

## Looking at the Overlooked

*Still life painting “lavishes attention on those things normally overlooked”.*

Norman Bryson

### Introduction

Linguists working on phenomena that are statistically rare in language use, face the problem of possible accidental gaps in the corpus. This problem is particularly relevant in historical linguistics as it raises the methodological issue of the amount of linguistic data needed to draw conclusions about the grammar of “dead” languages, i.e. languages attested only in texts from earlier periods. Such languages can be divided into what German scholarly tradition calls *Grosskorpus Sprachen* (‘large

corpus languages’; e.g. Latin, which, as is well known, has been abundantly attested over many centuries), *Kleinkorpus Sprachen* (‘small corpus languages’; e.g. Gothic, which is almost exclusively attested in a translation of parts of the Greek Bible dating from about AD 380), and *Rest- und Trümmersprachen* (fragmentary

languages, languages ruins; e.g. Ancient Nordic, which survives in a couple of hundred inscriptions carved in runes from ca. AD 150–550).

Clearly, the more text material that is available, the less the chances are that lack of documented linguistic phenomena is due to accidental gaps, and the higher the chances that the data are representative of the language in question. Traditional philological wisdom holds that “one example is no example” (cf. the Latin slogan *unus testis – nullus testis*). Contrary to this, I would like to defend the view that what really matters in determining the status of rare linguistic phenomena is not the quantity but the quality of the attested examples. Even for a well-documented language like Old Norse-Icelandic (a *Grosskorpus Sprache* by the definition given above, copiously attested in manuscripts dating from ca. 1150–1540), a linguistic analysis based solely on the most frequently occurring forms and structures in the texts runs the risk of overlooking rare but important patterns, which may have been perfectly grammatical for the speakers of these languages, but which, for some reason, are underrepresented in the texts. Thus, all occurring linguistic phenomena, both frequent and infrequent, have their place in the language system. In fact, the occurrence of even a single, philologically and linguistically unambiguous example of a particular structure may suffice to establish that it is part of the grammar of the language in question (although its status may, of course, be less central than the status of high-frequency structures). By “philologically and linguistically unambiguous” I mean examples whose grammatical analysis depends on solid arguments, and



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which can be justified on the basis of the textual evidence (manuscripts, inscriptions and other kinds of documents) considered most reliable by leading experts.

### The story of oblique (“quirky”) subjects – again

I will use evidence from Old Norse-Icelandic to demonstrate the validity of the above considerations. First, however, I must briefly mention that in Modern Icelandic (and the closely related Faroese) the subject of the sentence is not necessarily in the nominative case. Rather, the subject can be in any of the four morphological cases: nominative, accusative, dative or genitive. Thus, case and agreement with the finite verb are not SUBJECT PROPERTIES in Icelandic and Faroese, which distinguishes them from many other languages. In the sentence in (1a) the subject is in the nominative, but in (1b) the subject is in the dative.

- (1) a. **Íslendingurinn** étur þennan hákarl.  
 Icelander.the-NOM eats this-ACC shark-ACC  
 ‘The Icelander eats this shark’  
 b. **Íslendingnum** líkar þessi hákarl.  
 Icelander.the-DAT likes this-NOM shark-nom  
 ‘The Icelander likes this shark’

The subject status of oblique noun phrases of the kind shown in (1b), termed OBLIQUE SUBJECTS, has been established in Modern Icelandic on the basis of the fact that they pass all SUBJECT TESTS applicable to Icelandic (Andrews 1976, Zaenen, Maling & Thráinsson 1985, and subsequent work). These tests for subjecthood include long distance reflexivisation and control infinitives, both of which I will explain shortly (see 2.1 and 2.2 respectively).

For a historical linguist, the natural question to ask is: What is the diachrony of oblique subjects in the Nordic languages? In other words, are oblique subjects an innovation in Modern Icelandic and Faroese, separating these Insular Scandinavian languages from the related languages on the Scandinavian mainland? Or are oblique subjects an archaism – an old linguistic feature that these languages have preserved while their mainland relatives have lost it?

Whereas the facts of Modern Icelandic are unanimously accepted in the linguistic community, there has been a debate in the literature on the syntactic status of subject-like obliques in Old Norse-Icelandic. A number of scholars have argued that the oblique noun phrases are subjects just as in Modern Icelandic (Rögvaldsson 1996, Barðdal & Eythórssón 2003). Others argue that they are not subjects, but rather objects (Faarlund 2001). On the latter view there would have been a change in the history of Icelandic and Faroese, whereby the original objects were reanalyzed as subjects. On the former view, however, there has been no change in the history of Icelandic (and Faroese). The problem is that the relevant structures required to test the grammatical function of the potential oblique subjects are hard to come by in a “dead” language, and in some cases even totally absent. The question to be determined is whether this lack of the crucial examples is coincidental or systematic. Linguists working on living languages mostly have an easier task as they can either obtain the relevant examples by introspection (in the case of their own native

language), or by asking their informants for judgments; particularly important is the solicitation of negative evidence, supplying information on what speakers **cannot** say. Historical linguists, on the other hand, must rely on their philological skills and thorough knowledge of the languages in question; but there is no substitute for the negative evidence provided by actual speakers.

#### Long distance reflexivisation

As mentioned above, one of the tests for subjecthood of oblique subjects in Modern Icelandic is LONG DISTANCE REFLEXIVISATION (LDR); this involves a reflexive pronoun in a subordinate clause referring to an antecedent in a matrix clause. There is no question that nominative subjects can be antecedents of reflexives in Old Norse-Icelandic. However, only **three** examples of potential oblique subjects functioning as antecedents for a long distance reflexive have been reported in the scholarly literature. One of these three examples from Old Norse-Icelandic is shown in (2); the dative noun phrase in the matrix clause is the antecedent of the reflexive pronoun in the subordinate clause (both shown in boldface).

- (2) ok þótti **honum** [sem fóstura **sínum** myndi mein at verða]  
 and seemed him-DAT as fosterfather-DAT self-DAT would harm to  
 become  
 ‘and it seemed to him as if his fosterfather would be harmed’  
 (Ljósvetninga saga)

It is important to note that there are **no** examples of unambiguous objects functioning as antecedents for LDR in Old Norse-Icelandic. However, if an example were found of a reflexive referring back to an unambiguous object (say, in a hitherto unknown Icelandic saga, if such a text were discovered – something which is not very likely), LDR would be shown to be invalid as a subject test for Old Norse-Icelandic (even though it holds for Modern Icelandic). The reason is that it is in principle not excluded that a reflexive may refer back to a non-subject. But until such a counterexample is found, the above example is in accordance with the OBLIQUE SUBJECT HYPOTHESIS for Old Norse-Icelandic.

#### Control infinitives

A further argument for the existence of oblique subjects in Old Norse-Icelandic involves infinitive clauses whose subject is omitted on identity with the subject of the matrix clause. This argument is much more persuasive than the one discussed above because only subjects can be omitted in such infinitive clauses (so-called CONTROL INFINITIVES), given standard assumptions about grammatical functions. Only six unambiguous examples bearing on this issue have been reported for Old Norse-Icelandic (Rögnvaldsson 1996, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003:458–59), including the one in (3).

- (3) Höskuldr **kvaðsk** \_\_\_\_ þat mikit **þykkja** ...  
 Höskuldr-NOM said Ø-DAT it-NOM much-NOM seem-INF  
 ‘Höskuldr said that it concerned him greatly ...’ (Laxdæla saga)

In this example the matrix control verb is *kveðask* ‘say (of oneself)’ which takes a nominative subject. The control infinitive is *þykkja* ‘seem (here: concern)’, which selects for a subject-like dative. It should be emphasized that the subject behaviour here lies in an argument’s **ability to be left unexpressed**, as opposed to being obligatorily overt. In the example in (3) the unexpressed argument of the infinitive (indicated here as Ø-DAT) corresponds to a dative argument of the finite *þykkja* ‘seem’.

It may be objected that the examples of potential oblique subjects being unexpressed in control infinitives are quite few, and that if this was a structural property of Old Norse-Icelandic we would expect it to be more pervasive in the texts. The force of this objection, however, is not as strong as it might seem because predicates selecting for oblique subjects are also extremely rare in control constructions in Modern Icelandic, yet they are accepted by native speakers (cf. Rögnvaldsson 1996:50, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003:461). It was not until after the dawn of the World Wide Web that it became possible, without vast efforts, to find such examples in written Modern Icelandic. However, the fact that a particular structure is rare is not equal to its being unacceptable or non-existent. If there is any difference at all between Modern Icelandic and Old Norse-Icelandic with regard to structures like (3), it would seem to be quantitative and not qualitative in nature. The six examples are from the oldest and most reliable manuscripts of the classical Old Norse-Icelandic period (cf. Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003:458–59). Therefore, although extremely few in number these examples must on both philological and theoretical grounds be considered valid evidence for the subjecthood of potential oblique subjects, given that only subjects, and not objects, can be left unexpressed in control infinitives.

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