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Unaccented pronominal subjects in the Germanic languages

In the Germanic languages, unaccented pronominal subjects have been in use for quite some time, whenever other types of subject are excluded. Utilising Gothic, Northumbrian and above all Old High German data, the author explains certain aspects of that phenomenon in the framework of the syntactic theory operating with strong and weak syntactic variants. (The theory is outlined at the beginning of the paper.)

In the old Germanic languages of the pre-historic and partly of the historic period, emphatic pronominal subjects were used, only sporadically also non-emphatic but accented ones. The latter were the most common in non-third verbal persons. This circumstance is explained by the author under the presupposition that strong variants (*ego dico* [ego non-emphatic] was a strong variant, as opposed to the bare *dico*) assert themselves in less "natural" surroundings first, here in the non-third verbal persons.

Later on, the non-emphatic pronominal subjects of the Germanic languages lost their accentedness, under the influence of oblique cases (of pronominal pronouns), which as early as Indo-European times had clitic forms beside emphatic ones.

The old non-emphatic but accented pronominal subjects enjoyed the status of strong variants, whereas the new unaccented pronominal subjects were allotted the status of weak variants. Because of this, the latter spread into simple syntactic constructions first, and only later into less simple ones: first into dependent clauses, then into main clauses displaying normal word order, and eventually into main clauses characterised by inversion.

A number of us linguists affiliated with the Universities of Ljubljana and Maribor have developed the basics of a theory meant to furnish a principled explanation of certain phenomena that obtain in the syntax of human languages time and again. What I have in mind are cases such as the following two:

- (1) A given syntactic construction manifests itself weakly, or not at all, with the most frequent elements of the language. For example, the use of the English continuous tenses (eg *he is teaching*), whose in-

ipient stage dates from Old English, expanded gradually, to reach the (main) verb *to be* (cf *he is being silly*) only late.

- (2) A given syntactic construction asserts itself best precisely with the most frequent elements of the language. For example, in Slovene negative clauses, the subject can take the genitive case instead of the usual nominative; however, the genitive subject can only co-occur with the main verb *biti* 'to be', eg *Janeza ni doma* beside *Janez ni doma* 'Janez is not at home'. *Janeza* = the genitive case.

Our theory accounts for such cases in the following way. Whenever a syntactic change takes place in the language, the old and the new syntactic expressions behave as variants of each other for some time. According to our theory, one variant is "strong", the other "weak". (The strong variant is structurally more complex than the corresponding weak variant. The strong variant exhibits a narrower meaning than the weak variant, or they may be roughly synonymous.) Each variant competes with its opposite number, and their competition runs along the following lines:

- (1) The strong variant first prevails in some complicated environment. Sometimes the development ends here, but often it continues, and the strong variant spreads gradually into less complex environments.
- (2) The weak variant first prevails in some simple environment. Sometimes the development ends here, but often it continues, and the weak variant spreads gradually into less simple environments.

In syntax, it is structural complexity that counts as the defining feature of complicated environment. Where structural complexity does not obtain (does not make sense), it is the well-known "naturalness" of Natural Morphology that decides what is complicated environment. A common picture:

- (1) The *weak* variant is used in some *simple* environment, the corresponding strong variant is used in the remaining environments, or even everywhere.
- (2) The *strong* variant is used in some *complex* environment, the corresponding weak variant is used in the remaining environments, or even everywhere.

Our work up till now is reported in the publications listed in the bibliographical article, Petrič 1994.

This time I wish to demonstrate the performance of our theory with the aid of a case study concerning the early syntactic development of obligatory unaccented pronominal subjects in the Germanic languages. If for no other reason, the case deserves special attention because it still lacks a proper historical explanation. I have treated the matter earlier, in Orešnik 1984 and 1986. In the

present paper, I discuss it anew from the standpoint of our above-mentioned theory only.

The original conditions (of the use of pronominal subjects) that obtained in the old Germanic dialects were the same as still obtain in most modern European languages, eg in most Slavic and in most Romance ones. After the Germanic speaker had decided that the subject of his clause would not be nominal, he could choose a pronominal subject instead, in one of the following situations: (a) under emphasis, (b) if the subject noun phrase was complex (ie contained some element(s) in addition to the head), (c) if the subject noun phrase was used in a nominal clause lacking the copula. Eg Slovene *JAZ sem velik, TI si majhen* 'I am tall, you are small', *Janez in jaz* 'Janez and I', *mi trije* 'we three, ie the three of us', *jaz, ki me nihče ne mara* 'I, whom nobody likes', *ti — osel* 'you are an ass'. Outside the situations just enumerated, pronominal subjects were used sporadically only, unemphatically, and as the sole constituent (ie as the head) of a noun phrase. Eg Slovene *pridi ti zdaj domov* 'come (unemphatic you) home now'. I will first devote a few lines to this sporadic type of pronominal subjects, which play an important role in my subsequent discussion of unaccented pronominal subjects.

In my opinion, the use of unemphatic pronominal subjects developed in some ill-defined distant past, due to the following four-part analogy patterned on non-pronominal subjects:

emphatic non-pronominal subject : : unemphatic non-pronominal subject =
emphatic pronominal subject : : X; X = unemphatic pronominal subject

(It is to be expected that the outcome of analogical change is something optional, sporadic.)

It has been observed in sundry languages that unemphatic pronominal subjects are used more in the non-third than in the third verbal persons. This state of affairs can be explained as follows. The construction unemphatic pronominal subject + finite verb invariably competes with the finite verb (subject unexpressed). Eg *ego dico* (*ego* unemphatic) competed with the bare *dico*. The two constructions were (roughly?) synonymous, hence variants of each other. According to our theory, the two-word *ego dico* (*ego* unemphatic) was the strong variant, and the single-word *dico* was the weak variant. The competition between the two variants led to the spreading of the strong variant, ie of the type *ego dico*. (The weak variant *dico* could not spread, seeing that its distribution was maximal to begin with.) According to our theory, the type *ego dico* (*ego* unemphatic), being the strong variant, was to manifest itself in some complex environment first. I have data of this kind available for Greek (Schwyzer 1950, 188), Latin (Szantyr 1972, 173–74), Italian (Rohlf's 1949 par. 451), and Spanish (Rosengren 1974). In those languages the type *ego dico* (*ego* unemphatic) spread into non-third verbal persons. (This is to be expected in our theory, seeing that we consider, with Benveniste, the non-third verbal persons to be less natural than the third verbal persons [the term "natural" here and below used as eg in Dressler et al. 1987]).

The details. In the Greek of Homer and Herodotus, the pronominal subject of the second verbal person was used redundantly, especially in imperative clauses (l. c.). This usage is reminiscent of the incipient stage of the Latin state of affairs to be described presently. Further stages of the Greek development are not mentioned in my linguistic sources. It is known about Latin (l. c.) that the unemphatic subject of the non-third verbal person occurred especially early in imperative clauses, in certain kinds of questions, in solemn declarations, etc., all rather unnatural constructions in comparison with the plain indicative mood; hence this distribution of unemphatic pronominal subjects is to be expected according to our theory. It cannot be determined post festum whether the type *ego dico* (*ego* unemphatic) spread to additional kinds of complex environment. In my mother-tongue, Slovene, this matter has not been examined. However, the pertinent chapter and verse of the grammar by Toporišič 1976, 242, item 1č, adduces instances of non-third verbal persons only, and states that they express cosiness, a stylistic nuance. In general, such pronominal subjects, *stricto sensu* superfluous, are banished from the modern standard languages, as a result they are scarce in written texts, hence difficult to investigate. At any rate, the type *ego dico* (*ego* unemphatic) can be assumed to exist in all languages using optional pronominal subjects, but the phenomenon is rarely researched. (The type is of course absent from those languages in which it has been covered over by obligatory unaccented pronominal subjects, thus in the Germanic and in some Romance languages.)

An interesting parallel to the use of unemphatic pronominal subjects is the Scandinavian construction 'my ass (donkey)', here illustrated with Swedish data taken from Kjellmer 1982. Swedish sentences such as 'I put my foot in it again', 'you put your foot in it again' can be expressed with 'my ass put my foot into it again', 'your ass put your foot into it again'. The word 'ass' of this construction can be substituted for by a considerable number of other nouns, eg 'idiot, peacenik, student, little angel, Croesus' (with suitable changes of content in the rest of the sentence). The same construction can be used in the plural, 'our asses', 'your asses'. A slightly enlarged variety of the same construction occurs outside the nominative. As far as I can see, the nominative construction 'my ass' is a stylistic substitute of the bare pronominal subject. In the present context, it is essential that the expression is acceptable in the non-third persons only, and in this respect forms a parallel to the unemphatic pronominal subject + finite verb. — Like other European languages, Swedish also has a comparable construction that can be exemplified with 'your majesty', used in all verbal persons, even in the third, but Kjellmer has shown that that construction is syntactically different, and not to be confused with, the type 'my ass'.

The obligatorium of pronominal subjects in the Germanic languages

Now I propose to discuss that secondary obligatorium of pronominal subjects that has developed in the Germanic languages. (By the obligatorium of

pronominal subjects I mean the obligatory default use of unaccented pronominal subjects in any clause whenever other types of subjects are not employed.) The specialist literature contains a number of interesting data about the early syntactic development of the said obligatorium: about Gothic (Schulze 1924), about Northumbrian (Berndt 1956), about Old High German (Held 1903, Eggenberger 1961). (Excluded are the Scandinavian languages, seeing that in them the development of the obligatorium had been carried out in prehistoric times.) The main findings are as follows:

- (1) In Gothic, the tendency has been registered towards more frequent use of pronominal subjects in dependent than in main clauses. A more thorough scrutiny of the Gothic state of affairs is impeded by the known circumstance that the syntax of the preserved Gothic texts is heavily influenced by Greek syntax.
- (2) In Northumbrian, two tendencies have been registered: one towards more frequent use of pronominal subjects in the non-third than in the third verbal persons, and the other towards more frequent use of pronominal subjects in the subjunctive than in the indicative.
- (3) In Old High German, pronominal subjects are almost obligatory in main clauses displaying normal (ie non-inverted) word order, and in dependent clauses. In main clauses displaying inverted word order, pronominal subjects are more frequent in the non-third than in the third verbal persons. — These data have been culled (by Eggenberger) from the Old High German prose texts Tatian and Isidor. The inquiry has excluded the imperative clauses and the first person plural of verbs, which require special interpretation, for reasons immaterial here.

I base the remainder of my present paper upon the facts provided by Old High German, which are crucial and the most accurate. They are not contradicted by the Gothic and the Northumbrian data, which, however, do not contribute much novel either. In the statistics on which the above items (1–3) rest, two types of pronominal subjects are included:

- (a) emphatic and unemphatic pronominal subjects such as used also in Latin, Greek, Italian, Spanish, Slovene. Regrettably, the emphatic and the unemphatic pronominal subjects have not been counted separately in the statistics. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that the unemphatic pronominal subjects outnumber the emphatic pronominal subjects by a large margin (seeing that the statistics indicates the prevalence of type (a) pronominal subjects in the non-third verbal persons and in the subjunctive, a circumstance that would remain enigmatic if the EMPHATIC pronominal subjects predominated, given that the use of the latter depends on the meaning or on automatic syntactic regulation and consequently should not show any bias in favour of some verbal person or some mood). The existence of type (a) pronominal subjects can account for the state

of affairs described above for Northumbrian, and for Old High German main clauses displaying inverted word order. Elsewhere in Old High German and in Gothic, pronominal subjects of type (a) cannot be detected, for they have been covered over by type (b), see the next paragraph.

- (b) emphatic and unaccented pronominal subjects such as used in the modern Germanic languages. Regrettably, the emphatic and the unaccented pronominal subjects have not been counted separately in the statistics. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that the unaccented pronominal subjects outnumber the emphatic pronominal subjects by a large margin (seeing that the statistics indicates the prevalence of type (b) pronominal subjects in certain clause types, a circumstance that would remain enigmatic if the EMPHATIC pronominal subjects predominated, given that the use of the latter depends on the meaning or on automatic syntactic regulation and consequently should not show any bias in favour of non-automatic syntactic regulation). The existence of type (b) pronominal subjects can account for the state of affairs described above for Old High German (main clauses displaying normal word order, and dependent clauses) and for Gothic.

For the sake of completeness, I now enumerate (from Kuen 1956) the references to the hypotheses of old-time scholars concerning the origin of the obliquarium of unaccented pronominal subjects in Germanic languages: Koegel 1882, Baesecke 1919, Wartburg 1943, Schwartz 1951, Kuen 1956. Those opinions (summarised in Orešnik 1986) are pure conjectures proposed at a time when the syntactic data about the pronominal subjects of the Germanic languages were much scarcer than now.

My own view about the origin of the unaccented pronominal subjects

Numerous Indo-European languages had inherited, from Proto-Indo-European, emphatic and clitical personal pronouns outside the nominative, and some of those languages still use both sets of forms, cf Slovene emphatic *mene* and clitical *me* 'me (acc. /gen.)'. On Indo-European clitical personal pronouns see Seebold 1984. Even the Germanic languages must have inherited oblique-case emphatic and clitical personal pronouns (for the latter see Hopper 1975, 33–36). However, what can be reconstructed for the old Germanic dialects on the basis of the state of affairs in the modern Germanic languages are oblique-case emphatic and unaccented (not clitical) personal pronouns, and it is in my opinion the unaccented oblique-case personal pronouns that form the starting-point for the development of the unaccented pronominal SUBJECTS of the Germanic languages: I suggest that the unaccented pronominal subjects of the Germanic languages have come into being through the generalisation of unaccented personal pronouns of the oblique cases into the nominative. The historical process involved may have been the four-part analogy (emphatic *mik* [acc. sg., 1. person] : : unaccented *mik* = emphatic *ik* [nom. sg., 1. person] : :

X; X = unaccented *ik*) or levelling (the latter extending the unaccentedness of the unaccented pronouns from the oblique cases into the nominative).

The necessary condition of such a development obtains in all languages that use emphatic and corresponding unaccented (or even clitical) personal pronouns in the oblique cases. It is, however, in the nature of analogy that it does not operate mechanically whenever conceivable. That THIS instance of analogy took place in a group of languages in CONTACT is probably no accident.

The analogical change just described has, of course, not at all resulted in the obligatorium (of unaccented pronominal subjects). How that obligatorium came about, I am not able to explain.

What our theory CAN clarify are the earliest stages in the development of the said obligatorium. I assume competition between two variants: the old variant consisted of type (a) unemphatic pronominal subject + finite verb, the new variant consisted of type (b) unaccented pronominal subject + finite verb. Both variants were optional. According to our theory, the old variant was strong, the new variant was weak. I assume the weakness of the new variant for the following reason. The new type (b) unaccented pronominal subject was more similar to a verbal ending (prefix) than the old type (a) unemphatic pronominal subject, seeing that the unaccented pronominal subject was precisely unaccented (and therefore presumably obeyed fairly rigorous word order rules). According to our theory, the unaccented pronominal subject + finite verb, being the weak variant, had to assert itself in some simple environment first. And indeed, the above-mentioned data show that the new weak variant manifested itself in dependent clauses to begin with (dependent clauses are structurally simpler than main clauses, Orešnik 1990), then in main clauses displaying normal word order. (Under SOV or SVO, such main clauses are doubtless structurally simpler than main clauses characterised by inverted word order.) At last, the construction, unaccented pronominal subject + finite verb, spread to the least simple environment, ie to the main clauses displaying inverted word order. As late as present-day German, the particularly weak pronominal subject *es*, an unaccented dummy element, has not yet fully established itself in inverted word order: *es ist heiß hier* 'it is hot here' turns into *hier ist heiß*, without *es*, under expected inversion.

Thus our theory can elucidate those stages in the early syntactic development of the said obligatorium that have not been explained before.

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Nenaglašeni pronominalni subjekti u germanskim jezicima

U rečenicama germanskih jezika već se dugo upotrebljavaju nenaglašeni pronominalni subjekti onda kada drukčiji subjekti nisu mogući. Oslanjajući se na podatke o gotskom, northumbrijskom staroengleskom i prije svega starovisokonjemačkom jeziku, autor predlaže objašnjenje te pojave u okviru sintaktičke teorije o jakim i slabim sintaktičkim dubletama. (Teorija je ukratko predstavljena na početku članka.)

U starim germanskim jezicima prehistorijskog i djelomično historijskog doba upotrebljavali su se emfatični pronominalni subjekti, sporadično također i neemfatični, ali naglašeni. Neemfatični naglašeni pronominalni subjekti bili su najčešći u netrećim glagolskim licima, što autor obrazlaže pretpostavkom da se jake dublete (*ego dico* [ego neemfatičan] bio je jaka dubleta u usporedbi s golim *dico*) prije svega šire u manje "prirodnu" okolinu, ovdje u netreća lica.

Kasnije su neemfatični pronominalni subjekti germanskih jezika izgubili naglašenost, i to pod utjecajem zavisnih padeža (ličnih zamjenica), koji su već u indoevropsko doba pored emfatičnih oblika imali i klitičke. Stari neemfatični, ali naglašeni pronominalni subjekti ponašali su se kao jake dublete, a novi nenaglašeni pronominalni subjekti kao slabe dublete. Potonji su se zbog toga najprije širili u jednostavne sintaktičke konstrukcije, tek kasnije u manje jednostavne: prvo zavisne rečenice, zatim glavne rečenice s normalnim redom riječi i na kraju glavne rečenice s inverzijom.