Dative subject construction in Eastern Slavic: Early innovation or archaism?

Ilona Manevskaia[a], Leonid Kulikov[b]

[a] Ghent University, [b] EVALISA research group, Department of Linguistics, Ghent University

imanevskaia@yahoo.com; Leonid.Kulikov@UGent.be

This paper focuses on the historical sources and evolution of constructions with non-canonical (dative) subject in the history of Slavic languages, foremost in Eastern Slavic, paying special attention to possessive constructions and constructions with experiencer verbs. I will argue that the existence of competing syntactic patterns must be due to the interaction of two opposing tendencies in the history of the Slavic (and, more generally, Eastern Indo-European) syntax.

Traditionally, constructions such as (1), attested in some Eastern Slavic languages, are regarded as a feature of the literary language resulting from early borrowing or from the influence of Southern Slavic languages (e.g. Gallis 1956):

(1) Old Russian

bě   emu   synŭ

was he:DAT son:NOM

'He had a son'

This opinion leads to inadequate understanding of the origins of constructions with non-canonical subject in the history of Slavic languages, and in the history of Indo-European, in general. This traditional view will be subjected to critical analysis in the present paper.

I will concentrate on evidence from the history of (mainly Eastern) Slavic languages that unambiguously points to the antiquity of constructions with the dative subject in this Indo-European branch, most likely inherited from the proto-language. In particular, I will try to corroborate the idea expressed by V. Toporov (1960) (unfortunately largely disregarded in later scholarship) about the syntactic influence of Middle Iranian languages on Eastern Slavic dialects in the contact zone (see Ščecova 1996). While Old Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit) has few traces of Differential Subject Marking preserved after the split of Proto-Indo-Aryan and Proto-Iranian, the closely related Iranian languages proved to be much more conservative in this part of the syntactic system. In particular, they furnish valuable evidence for the Proto-Indo-European dative subject constructions (especially in possessive constructions). This paper will focus on possible impact of Iranian syntax that could have supported the preservation of a number of syntactic archaisms in early Eastern Slavic dialects which were lost in many other Slavic languages of both Western and Southern groups.

Integrating data from Slavic (mostly Old and early Modern Russian), Iranian and some other ancient Indo-European branches, I will investigate the main mechanisms and diachronic scenarios documented for the history of oblique subjects in this part of the Indo-European area.

I argue that the diachronic scenarios documented for the history of non-nominative subjects depend on several parameters, such as, above all, the semantic class of verbs. In particular, both verbs of possession and experiential verbs prove to be most conservative as

far as the preservation of the oblique subjects inherited from Proto-Indo-European (see especially Barðdal et al. 2012; Barðdal & Smitherman 2013) is concerned.

In particular, there are good reasons to assume the supporting influence of Iranian dative constructions that helped to preserve this and some other archaic features of the Slavic syntax arguably inherited from Proto-Indo-European.

Evidence from the history of Slavic syntax furnishes valuable material for a diachronic typology of constructions with dative (and, more generally, oblique) subjects, instantiating a number of basic mechanisms responsible for the rise of Differential Subject Marking, and its subsequent decline in some branches of Indo-European.

References

Barðdal, J. et al. 2012. Reconstructing constructional semantics: The dative subject construction in Old Norse-Icelandic, Latin, Ancient Greek, Old Russian and Old Lithuanian. *Studies in Language* 36.3: 511-547.

Barðdal, J. & T. Smitherman. 2013. The quest for cognates: A reconstruction of oblique subject constructions in Proto-Indo-European. *Language Dynamics and Change* 3.1: 28-67.

Gallis, A. 1956. The syntax of relative clauses in Serbo-Croatian viewed on a historical basis. Oslo: Aschehoug.

Lunt, H.G. 1987. On the relationship of Old Church Slavonic to the written language of early Rus'. *Russian linguistics* 11.2: 133-162.

Ščecova, T.G. 1996. *Dativ v drevnerusskom pis'mennom jazyke XI—XIV vv. (na materiale datel'nogo posessivnogo, gradacionnogo i priimennogo sub''ektno-ob''ektnogo)* [The dative case in Old Russian literary language of the 11-14 centuries: Possessive, gradational and adnominal subject-object constructions]. Moscow, PhD diss.

Toporov, V.N. 1960. Ob odnoj irano-slavjanskoj paralleli iz oblasti sintaksisa [An Irano-Slavic syntactic parallel]. *Institut slavjanovedenija, Kratkie soobščenija* 28: 3-11.