
The Semitic Perfect and the problem of zero subjects

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In many languages third person subject markers on verbs are frequently zero, while first and second person are overt (Cysouw 2003; Siewierska 2009). There have been several explanations for this phenomenon. Some suggest that it is a function of frequency: third person pronouns are less frequent in discourse (e.g., Bybee 1985). According to this explanation third person subjects do not develop in the first place. Others point to accessibility hierarchy, i.e., the more accessible a referent is, the less grammatical encoding it requires. Thus, first and second persons, which are more accessible, constantly regenerate, while the third person markers do not. Proponents of this explanation assume that third person subjects do develop, but are subsequently lost and reduce to zero (Givón 1976). Another possible explanation takes an iconicity approach: third persons are semantically unmarked relative to first and second persons and are therefore also morphologically unmarked (Siewierska 2009).

Siewierska distinguishes between absolute zero, where a language lacks any form in a particular paradigm to mark a person, and paradigmatic zero, where one slot in the paradigm, mostly third person singular, may have zero, but not others. Third person markers may be expressed as zero in adnominal possessive position, object or subject. She examines the frequency and cause for zero morpheme in all three and suggests that subjects tend to be of the paradigmatic type; she further concludes that a loss scenario is more likely to explain zero third person subjects. Koch (1995) suggested that synchronically in a paradigm one value is unmarked and least specific. Since singular is semantically the unmarked value of the number paradigm and third is semantically the unmarked value of the person paradigm, the third person singular is the unmarked value in any paradigm that marks such distinctions, i.e., subject, possessor etc. On the basis of this, he proposed a diachronic principle, according to which “[a] word-form which expresses by means of a non-zero marker a property which is typologically expected to be coded by zero is liable to be reanalysed as containing a zero marker”. According to Koch, therefore, morphological change consists of a drive to semantically create more iconic coding.

In this talk, I will present several cases of verbal paradigms developed in the

Semitic family, where third person forms are not marked for person, while first and second persons are overt and their source is fairly transparent. The third person pronoun in Semitic is a distal demonstrative and does not have distinct forms for subject and oblique. These functions are therefore expressed syntactically: the subject is independent, while the oblique is suffixed (Huehnergard & Pat-El 2012). In verbal paradigms based on canonical subjects (“nominative”), the 3rd person cannot be marked and the paradigm is asymmetric; however, in verbal paradigms where the person is based on non-canonical subjects (“oblique”), it is marked, and the paradigm is symmetric. This distribution suggests that the reason for zero of 3 person in verbal paradigms is primarily structural, not semantic or pragmatic.

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