

Non-canonical postverbal subjects

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Workshop description

The study of the grammatical relation *subject* has a long history in linguistics, dating back to ancient Greek. Over time different definitions of subject have been provided, depending on properties of the languages under examination or on the theoretical perspective adopted. There is consensus that subject is a central grammatical function in a great deal of the world's languages, where a cluster of morpho-syntactic properties (case morphology, in nominative–accusative languages, and control of person and number agreement on the verb) correlates with semantic and pragmatic properties (the semantic roles *agent* or *experiencer*, the discourse function *topic*, etc.). The question of whether subject is a linguistic universal is, however, still open (LaPolla 1993, Dryer 1997, Van Valin & LaPolla 1997, Van Valin 2005, Bickel 2011). Even though many of the properties that are traditionally associated with the subject function recur cross-linguistically, it is by no means the case that the subject exhibits exactly the same set of features across all languages (see Keenan 1976, Falk 2006). The term *subject*, moreover, takes a different meaning depending on whether one deals with nominative–accusative or ergative–absolutive alignment. In fact, it can be argued that the comparative analysis of these types of alignment, and cross-constructional analysis within individual languages, challenge the validity or usefulness of this construct (Comrie 1973, Anderson 1976, Sasse 1978, Van Valin 1981, Van Valin & LaPolla 1997, Farrell 2005).

In the last two decades, a great deal of progress in the understanding of the notion subject has been made by investigating non-canonical subjects, namely, predicate arguments of a given language that share some – but not all – patterns of grammatical coding and behaviour with the subject of that language (see Bossong 1998, Aikhenvald et al. 2001, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2003, 2009, Bhaskararao & Subbarao 2004, Barðdal 2006, Cennamo 2011, Seržant & Kulikov 2013, Fabrizio in press, Cennamo & Fabrizio in press). The narrowing down of the investigation to non-canonical subjects has led to the development of a number of useful criteria and tests for subjecthood.

Following this line of investigation, in this workshop we aim to bring together linguists working on a specific subclass of non-canonical subjects, namely postverbal ones. The goals of the workshop embrace the investigation of semantic, pragmatic and morpho-syntactic properties of postverbal subjects, as well as the specific constructions and syntactic environments that license them. The properties of non-canonical postverbal subjects in word order typologies other than SVO are also within the scope of the workshop. Ultimately, we aim to contribute to the understanding of the notion *subject*, its cross-linguistic extent and its limitations.

The following questions will be addressed in the workshop:

- WHICH MORPHOSYNTACTIC PROPERTIES CHARACTERIZE CLAUSES WITH NON-CANONICAL POSTVERBAL SUBJECTS?

A correlation holds between VS order and lack of verb-subject agreement (Moravcsik 1978, Lehmann 1982, Fassi Fehri 1993, Ouhalla 1994, Samek-Lodovici 2002, Corbett 2006, a.o.). The lack of V-S agreement is sensitive to a number of variables, including the presence of an expletive form in a preverbal subject position, the definiteness of the postverbal DP, the semantics of the predicate and its entailments on the postverbal argument. A typologically-adequate predictive theory of the relative significance of the relevant variables is still a desideratum. The relationship of the postverbal DP with a non-nominative constituent in a preverbal subject position, as well as the mechanisms that guarantee case marking, are also debated (Chomsky 1981, 1986, Rizzi 1982, Burzio 1986, Bresnan & Mchombo 1987, Belletti 1988, Grewendorf 1989, Vikner 1995, Tortora 1997, 2014, Cardinaletti 2004, Lahousse 2006, Sheehan 2010).

- ARE THERE ANY GENERAL OR WIDESPREAD SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC CONSTRAINTS ON POSTVERBAL SUBJECTS?

From an information-structure viewpoint, preverbal subjects correlate with the discourse role of topic, whereas postverbal subjects are typically foci (Lambrecht 1994, Belletti 2004). Postverbal subjects may abide by definiteness constraints (Belletti 1998, Pinto 1997), which have both information-structure and semantic correlates (Bentley 2013). The semantics of the predicate, in particular the type of eventuality or the *Aktionsart* that it expresses, also plays a crucial role, as is evidenced by the investigation of unaccusativity (Perlmutter 1978, Burzio 1986, Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995, Parry 2007, Bentley 2016) and, more generally, of aivalent and low-agentivity predicates.

- DOES THE POSTVERBAL DP OF CONSTRUCTIONS THAT DISALLOW PREVERBAL SUBJECTS EXHIBIT THE SAME PROPERTIES AS NON-CANONICAL POSTVERBAL SUBJECTS?

Subject inversion is typical of sentence types that require a specific word order (e.g. interrogative sentences; see Torrego 1984). Preverbal subjects are also disallowed in specific constructions such as *there*-existentials (see Bentley, Ciconte, Cruschina 2015), or locative and negative inversion (Bresnan & McChombo 1987, Coopmans 1989, Haegeman 2000, Marten & van der Wal 2014). The question of whether the postverbal DP of these constructions shares the same properties as postverbal subjects elsewhere is worth investigating.

- DOES THE ACQUISITION OF NON-CANONICAL POSTVERBAL SUBJECTS DIFFER FROM THAT OF PREVERBAL SUBJECTS?

Several studies have suggested that certain behavioural subject properties are acquired earlier than coding subject properties (Cole et al. 1980). More recently, the comparison between languages with rigid and flexible word order has led to the design of experiments targeting the production and interpretation of postverbal subjects in acquisition (see Belletti, Bennati & Sorace 2007, Belletti & Guasti 2015). Further work on the principles that govern the acquisition of non-canonical postverbal subjects is desirable.

- IS THE NON-CANONICALITY OF POSTVERBAL SUBJECTS LIMITED TO LANGUAGES WITH PREDOMINANT SVO ORDER?

A broader issue is whether the semantic and pragmatic properties, as well as the coding and behaviour, mentioned above are at all shared by postverbal subjects in languages

with word-order typologies other than SVO, as well as by the postverbal argument in intransitive constructions of languages which offer little or no evidence for the subject.

We accept submissions that contribute to the description, discussion, and analysis of these and other issues concerning non-canonical postverbal subjects, both from an Indo-European and a non-Indo-European perspective. We welcome contributions from all frameworks and approaches, including synchronic, diachronic, data-driven, corpora, discourse, typological, and theoretical analyses.

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