

Subjecthood and the on-line processing of dyadic psych structures

Psych predicates have come to figure heavily in linguistic discussions due to their propensity for idiosyncratic structural phenomena. A particularly interesting instance of this is found in some Germanic languages, most notably in Icelandic: Here, the participants central to an experiential situation can be mapped onto syntactic functions in configurations in which an obliquely marked Experiencer is awarded positional and behavioral properties in the sense of KEENAN (1976) which have been shown to be indistinguishable from those displayed by the Agent of a transitive action predicate (see e.g. ANDREWS 1976, HELGI BERNÓDUSSON 1982:128-160, ZAENEN et al. 1985), the hallmark for what is generally considered a 'canonical subject' (e.g. LANGACKER 1991). This is often contrasted with German, a sister language of Icelandic paralleling its structural conservatism which crucially appears to lack the ability to assign 'subjecthood' to oblique arguments. A considerable amount of research has been devoted to this difference (see COLE et al. 1980, ZAENEN et al. 1985, SMITH 1994, JÓHANNA BARÐDAL 2002, 2006; HAIDER 2005 and many others), creating a debate now spanning more than three decades which has relied nearly universally on syntactic tests and introspection. The present study seeks to provide new empirical evidence from a perspective that has often been referred to implicitly, but which only recently has become widely accessible to researchers: sentence processing. To this end, systematic and controlled self-paced reading experiments were carried out in Iceland and Germany, measuring *in actu* how 36 native speakers of each language parsed naturalistic yet strictly parallel material involving DAT-Experiencers and NOM-Stimuli. While the processing profile of German is well-documented and known to exhibit a strong *Subject-First Preference* (HEMFORTH 1993) - with the crucial exception of experiential DATs (BADER et al. 2000, SCHLESEWSKY & BORNKESSEL 2003) - Icelandic has barely figured in psycholinguistic research to date (cf. ROEHM et al. 2007) despite its dominance in the theoretic literature. Thus, the aims of this study are twofold: Firstly, a general sentence processing profile for Icelandic needs to be established vis-à-vis the canon of German psycholinguistic data; Secondly, the interaction of this profile with the language's increased permissiveness in granting oblique arguments pivotal status needs to be contrasted systematically with the processing behavior observed for German. Three dyadic experiential verb classes are taken into consideration: 'canonical' NOM-ACC-predicates, symmetric or alternating DAT-NOM-predicates and asymmetric or fixed DAT-NOM-predicates, the latter of which are absent from German (JÓHANNA BARÐDAL 2001a). The results indicate that in general, Icelandic patterns with German in showing a significant slowdown when the canonical NOM-ACC-order is violated. However, despite this similarity, the data reveal that the roles of case as a processing cue may differ, a finding which may be expected considering frequency data (JÓHANNA BARÐDAL 2001b). The exploratory cross-linguistic comparison regarding the influence of non-canonically marked potential pivots shows that subjecthood is not a primary determinant of processing cost in Icelandic, as oblique subjects do not pattern with their canonical counterparts, again paralleling German. Rather, DAT-NOM-verbs display a class-internal gradient of processing cost, with violations in symmetric structures being least costly. These findings suggest that in terms of on-line sentence parsing, the syntactic function of subject is secondary to the mechanisms underlying the selection of predicate case frames.

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