

Oblique argument omission: How subject-like are the experiencer arguments in Estonian ‘need’ and ‘remember’ constructions?

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Nominative case is not a necessary characteristic of subjects, but oblique arguments differ from canonical subjects in more than just coding properties, often also behaving differently. Estonian, though not rigidly pro-drop, shows a tendency to omit subjects, with first- and second-person subjects omitted more often than third-person (Duvallon & Chalvin 2004). This is related to overt verb agreement, unique identifiability and discourse accessibility. Omission of oblique constituents is less straightforward to analyse: oblique adjuncts, when omitted, are simply not present; oblique arguments, unlike nominative subjects, do not trigger agreement with the verb. Hence, the omission of oblique elements linked to argument positions raises many questions. We conducted a corpus study to investigate oblique, subject-like arguments in Estonian ‘need’ and ‘remember’ constructions. Non-canonical subjects in Estonian bear adessive or allative case, depending on the predicate, and the corpus data show high rates of omission.

We pose two questions: (1) What is the syntactic status of oblique experiencers in Estonian: are they (more like) adjuncts or arguments? Ellipsis of oblique arguments is typologically rare (Siewierska 2003) and structurally difficult to explain. However, tests (cf Koenig et al. 2003; Needham & Toivanen 2011) indicate that these are arguments. (2) How do speakers use the option to express or omit the experiencer? Omission is associated with subjects, but also related to information structure, discourse status, predicate semantics, person marking, priming, and more (see, e.g. DuBois et al. 2003, Travis 2007, Travis & Torres Cacoullos 2012, Helasvuo 2014); which of these affect the omission of oblique experiencer arguments? We examine necessary constructions with *tarvis/vaja olema* ‘need’ (ex. 1) and constructions denoting remembering: *meeles olema* (‘be in-mind’) and *meelde tulema* (‘come into-mind’) ‘remember’ (2); both take adessive/allative experiencers, typically topical and animate.

(1) **Mu-l** *on* *vaja* *koju* *minna.* (Standard Estonian)
I-ADE be.PRS.3SG need home.ILL go.INF
‘I need to go to home.’

(2) **mull** *ei* *tulõ* *külh* *tuud* *miilde* (Võru, Southern Estonia)
I-ADE not.PRS come.CNG ptcl that-prt mind.ILL
‘I can’t remember that.’

In our data, experiencer omission in necessary constructions (as in 1) is related to participant-external modality (van der Auwera & Plungian 1998), but predicate complement and person are also important (1sg and 3sg are more often expressed). In remembering constructions, however, the variation between overt and elided experiencers is less clear. We analyse possible factors affecting omission in these constructions, and compare results with both oblique experiencers in the necessary constructions and nominative subjects of the semantically equivalent, canonical transitive construction with the simple verb *mäletama* ‘remember’. Although they have similar functions and both refer frequently to the speaker,

non-canonically marked experiencers are omitted more often than nominative subjects (43% vs 22% omission in a dialect corpus).

The difference between the oblique experiencers and nominative subjects is related to (1) the historical roots of these experiencers as adjuncts in external possessor constructions, and (2) synchronically, their intermediate status between freely omitted adjunct and obligatorily referential argument.

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