A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TOWARDS THE SUBJECT CATEGORY IN GERMAN

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In this paper, I present an analysis of the subject category in German, using the theory of Cognitive Grammar developed in Langacker’s *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar* (1987, 1991). Langacker (1991:554) defines subject as the primary clausal figure and he has argued that all clauses give prominence to one of the clausal participants.

The claim that all clauses have subjects is controversial for German. Further, there is substantial debate about which nominals can be called subjects (Smith 1985a). Traditional grammars for German, like Duden (cf. Duden 1984 574), state that the subject can be identified by tests based on the structural properties of the clause. The properties under consideration are subject-verb agreement and the possibility of replacing the word or phrase in question with *wer* ‘who’, *was* ‘what’ or *es* ‘it’. Duden (1984 574) also notes that most subjects are nominals in the nominative case. Following Langacker (1991) for English and Smith (1985a) for German, I argue that all German clauses have subjects.

The data to be discussed in this paper are examples from the literature on impersonal constructions as well as passive constructions in German. Such examples show that a variety of nominals in either the nominative or dative case can manifest subject-like properties. In some cases, there is additionally a nominative participant that occurs post-verbally and controls verb agreement, but otherwise has little claim to subject status.

Based on Langacker’s (1991) claims for subject status, I argue that all German clauses have subjects and that sentences that have no nominal in the nominative case are not “subjectless”. I claim that defining subject in German based on the structural properties of case and verb agreement ignores the functional properties that subjects share. Further, I claim that subject and topic are distinct in German. In order to make this argument, I have organized the paper as follows. First, I discuss non-prototypical German subjects in the nominative case, i.e. the subject-setting construction and then non-prototypical subjects in the dative case. I conclude with an analysis of subject and topic.

1 Subject-Setting Construction

In German, impersonal constructions are characterized by the occurrence of *es* ‘it’ or an adverb in sentence initial position. Within the generative framework, the pronoun *es* is considered to be a meaningless grammatical marker. *Es* is often the grammatical subject of an impersonal clause and therefore licenses subject-verb agreement. The pronoun *es* is also considered to be a place-holder so that the verb can occur, as expected in German main clauses, in second position.
In order to discuss the meaning of *es, it is necessary to begin with Langacker's (1991 343)
setting/participant distinction

In a prototypical transitive clause, the subject and the object are construed as participants
within a setting. In the prototypical event model, the setting is distinct from the participants. A
clause can depart from the transitive prototype in one of two ways. It can deviate from the model
by choosing a location or some other complement as background (Langacker 1991 345), or it can
select the setting as subject. Only the selection of setting as subject is relevant for German, so I
will focus on this point.

Langacker (1991 346) provides the following example of a setting-subject construction

1) Thursday saw yet another startling development.

The setting in example 1 is the temporal setting for some event that is expressed by the nominal
‘development’. There is no connection or transfer of energy between ‘Thursday’ and
‘development’, thus the subject-setting construction is intrasitive (Langacker 1991 345).

The setting/participant distinction is a salient part of German impersonal constructions
For example (Smith 1985a.412)

2) Es steht eine Vase auf dem Tisch

There is (lit. standing) a vase on the table.

*Es has no definite referent in this example, although the word es also functions as a neuter
pronoun in German. If *eine Vase were replaced by a pronoun the sentence would read *Sie steht
auf dem Tisch. ‘It [feminine pronoun] is [lit stands] on the table’. In impersonal constructions, es
represents an abstract or schematic physical setting within which a state or activity takes place
(Smith 1993). Es is selected as subject of the clause but is not conceived of as part of the action.
Thus, es in this function is part of a subject-setting construction.

The functional purpose of es in the subject-setting construction is to set up a
presentational frame (Smith 1993) 1. The other clausal participants are backgrounded in this type
of construction. The setting is the primary figure and the clausal participants are in its domain.
Further evidence for the presentational function of es is the fact that *Es steht *sie auf dem Tisch
‘It [lit. stands] on the table’ in which *sie refers to *eine Vase is ungrammatical. A
presentational framework sets up the expectation that new information will be introduced into the
discourse (Kirsner 1979, Helbig & Buscha 1988 395, Smith 1993). Thus one would expect a full
noun phrase or another construction that signals Low Accessibility 2. This accounts for the
grammatical acceptability of example 2. A high accessibility marker, such as the pronoun in the

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1 I do not mean to imply that es is only used in presentatives. Putz (1975) classifies es into nine
different categories based on distributional criteria and then analyzes the function of each type of
es.

2 Accessibility theory claims that nominal categories mark differences between retrievability or
accessibility in a given context (Anel 1988, 1990, Ward, Sproat & McKoon 1991, Gundel,
Hedberg & Zacharska 1993, van Hoek 1992). Full noun phrases signal low retrievability from the
context and pronouns mark high retrievability.
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example above, is ungrammatical in a clause that sets up a presentational framework. It is ungrammatical to set up the expectation of low accessibility and then follow with information easily retrievable from context that is coded by a pronoun or another high accessibility marker. As established above, the choice of setting for impersonal passives and other presentative constructions in German is the pronoun es. This pronoun has a presentational function that serves to set up a context into which new information can be introduced.

In German impersonal constructions, there is the setting that functions as the subject of the clause and the activity that takes place within the setting. There are a variety of impersonal constructions possible in German (see Smith 1985a, 1985b, 1992).

In order to show the variety of settings possible in German, the examples given below are both impersonal passives, 3, and personal passives in setting-subject constructions, 4 and 5. In German, the pronoun es is not the only word that can be used as a referent for the setting, it is merely the most abstract. The setting can be spatial, temporal or mental. Consider the following examples of both personal and impersonal passives in a setting-subject construction.

3) Es werden dort schöne Reden geschwungen
   There are brandished there pretty speeches

4) In letzter Zeit wurde zu viel nach rechts geschaut.
   Recently, it has been glanced too much to the right.

5) Nach nationalem und internationalem Recht dürfen aber nicht abgeschoben werden.
   According to national and international law, deportations are not permitted.

These examples show spatial, temporal and mental settings respectively, that contain an event or an activity. Example 3 has both an abstract setting, es, and a concrete locative setting dort 'there'. The event, 'brandish speeches', is located in the spatial domain. The activity, 'to glance to the right', in example 4, is located in the temporal domain represented by the phrase 'recently'. The last example, 5, shows a series of events that are located in a mental domain. The interpretation of national and international law can only take place in the mental domain, although the consequences of this interpretation may take place in the spatial domain. In order for the setting-subject construction to be present, there only needs to be some description of the setting that is selected as the primary focus. Setting-subject constructions are non-prototypical subjects in German, but subjects nonetheless.

2 Subjects in the dative case

Subjects in the dative case have many features of prototypical active subjects. They are the most prominent nominal in the clause, animates (Givón 1976, Croft 1991 153), definite and high on the empathy hierarchy (cf Silverstein 1976, Dixon 1979). The following example based on Smith (1985a 394) shows the characteristics of animacy, definiteness and high rank on the empathy hierarchy.

Non-prototypical nominative subjects also include adverbs that are construed to be participants, locations or clauses as participants, participants retrievable only from context and participants that are incorporated into the verb morphology.

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7) Dem Dieb wird von dem Polizisten gefolgt.
The thief (dat) is followed by the policeman.

Dative subjects are not agentive and this distinguishes dative subjects from prototypical active subjects.

In German, as in many languages, the dative case is used to mark nominals in the clausal realm that fit the experiencer prototype (Rudzka-Ostyn 1992 334, Smith 1992 406, Foley & Van Valin 1984 101, Shibatani 1985 833) An experiencer is 'an individual engaged in some type of mental process, be it intellectual, perceptual or emotive' (Langacker 1990 236) In German, these nominals are indirect objects and objects of dative verbs.

The experiencer role is conceptually different from the patient role (Smith 1992 406) Patients are affected by the action of the agent such that they undergo an external or internal change. Experiencers are also affected by the action of the agent. However, they do not undergo change in the same way as a patient participant that is unable to react to its surroundings. Experiencer participants are actual or potential actors in their own right with respect to the action (Langacker 1991 401, Smith 1992 408) and thus differ significantly from patient participants. In other words, the dative case marks a high degree of personal involvement (Givón 1976 170) Further, Smith (1992 408) claims that in active clauses dative participants manifest a certain degree of independent potency of their own as a result of the actions of the agent. Dative participants have some properties of prototypical subjects in that they are animate and high on the empathy hierarchy. They are non-prototypical because they are not in the nominative case.

3 Subject vs. topic

The grammatical category of subject is not given the traditional definition in Cognitive Grammar. Instead, subject has a schematic definition as well as a set of prototypical values. Langacker (1991.306) defines a prototypical subject as the initial element in an ordered sequence such as the action-chain. As the first element in the action-chain, the subject has maximal topicality and a high degree of prominence. Topicality has long been connected with subjecthood (Givón 1976, 1983, 1984), and in CG topicality is described by four different aspects of the relations between clausal participants (Langacker 1991 306ff).

In German, the issue of what is topic and what is subject is ill-defined. The passive can be used to show that the issue is fairly complex. Foley & Van Valin (1984) claim that the function of the passive is to topicalize a non-agentive participant. They assume that subject and topic must be the same in passive clauses. Croft (1991) states that the passive is a relation-changing construction and that topicality is required for subjects. Givón (1976) also regards subjects as topics, but later recognizes that they do not always overlap (1984 138). In contrast to these scholars, Langacker (1991 317) points out that 'a subject is not definable as a discourse topic, even though a subject's cognitive salience makes it the unmarked choice to function in that capacity'. Langacker (1991 317) claims that relational figure is how subjects should be schematically characterized. The subject is always the figure within the profiled relationship.
Consider the following example

8) abends wurde alles mitsammen wegeschaufelt und hinunter zum Friedhof oder hinunter zum Fluß

In the evenings everything was shoveled out of the way and carried to the cemetery or down to the river

In example 8, the traditional subject of the clause is *alles* 'everything'. It is in the nominative case and it agrees with the verb. Langacker (1991 308) defines prototypical subjects as definite, agentive, animate and the most salient participant. In this passive sentence, *alles* is not agentive, animate or the most salient participant of the entire clause. However, it is the most salient part of the verbal portion of the clause and thus has some claim to subject status.

In contrast to *alles*, the setting, *abends* 'evenings', is the most salient part of the entire clause. It is a subject-setting construction and, while it is not a prototypical subject, it does fit the criterion of being the most prominent part of the clause (Smith 1985a 412, Langacker 1991 346). Thus, I would argue that example 8 and other sentences like it (cf. example 3) have two nominals that can claim subject status because they are each the most prominent part of an important clausal relation. The subject *abends* specifies the conceptual realm within which the clause takes place (Langacker 1991 314) and the subject/topic *alles* is the most prominent part of the clause contained within the setting.

Langacker (1991 313) states that subjects are part of a clause and topics are part of discourse. Langacker (1991 314) defines the topic as 'the specific conceptual realm [within the mental world of the speech-act participants] with respect to which the clause is meant to be interpreted and into which its content is integrated'. Further, the topic is a subjective reference point used to establish mental contact with other entitles in the discourse. Without further context for example 8, it is possible to interpret *abends* as both the subject and the topic. However, context for the example makes clear that *alles* 'everything' is the topic and it is a pronominal reference to fish waste. If the setting were removed from the clause, *alles* would be both the subject and the topic of the passive clause. Given that there are clauses that show a distinction between subject and topic, Langacker (1991 315) claims that topicality cannot be used to characterize or define subjects.

Conclusion

The conclusion to all of this is that Langacker's definition of subject provides a more complete description of certain types of subjects in German than the traditional and current definition. Based on these few examples, there is good reason to pursue a broader definition of subject in German than just nominative case and subject-verb agreement. Even the traditional grammar Duden hedges and hints that certain types of nominals in German are subject-like. Langacker's definition provides a functional description of these subject-like nominals that traditional definitions ignore. The descriptive cost of clinging to a traditional definition is quite high, but there is little lost in redefining subjecthood in German. In fact, there are only two consequences. The first is that subject-verb agreement is considered to be a less important and even unimportant part of subjecthood and the issue of how verbs get their 3rd person singular...
marking must be reexamined. I think it is time to broaden the definition of subject and reexamine some old issues.

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