UNIVERSITEIT GENT

To Be or Not to Be an Oblique Subject? – That is the Question

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Overview

- Goals
- The Subject Concept
- Traditional Grammar vs. Modern Syntactic Approaches
- Subject as a Universal Category: The Problems
- Subject as a Language-Specific Category
- Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up Approaches to Subjecthood
- Oblique Subjects
- Icelandic and German
- Interpreting Deviations
- Typological Implications
- Conclusions

Goals

- To investigate how different approaches to subjecthood fare when they meet anomalies and deviant data
- To compare bottom-up and top-down approaches to subjecthood
- To address the issue of how to solve the problem of prioritizing among the subject tests?
- To argue for the need to implement an independent definition of subject into our theory and our methodology
- To show how an approach to argument linking based on causal conceptual structure and force dynamics adequately deals with this challenge

The Subject Concept

- Traditional Latin School Grammar (phrase structure)
  - ✓ The subject is one of the phrases of a clause; the other is the predicate
  - ✓ This definition is based on the concept of *phrase*
  - ✓ Phrase is a group of words that function as a clause constitutent
  - ✓ The concept of phrase hence means that there is internal structure within clauses

Relational Concept!

Modern Syntactic Research

- Keenan (1976)

    ✓ Coding Properties
    ✓ Behavioral Properties
    ✓ Semantic Properties

Keenan (1976): The Subject as a Universal Category

- Coding Properties
  - ✓ Position, Case Marking, Agreement

- Behavioral Properties
  - ✓ Omission in Coordinated Clauses and Control Infinitives, Reflexivization, Relativization, Subject and Object Raising

- Semantic Properties
  - ✓ Agentivity, Referantiality

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Problems (1)

- Not all subjects in all languages share all the properties
  - ✓ The Germanic languages do not use relativization to distinguish between subjects and objects

  (1a) **The man who came** sent me the book.
  (1b) The man sent me **the book that came**.

- Not all subjects are agents or instigators

  (2a) **I** saw her hooked up to a respirator.
  (2b) **The book** is lying on the table.

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Problems (2)

- Not all languages have case marking or agreement
  - ✓ The Scandinavian languages

- Some languages distinguish morphologically between subjects of transitive and intransitive verbs
  - ✓ Ergative languages

- Not all languages delete the subject in imperatives
  - ✓ Icelandic

Problems (3)

- A subset of the world's languages have subject drop
  - ✓ Italian

- Some languages have a flexible word order
  - ✓ Czech

- Even within a language, different constructions may behave differently with regard to the subject tests
  - ✓ Tagalog (only subjects of transitive verbs are left unexpressed in imperatives, not subjects of intransitive verbs)

Problems (4)

- In some languages, the subject tests may "leak" and distribute across different arguments of the verb

  ✓ Old Norse-Icelandic
  (3) … **mér** þykj**a** það **engin** **tíðindi**.
       I.DAT find.PL it   no.NOM.PL news.NOM.PL
                                   (*Gunnars Saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, Ch. 2)

- A description of subject, on Keenan's approach, does not take as its point of departure how subjects differentiate from, for instance, objects

Interim Conclusion

- Subject is not a universal category
- Language-specific category
- Construction-specific category
   - ✓ Radical Construction Grammar (Croft 2001, Barðdal 2006)

    Using different constructions in different languages to define subjects is theoretically inconsistent and is an example of methodological opportunism (Croft 2001: 30–32, 41–44).

Subject Tests in Icelandic and German

	Icelandic	German
First position in declarative clauses	√	*
Subject-verb inversion	√	*
First position in subordinate clauses	√	*
Subject-to-object raising	√	*
Subject-to-subject raising	√	*
Long-distance reflexivization	√	*
Clause-bound reflexivization	√	√
Control infinitives	√	√
Conjunction reduction	√	√
Deletion in telegraphic style	*	√
Deletion in imperatives	*	√
Nominative case	*	√
Verb agreement	*	√

Subject as a Construction-Specific Category

- Part-Whole relation   vs.   Part-Part relation
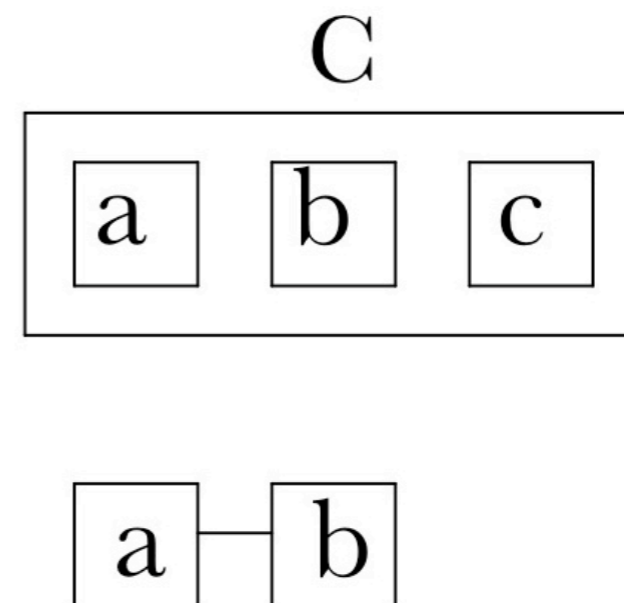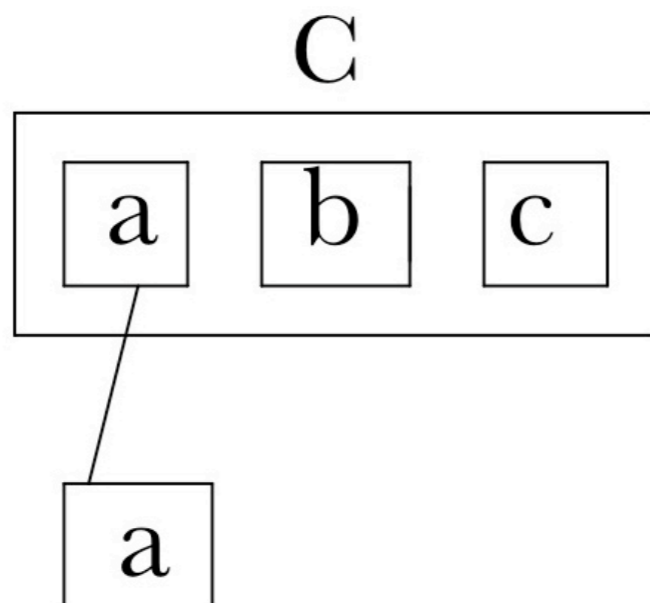
A Deeper Question!

- Which are the factors deciding on which argument is the subject?
- Can the subject properties function as a definition?
- How should we deal with the problem that some subjects do not display all the subject properties?
- Top-down vs. Bottom-up approaches
  - a) a definition from which the subject properties can be derived
  - b) a definition on the basis of the subject properties
- Chomskyan grammar: The subject is hooked up to a certain position in the sentence
- Different theoretical frameworks deal with this differently

Our Definition of Subjecthood

- Subject = the leftmost argument of the argument structure

  "The subject of a predicate is the leftmost argument of its subcategorization frame ... The internal order of the arguments is in turn determined by the causal conceptual structure of the predicate and the force-dynamic relations between the participants of the event denoted by each predicate. (Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005: 831)"

Argument Structure

Subcategorization frames:

English   *kill*   [ARG1, ARG2]
Icelandic *drepa*   [ARG1$_{nom}$, ARG2$_{acc}$]

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Icelandic *trufla*   [ARG1$_{nom}$, ARG2$_{acc}$]

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Icelandic *trufla*   [ARG1$_{nom}$, ARG2$_{acc}$]

English   *like*   [ARG1, ARG2]
Icelandic *líka*   [ARG1$_{dat}$, ARG2$_{nom}$]

Force-Dynamic Relations in Syntax (Croft 1998, 2000, 2012)

- Event Types:
  - Causatives
  - Inchoatives
  - Statives
    - Psychological Events
      - Two construals
        - An Experiencer directs his/her attention to a Content
        - A Stimulus affects an Experiencer

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≠ Thematic Hierarchy

- Thematic hierarchies a la Jackendoff (1972), Grimshaw (1990), inter alia:

  Jackendoff (1990): Agt > Pat/Ben > Th > G/S/L

  Grimshaw (1990): Agt > Exp > G/S/L > Th

- The relation of the arguments relative to EACH OTHER, and not relative to a hierarchy of semantic roles (Croft 1998, 2000, Barðdal 2001)

Formalisation within Sign-Based Construction Grammar

- Lexical Entry
- Argument Structure Construction
- ConstructiCon

Formalisation within Sign-Based Construction Grammar

- Lexical Entry

lexeme		
FORM	\<like\>	
SYN	ARG-ST \<NP-DAT$_i$, NP-NOM$_j$\>	
SEM	**FRAMES**	like-fr EXPERIENCER i STIMULUS j

Formalisation within Sign-Based Construction Grammar

- Argument Structure Construction

argument structure cxt

SYN	ARG-ST $<NP_i, NP_j>$
SEM	FRAMES: like-fr, EXPERIENCER i, STIMULUS j

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Formalisation within Sign-Based Construction Grammar

lexeme

FORM   <like>

SYN   ARG-ST <NP-DAT$_i$, NP-NOM$_j$>

SEM   FRAMES   like-fr
                                    EXPERIENCER i
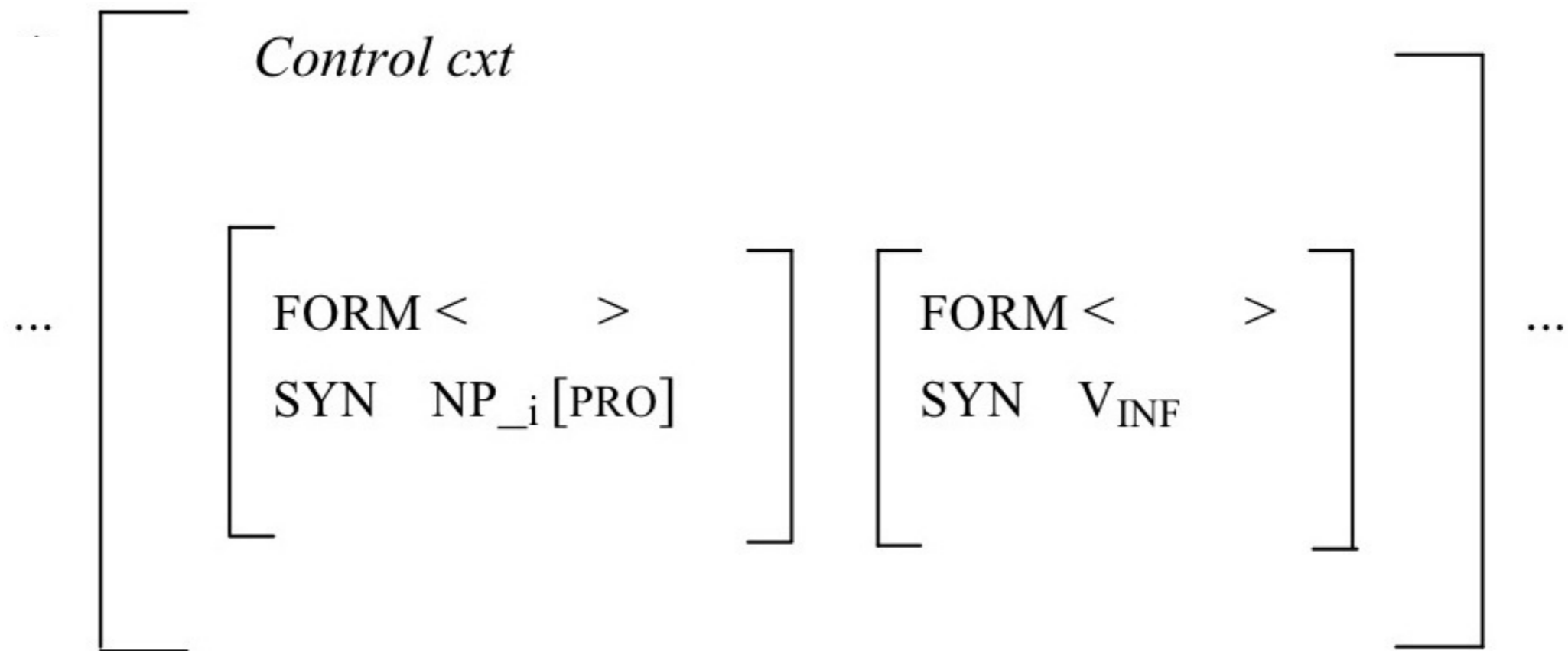   STIMULUS j

argument structure cxt

SYN   ARG-ST <NP$_i$, NP$_j$>

SEM   FRAMES   like-fr
                                    EXPERIENCER i
                                    STIMULUS j

Subject Behavior Follows from This!

$$
\ldots \left[\begin{array}{l} \textit{Control cxt} \\[2em] \left[\begin{array}{ll} \text{FORM} < \quad > \\ \text{SYN} \quad NP\_i\,[\text{PRO}] \end{array} \right] \quad \left[\begin{array}{ll} \text{FORM} < \quad > \\ \text{SYN} \quad V_{INF} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \ldots
$$

Oblique Subjects

- Keenan (1976)
  - ✓ Subject

- Andrews (1976), Masica (1976)
  - ✓ Oblique subjects

(4a) Icelandic: **Mér** þykja það *engin tíðindi*.   Dat-Nom

           I.DAT finds that no news.NOM

(4b) German: **Mich** hungert *nach Sauerkraut.*   Acc-PP

           I.ACC hungers for   Sauerkraut

Oblique Subjects

(4c) Lithuanian: **Jam**   labiau gailėjo *šunies*   kaip pinigų   Dat-Gen
                        he.DAT more grieves dog.GEN than money

(4d) Hindi: **Malāī** bāntā āyo   Dat-Nom
                    I.DAT vomit comes

(4e) Tibeto-Burman:
                    ṅar   *ldemig*   brnyedbyuṅ.   Dat-Nom
                    I.DAT key.NOM found

Oblique Subjects

Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson (1985)

✓ Systematic comparison between Icelandic and German
   o Omission in coordinated clauses
   o Omission in control infinitives

   (5a) She **came and walked** over the bridge in a dream.
   (5b) An older lady tried **to steal** bacon.

Coordinated Clauses

Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson (1985)

(6a) Hann **kom og** **varð** óglatt.
 he.NOM came and Ø.DAT became queasy

(6b) *Er **kam und** **würde** übel
 he.NOM came and Ø.DAT became queasy

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Control Infinitives

Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson (1985)

(7a)   Það er ekki gott   **að** ___   **vera** óglatt.
        it   is not   good to PRO.DAT be   queasy

(7b)   *Übel   ___   **zu sein** ist nicht angenehm.
         queasy PRO.DAT to be   is not   easy

How Do Oblique Subjects Deviate from the Prototype?

- Self-evident deviations:
  - ✓ Lack of nominative case
  - ✓ Lack of agreement with the verb

- Not self-evident deviations:
  - ✓ Lack of occurrences in control infinitives
  - ✓ Lack of occurrences in coordinated clauses

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Oblique 'Subjects' in Icelandic and German

	Icelandic	German
First position in declarative clauses	√	√
Subject-verb inversion	√	√
First position in subordinate clauses	√	√
Subject-to-object raising	√	√
Subject-to-subject raising	√	√
Clause-bound reflexivization	√	√
Control infinitives	√	*
Conjunction reduction	√	*
Deletion in telegraphic style	√	*
Deletion in imperatives	*	*

How Should the Deviations Be Evaluated?

- *Without* an independent subject definition:
  - ✓ Oblique subjects become less subjects if they have fewer behavioral properties
  - ✓ Where should we draw the limit between how many properties are sufficient for an argument to qualify as being analyzed as a subject?

- *With* an independent subject definition:
  - ✓ An argument is either a subject or it is not a subject
  - ✓ Partial subject behavior then needs to be explained

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Let's Dig Deeper!

(8a)   **Mich**   **schauderte und**   **ekelte**.
me.ACC felt.horrified and Ø.ACC felt.disgusted
'I felt horrified and disgusted.'

(8b)   **Mich hungert** nach Süssigkeiten **und**   **dürstet** nach Flüssigkeiten
I.ACC hunger for   sweets   and Ø.ACC thursts for   fluid
'I hunger for sweets and thurst for liquids.'

(8c)   **Mir**   **wird('s)** schlecht **und**   **graut('s)** vor der Zukunft.
me.DAT is.it   bad   and Ø.DAT worry   for the future
'I feel sick and worry about the future.'

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Let's Dig Deeper!

(9) **Dative 'be' ADJ** (Early Modern German)

Hier sind wir noch halb sinnlich, und es ist äusserst naturwidrig, hier alles verleugnen wollen, was Gott dem physischen Menschen zum Labsal und zur Erfrischung hie und da am Pfade unserer Wallfarth aufgetischt hat: aber den Lebensweg darum pilgern, um an diesen Erquickungsorten zu schmausen, *das ist so verächtlich, dass man das Auge davon abwenden muss, um nicht* **übel zu werden**.

(J.H. Jung-Stilling *Rede über den Werth der Leiden,* 1789)

'Here we are still half sensuous, and it is very much against nature to abstain from everything here that the Lord has served the physical person for comfort and refreshment here and there on the path of our pilgrimage: but to take a pilgrimage on the path of life in order to feast at these rest places, that is so disgusting that one has to turn (the eye) away **in order not to feel sick**.'

Interim Conclusions

- With an independent definition of subject, as being the first argument of the argument structure, we will analyze oblique subjects in German as exactly that, oblique subjects.
- The more exciting task is then to explain why they deviate from the prototype
- We can dispense with a gradient notion of subject

Typological Implications

- Does the current subject definition have a wider typological validity?
- Is the subject also the first argument of the argument structure in OS languages?
- The link between word order and the order of arguments in the argument structure is indirect, intermediated by the iconic relation between the event chain (force-dynamics) where instigators act upon endpoints.

Typological Implications

SO   S   O

       | |

    [Subj   Obj]

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Typological Implications

SO   S   O   OS   O   S

          | | | |
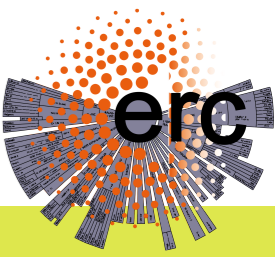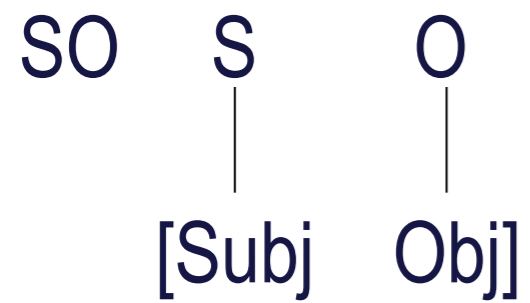
     [Subj   Obj]   [Obj   Subj]

Typological Implications

SO   S   O

[Subj   Obj]

OS   O   S

[Obj   Subj]

OS   O   S

[Subj   Obj]

Subjects in Ergative Languages

Transitive Subjects vs. Intransitive Subjects

- The socalled "subject" tests in ergative languages like Warlpiri are "case" tests and not tests of grammatical relations
- Hence, subjects of intransitives pattern with objects and transitives
- Hence, subjects of transitives stand alone

Are there Subjects in all Languages?

- There are scholars who claim that the subject concept does not have any grammatical consequences in some languages
  ✓Faarlund (2004) for Old Norse-Icelandic
- If all, or almost all languaes, have some type of distinction between subject and object, can't we then claim that the subject is a universal category?
- No, there is no rightful place for such a manifold subject concept in universal grammar.
- Subjects exist only as language-specific categories and it is most likely the need to distinguish between subjects and objects that is universal

What to Take Home?

- Subject can be defined in terms of argument structure and the relation between the arguments
- The order of the arguments, in turn, is defined as being a derivate of force-dynamics and the causal conceptual structure of verbs
- An independent definition of subject is needed, as opposed to a definition in terms of the subject properties themselves
- A definition in terms of the subject properties themselves enforces upon us a gradient concept with major analytical problems
- An independent definition of subject prompts us to dig deeper and search for explanations for why a specific category of subjects shows deviant behavior instead of "being less of a subject".
- Typological Implications; applicable to ergative languages