Syntactic and Semantic Aspects of Subject-Less Sentences in Malayalam

Dr. Kunjamma. S., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Abstract

Generally, all sentences can be broadly divided into a subject constituent and a predicate constituent is a view which is found in traditional as well as modern grammatical analysis. In surface level, the initial NP in a sentence of normal word order, which is directly related to the verb is identified as its subject. But, the identification fails to satisfy, when more complex structures are examined. The concept of “subject” is very elusive, and seems to be quite different depending on languages. The morphological feature, case is used to indicate the function of an NP within its clause. But case marking is not always a reliable guide for determining the grammatical relationship of a particular NP. An NP may be a grammatical subject or object even though its case marking suggests something quite different. This kind of irregular correlation between morphological features and syntactic functions is not uncommon. So the grammatical relations be identified on the basis of syntactic evidence which can be used to identify grammatical relations particularly in subjects.

In Malayalam though the subject is in nominative case, certain verbs do not allow NPs in the nominative to occupy the initial (subject) slot of sentences. And it is argued that subject-category is not relevant in the analysis of Malayalam sentences. This paper is an attempt to explain the above facts with reference to the syntactic and semantic aspects.

Keywords: Syntactic and Semantic, grammatical subject, dative case, logical subject

1. Introduction

All sentences can broadly be divided into a subject constituent and a predicate constituent is a view which is found in traditional as well as modern grammatical analysis. In surface level, the initial NP in a sentence of normal word order, which is directly related to the verb is identified as its subject. But, the identification fails to satisfy, when more complex structures are examined. The concept of “subject” is very elusive and seems to be quite different depending on languages (K.M. Prabakara Varriar). The notion ‘subject’ is described by various scholars differently. According to Chomsky (1965) it is in terms of the topology of the deep-structure
phrase marker that the semantically relevant notions of subject, object and predicate are defined and selection restrictions are accounted for. A noun phrase immediately dominated by the node ‘S’ will be called the deep subject. The deep subject refers to the NP argument that appears to the immediate left of the verb in surface structure. According to Fillmore (1968), The NPs appearing in the underlying structure are differentiated only on the basis of various semantic roles that they manifest. In the absence of an agent in the deep sentence, another NP is moved to the position of subject.

There are observations made by other scholars. Kothandaraman (1972) examines that, there can be certain verbs in languages like Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam which do not require a subject in the sentence. Now examine the Malayalam grammarian’s observation. Certain verbs do not allow NPs in the nominative to occupy the initial (subject) slot of sentences. Gundert (1859) termed them as verbs without nominative. Rev. George Mathen (1863) says that “state, happening and action show great difference. State is something which is possessed by the actor, happening is something which the actor is involved, and action is that thing which is performed by the actor. State and happenings are common to both animate and inanimate objects. Action is associated with only creatures and humans” George Mathen (p-138). In some verbs of happening and those which are used in that manner, the subject will be hidden. And such verbs are called subject less verbs. According to Raja Raja Varma, subject is the most important among case relations. If verb is divided into action and result, subject is action depended and object is result dependent. Some verbs, where the action of the subject is not required. Such verb is called subject-hidden verb. In such cases the position of the subject will have to be filled by the nominal in dative case. (A.R.p-189). Abraham (1976), says that, there is a class of verbs in Malayalam whose underlying (logic) subjects take dative case markers when they appear in the surface level. He refers such subject NP as pseudo dative. eg. enikku ‘for me’.

K.M. Prabhakara Varriar had also some observations. There are a good deal of variation is found in the literature with reference to the role of subject. Besides subject, the terms such as ‘topic’, ‘theme’and ‘focus’ are used to designate an element of statement. Each of these names is employed to explain the phenomenon in different contexts. Except subject, others are not grammatical category. As far as grammatical analysis is concerned, the notion subject can be dispensed with in speaking of underlying semantic relationships.

In the sentence, ‘ayaḥkkku eluttu kiṭṭi’. “He got the letter”, here the aim is that something (the letter) has reached somewhere (he). Here he functions as the goal. The goal-case subsumes several sub notions. Here the suggestion given by Fillmore is, we might account for all these variations in meanings by using the ‘principle of complementarity’. To quote Fillmore, “Sometimes we find in different sentences semantic functions which in detail are partly alike and
partly different, their difference being systematically relatable to differences in the semantic properties of the lexical material they are in construction with.” (Fillmore, 1968).

There are other expressions which overlap with other case-notions:
Eg. (1)  ുാൻ തുട്ട മുസാമം ദേഹിക്ക് പൂക്കാൻ. (destination)
‘Next month I will go to Delhi.’

(2)  പറ്റ് മണിയ്ക്ക് സ്കൂള്‍ ക്ലാസ് തുടാന്നം. (Time)
‘The class will start at 10’clock’.
(3)  ഇ മാരാ നെ റൈക്ക് പുറാതനം. (location)
‘Apply this medicine on the forehead’
(4)  ദേഹിക്ക് പൂക്കാൻ ഓറാണിയത്. (purpose)
‘Get ready to go Delhi.’
(5)  എനിക്ക് ഓറ വിതതുത്. (possession)
‘I have a house’.

So, the dative nominal is the surface realization of the underlying ‘goal-case’. The general case-frame consists of several sub-cases, which include experience and possession’. These presuppose an ‘experiencer’ and a ‘possessor’ respectively. The overt signaling of the relationship such as experience and possession is done with dative case markers in the language.

The dative case markers -ku and -nu, are phonologically conditioned and, are regularly used for indirect objects and locatives. Examples:
(6)  മോൺ കുത്ത്-ക് പാല കോട്ടുത്ത്.
Mother child-dat milk give.Past
‘Mother gave the child milk.’
(7)  റാജു കുത്ത്-ക്ക് പുബ്കിത്ത്-യ കോട്ടുത്ത്.
Raju child-dat kitten-acc give.past
‘Raju gave the child a kitten.’

The above examples show the fact that, in Malayalam, inanimate arguments take no case marker and only animate arguments take accusative case marking, which marked its absence on the argument paal ‘milk’ in example (6) and its presence on puuccakkutti ‘kitten’ in (7).

Distribution of Dative Nominals in Malayalam
Dative case expressions in Malayalam exhibit various functions such as goal, experiencer, purpose, possession etc. Sometimes, the dative case appears on the ‘logical subject’ of the
sentence. Milla Nizar, explained that, there are three domains in which we find this use of the dative case: experiencer predicates, possession constructions and modal constructions.

Experiencer Predicates

In certain cases, certain verbs functions as `experiencer' verbs that take a dative as the logical subject. In that case the verbs convey semantic notions such as experiencer, feeling, etc. In experiencer predicates, two types of constructions can be possible, construction with a simple verb, and construction with a complex predicate.

Construction with a simple verb:
Eg. enikku veedanikkunnu.
   Isg.-dat ache-have ‘I have an ache’
enikku toonnunnu.
   Isg.-dat feel-have ‘I have a feel’.

Construction with a complex predicate:
In this construction, the first element is a noun, adjective or non-finite verb, while the second element is a verb lacking its typical semantic content, which Mohanan and Mohanan (1990: 47) characterize as a `light verb'. These light verbs generally have meanings such as `be', `have', `become', `feel', `come', etc. and when they combine with a noun, adjective, or non-finite verb, the complex predicate induces dative case on the logical subject (Milla Nizar). If the simple verb is used, the subject can only take the nominative case, and if the light verb, the subject can only be dative. The following examples show this:

(8) (a)    aval santooṣiccu.
   3sg.f-nom be.happy.past
   ‘She became happy.’

(b) *aval-kku santooṣiccu.
   3sg.f-dat be.happy.past
   ‘She became happy.’

(9) (a)    aval-kku santooṣam aayi.
   3sg.f-dat happiness become.past
   ‘She became happy.’

b) *aval santooṣam aayi.
   3sg.f-nom happiness become.past
   ‘She became happy.’
In (8a) the simple verb *santooṣikkukata* 'be happy' takes a nominative subject and the usage of a dative subject in (8b) becomes ungrammatical. But, in (9a) the dative subject is grammatical with the complex predicate *santooṣamaakukata* 'happiness'+'to become', while in (9b) it cannot take a nominative subject. Semantically the two constructions are considered to be equivalent. Jayaseelan (2004: 231) notes that the nominative construction is grammatical with the imperative mood, while the dative construction is not.

Example:

(10) (a) (nii) santooṣik'k'-uu
    2sg-nom be.happy-imp
    '(You) be happy!'  
(b) *nin-akkku santooṣam aak-uu
    2sg-dat happiness become-imp
    *You become happy! (Jayaseelan 2004: 231)

Another type of predicates in which both the simple verb form and the corresponding light verb takes the dative case and the nominative usage is ungrammatical. Jayaseelan (2004) identifies the distinction between mental and physical experience as key to explaining this behavior. For predicates involving physical experience, such as *viṣakkukata* 'be hungry' and *veedanikkukata* `feel pain', the corresponding light verb predicates using the nouns *viṣappu* `hunger' and *veedana* `pain' can only occur with a dative-marked subject.

Examples:

(11) (a) enikkü viṣapputu.
    1sg-dat hunger be. pres
    `I am hungry.'
(b) *ñaan viṣapputu.
    1sg-nom hunger be. pres
    *I am hungry.'
(12) (a) eni-kku talaveedanat unṭu.
    1sg-dat headache be. pres
    `I have a headache.'
(b) *ñaan talaveedanat untu.
    1sg-nom headache be. pres
    *I have a headache.'

Mental experience predicates, illustrate an alternation between nominative and dative case, as seen in the examples (8) and (9). with a dative-marked subject. The simple verb *iṣṭappeṭukata* 'to like' is an exception to this. While the complex predicate use only dative case, both the dative and nominative forms are grammatical with the simple verb.
Example:

(13) (a) avaḷ-kku atu Ḣṭamaayi.
    3sg.f-dat that liking - become. past
    `She liked that.'
(b) *avaḷ atu Ḣṭamaayi.
    3sg.f-nom that liking-become.past
    *`She liked that.'

(14) (a) avaḷ atu Ḣṭappėṭṭu
    3sg.f-nom that like. past
    `She liked that.'
(b) avaḷ-kku atu Ḣṭappėṭṭu
    3sg.f-dat that like. past
    `She liked that.'

2. Possession

In possession constructions, we can find the dative subjects in which the possessor is marked by the dative case. We can account for two types of possession, namely concrete and abstract which is exemplified below:

(15). avaḷkku viṭṭu. ‘She has Home’
    3sg.f-dat home-be
    avanu viṭṭu. . ‘He has Home’ (Concrete possession)
    3sg.m-dat home -be
(16) maanakkku puli uego. (Abstract possession)
    mango-dat sour be. prest
    `Mango has sour.'

Another distinction which has certain significance both syntactically and semantically is that of alienable and inalienable possessions. Inalienable possessives express inherently relational concepts. Nouns which express the kinship and social relations are said to be relational nouns. The alienable possessives include concrete possessions like viṭṭu ‘home’. In inalienable possessives we can see both abstract and concrete possessions (V.P.Gopinadhan). The example for inalienable possessives is given below:

(17). avar-kku muunnu kuṭṭikaḷ uego.
    3pl-dat three child-pl be. prest
    `They have three children.'

The possessive datives generate genitival phrases, as in (18) below.
Another peculiarity is that, the substitutability of genitive case with datives without affecting any meaning change.

viṭṭu cuR Rum. ‘Around the house’

viṭṭu cuR Rum. ‘Around the house’

2. Modality

The meaning of possibility is expressed by the suffix ‘-aam’ in Malayalam. It determines the meaning when the occurrence is with the verbs and the subject which is in nominative or dative case. When it is used with a nominative subject, the modal suffix ‘-aam’ has the meaning of possibility and with a dative subject the meaning of permission. ‘-aṇam’.

Another suffix –aṇam is a shortened form of the modal veeṇam and has a meaning of external demand with a nominative subject and internal need with a dative subject (Mohanan and Mohanan 1990).

In certain cases, same NP appears in nominative and dative cases ‘without affecting the meaning change’. (Abraham p-125). Abraham observed that:

(e) enikku viyarttu. ‘I swet’
(b) "ñaan viyarttu. ‘I swet’

(24) (a) enikku viRaccu. ‘I trembled’
(b) "ñaan viRaccu. ‘I trembled’

(25) (a) enikku vallaate višannu. ‘I was hungry’
(b) "ñaan vallaate višannu. ‘I was hungry’

(26) (a) enikku atu ištappettu. ‘I liked that’
(b) "ñaan atu ištappettu. ‘I liked that’

Abraham points out that “the occurrences of dative nouns as subjects cannot be a syntactic contravention in Malayalam. But according to Prabhakara Varriar, the above sentence pairs are not synonymous. The dative nominal in ‘enikku viyarttu’ stands for the ‘experiencer’. The semantic distinction becomes explicit in the following sentences:

(27) enikku mukham viyarttu. ‘My face swet’
(28) *"ñaan mukham viyarttu. ‘I face swet’

Consider the following sentence:

(29) enRe mukham viyarttu. ‘My face swet’

This is a well-formed sentence as two NPs in the same case relation, do not coincide here. And also, the sentences like,

(30) nii višakkunnuntu? ‘Are you hungry?’
(31) "ñaṅṅal višakkunilla. ‘We are not hungry.’

are not acceptable. But the corresponding dative forms make the sentences acceptable. Another type of occurrence is that two datives in a single sentence. In this case one of the dative is not real.

(32) enikku pathikkunnatinu kaḷiṅṅu. ‘I could have to study’.

The sense of the word ‘atinu’ (which is used as an anaphoric pronoun) in the sentence is related to a verbal infinitive whereas ‘enikku’ stands for the possessor.

**Conclusion**

As far as Malayalam is concerned the subject notion is not required for an adequate interpretation of the semantic input of a sentence. The surface dative is related to several complementary case relations. The parallel constructions are realizations of distinct semantic relationships.
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Dr. Kunjamma. S., M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Associate Professor & Head
Department of Linguistics
University of Kerala
Kariavattom, Thiruvananthapuram
Kerala- 695581, India
drskunjamma@yahoo.co.in