The rise and fall of dative subjects

NIGEL VINCENT & THÓRHALLUR EYTHÓRSSON
Department of Linguistics, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL, GB
{nigel.vincent, tolli.eythorsson}@man.ac.uk

Indo-European languages show two at first sight unconnected contexts in which an argument in the dative case displays at least some of the properties traditionally associated with subjects. The first type is with a range of what we may call dative-experiencer verbs (DEVs for short):

a) Icelandic: batna 'recover (from an illness)', lika 'like', etc.
b) Latin: licet 'it is permitted', libet 'it is pleasing'
c) German: etwas fällt mir auf 'I notice something', etwas liegt mir 'I fancy something'
d) Hindi: tusaarko mithaaii khaanii hai 'Tushar (DAT) wants to eat sweets' (Mohanan 1994: 142)

Research to date suggests two conclusions: first, that this pattern is thematically based, i.e. the dative is an inherent case intrinsically linked to the role of Experiencer, and second that only in some languages can we speak of true dative-subjects in such constructions (Moore & Perlmutter 2000). For instance Icelandic DEVs have true dative subjects, as has long been recognised, but their German counterparts do not (Askedal 2001).

The second context is a dative subject with certain non-finite forms. e.g:

(1) mne ne sdat' èkzamen (Russian; Moore & Perlmutter 2000: (24a))
   me.DAT not pass.INF exam.ACC
   'it is not in the cards for me to pass the exam'

(2) jo noras buti megstamam (Lithuanian)
   he.GEN desire.NOM be.INF liked.DAT.MSG
   'his desire to be liked'

Example (1) is a main clause infinitival construction with a dative subject; example (2) is an embedded infinitive with an unexpected dative agreement on the participle, which we interpret as showing that the PRO subject has been assigned a dative case. The generalization here seems to be that for the dative to occur the form must be ungoverned (cf the traditional designation as absolutes), and the proposal has been made that this dative is a default structural case assigned when no other case marker is available (Smith 1994). Interestingly, in their careful diagnosis of what it takes to be a true dative subject, Moore & Perlmutter (2002) identify the dative with the infinitive in Russian as a default subject whereas with Russian DEVs the argument in the dative case is a surface indirect object even if it can be analysed as a subject at some underlying level (what they call an 'inversion-nominal'). This leads to the apparently paradoxical conclusion that true subjecthood is shared by the Icelandic inherent dative and the Russian structural (default) dative as against the Russian inherent dative.

In our paper we propose a diachronic resolution to this paradox and attempt a reconstruction that unifies the inherent and structural uses of the dative case in the Indo-European languages. In so doing we seek to generalise the distinction drawn by Eythórsson (2002) between semantically and syntactically driven changes in case marking within the history of Icelandic:

a) dative sickness (DS) consists in the replacement of accusative experiencers by dative experiencers and is argued to be driven by thematic/semantic considerations;
b) nominative sickness (NS) involves the replacement of accusative and dative themes by nominatives and is a morphosyntactic levelling of the case which marks the structural subject.

One consequence of this view is that we would expect the semantically driven pattern of change to recur at various points in the history of languages, and to be largely independent of other aspects of the case system, and this is indeed what we find. Thus, Latin has a series of dative experiencer verbs which for independent reasons disappear (e.g. libet, licet) but they are then replaced by other exemplars of the same pattern; e.g. Italian mi tocca 'lit it touches to you = it is your turn'; Old French il me chaut 'it matters to me', etc. A particularly interesting case in point is the Old French verb il estuet 'it is necessary'. This verb derives from the Latin expression est opus 'there is a need', a dative experiencer construction. Despite the reanalysis whereby the
originally inflected part est ‘it is’ is incorporated into a new stem (cf the remodelled OFr infinitive estovoir), the dative of experiencer, remains, e.g.:

(3) En Sarraguce sai ben qu’aler m’estoet (Chanson de Roland 292; cf Buridant 2000: §317)
To Zaragoza, I know well that it is necessary for me to go.

On the other hand another class of Latin oblique subject verbs such as paenitet ‘it repents’, pudet ‘it shames’, taedet ‘it tires’, which take accusative experiencers and genitive of cause (me pudet meae stultitiae ‘I (ACC) am ashamed of my stupidity (GEN)’), die out and are not replaced, arguably because their structural requirements cannot survive the loss of morphological case.

Within these changes, the recurrent development of modal constructions with dative experiencers is particularly noticeable and, we suggest, provides the context in which the two Indo-European patterns noted at the outset come together. We suggest that the link between the inherent dative of DEVs and the default dative of non-finites can be established as follows:
I: the cross-linguistically attested pattern in which the target of modality (i.e. the person who must/may act in a deontic, or who is the source of the judgement in an epistemic) is expressed in the dative represents a sub-category of the Experiencer role. To this extent dative subjects with modals are thematically motivated.
II: such modal constructions frequently involve a periphrasis in which the finite verb is be while the modal value comes from the use of an infinitive or participle of the lexical verb (cf Miller 2001).
III: the use of non-finites to express modality in turn derives from the fact that such forms are inherently unrealized or irrealis in their meaning. Put more generally, the dimension of finiteness is related to the domain of mood rather than of tense (cf Vincent 1998).
IV: we may thus establish the following correlations and project them back to the stage of Proto-Indo-European
• nominative is the unmarked case of the subject in a finite clause
• dative is the unmarked case of the subject in a non-finite clause

If this idea is along the right lines, we can see why Jerzy Kuryłowicz (1964), in his famous monograph on the inflectional categories of Indo-European, drew a distinction between ‘grammatical’ and ‘concrete’ cases which prefigures the modern separation of structural and inherent case, but remained indecisive about how to characterise the dative. It is an inherent/concrete case but with a meaning that makes it peculiarly compatible with the meaning of non-finite contexts, where it may take on a structural function. Once it has such a function, items that are marked with the dative will function as true subject in Moore & Perlmutter’s sense; on the other hand it will remain a matter of parametric variation whether a language has true subjects with finite DEVs (as in Icelandic) or not (as in German).

REFERENCES