Explaining Variation between the Accusative and Dative Subject Constructions in Early Germanic

Recent work has demonstrated that the Oblique Subject Construction was quite robust in Early Germanic (Barðdal et al. forthcoming). Predicates occur with subjects in the accusative, dative, and genitive for all attested early Germanic languages. What has yet to be explained are the motivations for the variation in the case marking on the oblique subject. This paper will focus on sememes (and sometimes lexemes) that vary between accusative and dative marking on the subject. This variation may be grouped as follows:

• Type 1: Variation within one stage of one language
• Type 2: Variation across stages of one language
• Type 3: Variation across related languages

Following work by Barðdal (2004, 2009, 2011) on the semantics of the dative and accusative in Germanic, I suggest that the primary motivation for the case variation in the Oblique Subject Construction is that of the affectedness of the subject argument.

In Type 1 variation, one sememe/lexeme is attested with both dative and accusative marking on the subject within one language. This is represented by Old High German *girinnan* ‘lack’:

(1) a. ni girinnit mih theroworto
   not lacks.3SG me.ACC the.GEN words.GEN
   ‘I do not lack words’
   (Otfrid 1,18,4)

b. där iu dero uuorto negerinne
   there you.DAT the.GEN words.GEN not-lacks.3SG.SBJ
   ‘May you not lack words there.’
   (Notker Psalmen 80,2)

Examination of the context of these examples reveals that the dative-marked subject is less affected by the situation than the accusative-marked subject. This is also observable for Old English predicates, as noted in Thornburg (1984).

Type 2 variation is represented by OHG *thunken*, Middle High German *dunken*, Modern German *dürken* ‘seem’. In OHG, this is of Type 1, varying between dative and accusative marking on the subject with an equal number of attestations for each. By MHG, while the dative is still occasionally attested, the majority of attestations are with the accusative. In Modern German, this verb is only attested with the accusative. We suggest that frequency effects, that the accusative is attested more frequently in MHG, account for the decrease in and eventual loss of variation over time.

Type 3 variation is represented by the sememes ‘hunger’ and ‘thirst’ in Germanic. While these are primarily attested with an accusative subject (e.g., Old Norse hungra, Gothic huggrjan, Old Saxon ghungrean, Old English (ge)hyngran), they may also occur with a dative subject (e.g., Old English (ge)hyngran). Thus a sememe/lexeme that is of Type 1 in one language may not be of Type 1 in closely related languages, leading to Type 3 variation.

References
