

The emergence of subjecthood: Evidence from Indo-European

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This paper presents a comparative study of syntactic subject behaviour in archaic Indo-European languages, primarily focusing on data from Old Latin (Plautus), Homeric Greek (Iliad and Odyssey) and Vedic Sanskrit (Rigveda), all of which have predominantly nominative-accusative alignment. Hitherto, this topic has mainly been addressed in the context of oblique subjects (cf. e.g., Barðdal et al. 2012, Barðdal et al. Forthcoming, Conti 2010, Fabrizio Forthcoming). However, there has been no systematic exploration of the various behavioural patterns claimed to be characteristic of subjects in comparative-historical perspective and the present contribution is a first step in this direction. In languages with predominantly nominative-accusative alignment, the notion of subject property should include only those morphosyntactic behavioural patterns that uniquely refer to the first argument of bivalent predicates (A) and the sole argument of monovalent predicates (S), excluding the second argument of bivalent predicates (P). This involves what is referred to as restricted neutralization of core arguments in Role and Reference Grammar (cf. Van Valin 2005), a notion that is pivotal for delimiting syntactic properties characteristic of subjects in the present context. For example, Fabrizio (Forthcoming) identifies the following six syntactic subject properties for Latin:

- 1) Most likely covert/empty argument
- 2) Addressee of imperatives
- 3) Anaphoric prominence with reflexives
- 4) Shared argument in coordinated clauses
- 5) Controlled argument in control infinitives
- 6) Raising/Accusative with infinitive (AcI)

Since objects can be covert and represent the shared argument in coordination in Latin, it seems that 1) and 4) show unrestricted neutralization of core arguments, and hence do not qualify as subject properties within the present framework. Assuming that the four remaining patterns constitute subject properties in Latin, the question remains whether the other two languages have identical or overlapping inventories of subject properties. A preliminary exploration of the data yields the following picture:

| | Old Latin | Homeric Greek | Vedic Sanskrit |
|---|-----------|---------------|----------------|
| Addressee of imperative | X | X | X |
| Anaphoric prominence with reflexives | X | X | |
| Controlled argument in control infinitive | X | X | |
| Raising-to-object (AcI) | X | X | |

At this point, some observations are in order. First, Vedic Sanskrit employs a variety of reflexive strategies which, however, do not require an A/S antecedent and show unrestricted person reference (cf. Orqueda 2019). One of these involves an adjective *svá-*, etymologically related to the Homeric Greek and Old Latin pronouns *hé/sē*, which have consistently third person reference and require an A/S antecedent. However, the Homeric Greek form shows traces of non-reflexive use, resembling the situation in Vedic Sanskrit. Second, control infinitives show unrestricted neutralization of core arguments in Vedic Sanskrit (cf. Keydana 2013), a feature that probably is archaic, since the restricted neutralization of A/S with control infinitives in Latin and Greek depends on their having independently developed mediopassive infinitives. Third, AcI constructions are secondary and most likely arose independently in Greek and Latin, probably resulting from the increasing flexibility of infinitival syntax. The only subject property shared by the three languages is being the addressee of imperatives, which involves verb agreement and represents more of a category at the interface between syntax and morphology than the other patterns reviewed here. Thus, the data from Old Latin, Homeric Greek and Vedic Sanskrit are suggestive of a prehistoric situation where coding and semantic properties were constitutive of subjecthood, control infinitives and reflexive pronouns representing emergent, not fully grammaticalized categories. Under this analysis, Vedic Sanskrit reflects a more archaic situation than Homeric Greek and Old Latin, the latter two languages showing several parallel syntactic innovations, including AcI, which result in a more complex notion of syntactic subject. Based on these observations, one can hypothesize the following schematic development of subjecthood properties: *addressee of imperative* > *control infinitive* > *anaphoric prominence* > *object raising/AcI*. It is tempting to link this development with an analogous evolution in another domain of grammar, where the inherited splits

in case marking and verb agreement between neuter and non-neuter nouns/pronouns are gradually replaced with consistently nominative-accusative patterns, both processes progressively increasing the number of nominative-accusative features across the Indo-European languages.

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