēma* (ῥῆμα) ‘verb’, literally, ‘that which is said’, the other key part of a sentence and *thus* the ‘predicate’ of a sentence (so Plato and later Aristotle)**

- a natural shift in reference since the verb is so central to the construction of the sentence and the predicate is the essential part of a sentence**
- the element opposed to it, the *onoma* (ὄνομα), then came to be a term for (what we might call) the ‘subject’**

***hupokeimenon* (ὑποκείμενον): present (middle) participle,
neuter singular nominative, of the verb *hupokeimai*
(ὑπόκειμαι)**

**= that which ‘underlies’, literally, < ‘lies’ (*keimai* (κειμαι))
‘under’ (*hupo-* (ὑπο-))**

Semantic development to ‘subject’ via:

‘to lie under (physically)’

==> ‘to be established [underlie as giving foundation]; to set before one’

==> ‘to be in question’ (as in *ho hupokeímenos eniautós* (ὁ ὑποκείμενος ἐνιαυτός) ‘the year in question’

==> ‘to be the subject at issue; to be subject matter’

cf. as a (relevant) overt nominal modifier in:

***hē hupokeimenē hulē* (ἡ ὑποκειμένη ὕλη) ‘the underlying substance’ (from Aristotle)**

= *subject-matter* of a science or treatise

(thus, *hupokeimenon* (ὑποκείμενον) by itself would seem to be a clipping (an ellipsis) of such a modified structure)

- 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 used today in Modern Greek linguistic literature**
- **from the Triantafyllides dictionary of Modern Greek: ‘the word which reveals about whom there is discussion within a sentence’ (η λέξη που φανερώνει για ποιον γίνεται λόγος μέσα στην πρόταση) – a definition which sounds more like “topic” than “subject” per se**
- **But note the example given: ‘The logical υποκείμενο of a sentence does not always coincide with its grammatical υποκείμενο (Το λογικό ~ της πρότασης δε συμπίπτει πάντοτε με το γραμματικό της ~).**

Still, it seems that the notion of “subject” for the ancient Greeks, as also for the modern Greeks, while certainly real, offered considerable room for interpretation:

- **since subject matter = topic under consideration, these definitions of *hypokeimenon* (ὑποκείμενον) suggest that it refers as much to what we would now call a «*topic*» as it does to what we might term a «*subject*».**
- **cf. analytic problem of differentiating languages that are topic-prominent from those that are subject-prominent (if such a distinction is legitimate), making one wonder what the ancient Greeks themselves thought about their own language**

This word also provides the basis for explaining what the title, “One of you is lying”, is all about:

- **a reference to the involvement of the verb κείμαι in the word for ‘subject’ – presumably, *some* noun in the sentence is «lying», i.e. ὑπόκειται, serving as the subject of the sentence, serving as the «subject matter», the underlying or presupposed material**

A double-entendre is intended here, since there are issues in situations where more than one nominal might seem appropriate to serve as «subject» or more than one level of analysis is involved:

- **passives, with a «deep / logical / semantic» subject (the agent) and a surface subject**
- **psych-verbs, possessives, and other instances with «noncanonical» subjects, e.g. *Robin strikes me as an interesting person*, Latin *Mihi liber est*, especially in languages with more interesting case (etc.) properties complicating the issue**

That is, given an argument structure:

VERB: [NP NP ...]

is it the case that one possible NP is “lying down on the job” and serving as the subject, i.e.:

VERB: [ZP NP ...]

VERB: [NP ZP ...]

where ZP = a lying NP (Z = N lying on its side)

As for Latin, in Classical usage, *subiectus* means (among other things) ‘subject to a specified operation or treatment’ and was the specific term used to translate Aristotle’s *hē hupokeimenē hulē* (ἡ ὑποκειμένη ὕλη), as *subiecta material*

In post-Classical usage, *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” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v.).

This Latin form is apparently glossing (i.e., is a calque on) Greek *hupokeimenon* (ὑποκείμενον) and thus is from *sub*, corresponding to Greek *hupo-* (ὑπο-), plus the participial form of some verb that corresponds to Greek *keimai* (κείμεαι) ‘lie’.

The question of which verb proves interesting.

The Latin seems to show some ambiguity of derivation:

- **the most appropriate Latin verb to correspond to Greek *keimai* (κείμεναι) is *iaceō* ‘lie’**
 - and there were many composites in Latin, often late in the tradition, with a prefix (like *sub-*)+ *iaceō*, “créés à l’imitation des composes de κείμεναι” (Ernout-Meillet, s.v.)**
- **but, *subiectus* cannot be not from *sub-* + *iaceō*, but must be from *sub-* + *-iciō*, the form of *iaciō* ‘throw’ found in compounds**

- the *-iō* conjugational class of the base verb (*subiciō*) argues for a derivation from *iaciō* rather than from the etymologically related but semantically differentiated verb *iaceō*.
- moreover, the participial form of *iaceō* = *iacitum*, if *sub-* + past passive participle were the derivation for the ‘subject’ word, we would expect *subiacitum** or *subiecitum**, and not what we do find

NB: *iaciō* (infinitive *iacere*) and *iaceō* (infinitive *iacēre*) are etymologically related, both connected to Greek *hiēmi* (ἵημι) ‘throw’) with a *-k-* extension (as in *faciō* ‘make’)

- **the “*iō*” inflection versus “*eō*” inflection reveals a derivational difference that reflects different semantics**
- ***iaciō* is more active in nature, whereas *iaceō* is more stative, meaning more “être dans l’état de quelqu’un ou de quelque chose de jeté” (in opposition to stative *sedeō* ‘be in a sitting position’, and thus ‘be in a lying (cast-down) position’)**

This composition of *subiciō*, then, 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.

For the Greeks, the “subject” was that which was underlying the discourse, an entity with a somewhat stative value (the middle voice inflection on *keimai* (κεῖμαι) and *hupokeimenon* (ὑποκείμενον) is telling here)

For the Romans it was not — etymologically speaking — that which was underlying something (appropriate if *iaceō* were involved) but rather more the result of an action of “setting” (“casting”) something under the discourse, so that it is “(that which has been) cast/set-up by someone or something”

Thus for Latin, my title might be better “One of you has been thrown under the bus” (rather than “one of you is lying (down on the job)”).

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”

Thus, 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.

THANK YOU

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