

Frederik KORTLANDT

Leiden University

PERSONAL AND IMPERSONAL SENTENCES IN LITHUANIAN AND PROTO-INDO-EUROPEAN

Asmeniniai ir beasmeniai sakiniai lietuvių kalboje ir indoeuropiečių prokalbėje

Abstract. The dative subject construction of the historical languages is the continuation of the Proto-Indo-European thematic present. It was largely replaced by the construction with a nominative subject that continued the athematic present as well as the aorist, where the ergative was reinterpreted as a nominative.

Keywords: Lithuanian; Indo-European; dative; nominative; thematic present; athematic present.

Anotacija. Istorinių kalbų datyvinio subjekto konstrukcija yra indoeuropiečių tematinio prezento tęsinys. Ją paprastai keitė konstrukcija su nominatyviniu subjektu, tęsusi atematinį prezentą, taip pat aoristą, pastaruoju atveju ergatyvą reinterpretavus kaip nominatyvą.

Raktažodžiai: lietuvių kalba; indoeuropiečių kalbos; datyvas; nominatyvas; tematinis prezentas; atematinis prezentas.

The monumental Lithuanian Grammar edited by Vytautas Ambrazas (1997) lists a number of alternations between personal and impersonal sentences, among them the following (pp. 663–667):¹

Nn~Nd. *Mes pritrūkome pinigų ~ Mums pritrūko pinigų* ‘We ran short of money’, *Ligonis/Ligoniui pagerėjo* ‘The patient improved’, *Jis/Jam gailėjo šuns* ‘He felt pity for the dog’.

Nn~Na. *Man skauda galva/galvą* ‘I have a headache’, *Jam gerklė/gerklę perši* ‘He has a sore throat’, *Man gelia šonas/šoną* ‘My side aches’.

Nn~Ni. *Vaiką išbėrė spuogai/spuogais* ‘Pimples covered the child’, *Kambaryje kvėpia gėlės/gėlėmis* ‘Flowers smell sweet in the room’, *Nuo ežero padvelkė vėsumas/vėsumu* ‘Cool air drifted up from the lake’, *Dangų užtraukė debesys/debesimis* ‘Clouds covered the sky’.

¹ Case forms: Nn nominative, Ng genitive, Nd dative, Na accusative, Ni instrumental, Nl locative.

Nn~Ni. *Man ūžia galva/galvoje* ‘There is a buzzing in my head’, *Daržai/Daržuose dar žaliuoja* ‘The gardens are green yet’, *Troba/Troboje prisirinko dūmų* ‘The cottage filled with smoke’.

Nn~Nd with an impersonal reflexive verb: *Aš nemiegu* ‘I do not sleep’ ~ *Man nesimiega* ‘I cannot sleep’, *Jis gerai dirba* ‘He works well’ ~ *Jam gerai dirbasi* ‘It is easy for him to work’, *Aš noriu miego* ‘I am sleepy’ ~ *Man norisi miego* ‘I feel sleepy’.

The authors remark that impersonal sentences emphasize the spontaneous nature of a state or process. There are also impersonal sentences with two oblique objects (pp. 631–634, 653):

Ng~Nd. *Saulės mums užtenka* ‘We have enough sun(light)’, *Medžiotojui pagailo stirniukės* ‘The hunter felt sorry for the little roe’, *Man gaila tavęs* ‘I am sorry for you’.

Na~Ng. *Sodą prinešė sniego* ‘The garden was snowed up’.

Na~Ni. *Vaiką mėto spuogais* ‘The child is covered with pimples’.

Such impersonal constructions are particularly frequent in Lithuanian but are also sometimes found in other Indo-European languages, e.g. Russian *Lodku uneslo vetrom* ‘The boat was carried away by the wind’, *Mne žal’ tebja* ‘I am sorry for you’, English *Me dreamed a strange dream* (cf. also Pedersen 1907, 134–140 on Iranian, Celtic and Germanic). It may therefore be appropriate to look for their Proto-Indo-European origins.

On a number of occasions (e.g. Kortlandt 1983; 2002; 2020) I have argued that the Indo-European thematic conjugation had a dative subject, to be compared with the Lithuanian instances listed above. Thus, the structural difference between Sanskrit *ad-mi* ‘I eat’ and Greek *ἔδ-ο-μ-αι* ‘I will eat’ is the same as between Bulgarian *spj-a* ‘I sleep’ and *spi mi se* ‘I am sleepy’, with the thematic vowel (Greek -ο-, Bulgarian zero) corresponding to an empty subject position and the first person (Greek -m-, Bulgarian *mi*) coded as an indirect object. A reconstruction of the Proto-Indo-European verb on the basis of the morphological evidence results in a system with a nominative subject for athematic presents, an ergative subject for transitive aorists, and a dative subject in bivalent constructions for thematic presents and perfects. It turns out that the ergative was identical with the ablative for animates and with the instrumental for inanimates. Morphological elements can be retraced in Uralic while the syntactic structures are the same as what we find in Caucasian languages. Thus, the reconstruction supports the theory that

Proto-Indo-European is an Indo-Uralic language that was transformed under the influence of a Caucasian substratum (cf. already Pedersen 1907, 152 and 1933, 309 and Kortlandt 2009).

It now appears that the dative subject construction of the historical languages is the continuation of the Proto-Indo-European thematic present. It was largely replaced by the construction with a nominative subject that continued the athematic present as well as the aorist, where the ergative was reinterpreted as a nominative. This is the origin of the nominative in **-s* (PIE ablative) for nouns and in **-d* (PIE instrumental) for neuter pronouns. The alternations listed above show that the replacement was a comparatively recent development. The same holds for the perfect, where we find Greek original *πέποιθα* ‘I trust’, (*εὔ*) *πέπραγα* ‘I have fared (well)’ beside more recent transitive *πέπεικα* ‘I have persuaded’, *πέπραχα* ‘I have achieved’. In a similar vein, the original ergative construction with an inanimate subject is reflected in Lithuanian *Dangų užtraukė debesimis* ‘Clouds covered the sky’ and Russian *Lodku uneslo vetrom* ‘The boat was carried away by the wind’. The Indo-European accusative in **-m* was originally a directive case, as in Latin *ire Romam* ‘to go to Rome’, and supplied a new object function when the ergative became a nominative. The original allative function appears to be preserved in the Lithuanian examples listed above, where pain affects a human organ: *Man skauda galvą* ‘I have a headache’, *Jam gerklę perši* ‘He has a sore throat’, *Man gelia šoną* ‘My side aches’.

It should be clear that the impersonal constructions discussed here are quite different from the “dative subject constructions” with a nominative subject such as Latin *Mihi est liber* ‘I have a book’, Spanish *Me gusta la cerveza* ‘I like beer’, German *Mir gefallen diese Bücher* ‘I like these books’, Japanese *Ken-ni (wa) eigo-ga hanaseru* ‘Ken/Nd (topic) can speak English/Nn’ (Shibatani 1999, 47). These are also quite different from such double subject constructions as Japanese *Taroo-ga Hanako-ga suki da* ‘Taroo/Nn likes Hanako/Nn’. Impersonal constructions with a nominative subject are of course widespread in the languages of the world.

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Frederik KORTLANDT
 Schouwenhove 223
 NL-2332 DV Leiden
 The Netherlands
 [fkortlandt@gmail.com]