

The Oblique Subject Construction in Old High German and Old Saxon: A Semantic Comparison

The existence of subjects marked with a case other than the nominative has been well documented throughout the Germanic language family. It is well attested in both Old High German and Old Saxon, with examples such as those in (1).

- (1) a. Old High German
in imo galihheta mineru seulu
in him.DAT liked.3SG my.DAT soul.DAT
'In him my soul is pleased' (Monsee Fragments 5,6)
- b. Old Saxon
nauseo: mir uuillot
nauseo me.DAT feels-nausea.3SG
'*Nauseo* means I feel nausea' (Old Saxon Glosses 31)

For both OHG and OS, the dominant semantic class found with the Oblique Subject Construction is that of emotion, with 36% and 49% of attested predicates respectively. This result is not surprising, given that cross-linguistically the semantic domain primarily associated with the construction is that of emotion. Also well attested for both languages are the semantic domains of bodily state (e.g., 'hunger') and cognition (e.g. 'think/consider', which is again not surprising, since predicates in these semantic domains are associated with the Oblique Subject Construction not only in Germanic, but throughout Indo-European.

This paper will compare the semantic distribution of predicates attested in the Oblique Subject Construction in Old High German and Old Saxon. The general semantic distribution in both these languages shows a great deal of overlap with each other as well as that of other Germanic (and Indo-European) languages, pointing to inheritance of the construction rather than parallel independent development. However, both languages also show some innovation, pointing to subsequent development (and productivity) of the construction.

Old High German, in comparison to both Old Saxon and the other Germanic languages, has a higher rate of attestation with the accusative rather than the dative, even in predicates where the reconstructed case must be dative. In some instances, a single predicate is attested with both accusative and dative, with equal frequency. This is clearly a language-specific development. Old Saxon, on the other hand, has extended the Oblique Subject Construction to semantic domains not previously associated with the construction, most notably the domain of motion verbs. This paper will outline these language-specific developments, and provide an account of the motivation for them in terms of available constructional networks.