Oblique Subjects in Slavic and Germanic languages

Problem: syntactic derivation of constructions with a subject-like element in an oblique case (= oblique subject) in languages with nominative case marking on the grammatical subject (= nominative sentence pattern), grammaticalization of zero subjects.

Data: Two Slavic languages – Ukrainian and Russian and two Scandinavian languages – Modern Icelandic and Faroese which have constructions with dative case marking on the subject (Rus. mne xolodno ‘I am cold’, Icel. mér er flökurt ‘I am nauseated’, transitive impersonals interpretable in terms of zero subjects (Rus. lodku prignalo k beregu ‘the boat drifted to the shore’, Icel. bótnin rak að landi ‘the same’ and other constructions interpretable either in terms of dative/accusative subjects, cf. Icel. bótninum hvolfdi ‘the boat capsized’ or in terms of zero subjects.

Subjecthood criteria: formal and functional. Grammatical subject is recognized as a priority NP/pronoun/other syntactic category that lies VP-external and has some diagnostic features (agreement control, control of embedded phrases etc) not characteristic to other NPs/pronouns/same type categories. There is only one grammatical subject in a clause.

Previous approaches: Babby (2002) analyzes all Russian and Ukrainian impersonals with a dative/accusative NP as subjectless and argues against postulating zero subjects. Mel’čuk (1995) postulates non-referential zero subjects for Russian transitive impersonals. Svenonius (2002) and Sigurðsson (2011) offer phrase-structural accounts of Burzio’s generalization for Icelandic transitive impersonals and claim that they have a defective vP. Woolford (2003) gives up Burzio’s generalization and explains Nominative/Accusative case marking on subject and object NPs in Icelandic and Faroese in terms of markedness constraints. Zimmerling (2009) adopts Mel’čuk’s analysis and argues that zero subjects of the 3rd p. are agreement controllers in Russian transitive impersonals and are specified as {+ Agent, - Referential; + Nominative}. Moore and Perlmutter (2000) compare Russian and Icelandic data and argue that both languages have dative subjects. Zimmerling (2012) argues that Russian has two different dative patterns – with an infinitive and with a nominal non-agreeing predicative as core elements.

Proposal: I argue that the oblique subject hypothesis is appropriate if the dative/accusative NP is specified as {+ Animate} and/or the predicate does not have a valency grid {Agent, Patient}. I’ll show that contrary to the previously raised claims Russian and Ukrainian lack transitive impersonals where the accusative NP cannot be analyzed as Patient. Therefore, Russian and Ukrainian transitive impersonals, cf. (2), must be analyzed as constructions with a covert zero Agent in the subject position. Active (1) and passive (3) impersonal constructions with an accusative NP with the role of Patient must be treated differently, since the covert Agent subjects are specified as {- Animate} and {+ Animate} respectively. The same holds for active dative impersonals (4) and dative passives (5). The distribution of constructions with a zero subject specified as {+ Animate} is due to parametric variation. Russian uses zero generic subjects in 3rd Pl in active sentences, cf. (7), Icelandic favors dative passives while Ukrainian has both active (9) and (8) passive structures with a generic zero Agent.
Glossed examples

(1) Icel. Bát-innACC.SG.M.DET rakPRT.3SG að landiDAT.SG ‘The boat drifted ashore.’

(2) Russ. Lodk-uACC.SG.F prigna-I-oPRT.3SG.N obratno k bereguDAT.SG. ‘The boat drifted back ashore’.

(3) Ukr. Statt’uACC.SG.F buloPRT.3SG.N vidhylenePRT.3SG.N- ‘The paper has been declined’


(5) Icel. Bátu-numDat.Pl.Det varPrt3Sg hvolf-tPartII.Sg.N viljandiPart- ‘The boats have been turned down <by some people> on purpose’.

(6) Colloq. Icel. VarPrt.3Sg skamma-ðPart.II.Sg.N big2Acc.Sg? ‘Were you scolded?’

(7) Russ. Lodk-uACC.SG.F prignal-PRT.3PL obratno k bereguDAT.SG. ‘One drove the boat back ashore’.

(8) Ukr. OficerivAcc.Pl zalyaka-n-oPart.3Sg.N zaturka-n-oPart.3Sg.Nv zakloba-n-oPart.3Sg.N- ‘The officers are bullied, scared and cowed’.

Abbreviations: ∅3Sg – non-referential zero subject pronoun in 3rd person, Singular.
∅3Pl – non-referential zero subject pronoun in 3rd person, Plural.

References: