

## On the Experiencer Subject Constructions in Assamese

**Ankur Jyoti Das**  
M.A. in Linguistics  
Research Scholar,  
English and Foreign Languages University  
Hyderabad 500007  
[ankur.j.das118@gmail.com](mailto:ankur.j.das118@gmail.com)  
Phone: 9401832459

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### Abstract

Experiencer Subject Constructions are those constructions where the subject gets the theta role of an experiencer. In English, experiencer subjects always get the nominative case but in the most Indian languages, it gets dative case. Unlike other Indian languages, in Assamese, Oriya and Bengali, the experiencer subjects get genitive case. This seems to be a language specific phenomenon. These constructions normally contain a ‘psych’ verb which shows a change of one’s mental state. It’s not only restricted to show the change of mental state but also shows the change of physical state. The presence of dative subjects in other Indian languages and genitive subjects in Assamese, Oriya and Bangla contradicts Chomsky’s claim that the experiencer arguments are marked with nominative case when it is realized as subjects (Chomsky 1981). This paper tries to investigate how and why the experiencer subjects in Assamese get genitive case within Lexical and Functional Grammar (LFG) approach. The paper discusses the subjecthood properties of the genitive subject whether it fulfills the properties or not. Later, this paper also shows where the genitive subject is originally generated and its movements under Minimalist Approach.

**Keywords:** Experiencer, Subject Constructions, psych, genitive, dative, case, Assamese

### 1. Introduction

Experiencer subject constructions are those constructions where the subject of a clause has the thematic role of an experiencer. In these constructions, the subjects undergo some mental or psychological change. These constructions normally have a psych verb in it. A psych or a psychological verb is a verb that expresses a mental state or event.

- (1) John admires Jane’s beauty.
- (2) Peter loves Jenny.

In (1) and (2), both the subject *John* and *Peter* undergo a particular change of his mental state i.e. love and affection. As we see in English, all kinds of subjects including experiencer subjects have the nominative case (the case that a subject NP normally has). In the above examples also, the subjects *John* and *Peter* have nominative case. But in some languages, the experiencer subject does not bear the nominative case, instead it gets a dative or a genitive case. In the languages belonging to the Dravidian language family, the experiencer subjects have the dative case and in Assamese and Bangla (Indo-Aryan language family), the experiencer subjects are realized with genitive case. In this paper, we will look at the subjecthood properties of the genitive experiencer subjects in Assamese and examine how it is considered as a subject with different tests.

## 2. Experiencer Subjects with Dative Case

Experiencer subjects in Dravidian languages like Malayalam, Telegu and Tamil have dative case. I will give some examples from Malayalam below:

(3)    aval-kkə       dukk<sup>h</sup>am       vannu  
       3.SG.F-DAT    sadness        come.PST  
       ‘She became sad.’ (lit. – Sadness came to her)

(4)    aval-kkə       santoosam     toonunnu  
       3.SG.F-DAT    happiness     feel.PAST  
       ‘She feels happiness.’

(Nizar 2010)

In (3) and (4), we see that the subject undergoes a change in its mental state i.e. the subject is experiencing the feeling of happiness and sadness, that is why in Malayalam, the subject has the dative case instead of the nominative case. Moreover, it does not have any certain motivation why the experiencer subjects are realized with a dative case. Not only in the case of changing mental state but also if some changes happen physically, the dative case is given to the subject. For example-

(5)    kutti-kkə       panikunnu  
       Child-DAT     have.fever.PRS  
       ‘The child has fever.’

(Nizar 2010)

In (5), we see that the subject is experiencing some physical change, so, the dative case is given to the subject. This feature is also present in some Indo-Aryan languages like Hindi, some Munda languages and some Tibbeto-Burman languages. The presence of this feature in South Asian languages makes this area a linguistic area (Emeneau 1956).

### 3. Experiencer Subjects with Genitive Case

In Bangla, Oriya and Assamese, the experiencer subjects do not carry the dative case, instead they have the genitive case. It is very rare to see languages where the subjects carry genitive case. Genitive case is normally assigned to arguments that possess something. But in case of experiencer subject constructions in Assamese and Bangla, we see the genitive case functioning differently. Consider the following sentence from Assamese:

- (6) rima-r sula-tu dami (ho-i)  
Rima-GEN dress-CLF costly (be.PRS-3)  
'Rima's dress is costly.'

In the sentence (6), the genitive case  $-r$  is suffixed to the noun *rima* to show her possession over the other noun *sula* 'dress'.

Now again consider the following sentences from Assamese and Bangla to see the genitive case given the experiencer subjects:

Bangla:

- (7) sik<sup>h</sup>a-r rag ho-etj-e  
Sikha-GEN anger be.PRS-PRF-3  
'sikha is angry.'

Assamese:

- (8) sik<sup>h</sup>a-r k<sup>h</sup>ong ut<sup>h</sup>-i-s-e  
Sikha-GEN anger raise-ASP-exist-3  
'Sikha is angry.'
- (9) jotin-ɔr b<sup>h</sup>uk lag-i-s-e  
Jotin-GEN hunger need.PRS-ASP-exist-3  
'Jotin is hungry.'

In sentence (7) from Bangla, we see the genitive case  $-r$  is suffixed to the noun *sik<sup>h</sup>a* that is an experiencer subject which undergoes a change of its mental state i.e. anger. Similarly, in (8) and (9) from Assamese, the subject *sik<sup>h</sup>a* undergoes the mental state of anger and the subject *jotin* undergoes the change of its physical state, so, the subjects are given the genitive case  $-r/-ɔr$ .  $-r$  and  $-ɔr$  both are the genitive case markers in Assamese where  $-r$  is suffixed to the nouns ending with a vowel and  $-ɔr$  is suffixed to nouns that end with consonants.

#### 4. Experiencer Subjects and the Possessor Theta Role

As seen above that the experiencer subjects are given genitive case, there is one more thematic role that the subject is getting i.e. the *possessor* theta role. Here, we are getting the notion of ‘amalgamation of two semantic meanings’ in a single argument (Mohanana and Mohanana (1988), Mohanana (1994)). Mohanana (1994) claims that in Malayalam, the experiencer subjects get the thematic role of a goal along with the experiencer theta role because in such constructions, something is assumed to be coming towards the subject. Consider the following sentences (3) and (4), there as Mohanana (1994) says *dukk<sup>h</sup>am* ‘sadness’ and *santoosam* ‘happiness’ seem to be coming towards the subject, so, the subjects are given dative case where the subjects ultimately get one more theta role i.e. *goal*. To prove this correspondence of the dative case the goal theta role Mohanana (1994) takes help of the Lexical and Functional Grammar (LFG). LFG says that the lexical information is attributed to the all four levels- semantic structure, argument structure, grammatical function structure and grammatical category structure. The knowledge about each lexeme, which is acquired by the child exposed to the language, would consist of its idiosyncratic properties relating to phonetic, semantic, morphological and syntactic structure. According to this theory, the precise explanation for a sentence like (10) would be formulated on the basis of the general principle of the association of the thematic role and the case, and the relation of the subject with a specific case, each relation corresponding to a separate level shown in (11):

Malayalam:

- (10)   aval-kkə           b<sup>h</sup>ayam           a:nə  
           3.SG.F-DAT   fear           be.PRS  
           ‘She is afraid.’

- (11)   GOAL                                   SEMANTIC STRUCTURE  
        ARGUMENT                         ARGUMENT STRUCTURE  
        DATIVE                             GRAMMATICAL FUNCTIONAL STRUCTURE

(Mohanana, 1994: 114)

Here, the argument with the semantic role of a goal has one to one correspondence with the dative case within this framework. Nath (2013) claims that in Assamese, the experiencer subject also gets the semantic role of goal even when it is getting the genitive case. Following Mohanana (1994), Nath (2013) says that in Assamese also, when a subject of a clause has the experiencer theta role, something seems to be coming towards the subject, so, the subject gets another theta role of goal with the experiencer theta role. Here, we see a problem if LFG is applied in Assamese experiencer subject constructions, the theta role of a goal cannot be given to the subject because if we see according to LFG, the goal theta role and the genitive case do not have one to one mapping. Nath (2013) avoiding LFG framework, assumes Principles and Parameters (P&P) approach which says there is no one to one correspondence between theta role and the case.

Here, contrary to Nath (2013), we see that the experiencer subjects in Assamese are getting the theta role of possessor instead of the goal role along with the experiencer role. To validate our argument, we will follow Mohanan’s claim and the LFG framework. Mohanan (1994) claimed the second theta role that subject gets in Malayalam is the goal theta role because with the dative case he found that some entity seems to come towards the subject and the sentence itself gives the semantic interpretation of a goal. The LFG framework works for his argument. In Assamese, the subject gets the genitive because it seems like the subject is possessing what it feels. For example:

- (12) tar                    oxux                    ho-i-s-e  
       3.S.M.GEN        disease                COP-ASP-exist-3  
       ‘He is sick.’

In the sentence (12), the subject is experiencing disease and at the same time it seems like the subject has possession over the disease. As we know that in Assamese along with most of the languages of the world, possession is shown by giving the genitive to the possessor as shown in (6), here in (12) also, the subject’s possession over the disease is shown with the genitive case marker *-r*. LFG works here perfectly with the possessor theta role because the semantic role of a possessor can establish the one to one mapping relationship with the genitive case perfectly. Nath (2013) following P&P framework says that there has not to be a one to one mapping relationship between the semantic role and the case so, he claimed the semantic role as a goal. But case itself is a relation between elements in a sentence. Someone might also come with some sentences like (13) and say it is the goal theta role that the subject is getting:

- (13) tumar                ek<sup>h</sup>ɔn                sit<sup>h</sup>i    ah-i-s-e  
       2.S.GEN            one.CLF            letter    come.PRS-ASP-exist-3  
       ‘A letter of yours has come/ is coming.’
- (14) tumaloi            ek<sup>h</sup>ɔn                sit<sup>h</sup>i    ah-i-s-e  
       2.S.DAT            one.CLF            letter    come.PRS-ASP-exist-3  
       ‘A letter has come to you/ is coming to you.’

In the sentence (13) also, we are getting the possessor interpretation which can be translated into English as shown in (13) but not like in (14). In (14), the dative case *-loi* is suffixed to the subject, so, we are getting the goal interpretation there. With this I can surely say that the experiencer subjects in Assamese get the possessor theta role not the goal theta role.

## 5. Subjecthood Properties of Experiencer Subjects

There are two kinds of properties based on which we consider a subject: Coding properties and behavioral properties.

### 5.1. Coding Properties



“There are three main coding properties to identify a subject in a language: case, agreement and word order” (Keenan 1976). Let us first see case in genitive subject constructions in Assamese. If we consider case, a prototypical subject always gets nominative case in all the languages in the world because it obeys all the necessary properties of a subject structurally like agreement, binding etc. But, here, the case is genitive, so, we cannot rely on case to consider it as a subject here. The second property is agreement: here also, we see the same agreement marker *-e* i.e. third person agreement used in all genitive constructions (8-9). So, agreement also cannot be taken to consider it as a subject. The third one is word order: as we know that the sentences in all the Indian languages can be scrambled, so, word order also fails here to consider genitive subject as a subject.

## 5.2. Behavioral Properties

### 5.2.1. Conjunction Reduction

In Conjunction Reduction, two or more clauses having the same subject are conjoined together where the subject is overtly present either in the first or the last clause. “The deleted or the null subjects have shown to be controlled by the overt subject” (Jayseelan 2001) as in (15).

- (15) tai                xu-i    uth-i                [ga    d<sup>h</sup>u-l-e]  
 3.F.S.NOM                wake-CONJP    body    wash-PST-3  
 ‘She woke up and took a bath.’

In (15), it is clearly shown that the subject of the matrix clause is controlling the subject of the embedded clause. But in case of genitive subject, these kinds of constructions are not acceptable as in (16).

- (16) \*tair                mur    bixa-i                xu-l-e  
 3.F.S.GEN                head    ach-CONJP                sleep-PST-3  
 ‘she got headache and slept.’

Here, conjunction reduction also cannot help to consider the genitive subject as a subject.

### 5.2.2. Reflexivisation

In Assamese, the reflexive anaphor *nij* ‘self’ can be used as an anaphor which is controlled by the subject of a clause. Normally, we see a subject having nominative case controls an anaphor. Here, we will see if a genitive subject can control an anaphor or not.

- (17) xi                nij-e                kaam-tu                kor-il-e  
 3.M.S.NOM                self-NOM                work-CLF                do-PST-3  
 ‘He himself did the work.’

In (17), we can see that the subject having the nominative case controls the anaphor. Let us see if the genitive subject can control anaphors or not.

- (18) mur                   nij-ɔr-e                   ga   tʰik   n-a-i  
 1.S.GEN               self-GEN-EMPH           body well   NEG-exist-3  
 ‘My own health is not well.’

By looking at (18), we can say that the genitive subject is actually a subject because it can control an anaphor like a nominative subject does. But looking at only one property, we cannot claim that it is a subject. An interesting phenomenon we see here is that the anaphors take the same case as the subject takes (17-18). We assume it as a language specific phenomenon.

Although reflexivisation helps us to consider genitive subjects as subjects but we cannot consider it as a proper subject because it fails to obey most of the properties of a subject as mentioned above. Here, we can assume that since genitive constructions lack a prototypical subject i.e. a nominative subject, the genitive takes the place and act as a subject and it satisfies Extended Projection Principle<sup>1</sup> (EPP) which says every clause must have a subject. To make it as a valid argument, we would assume the hierarchy of arguments: ‘agent’ is higher than ‘experiencer’, ‘experiencer’ is higher than ‘goal’ and ‘goal’ is higher than ‘theme’. So, in the absence of the highest element of the hierarchy i.e. ‘agent’, the ‘experiencer’ takes the place of a subject.

## 6. Analysis

Following Jayseelan (1990) and Nath (2013), we came with an analysis where the genitive subject comes out of the spec of VP and moves to left adjoin TP. The genitive subject left adjoins to the canonical subject position because the main subject position i.e. spec of TP is only occupied by the prototypical nominative subject which satisfies all the properties of a subject. Here, the genitive subject moves to adjoin TP only to fulfill EPP. There is a little improvisation we did is that the genitive subject is generated in the spec of NP which is the complement of VP which according to Nath (2013) is generated in the VP spec. let us see with an example:

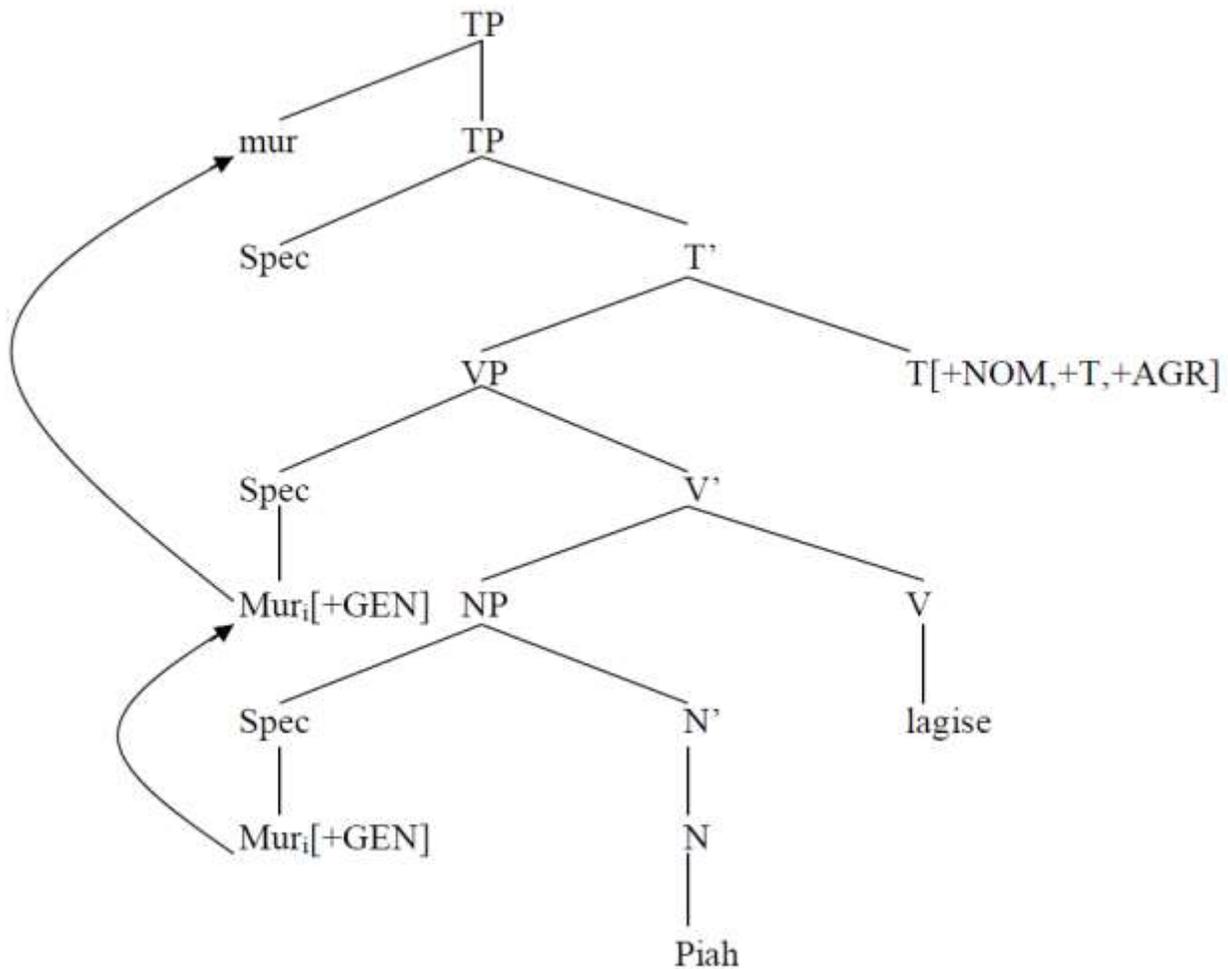
- (19) mur                   piah   lag-i-s-e  
 1.S.GEN               thirst   need.PRS-NF-exist-3  
 ‘I am thirsty.’

The diagram of the sentence (19) is shown in (20):

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<sup>1</sup> See Chomsky (1981): ‘Lectures on the Government and Binding Theory.’

(20)



In (20), it is shown that the genitive subject is generated in spec of NP (the complement of VP) because a genitive noun cannot occur alone and it has to have a subject. The noun *piah* ‘thirst’ is head of the NP and the genitive *mur* ‘my’ as well. Since genitive NP bears an inherent case feature, which is [+interpretable] and does not need to be checked and deleted, it moves first to the spec of VP to satisfy the minimality condition and then it left adjoins to TP to fulfill EPP and to get the desired word order.

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen that the experiencer subjects are case marked with a genitive case unlike other Indian languages where the subjects are marked with dative case. We also see that the subject NP along with the experiencer theta role gets a semantic interpretation of a

possessor, so, there we an amalgamation of two theta roles: an experiencer and a possessor. The subjecthood properties do not support the experiencer subject enough to call it a subject, so, we assume that it takes the position of the subject only to satisfy EPP and to get the desired word order. The subject NP is first generated in the spec of NP (complement of VP), later it adjoins to the canonical subject position as in (20). Lastly, we see how the features are checked.

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