# PRELIMINARIES TO A HISTORY
OF SENTENTIAL SUBJECTS IN ENGLISH

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1. Subjects in English

The notion "subject" is, as described in the gloss offered by Roger Lass (1987: 362), "extremely complex, and it's not clear whether all languages have such a category, and what its defining criteria ought to be".* But one thing that is clear is that subjecthood is generally conceived of in overtly relational terms: subjects are seen as the subjects "of sentences", or "of predicates", or "of particular verbs". And there is some agreement that this relation can be one-to-many. Thus, in (1) Peter is represented – fairly uncontroversially, in spirit, if not in form – as the subject of both appears and like (I ignore the status of *to* and other aspects of the representation, including categorisation – see, for instance, J.M. Anderson 1992: §5.6).
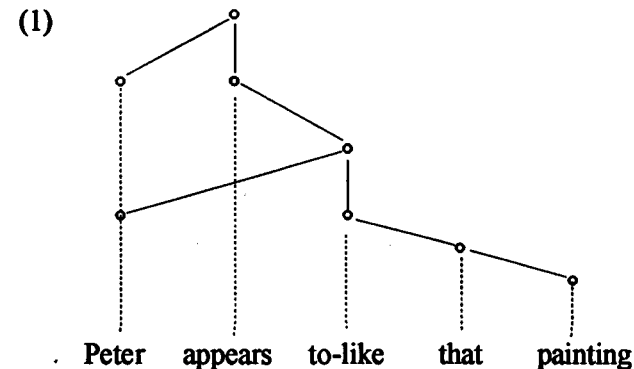
(1)

. Peter appears to-like that painting

Whether *Peter*'s non-unary attachment is represented, as in (1), by simultaneous multiple dependencies (indicated by the solid lines, with the discontinous lines serving merely to associate items with nodes in the graph), or by successive derivational status as subject of *like* and of *appears*, or by both, there exists a large measure of agreement among grammarians that *Peter* in this sentence is in some sense the subject "of two different verbs".

The idea that there might be a many-to-one relation between subjects and sentences or verbs has had a rather more restricted currency. The suggestion that the syntax of Japanese, for example, may attribute more than one subject to a sentence is controversial, and would be typologically parochial, apparently. J.M. Anderson (1992: §4.2), however, suggests that it is at least appropriate to allow for one rather restricted possibility for diversification of subjects with respect to a particular verb. He differentiates between what we might call a (strictly) *syntactic* subject of a verb, distinguished in particular languages by its syntactic 'behaviour', such as, and in particular, the ability to be shared with another verb shown in (1), and a *morphosyntactic* subject, which in particular languages is marked morphologically, by the bearing of a distinctive case, traditionally labelled the nominative, and/or by the controlling of concord on the verb. Frequently these types of subject coincide, as with *Peter* in (1) with respect to *appears* (while the non-finite *like* lacks a morphosyntactic subject). But in English the same verb may have distinct syntactic and morphosyntactic subjects, as in (2):

(2)   There are olives in that jar.

There is the syntactic subject – and so (3) shows it being shared by two verbs:

(3)   There appear to be olives in that jar.

But *olives*, as morphosyntactic subject, controls concord on the finite verb: it is the morphosyntactic subject of *are* in (2) and *appear* in (3). The syntactic subject in English also has a distinctive pre-finite position.

Two sets of questions arise at this point: one set arises from the observation (alluded to in Lass' gloss) that it is not obvious that cross-linguistically it is always "subjects" that display the properties just described; the second concerns the motivations for attributing subjecthood to both syntactic and morphosyntactic subjects. Both sets can be resolved if we look rather more carefully at what it takes to be a subject, at "what its defining criteria ought to be". I shall attempt to formulate these in a manner that is consistent with the traditional acceptance of the notion "subject", as well as providing answers to the questions just posed.

I take as a starting point the following "subjecthood criterion" (J.M. Anderson 1979a: §2; 1979b: 131-132; 1980: 205; Böhm 1983: 117; 1993: §2.1.1):

A language has subjects if the agent in simple 'transitive' action sentences shares non-contingent syntactic or morphological properties with the (patient/agent) argument in 'intransitive' sentences which the latter does not share with the patient in 'transitive' action sentences; and subjects in any sentence in that language are identified as sharing these properties.

This formulation aims to reconstruct the accepted understanding, but allows that a language (or subsystem of a language) may lack subjects, in this traditional sense: this is instantiated by Dyirbal, where a different grouping of arguments than is specified by the criterion share the equivalent syntactic and (most) morphosyntactic properties, and which on the basis of this set is described as "ergative" (Dixon 1979). If we appeal here to the distinction between syntactic and morphosyntactic properties, the criterion allows further for a language (or a subsystem) to have syntactic subjects but to lack morphosyntactic subjects: this may be exemplified by Basque, which has been claimed to be morphosyntactically but not syntactically "ergative" (S.R. Anderson 1976).

English, as already discussed, has both syntactic and morphosyntactic subjects, and usually these coincide in a particular simple sentence. In (4) and (5):

(4)   Peter kills his enemies.

(5)   Peter grows.

Peter is both syntactic and morphosyntactic subject. And we are justified in using the term "subject" for both kind of relation – syntactic and morphosyntactic – by their common appeal to the subjecthood criterion. However, in (2) the properties associated with subjecthood in English are spread over two different arguments: as described above, we have distinct syntactic and morphosyntactic subjects. J.M. Anderson (1992: §4.2) argues that in (2) a syntactic subject fails to be selected in accordance with the usual hierarchy based on the semantic role of the various arguments of the verb, the hierarchy which ensures among other things satisfaction of the subjecthood criterion; in (4), for example, the "agent" *Peter* outranks the "patient" *his enemies* with respect to subjectability. Instead, in (2) an expletive subject, *there*, is introduced. In this construction, non-selection is generally preferred to the result of selection:

(6)   ?Olives are in that jar.

Similarly, failure of subject-selection in (7) – the single argument is apparently not eligible, as shown in (8) – is associated with introduction of an expletive:

(7)   It appears that Peter likes that painting.

(8)   *That Peter likes that painting appears.

These expletives are subjects not required semantically by the verb. Likewise, only the lower subject relation contracted by *Peter* in (2) is associated with a semantic relation to the verb; *appears* requires semantically only a sentential argument, manifested as *Peter to like that painting* or *that Peter likes that painting*.

Again, it need not concern us, for the sake of what follows, how exactly this distinction between what I shall call *primary* (semantically required) subjects and *secondary* subjects is to be characterised (but see J.M. Anderson in press: ch. 3). Let us now look more carefully, however, at the ineligibility for subjecthood of the sentential argument in (7)-(8), given that not all sentential arguments are so excluded.

2. Sentential subjects in English

Sentential subjecthood in Present-day English is limited to primary subjects of transitive verbs or of adjectival or nominal predicators. Such are exemplified in (9)-(11):

(9)   That Peter likes the painting surprises Madeleine.

(10)   That Peter likes the painting is surprising/strange.

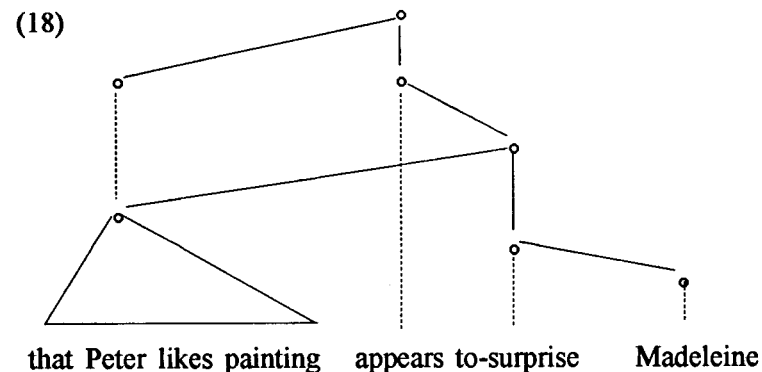(11)   That Peter likes the painting is a surprise.

In these sentences *that Peter likes the painting* is a syntactic but not a morphosyntactic subject: of *surprises* in (9), of *is* (secondary) and *surprising/strange* in (10), and of *is* (secondary) and *a surprise* in (11). In (12)-(14) *that Peter likes the painting* is neither syntactic nor morphosyntactic subject:

(12)   It surprises Madeleine that Peter likes the painting.

(13)   It is surprising/strange that Peter likes the painting.

(14)   It is a surprise that Peter likes the painting.

and the syntactic subject in the main clause is an expletive.

The single semantic argument of *appears* in (7)-(8) is not eligible for subjecthood. However, the sentential subject of one of the eligible predicator types can also serve thereby as subject of such an intransitive, as shown by (15)-(17):

(15)   That Peter likes the painting appears to surprise Madeleine.

(16)   That Peter likes the painting appears to be wellknown.

(17)   That Peter likes the painting appears to be a fact.

(18)

that Peter likes painting   appears to-surprise   Madeleine

The primary subject status of *that Peter likes the painting* with respect *surprise* in (18) (=(15)), licences its secondary subject relation to *appears*.
The viability of even secondary subjecthood is associated ultimately with the transitivity of the primary verb.

I assume that the restricted viability of (19)-(21) and the like:

(19)   *Does that Peter likes the painting surprise Madeleine?

(20)   *Is that Peter likes the painting surprising/strange?

(21)   *Is that Peter likes the painting a surprise?

does not constitute counter-evidence to the syntactic subjecthood of *that Peter likes the painting* in (9)-(11) and (15)-(18) (Koster 1978): the position occupied by the *that*-clause in (19)-(21) is not that of a syntactic subject; rather it is associated with morphosyntactic subjects which are not syntactic subjects, as in the "existential *there*" construction of (2). It is unsurprising that the sentential argument *that Peter likes the painting* fails to occupy a position associated with the morphosyntactic subject. Its syntactic subjecthood, on the other hand, is confirmed by the subject-sharing exhibited in (15)-(17) and spelled out in (18).

These observations concerning the distribution of sentential subjects in Present-day English are far from novel. I rehearse them here as a prelude to a claim that the distribution of such in Old English is very different from this: sentential subjects exhibit therein not merely a somewhat restricted distribution such as we have just observed; sentential subjects are absent from Old English. We thus find in Old English analogues to (12)-(14) in Present-day English but not to (9)-(11). This represents an important change in the syntax of English which tends to be obscured by a pervasive lack of precision in the deployment of the term "subject" in accounts of English historical syntax. Consider in this

regard the discussion of sentential arguments in the recent overview of Old English syntax offered by Traugott (1992).

Elizabeth Traugott might be thought to be being merely exercising admirable caution when she says, for instance, that "complements that could, on the basis of their equivalents in P[resent] D[ay] E[nglish], be regarded as subjects actually either function as oblique NPs in impersonal constructions, as complements of NPs or predicates, or are undecidable" (1992: 234). But the evidence of caution is only apparent, I suggest: there is no motivation for regarding any sentential arguments as subjects in Old English, "undecidably" or otherwise; the purported "undecidability" is an artefact of the unwarranted decision to introduce subjecthood as a possible option for certain sentential arguments – "on the basis of their equivalents in P[resent]D[ay]E[nglish]". Thus, Traugott comments with respect to (22):

(22)   Forðy me ðyncð betre ... ðæt we eac sumæ bec ...
'therefore me seems better ... that we also certain books
on ðæt geðiode wenden ðe we ealle gecnawan mægen
... into that language translate that we all know can'

('Therefore it seems better to me ... that we also translate certain
books ... into that language which we all can understand')

that "the þæt-clause may be taken to serve the stimulus function without also being subject or object, i.e. it could be an oblique NP. On the other hand it could be the subject" (1992: 235). But there is no reason why the ðæt-clause should be the subject (in any well-defined sense), and to suggest so obscures an important difference from Present-day English, one observed in earlier work by Traugott (1972: 102): sentential arguments in Old English do not occupy subject position, and do not participate in subject-sharing – as evidenced for Present-day English by (15)-(17). Subjecthood is not an option for sentential arguments in Old English. On the other hand, there is also no reason to subscribe to the alternative offered here by Traugott: it seems to me to make no sense to say that the ðæt-clause is "an oblique NP" (or any kind of NP); nor is it apparent even why it is to be labelled "stimulus". But that is another issue – or several.

Similarly, in Old English there are no uncontroversial instances of subject infinitives (cf. Mitchell 1985: §§1537-1539), whereas in Present-day English infinitive constructions function as subjects in all of (23)-(25):

(23)   To have sold the painting displeased Peter.

(24)   To have sold the painting was painful.

(25)   To have sold the painting was a source of regret.

as well as as non-subjects in (26)-(28):

(26)   It displeased Peter to have sold the painting.

(27)   It was painful to have sold the painting.

(28)   It was a source of regret to have sold the painting.

Traugott (1992: 244) again unhelpfully introduces subjecthood as an "undecidable" option for Old English infinitive arguments in impersonal constructions, as well as making the (decided) claim that (29):

(29)   7 to þam Pentecosten wæs gesewen ... blod weallan of eorþan.
'and at that Pentecost was seen ... blood to-well-up from earth.
swa swa mænige sædan þe hit geseon sceoldan
as many said that it see should'

('and at Pentecost ... blood was seen to well up from the ground,
as many said who were supposed to have seen it')

contains "a bare infinitive functioning as the subject of a passive sentence". Subjecthood is attributable to neither infinitive (weallan, geseon) in (29).

This is so even apart from the fact that no infinitive – or þæt-clause – in Old English could possibly meet Traugott's own definition of "subject": "it is associated with nominative case, and it agrees with the finite verb" (1992: 213). This defines what I am calling here the morphosyntactic subject, which Old English infinitives – and þæt-clauses – are (if anything) even further from approximating than they are syntactic subjects. But then it is clear that Traugott has not brought to bear in her account of sentential arguments any grammatical definition of subjecthood. This is perhaps even more apparent in other recent discussions, such as that in Molencki (1991), which does not even concede that the subjecthood of sentential (including infinitival) arguments might be (as often for Traugott) "undecidable", but unquestioningly assigns subjecthood to, for instance, the infinitive construction bracketed off from the rest of the sentence in (30), which is said to exemplify "non-finite clauses in the subject position" (1991: 38):

(30)   Þe gedafenað [þine þeode to læranne]

'you behoves your people to teach'
('It behoves you to teach your people')

Here and elsewhere, attribution of grammatical relations to sententials is apparently made not on syntactic grounds but "on the basis of their equivalents

in PDE" or on the basis of semantic relations perceived as shared with nominals, where even this perception is not necessarily well founded.

It is only if such practices as I have just exemplified are eliminated in favour of a consistent view of what constitutes subjecthood – of "what its defining criteria ought to be", in Lass' phrase – that we shall be able to even begin charting the history of sentential subjects (and non-subjects) in English.

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