

## **Oblique subjects in Indo-European: a reappraisal**

In recent years several arguments have been brought forth for the view that there were oblique subjects in ancient Indo-European languages (e.g. Barðdal & Eythórsson 2020, Frotscher et al. 2020, Barðdal 2023). It has even been claimed that it is possible to reconstruct oblique subjects for Proto-Indo-European. This paper critically reappraises some of the main findings of this research, presenting an evaluation of the state of the art. The conclusion is that while it may be possible that some individual language branches have oblique subjects, it cannot be established for all of them, nor be reconstructed for Proto-Indo-European (cf. Kiparsky 2018).

It has been persuasively argued that the relevant oblique NPs in Modern Icelandic show the behavioral properties of subjects; hence the term oblique (or “quirky”) subject (Andrews 1976, Thráinsson 1979 and subsequent work). The crucial syntactic tests used to establish the subjecthood of such oblique NPs include reflexivization, conjunction reduction, object and subject raising, control, and word order. Similar arguments have been applied to oblique NPs in Modern Indic and other South Asian languages (e.g. Masica 1976, Kachru, Kachru & Bhatia 1976, Klaiman 1980).

In various other languages the syntactic status of the oblique NPs is less clear. This is both true of the modern Indo-European languages and, even more so, of the older ones. The reason is that the application of the usual subject tests is much more difficult in those languages, due to various factors, including structural ambiguities and, especially at historical stages, philological problems inherent in the attested sources.

A further obstacle is the fact that it has so far hardly been possible to identify a convincing number of cognate verbal roots associated with oblique NPs across the Indo-European languages. Therefore, there is a lack of lexical material that can be used for the reconstruction of oblique subjects for Proto-Indo-European. On the other hand, common predicates involving oblique NPs have been established for individual branches, e.g. Germanic.

Finally, new oblique subject predicates have emerged in historical times in various languages, where oblique structures have evolved from nominative ones.

In conclusion, while significant progress has been made in recent research cataloging and analyzing constructions with oblique subject-like NPs in several Indo-European languages, the much more ambitious goal of making a convincing case for the reconstruction of oblique subjects in Proto-Indo-European remains elusive.