

THE ORIGIN OF THE OBLIQUE-SUBJECT CONSTRUCTION:
AN INDO-EUROPEAN COMPARISON*

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1. Introduction

Recent research on subject-like obliques in Germanic suggests that non-canonically-case-marked subject-like arguments behave syntactically as subjects not only in Modern Icelandic and Modern Faroese, but also in Modern German, Old Norse-Icelandic, Old Swedish and Early Middle English. This research calls into question the hypothesis that oblique or non-nominative subjects have developed from objects, as it suggests that they have been subjects from at least the beginning of the Germanic period. In this paper we examine six different hypotheses on the possible origin of the oblique-subject construction in the Indo-European languages. We conclude that five of these hypotheses are inadequate while arguing for the superiority of the sixth hypothesis, namely that Proto-Indo-European was a stative-active language, either a Split-S or a Fluid-S language, in which a subset of syntactic subjects is case marked in the same way as objects. On such an account, oblique subjects are a natural part of the alignment system and need not be postulated as having developed from objects.

2. The Subject Behavior of Subject-like Obliques

Several of the world's languages exhibit structures where the subject-like argument is not in the nominative case, but in the accusative, dative, genitive, instrumental, etc. Four such examples are given below, (1a) and (2a) from Modern Icelandic, and (1b) and (2b) from Modern German:

- | | | |
|--------|--|-----------|
| (1) a. | <i>Mér</i> <i>er illt.</i>
me-DAT is sick | Icelandic |
| b. | <i>Mir</i> <i>ist übel.</i>
me-DAT is sick
“I feel sick.” | German |
| | | |
| (2) a. | <i>Mér</i> <i>líkar þessi tilgáta.</i>
me-DAT likes this hypothesis | Icelandic |

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- b. *Mir* gefällt diese Hypothese. German
 me-DAT likes this hypothesis
 “I like this hypothesis.”

Traditionally in the linguistic literature, it has been assumed that oblique or non-nominative subjects in the world’s languages have developed from objects to subjects, hence their non-canonical case marking (cf. Cole et al. 1980, Haspelmath 2001). In recent papers, however, we have argued that such subject-like arguments in Germanic, at least, were syntactic subjects all along (Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003a, Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005). This analysis is based on a definition of subject as the first or leftmost argument [ARG1] of the argument structure or subcategorization frame of a predicate. The argument structure of a predicate is, in turn, derived from the event type denoted by that predicate, its conceptual structure and the force-dynamic relationship between the participants (cf. Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005:827–832). The syntactic subject, defined as [ARG1], exhibits a syntactic behavior which systematically differs from objects in all the languages that we have investigated, i.e. the Germanic languages. This behavior is found in a variety of constructions and it involves, for instance, basic word order, reflexivization, raising-to-subject, raising-to-object, and control infinitives. Of these it is the control infinitive test that has been regarded by the research community as the most conclusive subject test (cf. also Barðdal & Eythórsson 2006, Barðdal 2006). Hence, we will let it suffice to give examples of that test here and refer the interested reader to our earlier publications for more examples, argumentation and references.

In the following examples the subject-like dative, i.e. [ARG1], of the infinitive *líka* ‘like’ from (2a) is left unexpressed on identity with the nominative subject of the Icelandic matrix clause in (3), and the subject-like dative, i.e. [ARG1], of the infinitive *übel sein* ‘feel sick’ from (1b) is left unexpressed on identity with the nominative indefinite subject *man* ‘one’ of the German matrix clause in (4):

Icelandic:

- (3) a. ... *hún þótti* *góð eftirherma* *og var þekkt*
 she was-considered good impersonator and was known
fyrir að *líka* *kaldhæðinn húmor*.
 for to PRO-DAT like ironic humor
 “... she was considered a good impersonator and was known
 to appreciate irony.” (is.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anastasia)

German:

- b. ... *das ist so verächtlich, daß man das Auge davon abwenden*
 ... this is so disgusting that one the eye away turn
muß, um _____ nicht übel zu werden.
 must in-order PRO-DAT not sick to become
 “... this is so disgusting that one has to turn away in order not
 to feel sick.” ([http://www.jung-stilling-archiv.de/](http://www.jung-stilling-archiv.de/WertderLeiden.htm)
 WertderLeiden.htm, 1789)

We have already established in earlier publications that subject-like datives ([ARG1]) pass all of the subject tests in Icelandic and German (for a comprehensive comparison of the behavior of subject-like obliques with regard to the subject tests in both languages, cf. Barðdal 2006). It should also be pointed out that morphosyntactic properties, such as nominative case and agreement, are not included in the subject tests, since these properties are clearly irrelevant for subject-like obliques. However, as mentioned above, the only really uncontroversial subject test that is generally agreed upon in the literature is the control test, as objects, unlike subjects, do not have the ability to be left unexpressed in control infinitives on identity with a preceding subject:

- (4) *He promised not to _____ cut *(himself) when shaving.*

The star in front of *himself* in (4) is intended to show that this reflexive object cannot be omitted on identity with the subject *he* in the matrix clause, in spite of the fact that *he* and the reflexive object have the same external reference. Therefore, examples like (3a–b) clearly show that subject-like datives behave as ordinary nominative subjects in that they can and must be missing in control infinitives, and the example in (4) shows that objects do not share this property.

Similar examples of subject-like obliques being left unexpressed in control constructions have been documented in Old Norse-Icelandic (Rögnvaldsson 1995, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003a), Old Swedish (Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003a, cf. Falk 1997), Early Middle English (Seeffranz-Montag 1983, Allen 1995), and most recently in Old French. The following example, from an Old French text dating from 1179 AD, is reported by Mathieu (2006:291):

- (5) *A ce ne pueent il _____ faillir.*
 to this not can they PRO-DAT fail
 “In this respect they cannot fail.”

The infinitive verb *faillir* ‘fail’ selects for a subject-like oblique in Old French, which in this example is left unexpressed on identity with the nominative subject *il* ‘they’ of the matrix verb *pouvoir* ‘can’. Mathieu presents examples showing that *pouvoir* clearly selected for control infinitives in Old French and not raising infinitives. If the modal verb

pouvoir had been a raising verb, it should have occurred with a subject-like oblique in (5) above rather than the nominative *il* ‘they.’¹ This shows without a doubt that the subject-like oblique of *faillir* ‘fail’ has been omitted in the example in (5), which is a typical subject behavior. Hence, oblique subjects must be assumed to have existed not only in Old Germanic but also in Old Romance.

However, predicates selecting for subject-like obliques are not confined to Germanic and Old French, but exist in all the archaic and ancient Indo-European languages. The following examples from Latin, Greek, Lithuanian and Russian (Bauer 2000:112, 115, 130) suffice to illustrate this point:

- | | | |
|--------|---|------------|
| (6) a. | <i>fratris</i> <i>me</i> <i>pudet</i>
brother.GEN me.ACC is-ashamed
“I am ashamed of my brother” | Latin |
| b. | <i>melei</i> <i>moi</i> <i>tinis</i>
cares me.DAT something.GEN
“I care for something” | Greek |
| c. | <i>mán</i> <i>nėzti</i>
me.DAT itches
“I itch” | Lithuanian |
| d. | <i>mne</i> <i>žal’</i> <i>vašu</i> <i>sestru</i>
me.DAT feel-sorry your.ACC sister.ACC
“I am sorry for your sister” | Russian |

These facts demand a reevaluation of the status of oblique-subject constructions in the Indo-European languages in general. In the remainder of this paper, we discuss and reject several possible hypotheses on the origin and development of the oblique-subject construction. We conclude that the linguistic data speak for a reconstruction of the alignment system of Proto-Indo-European as a stative-active, or a Split- or Fluid-S, language, and hence that oblique subjects have not developed from objects.

3. The Origin of the Oblique-Subject construction

3.1 The Topicality Hypothesis

In an attempt to account for the non-canonical case marking of subject-like obliques Haspelmath (2001) suggests that the dative experiencer of Nom-Dat constructions was frequently topicalized to initial position because of its animacy and high topicality. Therefore, Haspelmath argues, the dative experiencer gradually acquired subject properties over time. The problem

¹ See Barðdal & Eythórsson (2006:fn. 8) for examples of modal verbs selecting for control infinitives in Modern Icelandic, and a discussion of the complementation of Icelandic modal verbs.

with this explanation, however, is that it does not hold for non-canonically case-marked argument structures where there is no nominative. So, for example, Old Norse-Icelandic exhibited several argument structure constructions where no nominative is found.

As evident from Table 1, argument structure constructions with Acc-Acc, Acc-Gen and Dat-Gen, for instance, constitute a problem for the Topicality Hypothesis. Obviously, no swapping of arguments within the argument structure can be assumed to have taken place for argument structure constructions where there is no nominative. Hence, an explanation that covers all the relevant data is preferable over an explanation that only covers a subset of the data.

Table 1. Case constructions in Old Norse-Icelandic (Barðdal 2008).

Nom	Acc	Dat	Gen
Nom-only	Acc-only	Dat-only	Gen-only
Nom-Acc	Acc-Nom	Dat-Nom	Gen-Nom
Nom-Dat	Acc-Acc	Dat-Gen	Gen-PP
Nom-Gen	Acc-Gen	Dat-PP	Gen-S
Nom-PP	Acc-PP	Dat-S	
Nom-S	Acc-S		

3.2 The Null Subject Hypothesis

Another hypothesis found in the literature, proposed by, for instance, Falk (1997), assumes that the subject-like-oblique construction originally contained a null subject and, therefore, that the subject-like oblique was an object. This hypothesis is problematic for at least two reasons. First, as argued at length in the literature cited above (e.g. Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003b, Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005, Barðdal 2006, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2006), subject-like obliques in German exhibit actual subject behavior. In the example in (3b) above it is clearly the subject-like dative of *übel werden* ‘become sick’ that is being left unexpressed in the control infinitive. Second, on this hypothesis it must be assumed that the null subject disappeared, and that the subject-like oblique became a subject in Icelandic and Faroese. In German the null subject would also have been lost up to a certain degree, in which case the subject-like oblique was eventually replaced by a nominative subject. However, Nominative Substitution, by which nominative is substituted for oblique case with oblique-subject predicates, is a development that has taken place, to a different extent, in all the Germanic languages, including Icelandic and Faroese, which are universally assumed to have oblique subjects, as well as German (see Eythórsson 2002, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003a).

Consider, moreover, the following German example, which is ungrammatical by all accounts:

- (7) **Es ist nicht gut, _____ mir übel zu sein.*
 it is not good PRO-NOM me.DAT sick to be
 Intended meaning: “It is not good to feel sick.”

If there were a null subject (bearing nominative case) with verbs selecting for subject-like obliques, one would predict that it should be able to be unexpressed (PRO) in control infinitives, and if the subject-like oblique were a syntactic object, it would be predicted to be obligatorily expressed, exactly like the reflexive object in (4) above. However, the example in (7) can be used to refute both predictions. First, neither the postulated null subject in *Mir ist kalt* (‘Me-DAT is cold = I’m cold’) nor what is supposed to be its overt manifestation, *es* in *Es ist mir kalt* (‘It is me-DAT cold = I’m cold’), can be left unexpressed in control infinitives in German (in this case it would be PRO with an arbitrary reference, PRO-ARB). Compare (7) with (8) below, where weather-*es* in German is left unexpressed in a control infinitive:

- (8) ... *und als wir schon so gut wie fertig waren, verzogen*
 and when we already so good as done were dispersed
sich die dunklen wolken _____ ohne zu regnen.
 REFL the dark clouds PRO-ARB without to rain
 “... and when we were already almost done, the dark clouds
 dispersed although it didn’t rain.”
 (<http://hiddenmask.twoday.net/month?date=200707>)

Thus, the ungrammaticality of (7) above shows that the postulated null subject behaves differently from *es*, its alleged overt counterpart, which can be omitted in control infinitives, as in (8). The example in (7) shows, moreover, that the subject-like dative *mir* cannot be expressed in control infinitives in German, and thus that it does not behave as an object. It is therefore highly unlikely that the postulation of a null subject can be maintained, at any rate for German and presumably for other languages as well (although this would have to be tested for each language individually).

3.3 The Semantic Development Hypothesis

Yet another possibility is that modern oblique subjects were objects at an earlier stage and that they became subjects through a semantic shift of the verb or predicate (cf. Jespersen 1927, Lightfoot 1979, inter alia). The verb *like*, for instance, is assumed to have developed from the adjective *like* selecting for a dative object. This object is still tracable through the etymological, and hence semantic, development of the lexeme. According to the standard etymology, the verb *like* (OE *līcian*), together with its cognates in other Germanic languages, derives from the noun **līka-* (OE *līc* and cognates) ‘body’, presumably originally meaning ‘appearance, form’. The basic meaning would be ‘to be like’ (cf. the adj. *like*) and, thus, ‘to be suitable’ (cf. www.etymonline.com and most English and Germanic

etymological dictionaries). This would mean that originally the verb *like* was construed with a nominative subject and a dative object, and through the change in meaning from ‘X is like Y’ via ‘X is pleasing to Y’ to ‘Y likes X’ the arguments swap their positions and the dative experiencer becomes a syntactic subject.

It is worth pointing out that the standard derivational history of *like* has been disputed and it has been argued that the verb *like* is primary and does not derive from the noun (‘body’) or adjective (‘like’) (Bjorvand & Lindeman 2000:533). But even assuming for the sake of argument that the standard derivational history of *like* is correct, the Semantic Development Hypothesis is still problematic, as it is not a given that a dative experiencer object is a part of the argument structure of the etyma of all the relevant modern predicates which select for oblique subjects. Compare, for instance, OE *lystan* ‘want, desire, please, lust’, which, along with its cognates in other Germanic languages (e.g. Icel. *lysta* ‘want, desire’), is generally assumed to be derived from the Proto-Germanic noun **lustu-* ‘desire, pleasure’ (OE *lust*, etc.). This verb seems always to have occurred with the Acc-Gen case frame, which probably continues the Proto-Germanic pattern, in view of the Acc-Gen case frame in Old and Modern Icelandic *Mig lystir þess* (‘I-ACC desire it-GEN’). Hence, as *lystan* did not originally exist as a verb, no potential accusative object changing into an accusative subject was a part of its argument structure when it would have “changed its meaning”. It is therefore clear that swapping of arguments in the argument structure, related to a change in the meaning of a verb, cannot be assumed to have taken place for all the oblique-subject predicates involved.

Table 2. Sanskrit Nom-Acc verbs → Marathi Dat-Nom verbs (Deo 2003:6).

SANSKRIT		OLD MARATHI		MODERN MARATHI	
ROOT	GLOSS	CASE	GLOSS	CASE	GLOSS
<i>smṛ</i>	‘recall’	N-A	‘recall’	N-A	‘remember’
<i>ut-kal</i>	‘expel’	N-A	‘solve’	N-A	‘solve’
<i>sādh</i>	‘obtain’	N-A	‘obtain’	N-A	‘obtain’
<i>pra-ir</i>	‘propel’	N-A	‘direct’	N-A	‘bear’
<i>sarṁ-jñā</i>	‘know’	N-A	‘understand’	N-A D-N	‘understand’
<i>budh</i>	‘perceive’	N-A	‘realize’	N-A D-N	‘realize’
<i>sūc</i>	‘reveal’	N-A	‘reveal’	N-A D-N	‘occur to’
<i>kal</i>	‘perceive’	N-A	‘realize’	N-A D-N	‘appear’
<i>bhāv-aya</i>		N-A	‘appear’	N-A D-N	‘suit’
	‘imagine’				
<i>mānaya</i>	‘think’	N-A	‘suit’	N-A D-N	D-N

Moreover, a particularly striking counterargument against the Semantic Development Hypothesis comes from Indo-Aryan. In Modern Marathi a number of predicates taking the Dat-Nom case frame correspond to Nom-Acc predicates in Sanskrit (see Deo 2003). Evidently, the Dat-Nom case frame started to occur with some of the predicates in question in Old Marathi, with the result that they either co-occur with the Nom-Acc case

frame in the modern language, or have replaced it altogether. This is illustrated in Table 2. One example is given in (9) below, which shows that the verb *sam-jñā* ‘know’ selected for Nom-Acc in Sanskrit, while its Modern Marathi cognate, *samaj* ‘understand’ may occur with the Dat-Nom case frame.

- (9)a. *kanyā pāṭham samjānāti.* Sanskrit
 girl.NOM lesson.ACC knows
 “The girl knows the lesson.”
 b. *mulīlā abhyās samajto.* Marathi
 girl.DAT lesson.NOM understands
 “The girl understands the lesson.” (Deo 2003:5)

Thus, the Dat-Nom predicates in Modern Marathi cannot be taken to indicate an earlier stage with a dative object since no dative experiencer existed in these predicates’ argument structure in Sanskrit.

3.4 The Free-Dative Hypothesis

The “free dative construction” can be found in various Indo-European languages, and occurs for example in Modern German. This construction is readily available to all predicates where a beneficiary can be construed, as shown in (10b). It might be proposed that dative subjects have their origin in this construction.

- (10)a. *Das ist eine grosse Freude.* German
 this is a great pleasure
 “This is great pleasure.”
 b. *Das is mir eine grosse Freude.*
 this is me.DAT a great pleasure
 “This is a great pleasure for me.”

The Free Dative Hypothesis may indeed be a plausible explanation for the existence of some subject-like datives. It does, however, not capture the existence of subject-like accusatives, as with *lustan* above, since no “free accusatives” have been documented in the literature.

3.5 The Anti-Causative Hypothesis

The prototypical oblique subject is an experiencer cross-linguistically. In Icelandic, however, a significant number of non-experience-based verbs have oblique subjects (cf. Barðdal 2004). It is a common pattern that an ordinary object of a transitive verb occurs as the oblique subject of its intransitive pendant in what can be regarded as an anti-causative derivation. Thus, it might be suggested that oblique subjects originated as objects of causative transitive predicates.

- (11)a. *Fólk skaut henni upp á stjörnuhimininn á einni nóttu.*
 people shot her.DAT up on star-heaven on one night
 “People made her into a star overnight.”
- b. *Henni skaut upp á stjörnuhimininn á einni nóttu.*
 her.DAT shot up on star-heaven on one night
 “She became a star overnight.”

However, this hypothesis is not feasible since only some oblique-subject predicates show signs of having been subject to anti-causative derivation (cf. Sigurðsson 1989:216–218, labeled “ergative” derivation there). The great majority of oblique subjects involve experiencers that do not figure in such derivation, like *bjóða við* ‘disgust’ in (12) below.

- (12)a. **Fólk bauð honum við hákarlinum.*
 people disgusted him.DAT with shark-the
 Intended meaning: “People made him feel disgusted by the shark meat.”
- b. *Honum bauð við hákarlinum.*
 him.DAT disgusted with shark-the
 “He felt disgusted by the shark meat.”

3.6 Interim Summary

The existing, or possible, hypotheses on the origin of the oblique-subject construction reported on above do not hold for all the relevant data. Some of the proposed hypothesis – the Topicality Hypothesis, the Semantic Development Hypothesis, the Free Dative Hypothesis, and the Anti-Causative Hypothesis – can possibly hold for a subset of the data at issue, but certainly not all of it.

4. Oblique Subjects as a Characteristic of Stative–Active Alignment

The final hypothesis that we consider assumes that oblique subjects are linked to a particular alignment typology. It has been argued in the literature that Proto-Indo-European was a stative–active language where the case marking of subjects of intransitive predicates is semantically motivated (see Klimov 1973, Schmidt 1979, Comrie 1979, Gamkrelidze & Ivanov 1995[1984], Lehmann 1989 and Bauer 2000, cf. also Drinka 1999 and Clackson 2007 for further references). Accordingly, the subjects of active intransitives were case marked in the same way as subjects of transitive predicates, whereas subjects of stative intransitives were case marked in the oblique. This is different from nominative–accusative languages and ergative languages. The former type of language treats subjects of transitives and intransitives alike whereas objects are distinct; in the latter type the case marking of subjects of transitives (ergative) is different from that of intransitives and objects (absolute). In a further type of language,

involving “tripartite” case marking, transitive and intransitive subjects and objects all have distinct case marking. Finally, in a system of “double obliques” subjects and objects of transitives share case marking properties, as opposed to the subject of intransitives. This alignment typology is illustrated in Table 3 (adopted from Harris & Campbell 1995:241).

Table 3. Alignment typology.

	Transitive subjects	Intransitive subjects		Objects
		Active	Inactive	
Accusative	A	A	A	B
Ergative	A	B	B	B
Tripartite	A	B	B	C
Active	A	A	B	B
Double oblique	B	A	A	B

The arguments brought forward in the literature in favor of reconstructing an active system for PIE are both typological and morphological. Thus, earlier approaches to stative–active languages assumed that they came with several ancillary properties such as the following ones (cf. Drinka 1999:469):

- (13)a. lack of passive
- b. lack of possessive ‘have’
- c. lack of feminine gender
- d. distinction between alienable and inalienable possession
- e. meagerness of nominal inflection in the earliest layers
- f. presence of lexical doublets with active/stative orientation

However, scholars such as Comrie (1979), Harris (1985, 1990) and Dixon (1994) have raised doubts against the necessary co-occurrence of ancillary properties when establishing the alignment type of a given language. In particular, they have brought forward compelling arguments that there exist stative–active languages without such properties (cf. also Donohue 2008, Wichmann 2008). In this light, the possible reconstruction of a proto-language exhibiting the ancillary properties is not an issue anymore. In other words, Proto-Indo-European could have been a stative–active language even though it did not have all, or even any, of the ancillary properties. Most proponents of an active structure for PIE assume a Split-S system, according to which there is a fixed association between animate nouns and active (transitive or intransitive) verbs (expressing control of the action by the subject), on the one hand, and inactive nouns and neutral (stative) verbs, on the other. In recent years, however, some scholars have put forward the case for Fluid-S alignment, which allows nouns to be marked active or inactive depending on whether or not the subject can be viewed as controlling the action of the verb (cf. Drinka 1999, Clackson 2007:178–179).

Evaluating the pros and the cons for the hypothesis that Proto-Indo-European was a stative–active language, it is clear that the oblique subject construction is a major argument for assuming a Split- or Fluid-S system in Proto-Indo-European (cf. Lehmann 1989, 1995, Bauer 2000). Several different case and argument structure constructions exist in the ancient/archaic languages, as in Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Hittite, Gothic and other Early Germanic languages, as well as Slavic and Baltic (cf. the case constructions listed in Table 1 above).

This of course raises the question of whether the oblique subject construction qualifies as “semantic alignment,” or whether this family of constructions should be regarded as marginal within the alignment system and non-pervasive. We quote Donohue (2008:74):

Alternations such as ... ‘quirky case’ objects (or subjects), are simply a special case of the same explicit semantic marking found with semantically aligned languages. Or, put another way, the phenomenon known as split intransitivity is a special case of the kind of semantically explicit subsystems that are found in most languages.

One argument against the view that the oblique subject construction is marginal comes from frequency and pervasiveness. For example, Modern Icelandic exhibits around 700 dative subject predicates, 200 accusative subject predicates and approximately ten genitive subject predicates (cf. Barðdal 2004:109, based in part on a list compiled by Jónsson 1998). The oblique subject construction can therefore not be regarded as a marginal phenomenon, but is clearly a substantial part of the core grammar of Icelandic.

Another argument comes from the lack of productivity of the oblique subject construction in the history of Icelandic. A textual comparison between Old Norse-Icelandic and Modern Icelandic (Barðdal 2001) reveals that 72 types occurred in a text of 20,000 running words, consisting of four different genres, while only 48 types were found in a compatible corpus of Modern Icelandic texts (Barðdal 2008:19). Hence, the oblique subject construction cannot be assumed to have gained in productivity from Old Norse-Icelandic to Modern Icelandic. Similar type frequencies can presumably be obtained from, for instance, Russian and the Modern Indo-Aryan languages, although we concentrate on Icelandic here, as the statistics for that language are readily available.

Finally, it should be emphasized that all the predicates instantiating the oblique subject construction in the Indo-European languages are low on the transitivity scale, which is highly compatible with a Fluid-S system. The following lexical semantic classes have been identified as containing oblique subject predicates in Icelandic (Barðdal 2004):

- (14)a. Verbs of perception
 - b. Verbs of cognition
 - c. Verbs of emotions
 - d. Verbs of attitudes
 - e. Verbs of bodily states
 - f. Verbs denoting changes in bodily states
 - g. Verbs denoting personal properties
 - h. Verbs denoting ontological states
 - i. Verbs denoting success/performance
 - j. Verbs of failing/mistaking
 - k. Verbs of decline
 - l. Verbs of social interaction
 - m. Verbs of gain

In addition to the predicates that are included in this coarse-grained classification, the class of oblique-subject predicates also contains verbs denoting obligation, mental states, judgments, and others. Oblique-subject predicates do thus not score high on the transitivity scale in general. The split in the case marking of syntactic subjects in Icelandic is to a large extent lexicalized, which is to be expected for such morphological marking (Donohue 2008:62).

5. Conclusion and Summary

We have, in this article, presented syntactic arguments for analyzing subject-like obliques as syntactic subjects in Modern and Old Germanic, as well as in Old Romance. This analysis is based on a definition of subjects as the first and leftmost argument [ARG1] of the argument structure or subcategorization frame, which in turn is derived from event type, conceptual structure and force-dynamic relations. This definition of subject entails that syntactic subjects can be differentiated from syntactic objects through a host of syntactic properties of which control infinitives are regarded as the most conclusive one. This analysis calls into question the axiomatic assumption found in the literature that oblique subjects must have developed from objects. We have reviewed five existing or possible hypotheses on the emergence of oblique subjects, none of which could be shown to hold for the whole array of data relevant for this issue, but possibly only a subset of it. It is, however, clear that structures containing subject-like obliques exist in all the ancient and archaic Indo-European languages. Given the archaic nature of the syntax of oblique subject constructions, it follows that they should be reconstructed for the proto-language. The question, then, arises whether Proto-Indo-European was an accusative language “with ergative structures”, or whether it was Fluid-S (stative–active) language. The pervasiveness and high type frequency of the oblique subject construction in some of the daughter languages, for instance Old and Modern Icelandic, speaks for a Fluid-S system as against an

accusative system “with ergative structures.” Oblique subjects are a natural part of a Fluid-S system and need not be postulated to have developed from objects.

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