

The category of subject and grammatical constructions in German and English

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This paper explores how the subject prominent features in a given language are correlated with the grammaticalization of syntactic rules within the Germanic typology. Drawing relevant data from German and English this research focuses on the grammatical constructions such as morphologically case-marked constructions, passive constructions, clause-union constructions and raising constructions. In this functional typological study, it is demonstrated that the subject-centered English type constructions can be interpreted as extreme cases even within the Germanic typology. Furthermore, it is claimed that prominence typology does not have to be viewed as a discrete dichotomy and that it is rather a gradable concept.

1 . Introduction

The typological classification of Li and Thompson (1976) is considered an important contribution to the research field of cognitive and discourse-oriented language sciences. The crucial point of this research is that we can identify a set of grammatical properties that distinguish subject-prominent languages from topic-prominent ones. Subject-prominent languages are characterized as having dummy subjects, passive constructions, and subject-controlled co-reference in the sentential interpretation, whereas these grammatical phenomena are non-existent or less observed in the topic-prominent languages. Topic- prominent languages have, instead, topic-controlled co-reference, double nominative constructions and topic constructions that in fact need not be a syntactic argument of the sentential predicate. Given the well-known fact that Korean and Japanese are classified as subject- and topic-prominent languages, Germanic languages are given less attention with respect to this typological parameter in the literature. In fact, Li and Thompson classify German as a typical subject-prominent language like English. Our aim in this paper is to show that we can dispense with the

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clear distinction of subject and topic-prominence, when we investigate the typological differences of construction-based (English type) and discourse-based languages (German type) in the Germanic typology which is gradable. In other words, we will compare some representative subject-centered English grammatical constructions with the translation equivalents of German and will show that the subject-centered English type constructions can be interpreted as extreme cases even within the Germanic perspective. Thus, prominence typology does not have to be viewed as a discrete dichotomy as has traditionally been the case.

II. The grammatical category of “subject” and grammatical relations

Even in the case of Li and Thompson, the category of subject is seen as an important grammatical concept to typologize some European languages, including English. However, it is demonstrated that the language type in which subject-predicate relation is the main core structure of the basic sentence grammar is actually a minor one among the world’s languages (Kiss 2001). When it comes to subject-oriented grammatical analysis, problems crop up even in German, which like English belongs to the West-Germanic family. In the typical subject-prominent languages, the subject is involved in grammatical phenomena such as passivization, deletion in infinitival constructions, verbal congruence, reflexivization and various raising constructions. Despite this list of diagnostic rules for the grammatical subject, however, the identification of “subject” can also be made by means of the semantic primaryhood (agent), the pragmatic notion of topic and, in case marking languages, via a morphological means. Furthermore, German word order is pragmatically constrained such that the positions of two NPs do not necessarily permute with each other (cf. Vennemann 1982: 243):

- (1) a. dass Ganoven ein Schweißbrenner fehlt
 that gangsters a blowtorch need-3rd per. sg.
 b. *dass ein Schweißbrenner Ganoven fehlt
 that a blowtorch gangsters-dat need-3rd per.

In these examples, we see that the non-topical status of the subject NP is marked syntactically (via subject-verb inversion) (cf. Lambrecht 1994: 133). This category mismatch becomes more complicated, when it comes to the following embedded infinitival clauses with control phenomena (cf. Askedal 2001: 67-68):

- (2) a. Mir fehlt das Geld nicht.
 me.dat lacks the money.nom not.
 'I don't lack money.'
- b. *Ich hoffe, das Geld nicht zu fehlen.
 I.nom hope PRO the money.nom not to lack,inf.
 'I hope not to lack money.'
- c. Ich hoffe, dass mir das Geld nicht fehlt.
 I.nom hope that me.dat. the money.nom. not lacks
 'I hope that I shall not lack money.'
- (3)
- a. Ihm kommt die Hausarbeit zu schwer vor
 him.dat comes the homework.nom too difficult particle
 'He finds the homework too hard.'
- b. *Er behauptet, tüchtig zu sein, aber kommt die Hausarbeit zu schwer vor.
 he.nom claims PRO clever to be but comes the homework too difficult part.
 'He claims to be clever but he finds the homework too hard.'
- c. Er behauptet, tüchtig zu sein, aber ihm kommt die Hausarbeit zu schwer vor.
 he claims PRO clever to be but him.dat comes the homework too difficult part.
 'He claims to be clever but he finds the homework too hard.'

As the above examples (1-3) demonstrate, German dative arguments are translated into English nominative subjects. Given the morphological ergativity, we note that the subject-specific rules do not apply to the dative marking of an NP in the German control phenomena.²

As far as mapping to grammatical relations goes, Croft (1991) points out that

² In typical ergative languages the subject of an intransitive verb is treated the same as the object of the transitive verb, in situations where the subject of a transitive verb is treated differently (cf. Dixon 1994). When it comes to ergativity, the traditional conception of grammatical relations has been called into question in the literature. Bechert (1979) maintains that "it is ethnocentric to stick to the traditional notions of subject and direct object in the description of any ergative system whatever," by which he apparently means that it is wrong to designate translation-equivalents of accusative-system subjects as "subjects" lacking any language-internal justification in terms of coding or behavior. He points out that, while "the objection could be raised that the grammatical relations 'subject' and 'direct object' would still be definable on a semantic basis, ... the notion of grammatical relation is a syntactic one and accordingly requires empirical facts of a syntactic order as evidence of its adequacy; semantic properties alone are not sufficient" (48). While it is certainly reasonable to distinguish semantic from formal terminology for the different domains, it is not clear why "subject" would not be as appropriate a term for deep-ergative pivot as for accusative pivot.

“subject and object choice is semantically highly underdetermined” (181). A variety of basic lexical options will often be available for selecting one or the other of the “direct” roles onto subject and/or object based on various conceptual and pragmatic factors, and many languages additionally have a “construction type such as the passive that allows a ‘reassignment’ of argument NPs from the unmarked configuration of grammatical relations to the desired one” (150). As far as the pragmatic conditions underlying subject- and objecthood, Croft notes that “when a choice for subject is involved, topicality governs the choice, (Hawkinson and Hyman 1974)” (151). Croft ultimately believes, however, that “the primary explanation for the conceptualization of subjects and objects is based on the conceptualization of verbs” (155).

As we have seen in the German examples (1-3), however, the subject signifying behavioral and coding properties do not accrue to a single NP. Rather, they can be distributed over multiple NPs in a German sentence. Given the comparative analyses in the German examples (1-3) for the category mismatch behavior between nominative argument and dative argument within a clause, it is also not true when Croft argues that the choice for subject is governed by topicality with respect to the pragmatic conditions underlying subject- and objecthood. When we compare English passives with the corresponding German translation equivalents, however, it seems untenable to claim that the primary explanation for the conceptualization of grammatical relations is contingent on the verbal semantics (cf. Croft 1991:155). In many cases English personal passives cannot be rendered into the corresponding German passives, even when the verbs involved show similar conceptualizations:

(4)

- a. At home, he was met by strong opposition.
- b. Zu hause traf er auf starken Widerstand
- c. *Zu hause wurde er von starkem Widerstand getroffen.

The difficulties arise simply because a personal passive can be easily construed in English from much more verbs than in German. In the cases in which English passives cannot be translated into German passives, we need to consider alternative active constructions in German.

(5) active sentences with “man” as impersonal subject:

- a. He will be followed.
- b. Man wird ihm folgen.
- c. He should be encouraged to marry his girlfriend.
- d. Man sollte ihn ermutigen, seine Freundin zu heiraten.

(6) active sentences with reflexive verbs:

- a. Meanwhile, the problem had solved itself.
- b. In der Zwischenzeit hatte sich das Problem von selbst gelöst.
- c. She is not easily persuaded.
- d. Sie lässt sich nicht leicht überreden.
- e. Man kann sie nicht leicht überreden.

(7) active sentences with subject and object exchanged

- a. My friend owed me a considerable amount of money.
- b. I was owed a considerable amount of money by my friend.
- c. Mein Freund schuldete mir eine beträchtliche Geldsumme.
- d. She was being helped by her husband.
- e. Ihr Mann half ihr

In the example (7b) a corresponding German passive construction is simply not acceptable (cf. 7c). In the example (7d) German passive construction “Ihr wurde von ihrem Mann geholfen” is possible only marginally. In the ditransitive constructions in which English allows two different personal passives, different solutions are sought for the German equivalents as in (8):

(8) ditransitive constructions

- a. I was offered a new job.
- b. Man/Sie bot(en) mir eine neue Stelle an.
One/They offered to me a new job prefix
- c. Mir wurde eine neue Stelle angeboten.
- d. Es wurde mir eine neue Stelle angeboten.

From the above examples, we note that when dealing with grammatical relations, cross-linguistic grammatical structures among closely related languages need to be seriously considered.

The notion of subject is also not a simple category to define cognitively, when we encounter the explanation of Chafe (1976). Chafe attempts to provide a clarification of “the various statuses that a noun may have,” whereby status is understood as having “to do with how the content is transmitted [rather] than with the content itself”—i.e., with discourse or “packaging” considerations rather than semantic or “case” roles in Fillmore’s sense or with “message itself.” With his discussion of the nature of subjects, Chafe enters a somewhat more speculative, less empirically-based discussion of the “subject.” He suggests, in response to the view “that the status of a noun as surface

subject of a sentence is a strictly syntactic status, ... that it is a priori unlikely that a status which is given such prominence in English and many other languages would not do some work for the language, and would be only arbitrary and superficial in its function” (43). At the same time, Chafe cautions that “we should not be surprised to find that this [cognitive] role has been confounded, in the course of a language’s history, with other roles,” to the point where “that surface subject status is not associated consistently with a single cognitive status” (43).

What, then, would this cognitive status be? Chafe endorses the traditional rough characterization of subjecthood in terms of “what we are talking about,” or that “starting point” with respect to which we add communicated knowledge, or a “hitching post for new knowledge” (pp. 43-44). As support for this intuitive characterization, Chafe cites a Perfetti and Goldman (1974) experiment in which two versions of a narrative are presented, one in which the ‘serfs’ receives frequent mention while ‘Baron Wozjik’ receives little mention, and the other in which the bias is reversed; both end with ‘The serfs rebelled against the baron.’ Interestingly, while in the former version ‘the serfs’ is a much more effective prompt for retrieval of the final sentence, in the case of the latter version, ‘the baron’ is no more effective than ‘the serfs’. Chafe comments: “The serfs, of course, was the subject of the target sentence, and these results suggest that its subject provides a particularly effective prompt for a sentence, even when the preceding context has been predominantly about something else” (pp. 44-5).

Chafe also mentions that, while it is clear that “languages differ in the prominence which they give to subjecthood, so far as surface manifestations of it are concerned,” even in languages lacking any morphologically unified subject category, there will often still be evidence of subjecthood. As we have seen in the examples (1-3), however, these subject signifying behavioral and coding properties can be distributed over multiple NPs in a German sentence.

In Keenan’s terms, a language may display “behavioral” evidence of a subject category even though lacking such evidence according to “coding” properties. Thus, in Dakota, an “active-stative” language, the leftmost argument in a transitive clause seems, based on an “examination of contexts’ and informants’ reactions,” to be the “subject, in the sense that it is the particular about which knowledge is being added” (p. 46). Even though Dakota has no true passive, then, Chafe considers a passive structure to be the best translation of a sentence such as the following:

(9) Dakota

thalo he suka he yute

meat-the dog-the ate

“The meat was eaten by the dog.”

Two more pieces of evidence Chafe presents in support of the analysis of a subject category in active-stative languages are, first, that switch-reference system of Dakota seems in some instances to be sensitive to a topic-like or subject-like nominal which diverges from a clause's actor, and second, that the Iroquois active-stative pattern seems to be disintegrating in favor of a nominative-accusative system.

It seems clear that this intuitive notion of subjecthood as a conceptual "starting point" or "what we are talking about" is precisely what needs to be clarified if we are to make any real progress in determining the status of grammatical relations as universal categories. It is obviously essential to establish the distinction between whatever Chafe means by subject and the notion of "topic," as well as to reconcile the claim that subjects have a conceptual nature of the sort alluded to by Chafe with the existence of cases where the subject is clearly not "what we are talking about." Consider the following sentences:

(10)

- a. It seems that the former president will appear in the court of law.
- b. You know that guy we were talking about? Well, he might be imprisoned.

If the distinction between topic and subject isn't clarified, then much of the alleged evidence for subjecthood might otherwise be nothing more than evidence for topichood (cf. especially Chafe's discussion of the Perfetti and Goldman experiment, which we could interpret in terms of topichood if we consider the grammatical subject position as the default topic position, and the evidence for "subjecthood" in Dakota). It seems that Chafe's approach would lead us towards an understanding of subjects as discourse-based entities that depart from any strict determination in terms of semantic categories such as "actor" or "agent" (cf. Iroquois), or that involve a neutralization of such distinctions. This is a congenial approach that I think deserves pursuing. If we additionally accept the notion that the grammaticalization of subject in English entails cases where subject-selection is basically a matter of a grammatical constraint with little or no conceptual/cognitive content, then this approach will yield a satisfying characterization of subjecthood in English.

III. Grammatical relations and word order

The behavioral features of the category 'subject' are closely linked with word order phenomena. Unlike the system of English in which linear word order and configuration

regulate the grammatical relations, German system allows for other factors to influence the word order.

According to Primus, the German middle field linearization principle should be set up in accordance with thematic hierarchy, case hierarchies and configurational syntactic hierarchy.³ For the moment, we will concentrate on the thematic hierarchy and the case hierarchy to examine the grammaticality of the following examples taken from Primus (1998: 443-444).

- (11) (a) *Heute hat das Mädchen den Jungen geschlagen.*
 girl-nom boy-acc
 (b) ??*Heute hat den Jungen das Mädchen geschlagen.*
 boy-acc girl-nom
 ‘Today, the girl hit the boy’
- (12) (a) *Heute hat das Mädchen roten Wein bekommen.*
 girl-nom red wine-acc
 (b) ??*Heute hat roten Wein das Mädchen bekommen.*
 red wine-acc girl-nom
 ‘Today, the girl got red wine’
- (13) (a) *Heute hat das Mädchen den Wein bevorzugt.*
 girl-nom wine-acc
 (b) ??*Heute hat den Wein das Mädchen bevorzugt.*
 wine-acc girl-nom
 ‘Today, the girl preferred the wine’
- (14) (a) *Heute hat dem Mädchen der Wein geschmeckt.*
 girl-dat wine-nom
 (b) *Heute hat der Wein dem Mädchen geschmeckt.*
 wine-nom girl-dat

³ These hierarchies are given as follows (cf. Primus 1993a, 1998; m = marked):

- a. semantic (=theta or thematic) role hierarchy
 agent/experiencer < Θ recipient < Θ benefactive < Θ patient/theme < Θ other roles
- b. case hierarchy
 nominative/absolutive argument < m accusative/ergative argument < m dative argument
 < m other oblique arguments
- c. configurational syntactic hierarchy of arguments by c-command relation
 A node A c-commands a node B (A < c B) iff
 (a) A and B do not dominate each other, and
 (b) the first node dominating A also dominates B.
 (i.e. [e] states that external argument [NP, S] directly dominated by S asymmetrically
 c-commands internal argument [NP, VP] and both c-command [NP, V'])

e. Für mich wäre es besser mich selbst zu töten als auf diese Weise verletzt zu werden.

In (17) we observe that the subjectification process took place to a different degree in Germanic languages, even though the category of subject functions as the preferred target of the syntactic processes (e.g., raising and passive constructions). Originally the Middle English construction *for + NP* in (17a) belongs to the matrix sentence. In this case the pronoun ‘me’ is interpreted as the logical or semantic subject of the Middle English infinitival construction ‘to sleen myself’ of the second clause. In the diachronic evolution of the construction (17a) the construction ‘for me to sleen myself’ can be understood as a postposed subject, since *for + NP* together with the infinitival construction of the subordinate clause could be preposed later on as in example (17c) (Ebert 1978: 12). We can interpret this grammatical change such that the adverbial complement *for + NP* in the matrix clause and the infinitival construction in the dependent clause constitute together a newly formulated syntactic unit (that is, a new syndetic construction). Therefore we can state that the original adverbial complement *for + NP* forms a part of the subject in the English sentence (17c). This process of subjectification has not taken place in German to the extent it has in English, because the grammaticality of the corresponding German example (17d) is still accepted marginally by German native speakers. In (17e) we note that the German construction ‘für mich’ has the function of the adverbial complement for the matrix clause. German native speakers also tend to place a small pause between ‘für mich’ and ‘mich’ within the prefield (Ger. Vorfeld) for a better reading (Für mich, mich selbst zu töten, wäre...: example from A. Huwe, [p.c.]). The sentence (17d) is also evaluated as a colloquial expression.

In many cases English infinitival constructions can be translated into the corresponding German constructions analogically. However, there are typical grammatical constructions in which the sentence structures must be entirely reformulated.

(18) subject to object raising constructions

- a. She thinks him to be the best person for this position.
- b. She thinks that he is the best person for this position.
- c. *Sie glaubt ihn the beste Person für die Stelle zu sein.
- d. Sie glaubt, dass er die beste Person für die Stelle ist.
- e. He_i is thought to e_i be the best person for this position.

In the literature the construction (18a) is known as ‘subject to object raising construction’ because the semantic subject ‘he’ in the paraphrased subordinate clause (18b) is raised to the grammatical object ‘him’ in the syndetic clause (18a). However, the same

grammatical relation changing rule does not apply to the German construction. Besides, the passive construction in (18e) in which the NP 'He' is moved from the subject position of the lower clause to the subject position in the higher clause does not obtain in German because no infinitival complements with *zu* and exceptional case-marking are permissible (cf. Haider 1985).

V. Conclusion

In this paper we have investigated the relationships between prominence typology and the grammaticalization of syntactic rules in English and German. In this endeavor we concentrated on the subject-centered grammatical constructions in both languages. Furthermore, we demonstrated cross-linguistic variations of English and German with respect to case-marked constructions, passive constructions, clause-union process and raising constructions. In this functional typological study, we made clear that the subject-centered English type constructions can be interpreted as extreme cases even within the Germanic typology. Thus, prominence typology does not have to be viewed as a discrete dichotomy as has traditionally been the case.

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