

CHAPTER 4

SUBJECTHOOD AND AGREEMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

A standard assumption that has been made in the generative literature is that subjecthood can be defined in structural terms. Within pre-X'-frameworks, subjects have been argued to occupy the structurally most prominent NP position, i.e. the NP position which is immediately dominated by S ([NP, S], cf. Chomsky 1965:68ff.). This basic assumption has been maintained to a large extent in later work except that the actual label for the subject position has been adapted to the developments in the analysis of the clause structure (cf. McCloskey 1997 for a survey¹). Within a simple X'-system, the subject position has been identified as [Spec, IP]. Finally, within the more fine-grained clause structures proposed in more recent work (cf. Pollock 1989 and much subsequent work), the subject position has generally been identified as [Spec, Agr_SP], but more generally the subject position could simply be defined as the highest specifier position in the inflectional layer (McCloskey 1997:216).

If we assume that a definition of subjecthood along these lines is on the right track, then the analysis of German scrambling proposed in the preceding chapter section 2.7 raises a problem. I have argued there that the different orders found with nominal arguments in German are the result of argument movement to proxy case checking categories above TP. Thus, for example the order DO-SU is the result of DO movement to an ACC checking position which is higher than the subject's NOM checking position. This means that the DO would occupy a specifier position which is higher in the inflectional domain than the position occupied by the subject, contrary to what we would expect if subjecthood is defined as the highest specifier position in the inflectional domain. In other words, the object seems to be too high in terms of this definition or the subject too low.

¹ As McCloskey observes however, within more recent work the properties that define subjecthood are actually distributed over a sequence of derivationally linked positions. But one of these positions would still be the highest position in the inflectional domain, i.e. this position still plays a central role for the definition of subjecthood.

The conclusion that, with the order DO-SU, the object is too high or the subject too low is confirmed by another property of scrambling in German. As discussed in chapter 3.2.3.6, scrambling of arguments past the subject generally leads to what look like reconstruction effects. The relevant data are repeated here in (1).

- (1) a. dass [seinen Vater]_i jeder t_i besucht hat German
 that his father (DO) everyone (SU) visited has
 'that everyone has visited his father.'
- b. weil sich_i der Hans t_i einen Brief geschrieben hat
 because himself (IO) the John (SU) a letter (DO) written has
 'because John wrote a letter to himself.'

In (1a), a DO occurs to the left of the subject quantifier, but a bound variable reading of the pronoun contained within the DO is nevertheless possible. Similarly, a reflexive DO occurs to the left of the subject in (1b) but binding of the DO by the subject seems to be possible, contrary to what we would expect given the c-command condition on binding as assumed within Binding Theory. But what is interesting is that reconstruction effects seem to be possible only with respect to the subject but not with respect to other elements.

- (2) * dass [seinen Vater]_i der Jörg jedem t_i gezeigt hat Ge.
 that his father (DO) the J. (SU) everyone (IO) shown has

In (2) the scrambled DO cannot reconstruct to what is generally assumed to be its base position, i.e. the position below the IO.

Both the binding data in (1a/b) and the standard structural definition of subjecthood suggest that, with the order DO-SU, the surface position of the DO is too high or the one of the subject is too low. There are two ways to deal with this dilemma. First of all, it could be argued that an argument that occurs to the left of the subject occupies an A'-position and that it therefore gets reconstructed to a position below the subject. The binding properties shown in (1) would then be obtained in the base position of the DO and subjecthood can be defined in terms of the highest A-position in the inflectional domain. However, as discussed in chapter 3, an A'-movement analysis of scrambling past a subject has several disadvantages. First, arguments preceding the subject have properties of elements in A-positions (cf. chapter 3.2.3). Secondly, in terms of an A'-movement analysis of scrambling past the subject, the cross-linguistic variation found with this process would be entirely accidental (cf. chapter 3.2.4.1). Finally, examples like (2) suggest that it is the subject which has a special status with respect to binding and that it is not the nature of scrambling past the subject (i.e. A' vs. A) which is responsible for reconstruction effects.

To analyze a scrambled DO as an element in an A'-position would deal with the observation that the DO seems to be too high for the definition of subjecthood and for binding by the subject. However, there is a different way of looking at the same state of affairs. Rather than to say that the object is too high, we could say that it is the subject which is too low. In other words, with the order DO-SU, the subject is not the head of the subject chain but there is a subject position which is higher than the position occupied by the DO but which is not occupied overtly. This proposal would again deal with both the problems raised above. Subjecthood can be defined as the highest specifier position in the inflectional domain and binding into the DO in (1) is obtained from the higher subject position.

In this chapter, I will pursue the latter option, i.e. the assumption that there is a higher subject position above the case checking positions in German. I will argue that the higher subject position is related to agreement (cf. also Frey 1990 and Santorini 1990 for earlier proposals along these lines) and I will discuss the consequences of this assumption for German. In the second part of this chapter (section 3), I will show how the analysis of German subjects can be extended to account for an intricate cross-linguistic variation that can be found among the Germanic languages with respect to the occurrence of constituents between the subject and the C-position.

2. SUBJECTS AND AGREEMENT IN GERMAN

As discussed in the introduction, the assumption that scrambling past subjects in German is the result of the occurrence of the subject in a position which is not the highest subject position allows us to account for the fact that subjects can bind into scrambled objects and it also allows us to maintain the standard definition of subjects as the element occupying the highest specifier position in the inflectional domain. The first question that arises for such an analysis is what the nature of the higher subject position is. There is a fairly obvious answer to this question. Subjects in German not only bear Nominative case, they are also related to a second property which is morphologically expressed, namely agreement on finite verbs. Hence, I propose that the higher subject position is a position where agreement is checked, an assumption which is in line with many proposals concerning the structure of the clause.

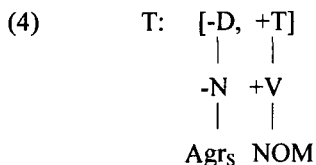
Given these assumptions, we obtain the following representation for a DO-SU order in German (proxy categories for case checking are labelled according to the case feature that is checked in the corresponding projection):

- (3) $[_{AgrSP} e_i [_{AccP} DO_j [_{NomP} SU_i [_{TP} t_i t_j [_{VP} t_i t_j]]]]]$

After movement to TP for categorial feature checking, the two arguments move to case checking proxy categories and above these case checking positions we have an

additional proxy category (Agr_sP) and a subject position which is related to agreement. Two additional issues arise now. First of all, what is the status of agreement within the framework proposed here? And secondly, what is the status of the higher subject position, i.e. how is the overtly realized element in the NOM checking position associated to this higher position so that it can bind the DO for example?

Let us start by considering the status of agreement within the framework proposed here. As pointed out in chapter 2, the source of agreement morphology can be argued to be the nominal features on verbal heads within the categorial feature checking system adopted here. In other words, agreement morphology is the morphological reflex of an uninterpretable N-feature in the same way that morphological case is the reflex of an uninterpretable V-feature. Thus, case is related to V-features whereas agreement is related to N-features. Agreement can therefore be represented as a subfeature of N as illustrated in (4):



T therefore contains (at least) three types of features: categorial features, an agreement feature and a case feature.

But what are the consequences of the presence of the Agr_s subfeature in (4)? First, we can observe that the status of Agr_s is not exactly identical to a feature like NOM in (4). Case features on heads such as T and V are entirely uninterpretable because they play no role at the interfaces, neither at PF nor at LF. They therefore have to be checked and deleted before the derivation reaches the interfaces. Agreement however does play a role at one interface, namely at the PF interface (agreement morphology on the verb). At LF, verbal agreement does not play a role because the content of Agr_s is already encoded on a nominal element and Agr_s is therefore redundant. However, as observed in chapters 2 and 3, interpretability within a Single Output Model can be understood as meaning interpretable for at least one of the two interfaces. The fact that Agr_s is interpretable at PF therefore means that Agr_s does not get checked and deleted in the course of a derivation.

But another property of Agr_s is important now. The exact value of Agr_s (e.g. 1sg, 3pl etc.) depends on the syntactic context in which it occurs. Thus, like Case on nominal constituents, Agr_s on T is a feature without a value. We can assume then that once T selects a nominal element for categorial feature checking, Agr_s also selects this nominal as the element determining its value. As already discussed in chapter 3.2.7, I assume here that feature checking and the assignment of a value to an unspecified feature are similar processes in the sense that in both cases a selection process (*Search* - selection of a feature checker or of a value) is followed by an

I propose now that this observation can be extended to agreement licensing in German cases like (3). However, as we can see from the surface word order in DO-SU examples, there is no expletive overtly present in the German examples that we are considering here. Yet this does not necessarily entail that no expletive is present at all. On the basis of examples like (5), it has often been argued that German licenses non-overt expletives (expletive *pro*, cf. e.g. Cardinaletti 1990, Grewendorf 1989, Safir 1985).

- An alternative to account for the order Agr-Case would be to relate it to the nature of the two licensing configurations. The proxy category created for case has two functions. First, it licenses the value of the case feature on the nominal constituent, and secondly it leads to the deletion of the uninterpretable case feature on T or V. The Agr_S proxy category, however, has only one function. It licenses the value of Agr_S. We therefore could argue that if two licensing configurations could be created at a given stage in a derivation it is the one with more effects which is created first.

Features, Categories and the Syntax of A-Positions
Cross-Linguistic Variation in the Germanic Languages

Haeberli, E.

2002, X, 381 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0854-2