On clausal subjects and extraposition in the history of English

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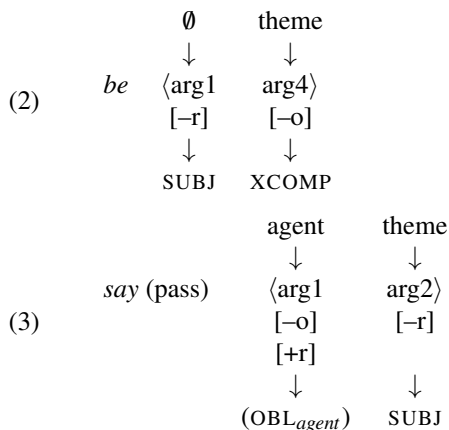University of Gothenburg
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Abstract

In this paper, the argument structure of English predicates taking clausal arguments is discussed from a historical perspective. Based on data from the Penn Corpora of Historical English (PCHE) (Kroch et al., 2000, 2005, 2010) and the *The York-Toronto-Helsinki Parsed Corpus of Old English Prose* (YCOE) (Taylor et al., 2003), the paper in particular constitutes an attempt to account for the realization of the subject for these clausal argument-taking predicates, based upon an approach to argument structure (Kibort, 2007) that does not assume the Subject Condition, i.e. 'every predicator must have a subject' (Bresnan, 2001: 311). The argument made is that there is a close connection between non-thematic subjects in clausal argument constructions in the history of English and the development of the so-called raising construction.

Consider first the behavior of the verb *say* in examples taken from the Early Modern English corpus.
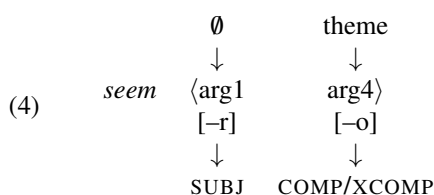
(1) a. She said she had a spirit in the likenes of a yellow dun catte. (GIFFORD-E2-H,E1R.290)
  b. It is said that Dunkirk is sold to the French for four hundred thousand pound. (HOXINDEN-1660-E3-H,280.184)
  c. She is said to have bine the death of her husband. (MONTAGUE-E3-P2,1,219.78)
  d. and, as he said of Geometry, that if she be skill'd in that, she will not easily be a Gamester or a Dancer, may perfectly be said of Religion. (JETAYLOR-E3-P1,34.222)

In (1-a), the verb *say* occurs in a transitive construction, in (1-b), an impersonal passive, in (1-c), passive raising, and, lastly, in (1-d), in the nonextraposed clausal subject construction. When used in the passive, the verb *say* appears to take a subject that is not associated with a thematic role, and thus essentially functions as a raising verb. In order to account for the raising verb behavior of the passives of verbs such as *say*, passive *be* is treated as a raising verb with the argument structure given in (2). The argument structure for passive *say* is given in (3).

$$
(2) \quad
\begin{array}{ccc}
 & \emptyset & \text{theme} \\
 & \downarrow & \downarrow \\
be & \langle \text{arg1} & \text{arg4} \rangle \\
 & \text{[--r]} & \text{[--o]} \\
 & \downarrow & \downarrow \\
 & \text{SUBJ} & \text{XCOMP}
\end{array}
$$

$$
(3) \quad
\begin{array}{ccc}
 & \text{agent} & \text{theme} \\
 & \downarrow & \downarrow \\
say\ (\text{pass}) & \langle \text{arg1} & \text{arg2} \rangle \\
 & \text{[--o]} & \text{[--r]} \\
 & \text{[+r]} & \\
 & \downarrow & \downarrow \\
 & (\text{OBL}_{agent}) & \text{SUBJ}
\end{array}
$$

In an approach that assumes the Subject Condition (e.g. Bresnan, 2001), verbs whose thematic argument(s) cannot be mapped to SUBJ take an additional non-thematic argument, prompted by the Subject Condition. In the approach adopted in this paper, the motivation for the occurrence of *it* as subject in a sentence such as (1-b) is simply to fill the empty subject position of passive *be*, a position that alternatively could be filled by either a constituent raised from the subclause, as in (1-c), or the subclause itself, as in (1-d).

Lexical raising verbs, such as *seem* and *appear*, have an argument structure similar to that of passive *be*. Consider (4).

$$
(4) \quad
\begin{array}{ccc}
 & \emptyset & \text{theme} \\
 & \downarrow & \downarrow \\
seem & \langle \text{arg1} & \text{arg4} \rangle \\
 & \text{[--r]} & \text{[--o]} \\
 & \downarrow & \downarrow \\
 & \text{SUBJ} & \text{COMP/XCOMP}
\end{array}
$$

The argument structure in (4), apart from accounting for the raising verb behavior of lexical raising verbs, also accounts for the fact that raising verbs like *seem* cannot occur with an unaccompanied clausal subject, as shown in (5). This is on the other hand possible for passive verbs and intransitive unaccusative verbs, as is shown in (1-d) and in (6), respectively.

(5)   a.   It seems that there are consulting physicians in Africa. (READE-1863,212.260)
           b.   *That there are consulting physicians in Africa seems.

(6)   that in this matter I was not led by hym, very well and plainly appereth, (MROPER-E1-P1,521.98)

Historically, it appears as if the use of non-thematic *(h)it*, maybe to the exception of weather-verb constructions, is tied to the development of the raising construction in Middle English (cf. Denison 1993; Barron, 1997, 2001). In Old English, the occurrences of *hit* found in conjunction with clausal arguments should probably be analysed as thematic. With respect to the two verbs that most frequently occur in conjunction with a clausal argument in Old English, the unaccusative intransitive verb *gelimpan* and the impersonal two-place verb *þyncan*, the *hit*-pronoun frequently does not occur. Table 1 shows the the way in which the verbs *gelimpan* and *þyncan* cooccur with the *hit*-pronoun and/or an experiencer argument per 100K clauses (IPs in the corpus annotation).

Table 1: The OE verbs *þyncan* and *gelimpan* in conjunction with *(h)it* and/or dative experiencer

	(h)it	experiencer	neither	both
þyncan	0	46	<1	<1
gelimpan	97	13	27	0

As can be seen from the table, *gelimpan* coocccurs with the *hit*-pronoun, a dative experiencer, or neither. Based on the assumption that the nonoccurrence of *hit* here does not constitute a case of pro-drop, the frequency of which *gelimpan* occurs with only a clausal argument suggests that it should be analysed as an unaccusative intransitive verb. The verb *þyncan* only cooccurs with *hit* in conjunction with a dative experiencer.

As is shown in the present paper, the development of the raising verb behavior for the verbs commonly referred to as raising verbs as well as for certain passive verbs, seems to go together with the non-thematic use of the pronoun *(h)it* in clausal argument constructions. This behavior is modeled within an approach to argument structure (Kibort 2007) that does not assume the Subject Condition.

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