

Locating the Subject in Old Irish and Hittite: Position as a Behavioral Property of Subjects

Cynthia A. Johnson, Esther Le Mair, Michael Frotscher,
Thórhallur Eythórsson & Jóhanna Barðdal

Ghent University, University of Verona & University of Iceland

The analysis of oblique subject-like arguments is controversial even across the modern languages where the available data are not finite. For example, while these arguments are generally considered as subjects in Icelandic and Faroese, in other modern languages like Lithuanian, they have more often been regarded as objects. In the ancient Indo-European languages, this question is relatively unaddressed outside of Sanskrit (Hock 1990), Gothic (Barðdal & Eythórsson 2012) and Ancient Greek (Danesi 2015). In this article, we address the analysis of subject-like oblique arguments in Hittite and Old Irish, two languages that are generally considered to have stricter word order than other early Indo-European languages. The strictness of word order makes it possible to compare the behavior of nominative subject arguments of the familiar type to oblique subject-like arguments with respect to their position relative to the verb and other argument(s). We first determine the neutral position (the “baseline”) of nominative subjects and accusative objects relative to the verb in both languages and then compare this distribution to the position of oblique subject-like arguments under two conditions: when they are analyzed as subjects and when they are analyzed as objects. The results indicate first that word order in these two languages is indeed more fixed (with clear preferences for SOV in Hittite and VSO in Old Irish). Second, the word order distribution differs significantly across the two contexts when the oblique arguments are analyzed as objects, but not when they are analyzed as subjects. These results add to the growing evidence that oblique arguments should indeed be analyzed as subjects, although their coding properties are non-canonical. Furthermore, this study motivates the usage of word order distribution as a test for subject behavior, which we believe can even be applied to languages with assumed “free” word order: the word order variation that is found in both languages on account of discourse factors (e.g. topicalization) or prosodic factors (Wackernagel’s position) did not affect the overall preference for word order.