Motion Verbs in Old Saxon with the Oblique Subject Construction: A Semantic Analysis

Many languages attest the oblique subject construction, e.g. Japanese (Masuda 2007), Russian, German (Smith 1985, Barddal 2006), Icelandic (Barddal 2006), Spanish (Maldonado 2002), Ancient Greek, Latin. The oblique subject construction can be defined as an argument structure where the subject-like argument is not in the canonical nominative case. For example (Barddal et al. 2010):

1) Mich friert!
   me.acc freezes.3sg
   Modern German

2) Mir ist kalt.
   me.dat ist.3sg cold.pred
   Modern German

3) Mér er kalt.
   me.dat is.3sg coldN.pred
   Modern Icelandic

4) Mig langar í kaffi.
   me.acc longs.3sg in coffee.acc
   Modern Icelandic

The examples above show the oblique subject in the accusative or dative case. In Early Germanic, oblique subjects in the accusative and dative case occur as well as the following patterns: ACC-NOM, ACC-ACC, ACC-GEN, ACC-PP, ACC-S, DAT-NOM, DAT-GEN, DAT-PP, DAT-S. These syntactic patterns are used to express happenstance, possession, modality, speaking, hindrance, ontological states, gain, success, evidentiality, experience, bodily states, emotion and attitude, happening, perception and cognition. Not all meanings are expressed by these patterns in every early Germanic language, but there is significant overlap (Barddal et al. 2010). OS expresses possession, experience, bodily states and emotion in this manner. OS has 19 predicates that show the DSC and 8 that show the ASC. This is in contrast to Old Norse-Icelandic, which has 337 (Barddal et al. 2010).

What is interesting about OS is that certain verbs of motion can occur with a dative pronoun and this is considered to be an example of the dative subject construction. *Faran* ‘go (be means of conveyance), *gangan* ‘go’, *cuman* ‘come’ and *giuuitan* ‘travel’ are the verbs found in this construction. All the verbs are attested more frequently with the dative than without (Clopton 1994). The dative marked argument is always animate, like Japanese, but unlike Modern German in the DSC, and usually human. Punctuality and telicity are often overtly marked in the clause. For example:

5) endi forum im ôđran uueg
   and went.3pl them.dat. other.acc way.acc
   Old Saxon

6) giuuitun im te Betheleem thanan nahtes sîđon
   travelled.3pl.dat. to Bethlehem thence night.gen later
   Old Saxon

The DSC occurs with these verbs of motion in OS when the participant is salient in the discourse. In some cases, a nominative subject earlier in the discourse can trigger verb agreement, but sometimes a nominative simply is not there. Additionally, the dative pronoun is in subject position next to the finite verb. The DSC with verbs of motion shows the subject properties of linear subject position, topicality, animacy, definiteness
and salience in the discourse. Semantic properties include differentiation of participants (where a nominative also occurs), volitionality, initiation of action, telicity and punctuality. The DSC with motion verbs is similar to, but not the same as, the more robust DSC.