

## SYNTACTIC REPRESENTATION OF THE SUBJECT IN OLD ENGLISH

### Abstract

The article presents the inventory of subject representations in the Old English period. The subject is defined as a functional category viewed from three main dimensions: syntactic, semantic, and cognitive. Syntactically, the subject is a privileged sentence constituent, functioning as the external verb argument and prototypically expressed by a noun phrase. Semantically, the subject is associated with a certain participant role, determined by the grammatical and semantic properties of the verb that assigns it. Cognitively, the subject acquires the status of the clause topic, marking who or what the message is about. The author provides examples of the following syntactic representations of the subject in Old English: prototypical structures with nominative noun phrases, complex structures with appositive constituents, substantivised adjective phrases, dative / accusative experiencers, impersonal subjectless patterns, and prototypes of expletive subjects with *hit* and *þær*. The subject normally controls verb agreement in  $\phi$ -features (person and number) with the predicate verb, but the rule for subject-verb agreement may sometimes be violated in the Old English period, resulting in ambiguous or multiple structure interpretations, such as asyndetic coordinate subjects versus an appositive construction. Lack of a mandatory explicit sentence-initial subject in Old English complies with the V2 constraint in Old English by means of placing locative adverbs or a non-referential pronoun in the initial position. As a result of further reinterpretation, such initial constituents begin to function as formal expletive subjects. The uncertainty of the syntactic semantics of complex sentences, caused by the variability of the interpretation of the pronoun *se* as either a topicalised demonstrative or a relative pronoun, complicates the identification of subjects in Old English sentences. The lexical meaning of the verb is essential for the analysis of its argument structure, as it may appear in both personal and impersonal structures.

**Keywords:** subject, canonical / non-canonical subject representation, expletive, topic, personal / impersonal construction.

### Анотація

У статті представлено огляд репрезентацій суб'єкта в давньоанглійській мові. Суб'єкт визначено як функціональну категорію, що розглядається з трьох основних вимірах: синтаксичного, семантичного та когнітивного. У синтаксичному вимірі суб'єкт є привілейованим складником речення, що виконує функцію зовнішнього аргументу дієслова та зазвичай виражається іменною фразою. У семантичному вимірі суб'єкт пов'язаний із певною роллю учасника, яка визначається граматичними та семантичними властивостями дієслова, що його призначає. У когнітивному плані суб'єкт набуває статусу топика в реченні, позначаючи, про кого або про що йдеться в повідомленні. Автор наводить приклади таких синтаксичних репрезентацій суб'єкта в давньоанглійській мові: прототипові структури з іменними фразами в називному відмінку, складні структури з апозитивними складниками, субстантивовані прикметникові фрази, суб'єкти в давальному / знахідному відмінку, безособові конструкції без суб'єкта та прототипи структур з експлетивами *hit* і *þær*. Зазвичай підмет керує узгодженням з присудком за  $\phi$ -ознаками (особа та число), проте в давньоанглійській період дотримання вимоги узгодження суб'єкта з дієсловом іноді порушувалося, що призводило до неоднозначних або множинних інтерпретацій структури, таких як асиндетично зв'язані однорідні суб'єкти або апозитивні конструкції. Відсутність обов'язкового експліцитного суб'єкта на початку речення в давньоанглійській мові компенсується через обмеження V2 за допомогою розміщення локативних прислівників або неререферентних займенників в ініціалній позиції. У результаті подальшої переінтерпретації такі складники починають функціонувати як формальні експлетивні суб'єкти. Невизначеність синтаксичної семантики складних речень, спричинена варіативністю тлумачення займенника *se* як топікалізованого вказівного або відносного займенника, ускладнює ідентифікацію суб'єктів у реченнях давньоанглійської мови. Лексичне значення дієслова є суттєвим для аналізу його аргументативної структури, оскільки воно може з'являтися як в особових, так і в безособових конструкціях.

**Ключові слова:** суб'єкт, канонічна / неканонічна реалізація суб'єкта, експлетив, топік, особова / безособова конструкція.

**Introduction.** The study of Old English material is traditionally marked by a number of acknowledged challenges, largely due to the nature of the linguistic evidence it can provide to scholars. Unlike Modern English, Old English cannot be explored directly, nor can researchers check their hypotheses relying on native speakers to clarify meanings, pronunciation, or grammatical patterns. Naturally, scientists have access to a limited and fixed corpus of surviving manuscripts, many of which are translations significantly affected by the source language, e.g. Latin. Thus, diachronic studies have to rely on exclusively written evidence, lacking the insight into the spoken forms of Old English. Consequently, exploring Old English is inevitably characterized by a certain degree of distortion and variability of scientific findings, interpretations, and conclusions. Unreliable punctuation, sometimes modified by editors for better clarity, may hide genuine features, ambiguities, and complexities of Old English syntax and mislead the investigator (Hogg, 1992). Hence, diving into a diachronic study, we should accept possible distortions or variability of linguistic evidence and sometimes allow multiple interpretations of the outcomes. This article is a glimpse of typically registered sentence patterns in Old English. It aims to focus on the core sentence constituents and provide the inventory of subject representations.

**Literature review.** Grammatically, the subject is defined as a functional category, or a syntactic function, viewed across at least three main dimensions: syntactic, semantic, and cognitive (Downing & Locke, 2006). It is represented by a spectrum of language material ranging from prototypical to marginal syntactic units of simple or complex structure. From the syntactic perspective, the subject is regarded as a privileged function, i.e. an external argument that is licensed by and compatible with any type of the predicate verb but positioned outside the verb phrase (VP). The subject possesses a set of formal and structural properties realised and identified by several key grammatical behaviours. While predominantly a nominal group (NP), the subject may be expressed by other types of syntactic categories, namely, dummy subjects, embedded (finite, non-finite) clauses, adjectival or prepositional phrases, adverbial groups, and the extraposed subject with anticipatory *it*. It is marked by syntactic necessity, being generally obligatory in canonical clauses or completed by semantically empty “dummy” *it* or *there* (Biber et al., 1999; Farrel, 2005; Downing & Locke, 2006). Canonically, the subject is marked by the common case for nouns and the nominative case for pronouns; however, non-finite clauses allow oblique case marking of subjects: genitive noun phrases and accusative pronouns (Biber et al., 1999).

**Methodology.** One of the subject properties is the agreement (concord), i.e. the ability to determine the form of the predicate verb (marking its number and person), the subject complements, and reflexive pronouns (Biber et al., 1999; Leech & Svartvik, 2002; Downing & Locke, 2006; Huddleston & Pullum, 2007). In the Minimalist program of the generative grammar, Agree is one of the key combinatory operations in the transformational system (Merge, Agree, Move) that is carried out in several distinct steps and involves probes and goals as its participants. Probes are typically functional heads entering the derivation with uninterpretable features that are unvalued and non-semantic, so they must be valued and deleted to allow derivation completion. Within their c-command domain, probes seek a goal that possesses interpretable, already valued features to match. After checking and eliminating the uninterpretable features, the agreement is successfully completed. In case of subject-verb agreement, the functional categories operate both as probe and goal simultaneously. A functional verbal head T with uninterpreted  $\phi$ -features (case, number) seeks a nominal NP goal with matching interpretable feature. At the same time, a suitable

NP involved in this syntactic relation contains an uninterpreted Case feature, which is also valued through Agree since the case is assigned by the verb. In this way, the relation between the probe and the goal is bidirectional and Agree simultaneously values features on both elements. The probe-goal agreement can occur over a distance and does not necessarily trigger the movement, for example in Modern English existential constructions with *there*, where the verb agrees with the post-verbal NP. However, if the probe verb possesses the uninterpreted EPP (Extended Projection Principle) feature, it triggers the Move operation of the goal NP to a specifier position [Spec, TP] to satisfy the EPP requirement and results in prototypical subject-verb structures of modern English (Полховська 2016; 2018; Fong, 2004).

The semantic dimension of the Subject refers to the meaning-based role (or “participant role”) that the subject plays in the situation described by the clause. The subject is not simply equated with “the performer of the action” but aligned with a vast range of semantic roles depending on the verb and the voice of the clause. Hence, the subject function is semantically flexible and can represent almost any participant role. The prototypical subject – the Agent (or Actor) – is defined as the “willful initiator” or “the most active participant” who carries out the action. It is found in a basic active-voice clause (Farrel, 2005; Huddleston & Pullum, 2007). With a certain degree of variability in labelling across theoretical frameworks, other common semantic roles include *external causer* denoting an inanimate entity that causes an event (1), *instrument* naming the means used by the agent to perform an action (2), *recipient* or *experiencer* representing an animate being non-volitionally involved in an action or state expressed by the verbs of perception, cognition, and emotion (3), *affected or patient / theme* found in constructions with passive or intransitive verbs and frequently associated with the role of the direct object (4), *local* and *temporal* subject generally associated with the role of adverbials (5a, b), and *eventive* subjects typically expressed by the deverbal nouns (5c). There is no one-to-one correlation between the syntactic subject and the semantic role. The subject is associated with a set of roles and determined by the voice features of the clauses. Moreover, subjects that do not refer to any participant, namely *it* and *there* exist solely to satisfy the syntactic requirement (EPP) that an English clause must have an explicit subject (Biber et al., 1999; Leech & Svartvik, 2002).

(1) **Strong winds** made the crossing very choppy. (CaDO)

(2) What should **our marketing strategy** have achieved? (CoDO)

(3) **She** heard a noise outside. (CaDO)

(4) a. **The dish** fell to the floor and broke. (CaDO)

b. **The number of cars** which are stolen every year has risen. (CaDO)

(5) a. **February** is the shortest month. (CaDO)

b. **The hotel** is an ideal venue for conferences and business meetings. (CaDO)

c. **The arrival of satellite television** changed the face of broadcasting. (CaDO)

The cognitive dimension of the subject refers primarily to its status as the Topic of the clause, i.e. who or what the clausal message is about. Subjects encode various kinds of information (persons, things, facts, situations) and serve as the starting point or perspective from which the speaker presents the message. Still, lack of one-to-one correspondence is displayed in case the cognitive Topic is expressed by other elements, e.g. adverbials, or the subject cannot function as a true cognitive topic, e.g. dummy *it* and subjects like *something* or *nobody* (Downing & Locke, 2006; Huddleston & Pullum, 2007).

**Results and discussion.** Hereby, we outline the range of syntactic representations of the subject in Old English texts. Sentence (6) is the example of the prototypical English subject that turns out to be the most durable syntactic pattern throughout the course of

language development. The subject *Beowulf* is the overt NP used in the nominative case; it controls the verb agreement with the predicate verb *maþelode*, precedes the verb, i.e. it is placed in sentence-initial position; semantically represents the Agent; and possesses the discourse-pragmatic property of topicality. In addition, the subject is frequently extended by the appositive constituent, e.g. *bearn Ecgþeowes*. Appositives may be separated from the head noun and make up a split appositive construction, especially in Old English poetic texts, or immediately follow the head noun creating a complex NP to express the subject.

(6) *Beowulf maþelode, bearn Ecgþeowes* – [*Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow*] (Beo, 631)

Sentence (7) is another example of a split appositive construction performing the subject function. In this case, however, the first constituent *se goda* is expressed by the adjective used substantively to refer to a specific person. To compare, Modern English substantivised adjectives are used generically to refer to the whole group, e.g. *the rich*.

(7) *Gespræc þa se goda gylpworda sum, Beowulf Geata* – [*Spoke then his vaunt the valiant man, Beowulf Geat*] (Beo, 675–676)

Subject-verb agreement in  $\phi$ -features (person and number) is a characteristic feature of the Old English period. However, this regulation may be overridden, making the agreement pattern somewhat obscure. Although sentence (8) exemplifies two conjoined NPs that are expected to combine with a plural predicate, the verb *wearð* is used in the singular form. Thus, the subject NPs *Se frumsceapena man* and *eall his ofspring* are comprehended as a whole unit (Hogg, 1992).

(8) *Se frumsceapena man and eall his ofspring wearð adraefed* – [*The first-created man and all his offspring were driven out*] (ÆCHom I, 118.23)

Such grammatical discrepancies lead to an ambiguous understanding of subject-verb patterns. In particular, the reference on noun phrases in a certain context may be very similar in meaning, if not identical, and result in at least two structural interpretations: asyndetic coordinate subjects or an appositive construction, compare *hearpan sweg* and *swutol sang scopes* in sentence (11) below.

In example (9), the second clause *druncon win weras* with VOS order includes the overt nominative subject *weras*<sub>N,pl</sub> agreeing with the predicate verb *druncon*<sub>V3,pl</sub>, while the following clause *Wyrð ne cuþon, geosceaft grimme* is subjectless. The subject ellipsis, or deletion, takes place due to the coreferentiality of the implied experiencer-subject of *ne cuþon* to the subject of the immediately preceding clause *weras*. Hence, the former is considered to be context-redundant and is not repeated. The verbs *druncon* and *cuþon* are both clearly marked by the inflections as the third-person plural, which amplifies the contextual clarity even without the explicit subject noun / pronoun.

(9) *þær wæs symbla cyst; druncon win weras. Wyrð ne cuþon, geosceaft grimme ...* – [*That was proudest of feasts; flowed wine for the warriors. Wyrð they knew not, destiny dire ...*]. (Beo, 1232–1234)

Example (10) demonstrates the ability of the verb *lician* (*to like*) to allow different semantic perspectives and, thus, varied syntactic patterns. Sentence (10a) is an OSV clause with a fronted dative NP *ðam wife* denoting an Emoter and a nominative NP *þa word* denoting a Stimulus. The emotion of pleasure (liking) is conceptualised as directed from the Stimulus to the Emoter, and the predicate verb *licodon*<sub>V3rd.past.pl</sub> represents the causative meaning. Sentence (10b) also includes an oblique Emoter *me*<sub>acc/dat.sg?</sub>, but the verb *licode*<sub>3rd.past.sg</sub> is followed by a clausal complement representing a background Stimulus. In this case, the emotion of pleasure is conceptualised as received by the Emoter, and the verb possesses the receptive meaning (Möhlig-Falke, 2012). In terms of subject realisation, example (10) proves that Old English verbs could appear both in personal (10a) and impersonal

(10b) structures. Impersonal patterns do not have a nominative NP / pronoun that shows agreement with the predicate verb, i.e. they lack a prototypical subject. Further diachronic development results in the demise of the independent impersonal use of English verbs. It is generally explained by the following reasons: 1) loss of verbs capable of impersonal use; 2) the use of expletives, like (*h*)*it*; 3) reinterpretation of the preposed dative / accusative argument denoting a person as the prototypical subject in the nominative case due to the overall transition of English from OV to VO type and the consequent syntactic requirement for the subject to occupy the position before the predicate verb it shows agreement with (Allen, 1995; Möhlig-Falke, 2012).

(10) a. ***ðam wīfe þa word wel licodon, gilpcwide Geates*** – [Well did those words please the woman, the boastful speech of the Gaut] (Beo, 639–640)

b. ***Wel me<sup>acc/dat.sg</sup> licode<sup>V,3rd.sg</sup> ðæt þu ær sædes*** – [Well I was pleased by what you earlier said] (Bo 1258 (35.98.23), Möhlig-Falke, 2012, p.126)

The clause in (11) begins with a locative adverb *þær* and may be viewed as the forerunner of modern existential sentences with the expletive *there*. Since there was no requirement for mandatory explicit sentence-initial subject in Old English, *þær* was used in [Spec, CP] position at the beginning of a clause to fulfil the V2 requirement and not to allow the verb to occupy the initial slot. Later on, in Middle English, *there* will be used in [Spec, TP] and satisfy the EPP feature. As a result of reinterpretation (reanalysis), the former locative adverb will begin to function as a formal expletive subject, while the logical subject NP, the communicative core, will remain in postverbal position and agree with the verb (Полховська, 2016; 2018).

(11) ***þær wæs hearpan sweg, swutol sang scopes*** – [There harps rang out, clear song of the singer] (Beo, 89–90)

As for impersonal constructions, it is debatable whether they truly existed in Old English or rather, there were morphosyntactic patterns with third-person singular predicate verbs with a single argument in the oblique case and missing grammatical subjects, e.g. *Me<sup>acc.sg</sup> hyngrede<sup>V,past.3rd.sg</sup>* – [I was hungry] or no nominal argument at all, e.g. *norþan (Ø) sniwde<sup>V,past.3rd.sg</sup>* – [It snowed from the north] (Möhlig-Falke, 2012). Example (12) includes the construction with a formal *hit*-subject (*hit*-expletive), which functions as the only expressed argument for the verb *winterlæcan* denoting a spontaneous nature event.

(12) ... ***swa hit swiþor winterlæcð*** – [... the nearer it grows to winter] (BT)

Another use for the formal *hit* is registered in extraposition constructions, as in (13). The notional clausal subject is repositioned (postponed) to the end of the clause, and the formal anticipatory subject *hit* fills the position instead of the extraposed unit. *Hit*-extraposition patterns comply with the evolving subject requirement and gradually replace various impersonal structures of earlier periods.

(13) ***Forðæm hit gebyreð<sup>V,3rd.sg</sup> oft þæt God nylle<sup>V,3rd.sg</sup>*** – [Because it happens often that God does not wish] (Bo 1714 (39.133.3), Möhlig-Falke, 2012, p.167)

The lexical meaning of the verb is a core factor taken into account for the analysis of its argument structure, that is the range of syntactic patterns it can appear in. Traditionally, the very meaning is allocated to a lexical field which itself may be part of another superordinated field, e.g. the lexical field of pleasure is found within the lexical field of emotions. Verbs that were registered in Old English impersonal structures are mostly polysemous, and the range of lexical fields their multiple meanings belong to is quite heterogeneous. The ability of these verbs to enter specific syntactic frames is determined by the lexical meaning they realise in a certain context. It means that the grammatical properties of a verb are not just the result of its general form but they are associated with a definite semantic role it assigns to the argument. For example, the verb *langian* has the following meanings: “to long for,

yearn for” (emotion), “to grow long” (change-of-state), “to become weary” (emotion), “to call for, summon” (utterance), or “to belong to, pertain to” (possession), but it only occurs in impersonal constructions when it expresses the emotion of yearning or longing (Möhlig-Falke, 2012).

Such variability of syntactic behaviour of a single lexicon unit proves the idea that the subject is a functional category dependent on the semantics of the verb that assigns it. Each meaning of the verb may launch a different case-assigning mechanism, which results in several options for the subject type (nominative, dative / accusative experiencer, null, or expletive), compare (14) and (15). In sentence (14), *langian* means “to long for”, assigns the accusative experiencer *hine*, and creates the impersonal construction, while in (15) it realizes the meaning “to grow long”, assigns the nominative case to the NP *se dæg*, and represents the prototypical subject construction.

(14) *Da ongan hine eft langian on his cyððe* – [Then he began to long again for his native land] (BT, Blickl. Homl. 113, 15)

(15) *Donne se dæg langap...* – [So the day lengthens...] (BT, Lchdm. iii. 250, 9.)

More complex syntactic units, such as sentences with subordinate relative clauses descend from independent, complete sentences containing the originally demonstrative pronouns *se*, *seo*, *þæt*, which were reinterpreted as dependent clauses. The demonstrative pronouns gradually lose their morphological connection with the main clause and acquire the status of a relative marker. However, not all sentences with *se* underwent reinterpretation into relative clauses during the Old English period, so their syntactic status remains somewhat obscure in Old English. (Буніятова, 2004). This leads to variability in the interpretation of syntactic structures as paratactic or hypotactic, in which the pronouns *se*, *seo*, *þæt* can be identified in two ways: as topicalised demonstratives or as relative pronouns, as in sentence (16). Consequently, the identification of the key sentence constituent – the subject – becomes complicated and ambiguous.

Sentence (17) exemplifies verb-initial (*Heold* <sub>V<sup>past</sup></sub>) word order and three possible ways of identifying the subject. If *se* is interpreted as a topicalised demonstrative, the subject is expressed by the pronoun, lands in VS position and is extended by a relative clause with the relative marker expressed by the indeclinable particle *þe*. If the combination of the deictic anaphoric pronoun *se* and the complementiser *þe* is analysed as a two-component relative marker, then the whole structure in (17) may be represented either as a sentence with the sentential (relative clause) subject or as a complex sentence with the subjectless main clause *Heold hine fæste* and a subordinate relative clause.

(16) *Her Æpelbryht Cantwara cyning forþferde se was Wihtreres cinges* – [Then Ethelbert, King of Kent, died; he/who was the son of King Wihtrred] (The Parker Chronicle, an. 760).

(17) *Heold hine fæste se þe manna wæs mægene strengest on þæm dæge þysses lifes.* – [Too closely held him he who of men in might was strongest in that same day of this our life.] (Beo 788–790)

This uncertainty of the syntactic semantics is exacerbated by lack of data on intonation patterns and the unreliable punctuation in Old Germanic texts. Thus, Old English structures with relative clauses lack a clearly defined structure and a fixed order of constituents. This complicates the analysis of the syntactic characteristics of the other units they modify, including subject representations. The further development of relativisation strategies leads to a gradual change of relative markers, enabling a more transparent interpretation of the syntactic status of sentence constituents.

**Concluding remarks.** The collected patterns of subject representations serve the starting point for studying the subjecthood in the diachronic perspective. Surely, the list

provided here is not ultimately conclusive, but it gives the overall idea of the controversy and versatility of grammatical subject and determines the necessity of a multi-factor approach to its study. The combination of structural analysis with semantic and pragmatic interpretation will help create a comprehensive view of subject nature and the subjecthood as the syntactic property. It still remains unclear whether language reorganisation from SOV to SVO type, gradual decline of case marking, and fixing word order directly trigger the shifts in subject assignment, cause the appearance of formal expletive subjects *it* and *there*, and the loss of impersonal structures in Modern English. It would be also relevant to trace the relation between the lexical field the verbs belong to and their capability of impersonal use in Old English.

In Old and Modern Germanic languages, subjects show similarities and differences in their generating, positioning, strategies of assigning case and semantic role, the ability to be expressed by grammatically acceptable oblique, expletive, or null structures. In the course of development, languages opt for diverse directions for preserving, losing, or reinterpreting the subject properties, which results in a unique set of subject representations for each language. The study of subjects from a diachronic perspective provides opportunities for a comprehensive comparative analysis of subjecthood in Germanic languages.

### **Conflict of Interest**

No conflicts of interest were declared.

### **Use of Artificial Intelligence**

Artificial intelligence was not used

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Дата надходження до редакції 11.03.2026

Ухвалено до друку 20.04.2026

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