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THE INCONSISTENCY OF SENTENTIAL SUBJECTS ANALYSIS IN ENGLISH

Abstract

The article presents a critical analysis of approaches to defining sentential subjects as non-canonical syntactic units consisting of a finite or a non-finite clause. The major issue discussed is the position of the sentential subject in the tree structure debating whether it lands in subject position as a result of movement or it is base-generated in the subject position. Additionally, a claim is made that sentential subjects are not true subjects, but rather topics, suggesting that a different constituent occupies the canonical subject position. Therefore, sentential subjects appear to behave akin to both topics and regular subjects. They cannot generally occur in subject positions in embedded clauses, subject-auxiliary inversions and after topicalised units, yet they trigger subject-verb agreement. When considering these two alternatives, the author finds it important to distinguish between the pragmatic function and the syntactic position. Though subjects have been studied in various linguistic schools, a common consistent opinion on the sentential subject status has not been reached. The discrepancies in existing views are revealed in similar examples analyzed as grammatical or ungrammatical within different scientific frameworks. Distributional and transformational tests, along with the study of the information structure of the utterance aimed at proving the acceptability / unacceptability of sentential subjects show mixed results and sometimes contradictory analyses. The research suggests that ungrammatical sentential units are normally neutralised by alternative structures that function as syntactic blockers. To address the complexity in exploring sentential subject, the author advocates for a multifactor approach, which takes into account structural, distributional, weight ratio, semantic, pragmatic and psycholinguistic characteristics of subjects in a variety of configurations to ensure understanding the degree of subjecthood of syntactic structures and their systemic arrangement from the core to the periphery. In conclusion, the article emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to studying sentential subjects, acknowledging their multifaceted nature and aiming for a systemic understanding of subjecthood within linguistic frameworks.

Keywords: sentential subject, canonical / non-canonical subject position, topic, syntactic blocker.

Анотація

У статті представлено критичний аналіз підходів до визначення реченнєвих суб'єктів як неканонічних синтаксичних одиниць, утворених фінітною або нефінітною клаузою. Головним питанням є визначення позиції реченнєвого суб'єкта в дериваційній структурі-дереві: чи займає він відповідну синтаксичну позицію в результаті переміщення, чи від початку генерується в ній. Доведено, що реченнєві суб'єкти не є власне синтаксичними суб'єктами в реченні, а радше топіками. Водночас канонічну позицію суб'єкта займає якийсь інший складник. Таким чином, реченнєві суб'єкти мають властивості як топіків, так і канонічних суб'єктів. Вони не здатні займати канонічну позицію суб'єкта в підпорядкованих клаузах, питальних реченнях з інверсією та після інших топікалізованих одиниць, але зумовлюють узгодження із фінітним дієсловом. З огляду на це важливо розрізняти прагматичну функцію та синтаксичну позицію реченнєвого суб'єкта. Хоча суб'єкти досліджувалися в різних лінгвістичних школах, наразі немає спільної думки щодо статусу реченнєвого суб'єкта. Розбіжності в наявних поглядах виявляються на аналогійних прикладах, що проаналізовано як граматично допустимі або недопустимі в різних наукових парадигмах. Дистрибутивні й трансформаційні тести, дослідження інформаційної структури висловлювання, спрямовані на підтвердження прийнятності / неприйнятності реченнєвих суб'єктів, демонструють невизначені результати та суперечливі висновки. Установлено, що граматично неправильні речення здебільшого нейтралізуються альтернативними структурами, які виконують функцію синтаксичних блокаторів. Для нівелювання труднощів в аналізі реченнєвих суб'єктів

запропоновано розробити багатофакторний підхід, який враховує структурні, дистрибутивні, кількісні, семантичні, прагматичні та психолінгвістичні характеристики суб'єктів у різних конфігураціях для визначення ступеня суб'єктності синтаксичних структур та їхнього системного розміщення від ядра до периферії. У висновках наголошено на необхідності комплексного підходу до вивчення реченнєвих суб'єктів, визнання їхньої багатогранної сутності з метою системного аналізу суб'єктності в межах лінгвістичних концепцій.

Ключові слова: реченнєвий суб'єкт, канонічна / неканонічна позиція суб'єкта, топік, синтаксичний блокатор.

Introduction. The analysis of a certain grammatical unit , whether considered the subject of the sentence or any other structural constituent, depends on how the subject is defined and what its grammatical features are. The notion of the subject encompasses a number of factors and is characterised within at least three major properties domains: syntactic, morphological and semantic (Keenan, 1976). Syntactically, the prototypical subjects in the English language normally take the initial position in a sentence, control agreement with the predicate verb and deletion of coordinate subject, cause reflexivisation. Morphologically, subjects are assigned the nominative case, which can only be seen within the paradigm of personal pronouns, while nouns are represented by the unmarked common case form. Moreover, modern English prototypical subjects share the semantic property of agency, signifying that if there is an Agent-participant, it is selected as the subject of active clauses.

Not all properties, however, are equally fixed in every language, which means that some of them are peculiar for the particular language and, therefore, not universally valid. The question arises whether it is possible to provide a universal definition of the subject overall or it should be done in a way that allows employing language specific means to represent the subject.

Literature review. In case of English, a generalised definition of subject seems impossible with reference to different periods of the language development. Hence, it appears more viable to formulate a comprehensive list of subject features, properties and criteria that help identify it in a sentence as its core constituent and then apply those to the studied structures. There are structures that fully represent the set of subject features, while others may partially correspond to the subject identification criteria. In this way, prototypical, that is, canonical subjects are distinguished from non-canonical ones. Presumably, there are three sets of subject features: universal (applicable to every language), language-specific, and, as of English, period-specific. The fuller the complement of subject features is and the more properties are realised, and the more subject-like the constituent is. The degree of subjecthood varies depending on the language, the period of its development, or the degree of semantic ambiguity and informativity of the sentence. It is rather problematic to compile both necessary and sufficient subject characteristics, as the feature and property combinations appear to be variable.

Various linguistic schools study grammatical relations within clauses and sentences and view subjecthood from diverse perspectives. The outcomes of scientific explorations are still far from arriving at a unanimous verdict on the definition and key properties of the subject; still, there is agreement on the issue that subject is a complex notion, a multifaceted entity. Role and Reference Grammar, for instance, analyses the clause as a layered structure with predicating and non-predicating elements; it distinguishes between argument NPs and non-argument NPs. Here, the subject is understood as a core argument within the core structure (Van Valin & LaPolla, 1997; Bakker & Siewierska, 2007). Multiple versions of Generative Grammar apply a set of rules and labels, formulating subject hypotheses and grammatical restrictions on distribution in search of the landing node for subject in the clause structure tree (McCloskey, 1997; Downing & Locke, 2006). Cognitive paradigm aims at presenting

the conceptual structure of the subject and defines it as the "primary focal participant", "the trajector of a profiled relationship", and a clausal element "instantiating" a semantic role (Taverniers, 2005; Langacker, 2008).

Synchronic and diachronic studies refer to the dichotomy of canonical and non-canonical subjects in English and other Germanic languages. There is a debate on two opposing opinions concerning the syntactic status of oblique subjects, namely, whether they existed at early stages of language development or they were syntactic objects that were gradually reanalysed as subjects (Faarlund, 2001; Barđdal J. & Eythórsson, 2003; Eythórsson & Barđdal, 2005). Another type of non-canonical subjects, which is studied cross-linguistically, is the sentential unit that remains unexpressed, i.e., a null subject. In Germanic languages, null subjects are mostly registered in old periods and show different results of diachronic development from preservation to complete extinction (Rosenkvist, 2009; D'Alessandro, 2015; Kinn et al., 2016; Cognola & Casalicchio, 2018).

Methodology. As for the structural domain, the analysis of a basic clause distinguishes between two core constituents, subject and predicate, which in canonical clauses are normally represented by NP and VP respectively. However, it is grammatically possible to express essentially the same meaning by means of syntactically different constructions. Hence, besides the typical syntactic structures comprised of canonical constituents in the basic order, there are non-canonical clause patterns that demonstrate a variety of structural interpretations (Huddleston & Pullum, 2007). A number of predicates in English may select an embedded S-structure, mainly a *that*-clause, as their subject (or object). The *that*-clause in this case is presupposed to be true, for example, sentence (1) implies that the team won the competition, with *surprised* functioning as the main lexical predicate of a main clause. Such predicates share the property of factivity, which is defined as both a semantic and syntactic feature (Seuren, 2006).

(1) *[That the team won the competition] surprised us.*

From the semantic-pragmatic perspective, in terms of the information structure of a sentence, the notion of subject may be understood within the framework of topic-focus relation. The topic of a proposition is the interpretation of a referent in a given discourse, where this proposition expresses relevant information that extends knowledge of the referent. It implies that the proposition is about the referent. The key topic properties are aboutness and relevance. A referent possesses a certain degree of accessibility and is of current interest within a discourse; therefore, topic is established itself in a discourse or is related to the one already established (Lambrecht, 1994; Möhlig-Falke, 2012). In its turn, sentence focus represents new knowledge about the topic and is, in its most general sense, complementary to it. Since all sentences convey new information, they all have a focus. However, as not all sentences have a topic, focus should be defined wider than just topic complement. Therefore, sentence focus is the counterpart of topics; it conveys new information and is a pragmatically unpredictable and non-recoverable utterance element. This clause constituent is emphasised and highlighted, i.e., it is in focus of attention (Lambrecht, 1994). The issue whether the information structure of a sentence intertwines with its syntactic structure or these are separate domains has not been finally settled. It provokes the speculation over the relationship between the categories of topic and subject. If analysed independently, topic represents the level of informative structure, and subject is the unit of the syntactic level. Information structure influences the syntactic structure, thus determining the order and representation of sentence constituents, namely, subject, verb, and object. Conversely, syntactic changes may also disrupt information structure (Los, 2009).

The study of the sentential subjects and defining their grammatical status should employ a multifactor approach, in particular, the analysis of their base and landing syntactic position

in derivational structure, the relation to other sentence constituents, and the pragmatic and information structure features that influence their distribution. The aim of this article is thus to outline and compare the existing viewpoints on the grammatical status of the sentential subject. It allows identifying the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, their common arguments and discrepancies, which encourages the development of a comprehensive theoretical background and methodology for the study of non-canonical subjects from synchronic and diachronic perspectives.

Results and discussion. It is interesting to note that exploring sentential subjects, the researchers not only criticise or refute other scholars' analyses; they may change their own conclusions to opposite ideas. Sentences (2)–(4) exemplify English sentential subjects represented by finite or non-finite clauses, in position before or after the finite verb:

(2) a. *[That the team won the competition] really surprised us.*

   b. *It surprised us [that the team won the competition].*

(3) *[For the team to lose the championship] would be terrible.*

(4) *[Whether we make a profit or not] is irrelevant to us.*

The non-prototypical nature of sentential subjects is reflected in the existence of an alternative structure where the clausal subject is extraposed, and the subject position is assumed by the dummy NP *it* (Huddleston, 2002), as in sentence (2b). In terms of the transformational accounts of subjects, all sentential arguments are generated as complements to a subject pronoun *it,* thus sentences (2a) and (2b) have an identical underlying structure: *[ₙₚ It [ₛ that the team won the competition]] surprised us.* This abstract syntactic representation is further derived into a specific surface structure via a series of transformational operations (deletion, movement). In sentence (2a), the pronoun deletes in the process of derivation, leaving the S in subject position dominated by a headless NP projection. In sentence (2b), the S extraposes to the right, thus leaving the pronoun *it* stranded in subject position (Rosenbaum, 1967).

These sentential arguments leave their base position to complete the derivation process. The movement may occur in two directions. In case of rightward movement, or extraposition, there is an expletive *it* in the argument position; otherwise, topicalisation results in erasure of the empty head (Davies & Dubinsky, 2009). The choice between a headless constituent and an extraposed one is in favour of the former if the sentential unit is found within a dependent (subordinate) clause (6), inverts with the auxiliary in questions (7), or follows topicalised elements (8).

(6) a. **I think that that John left early disappointed them.*

   b. *I think that it disappointed them that John left early.*

(7) a. **Who did that John left early disappoint?*

   b. *Who did it disappoint that John left early?*

(8) a. **Such things, that he reads so much doesn't prove.*

   b. *Such things, it doesn't prove.*

According to a reverse movement analysis, sentential subjects are base-generated in an adjunct position and then intraposed into subject position (Emonds, 1976; Davies & Dubinsky, 2009). However, Emond's later interpretation suggests that sentential subjects are generated under an NP node with an empty N head:

(9) *[ₙₚ Ø [ₛ that the team won the competition]] surprised us.*

The approaches presented above are largely denied by a contrary view upon the sentential subjects, which Koster analyses as constituents that occupy the position outside the main clause, and it is even assumed that sentential subjects do not exist (1978). It is claimed that sentential units are generated outside the main clause, and they are in fact "satellites" of the clause that cause the actual subject deletion, for example:

(10)   *[[$_{Si}$ That John loves Mary] [$_S$[$_{NP}$ e$_i$] [VP is obvious]]].*

In a way, they resemble constructions with explicit subjects that are bound by phrasal or clausal constituents external to the clause, as in sentences (11) and (12):

(11)   *My father, he won't come today.*

(12)   *He will come, which we regret.*

In an attempt to dispel existing misconceptions about sentential subjects, Haegeman and Gueron provide the analysis of the sentential subjects in terms of IP-adjunction or CP-adjunction as constituents that are co-indexed with non-overt pronoun in canonical subject position (1999, pp. 114–119).

A number of grammatical and transformational tests may be applied to define the structural position of the subject (Lohndal, 2014). First of all, real subjects agree with the verb, for example, the tense auxiliary [$_T$ BE] agrees with the nominal [$_{NP}$ Carlos] in *Carlos **was** awarded first prize.* This property is observed in sentential subjects as well, but the operation of agreement with the verb works somewhat differently. A single clausal unit that takes subject position triggers the assignment of singular number to the verb, e. g., *That he is the best athlete in the world **is** disputable.* Two coordinate subject clauses cause the use of a plural verb, e. g., *[[That you arrive in time] and [that you arrange my meetings]] are my basic requirements.* In a bit modified way, but sentential subjects pass the agreement test; however, this may not be enough to define the position of the clausal element in the sentence structure.

Another test – subject-auxiliary inversion – reveals more discrepancies than regularities in syntactic status of clausal subjects. Unlike canonical nominal subjects that invert with the auxiliary verb in interrogative sentences, sentential units provide mixed data. According to different authors (Rosenbaum, 1967; Emonds, 1972; Emonds, 1976; Koster, 1978; Haegeman & Guéron, 1999; Davies & Dubinsky, 2009; Lohndal, 2014) the inversion results in either of the three: 1) grammatical (acceptable), 2) ungrammatical (unacceptable), or 3) grammatically uncertain (not fully acceptable) structures, as seen in examples (13a)–(13c).

(13) a. *Does [that Fred lied to them] bother all of the people who bought stock in his company?*

   b. **Has [that we have arrived back at our starting point] proved that the world is round?*

   c. *? Does [that your brother earns more than you] bother you?*

The attempts to prove that sentential subjects should be analysed as topics are again realised through compatibility tests and comparison with other syntactic units. In addition, Lohndal states that subject is a relational notion, distinguished within the tree structure, and the subject / topic parameter is language-dependent, so it can only be identified via thorough research within each language. It is argued that topic phrases cannot appear after other topic phrases (Lohndal, 2014), as in **John, the book, I gave to.* Yet the analyses of sentential units are inconsistent. Sentences (14) and (15) are the examples of sentence-initial topics *[John]* and *[To me]* that are both followed by sentential subjects. While the nomenclature of the constituents is the same: topic phrase – sentential subject – verb phrase, the grammatical acceptability is marked contrariwise: sentence (15) is defined as grammatical, while (14) is ungrammatical.

(14)   **John, that the Giants lost the World Series shouldn't have bothered.*

(15)   *To me, [that the world is round] is obvious.*

Another claim is that topicalised elements may be placed in clause-internal position but they are not found in an infinitival clause (Lohndal, 2014), compare (16) and (17). However, this does not work for sentential subjects and sentence (18) is regarded acceptable.

(16) *Bill says that [to Fred] he will give a raise.*

(17) **Bill wants [to Fred] to give a raise.*

(18) *Bill wants [that Fred lied] to be obvious to everyone.*

The tests illustrated above appear not to provide exhaustive proof that sentential subjects may be categorised as topics. From the structural and word order point of view, the choice for acceptability / unacceptability does not seem obvious, and additional defining mechanisms should be applied. Among other reasons for unacceptability of sentences with sentential subjects there are prosodical features of the utterance and so called "weights" of the constituents. In particular, the length of the sentential subject counted in syllables or in words is compared to the length of the matrix predicate. The subject constituent being considerably longer than the predicate leads to the grammatical unacceptability of the inverted sentence structure (Lohndal, 2014). Comparing two analogous examples with subject-auxiliary inversion, one of which (19a) is analysed as ungrammatical, while the other (19b) is considered quite acceptable, one can see the difference in the length ratio of the basic constituents. The subject unit in sentence (19a) is twice longer than the predicate (counting in syllables), while in sentence (19b), the subject unit is three times shorter than the predicate group (counting in words):

(19) a. **Did [that John showed up] please you?*

b. *To what extent did [that Fred failed to show up] anger those of his devoted fans who had waited by the stage door since dawn of the previous day?*

The subject-predicate weight (length) ratio has a crucial impact on sentence structure and word order. The heavier the predicate VP is, the less plausible sentential subject extraposition is. Therefore, grammatical constraints on the movement of sentence constituents are of less critical importance for the acceptability / unacceptability of a syntactic structure.

From the psycholinguistic perspective, center-embedded sentential subjects are less likely due to memory limitations and parsing ambiguity. Clause-internal, i.e. embedded, sentential NPs cause interruptions that lead to the difficulty in processing the main clause and identifying clause boundaries. Hence, extraposed sentential subjects are preferable because they are easier to process. Even physiologically, as the eye-tracking experiment showed (Frazier & Rayner, 1988), reading and comprehending units with extraposed sentential subjects took less time than those with embedded ones. This experiment also adds a point in favour of structure weight significance (Davies & Dubinsky, 2009).

Since not all sentential subjects appear awkward or unacceptable if they take the position between the subordinating conjunction and the finite verb or if they immediately follow the finite verb in the interrogative sentence, they are not to be ousted from the corresponding syntactic class completely. Their arguable grammaticality may be explained by the dual effect of a certain processing complexity and a pragmatic influence (Padgett, 1991). Here, pragmatic influence refers to the consistent availability of related alternative constructions, which help circumvent processing difficulties and essentially serve as "syntactic blockers", preventing the occurrence of unacceptable cases. The obscurity of embedding and inversion cannot be merely explained by the fact that these constructions are not subjects; rather, the rationale behind it involves a more complex consideration. After all, the examples marked as ungrammatical by some speakers turn out acceptable for the other, as seen in sentences (20) and (21).

(20) *I admit that [for John to leave] would seem rude.*

(21) *Would [for John to leave] seem very rude?*

The question arises how to range the structures as acceptable / unacceptable and whether there are certain degrees of acceptability. The fact that sentential subjects can still be embedded or inverted, that is, they do not behave like topics, allows defining them as true subjects. The ambiguity of their being / not being grammatical correlates with the fact that extraposed structures may be more preferable than headless constituents.

Syntactic blocking is not caused by synonymous grammar structures but rather by pragmatic factors (Padgett, 1991). In case of two available synonymous constructions, avoiding pragmatic difficulty will be decisive for choosing a more acceptable one. A prospective blocking structure should not only share synonymy with the problematic construction but also exhibit a close syntactic relationship to the latter. The structures for syntactic blocking are sentences featuring *it*-extraposition mentioned above. In a broad sense, sentences with sentential subjects typically possess corresponding extraposed counterparts. In examples (22) and (23), both sentences are structurally close, so they tend to be in a blocking relation to one another.

(22) *Does [that John left] bother you?*

(23) *Does it bother you [that John left]?*

Hence, sentential subjects are viewed as true subjects expressed by NPs without explicit heads. This headlessness accounts for parsing complexity and ungrammaticality of subject-auxiliary inverted or embedded structures in case there exist extraposed counterparts that function as syntactic blockers.

Concluding remarks. The available research on sentential subjects reveals uncertainty concerning their grammatical status. Whether they take the position of a canonical subject, the topic, or stay out of the scope of the clause remains is still debatable. The tests applied by scholars provide conflicting evidence for and against each of these approaches. Sentences with sentential subjects are ambiguous as for their acceptability in a number of distributional environments: embedded clauses, inverted interrogative structures, and between a fronted constituent (topic) and the finite verb. In case of possible alternative structures (*it*-extrapositions), the choice is in favour of the one that causes less memory and parsing impediments. Overall, there is no exhaustive and comprehensive theory that neutralises all the uncertainties concerning non-canonical subjects. Developing a set of parameters for creating a portfolio for different types of subject that includes structural, distributional, weight ratio, semantic, pragmatic and psycholinguistic features will provide a comprehensive theoretical background for studying subjects in in both synchronic and diachronic perspectives. The way the parameters are realised may determine the degree of subjecthood for syntactic units and, hence, to which extent they are canonical or non-canonical. Therefore, subjects may be organised in a ranging system of core and peripheral subject representations.

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Відомості про автора

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