

A monarchy without subjects: on Brassai's (almost) subject-free dependency grammar

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Abstract

The paper presents Sámuel Brassai's reasons for almost entirely eliminating the term *subject* (Hu. *alany*) from syntactic analysis, and the manner in which this was achieved. It is shown that Brassai's dependency grammatical theory was in large measure motivated by his rejection (reminiscent of Tesnière) of the logical tradition working with a subject-predicate division. In contrast with much of today's dependency grammar, Brassai did more than relegate subjects to dependent status; he also stripped them of their name, preferring to use the term *nominative* (Hu. *nevező*) instead. The term *subject* was retained for only a subset of finite clauses, and applied on a semantic basis in partial independence from nominative case. The final part of the paper discusses Brassai's approach to the semantics of nominative dependents.

1 Introduction

If today's dependency grammarians were asked to name a few basic types of dependency relations, *subject* would probably quickly spring to their minds. Although the idea of a privileged subject-predicate relationship at the top of the clausal hierarchy has long been discarded in the tradition that DG linguists belong to, the term *subject* itself has survived, perhaps largely owing to another opposition it participates in, namely that of *subject vs object*. In the DG community, and especially among linguists working on nominative-accusative languages, a syntactic model eschewing the notion of subjects may seem almost unthinkable.

The goal of this paper is to present just such a model, which also happens to be one of the first completely dependency grammatical theories of syntax to be produced in Europe. It will be shown that when Sámuel Brassai, a Transylvanian polymath of the 19th century, developed his DG approach to the sentence, he did so by stripping subjects not only of their status (as standing in a privileged relationship with the predicate) but also of their name. While no doubt controversial, Brassai's argument deserves close scrutiny, and this is what the present paper aims to accomplish.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, it is discussed why Brassai rejected the dualistic, logically inspired tradition based on the subject-predicate opposition, developing a verb-centric dependency grammatical analysis instead. Section 3 is devoted to Brassai's terminological choice of referring to the relevant dependents as nominatives rather than subjects, and the use that Brassai still found for the latter term. Section 4 outlines Brassai's approach to the semantics of nominatives, which is consonant with recent work in construction grammar. Finally, Section 5 concludes the paper.

2 From dualism to monarchy: how Brassai stripped subjects of their status

Looking for a suitable way for framing the history of dependency grammar, Sériot (2020) remarks that “researchers without any link between each other can reach conclusions that are identical or very similar”, one possible reason being that “they reject the same thesis, because they find it unsatisfactory” (Sériot, 2020: 254). The history of DG lends considerable support to Sériot’s approach, especially with regard to the idea of verb-centricity. In particular, as the present section aims to show, Brassai’s decision to treat the verb as the unique root node of the clause was at least in part motivated by his strong dissatisfaction with a logical tradition that had regarded the subject and the predicate as equally prominent. In this respect, Brassai’s position was exactly the same as Tesnière’s several decades later, even though there is no reason to assume that Tesnière ever heard about Brassai.

Let us begin with a brief overview of what it is that Brassai and Tesnière would both come to reject. The assumption that subject and predicate are of equal prominence, mutually presupposing each other, has been widely held in linguistics. Inspired by a logical tradition going back to Aristotle, several syntacticians have assumed that sentences have two equally indispensable parts: a subject, expressing that about which something is said, and a predicate, which is what is said about the subject. This view did not only leave its mark on 20th c. constituency-oriented theories (see the $S \rightarrow NP VP$ rewrite rule in Chomsky, 1957) but had also been present in otherwise dependency-oriented approaches of previous eras. A remarkable example is the following diagram produced by Billroth (1832: 102); for discussion, see Osborne (2020: 191). In the diagram, the subject *Miltiades* and the predicate *reddidit* ‘gave back’ are both at the top in an otherwise fully DG-compatible analysis of the Latin sentence *Miltiades, dux Atheniensium, toti Graeciae libertatem paene oppressam in pugna apud Marathonem reddidit* ‘Miltiades, leader of the Athenians, returned severely oppressed freedom to all of Greece in the battle at Marathon.’

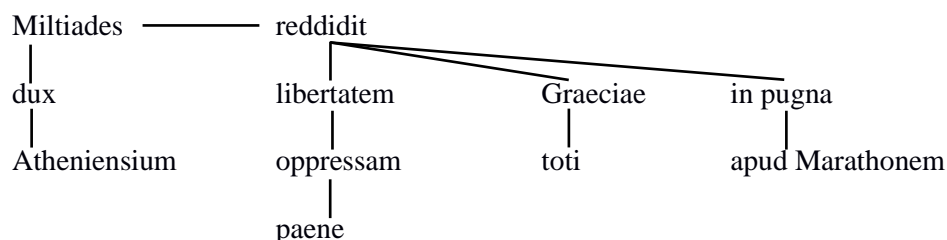


Figure 1: Billroth’s (1832) analysis of a Latin sentence.

Whether or not Brassai had access to Billroth’s grammar is uncertain but he did know about the Port-Royal analysis and regarded it as a modern version of the dualistic treatment of the sentence in Antiquity (Brassai, 1873: 5; Brassai, 1874: 64, cf. Imrényi and Vladár, 2020: 168). His reasons for refusing to begin syntactic analysis with an initial subject-predicate division are stated in the passage below.¹

“Therefore the first question is: what are the main parts of the sentence in its topmost division? [...] Pressing reasons force me to discard the presumptuous answer: subject and predicate. I will say it briefly: 1.) linguistics being an inductive discipline, I cannot set forth with a principle based on insufficient induction; 2.) in fact, dualism in the sentence is strictly speaking not even the offspring of linguistic induction; rather, it has been borrowed from another discipline, logic; 3.) I am yet to find a linguistic interpretation of subject by which it could be identified in every sentence; 4.) in its implications, the entire principle is unfruitful for the ensuing discussion [in this treatise]; 5.) granted that there might be languages in which it could be ubiquitously employed (even if by force), in Hungarian this is entirely impossible” (Brassai, 2011/1860: 104).

It is interesting to compare Brassai’s passage with Tesnière’s observations below; it is clear that the two linguists are completely on the same platform.

“Founded on the principles of logic, traditional grammar strives to find the logical opposition between subject and predicate in the sentence, the subject being that about which something is said and

¹ Throughout the paper, Brassai’s passages are quoted in my translation (A.I.).

the predicate being what is said about it. Hence in the sentence *Alfred speaks slowly*, the subject would be *Alfred*, and the predicate *speaks slowly* [...]. One can acknowledge that this conception of the sentence is merely a remnant that has not yet been entirely eliminated. This remnant stems from the epoch that extends from Aristotle to Port-Royal, when all grammar was founded on logic. Indeed, all arguments that can be invoked against the concept of the verbal node and in favor of the opposition between subject and predicate come a priori from formal logic, which has nothing to do with linguistics” (Tesnière 2015/1966: 98).

As can be seen, both Brassai and Tesnière consider the dualistic analysis to be grounded in logic rather than linguistics, and are critical of its deductive (aprioristic) rather than inductive nature. In what follows, let us examine Brassai’s third and fifth arguments in somewhat more detail.

After a survey of conventional meanings of *alany* ‘subject’ in Hungarian, Brassai notes that linguistics has taken over the meaning this word has in logic, i.e. ‘in a logical proposition, the concept whose attribute is specified, or an inferior (more specific) concept which is subsumed by a superior (more general) one’. With some adjustment, grammarians have developed the meaning ‘that about which the predicate says something’, with the predicate expressing ‘that which is said about the subject’ (Brassai 2011/1860: 45).

Brassai goes on to challenge this approach by listing sentences in which the above definition can easily lead to an incorrect identification of the subject. Let us now consider only the example below.

- (1) Közös lónak túros a háta.
 shared horse.DAT worn the back.PX(3SG).NOM
 ‘A shared horse has a worn back.’

The Hungarian proverb in (1) expresses a proposition about shared horses; namely, that their backs are worn. However, grammatically speaking, *lónak* is in dative case. In practice, the nominative *háta* ‘back.PX(3SG).NOM’ should be identified as subject under the assumptions of traditional grammar. The problem, of course, is that this analysis is hardly backed up by the above logical definition.

The example also lends support to Brassai’s fifth argument quoted in the passage above: “granted that there might be languages in which [the logical division of sentences into subject and predicate] could be ubiquitously employed (even if by force), in Hungarian this is entirely impossible” (Brassai, 2011/1860: 104). Further evidence for this comes from the fact that Hungarian weather verbs can act as full-fledged sentences by themselves (e.g. *esik* ‘it is raining’, *havazik* ‘it is snowing’, see also It. *piove* ‘it is raining’), without any expletive subject. As Brassai notes,

“It is true that Germans cannot say *regnet* by itself but rather need to put a subject-gapfiller *es* before it: *es regnet*, and one cannot blame them for starting off with the nature of their language and granting such importance to syntactic dualism. But why would a Hungarian adopt their train of thought and resulting bias? To rise to the ‘level of science?’” (Brassai 2011/1860: 106).

Brassai thus concludes that the verb alone is at the top of syntactic hierarchy. Just like Mel’čuk (1988: 23) more than a hundred years later, he considers it fundamental that one-word sentences consisting only of a finite verb are a common phenomenon. As Brassai puts it,

“[The verb] can perform the function of the sentence in and by itself, without its apprentices, while these latter cannot possibly exist without their master. *Esik* [‘it is raining’], *havazik* [‘it is snowing’], *villámlik* [‘it is lightning’], *dörög* [‘it is thundering’], *kiabálnak* [‘they are shouting’], *muzsikálnak* [‘they are playing music’], *egyél* [‘eat!’], *szaladj* [‘run!’], etc. fully express in themselves what the speaker wants to convey. And the hearer need not supplement it or replace it by something else, but comes in immediate and complete possession of the concept that the speaker wished to evoke in him. When someone tells me: *esik*, the whole phenomenon of rain, the darkening of the sky, the fall of raindrops, the dampening of the ground appear in my imagination so fully, even unseen, that the poetic description of a Vörösmarty or Arany [Hungarian poets] could not do better. In this word: *kiabálnak*, the gasping of mouths, the air and the resulting vibration in the hearer’s nerves, the sound itself, are all included, thus the event, the subject and the object are fused into a single word to evoke the desired image” (Brassai, 2011/1863: 104–105).

For Brassai, the implications are clear: the finite verb alone is the “soul” of the sentence (Brassai, 2011/1860: 104). Using another metaphor, he also describes it as the monarch of the sentence, a view

reminiscent of Dmitrievsky's proposal whereby "the verb is the absolute ruler, the Tsar of the proposition" (Dmitrievsky, 1877: 23, quoted by Sériot, 2020: 264). To quote Brassai's elaborate discussion of the metaphor,

"Sitting at the beginning, middle, or end of the sentence, wherever it pleases him, is the monarch, the verb, related by meaningful bonds to his vassals, the dependents [*igehatározók*]. [...] The rule of the verb is no dictatorship, and his vassals are no slaves but have lawful relations to their lord and to one another; they each possess a degree of autonomy and a certain rank, with a feudalism whose slogan is, just as in history, *nulle terre sans seigneur* [no land without a lord]" (Brassai, 2011/1860: 48).

With this metaphor, Brassai arrived at nothing less than a complete, coherent dependency grammatical conception of sentences, as argued by Imrényi (2013) and Imrényi and Vladár (2020). It is not the purpose of this paper, however, to repeat the same points that have been made elsewhere. In this section, my aim has been to show that Brassai's view of the sentence as a monarchy grew out naturally from his dissatisfaction with the dualistic logical tradition that had regarded the subject and the predicate as equally prominent. Brassai stripped subjects of their privileged status, and relegated them to the rank of dependents. And this was not all: as shown in the section below, Brassai's conceptual shift also had terminological consequences.

3 Terminological choices: how Brassai stripped subjects of their name

On 4 June 1860, Brassai discussed the problems that examples like (1) posed to the logical definition of subjecthood at an assembly of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, reading out the first part of his treatise on Hungarian sentences. He fully expected objections to his ideas and often anticipated and reacted to possible counter-arguments that he thought could be coming from the audience. One example for this is the passage below:

"Not a word, gentlemen! I know the objection at the tip of your tongues. I mean, that I did not have a good grasp of the matter, i.e. 'I did not add to the interpretation of subject the highly characteristic feature that the subject must also be the nominative'! But to this objection let me just say that 'it would have been better for it not to have been born.' Because as soon as we are opening up its secrets, it becomes Pandora's box for you. For one thing, you acknowledge by it that the previously endorsed interpretation is not good, as it needs to be 'supplemented.' Moreover, since the pertinent noun's nominative character appears to determine sufficiently that *it* is the subject, that controversial interpretation is rendered superfluous" (Brassai, 2011/1860: 46).

This argument is probably the key to Brassai's choice of almost entirely eliminating the term *subject* from syntactic analysis, and his preference for the term *nominative*. However, a purely formal description would not satisfy Brassai; he was also interested in the semantic basis of selecting the noun which must be the nominative in a given sentence. The underlying reason was that he placed emphasis not only on sentence analysis but also on synthesis (Brassai, 2011/1860: 47). Therefore, as he put it, "we need to search for a real interpretation, i.e. one based on the nominative's meaning, derived from its relation to the verb" (Brassai, 2011/1864: 200). In Section 4, I return to the issue of how Brassai assigned a semantic interpretation to nominatives. For now, let us continue with the question as to what place, if any, the term *subject* had in Brassai's system.

Brassai did retain the word *subject*, but applied it only to sentences that expressed logical propositions. In his view, this was only the case when a concept's attribute was specified, or an inferior (more specific) concept was subsumed by a superior (more general) one (Brassai, 2011/1860: 45). Two such examples are given below.

(2) A gyermek játszik. (Brassai, 2011/1864: 205)
the child.NOM plays
'The child plays.'

(3) Én pap vagyok. (Brassai, 2011/1864: 239)
I priest.NOM am
'I am a priest.'

With regard to (2), Brassai hastens to note that it is only a logical proposition when it means 'The child is a playing entity/creature' (or 'Children are playing creatures'), not when it means 'The child is playing (right now)'. He brings up the analogy of a sentence expressing that a leaf is flying in the wind, which does not imply that leaves are flying entities (Brassai, 2011/1864: 206). In (3), which contains two nominative elements, one (*én* 'I') is analysed as subject and the other (*pap* 'priest') as attribute. According to Brassai,

"In relation to the attribute, and only that – not in relation to the 'predicate' of our grammarians, which also subsumes the verb – can the concept of *subject* come into play. Here we can safely settle for the interpretation according to which it is a noun or pronoun about which the attribute is stated. Conversely, the attribute is a noun, pronoun or adjective that is stated about the subject. *Here*, I say, because in order to get the wind out of a possible objection and to dismiss any accusation of inconsistency, I declare repeatedly that for a theory of the sentence, I consider the concept of subject to be generally barren and useless, no matter how it is interpreted; but in relation to the attribute it has both appropriate meaning and sufficient usefulness" (Brassai, 2011/1864: 242).

To make sense of Brassai's proposal, it seems necessary to recognize that his restricted notion of subjecthood is semantic rather than grammatical; it concerns meaning in partial independence from formal properties such as nominative case. For example, in the sentence below, Brassai considers the accusative noun *Zsugorit* to function as subject with respect to the attribute *fösvénynek*.

- (4) Én Zsugorit fösvénynek tartom. (Brassai, 2011/1864: 242)
 I Zsugori.ACC mean.DAT consider.1SG
 'I consider Zsugori to be mean.'

To conclude this section, Brassai eliminated the term *subject* from syntactic description, at least as far as its traditional application was concerned. For what other grammarians had called subject, he preferred the term *nominative* (Hu. *nevező*). He reserved the term *subject* (Hu. *alany*) as a semantic category that he applied in the context of *subject-attribute* rather than *subject-predicate* relations, in partial independence from nominative case. What remains to be seen is how Brassai defined the meaning of nominatives; a quest made necessary by his emphasis on sentence synthesis (Brassai, 2011/1860: 47).

4 Brassai's approach to the semantics of nominative dependents

As hinted above, Brassai was critical of purely formal definitions of grammatical categories on the grounds that he considered them unfit for the purpose of accounting for sentence synthesis (production). Discussing the observation that in English, the nominative (the so-called subject) could be identified by its position in front of the verb, he noted that "in the analysis of a correct and complete sentence, this is definitive indeed; but in synthesis, when I need to produce a sentence in a given language, does it help? Not one bit, because I should figure it out from the meaning of words to be included in the sentence, from their relations to the verb, which one I should or could put in front as subject or nominative" (Brassai, 2011/1860: 47). In the present section, I turn to the question of how Brassai sought to associate a semantic characterization with nominative dependents. As we shall see, he adopted a piecemeal approach relativized to particular constructions (active, passive, middle), in a way that is consonant with recent work in construction grammar. Interestingly, by 1864 he came to assume a position that he had rejected in his 1860 lecture.

Surveying various definitions of subjecthood in his 1860 lecture, Brassai remarks that according to certain linguists, the nominative expresses some (often metaphorical and imaginary) agent or actor. However, since this definition fails to account for all instances of nominative nouns, the definition has had to be extended so that

"the subject is the entity that acts when it is beside an active verb [...]; suffers when it is beside a passive verb [...]; and beside a neutral verb, it is in a state or involved in the event that is expressed by the verb. This way, it is 'defined' indeed, that is true, but it is overly specified. [...] Because of its numerous definitions, subject has become a protean concept, so protean that it is extremely hard to grab and downright impossible to comprehend" (Brassai, 2011/1860: 46).

Returning to the problem of semantic characterization in his 1864 lecture, now consistently adopting the term *nominative* rather than *subject*, Brassai seems ready to accept this piecemeal approach, even though he is less than fully satisfied. He proposes the following definition:

“the thing denoted by the nominative is the actor in the plot of active verbs, the sufferer in that of passive verbs, and it is in a particular state in the plot of middle verbs. The generalization cannot be taken any further, hence the true [semantic] interpretation cannot be considered completely successful” (Brassai, 2011/1864: 201).

From the perspective of present-day construction grammar, Brassai had no reason to be dissatisfied. What he did was develop a set of construction-specific definitions of the meaning(s) of nominative dependents. Rather than seeking to define the meaning of nominative dependents as such, he settled for defining the meaning of nominative dependents of transitive verbs, passive verbs, middle verbs, etc. (cf. Comrie, 1978; Dixon, 1979; Croft, 2001: 134). Theoretically, this approach is justified at length by Croft (2001), who argues that “constructions, not categories and relations, are the basic, primitive units of syntactic representation”, and consequently that “[t]he categories and relations found in constructions are derivative” (Croft, 2001: 46). In terms of language acquisition, the point that form-meaning correspondences are always learnt in particular contexts, and are conditioned by those contexts, is convincingly made by Ellis (2006):

“Learners FIGURE language out: their task is, in essence, to learn the probability distribution P (interpretation/cue, context), the probability of an interpretation given a formal cue in a particular context, a mapping from form to meaning conditioned by context” (Ellis, 2006: 8, quoted by Gries, 2017: 593).

To conclude this section, Brassai’s approach to sentence structure may be seen as falling into the traditions of both dependency grammar and construction grammar (or more broadly, cognitive linguistics).² Not only did he propose a verb-centric, dependency-based description of clause structure but he also insisted on the study of form-meaning correspondences rather than accepting purely formal definitions of grammatical categories. In fact, his work seems to have been guided by a principle that takes the following form in Langacker’s *Cognitive Grammar*: “all constructs validly posited for grammatical description (e.g. notions like “noun”, “subject”, or “past participle”) must in some way be meaningful” (Langacker, 2008: 5).

5 Summary and conclusions

The goal of the paper was to observe the fate of subjects in Sámuel Brassai’s dependency grammatical theory of the sentence. As noted in Section 2, Brassai’s concept of a verb-centric, monarchy-like structure in the sentence grew out naturally from his dissatisfaction with the logical tradition that worked with an initial subject-predicate division. In Section 3, I discussed Brassai’s reasons for preferring the term *nominative* to *subject*; in short, he was not content with any of the existing definitions of subjecthood, and considered the term *nominative* to provide a better basis. He retained the term *subject* in the context of *subject-attribute* rather than *subject-predicate* relations, and employed it in a semantic sense in partial independence from nominative case. Finally, Section 4 addressed the question as to how nominative dependents could receive a semantic characterization. Here, Brassai (somewhat unwillingly) endorsed a piecemeal approach, relativized to particular constructions. Specifically, he argued that “the thing denoted by the nominative is the actor in the plot of active verbs, the sufferer in that of passive verbs, and it is in a particular state in the plot of middle verbs” (Brassai, 2011/1864: 201).

Brassai’s ideas are not only of historical interest; rather, they may inform theory development in present-day linguistics. Among others, the following points seem to be worthy of serious consideration by those working in dependency grammar:

1. The idea that the notion of subject should not be taken for granted in DG. It is a remnant of a logical tradition (cf. Tesnière 2015/1966: 98), and simply relegating subjects to dependent status may not be enough for completely eliminating that tradition’s potentially undesirable implications.

² For suggestions that the tenets of dependency grammar and construction grammar can be combined, see e.g. Hudson (2008), Welke (2011), Osborne and Gross (2012) and Imrényi (2017).

2. The idea that purely formal grammatical categories are not satisfactory. In order to account for sentence synthesis, it is necessary to explore the semantic basis of such formal properties as case assignment and word order, with the aim of defining grammatical categories in terms of form-meaning correspondences.
3. The idea that “every language and every construction [should] be characterized in its own terms” (Langacker, 2008: 423, see also Haspelmath, 2015). With regard to syntactic dualism, Brassai passionately argues that what might be a well-motivated generalization in a grammar of German is clearly not optimal for Hungarian (Brassai 2011/1860: 106). In his description of the meaning of nominative dependents, he endorses a set of construction-specific definitions.

All in all, the paper forms part of an attempt aimed at demonstrating that Brassai’s ideas fall within the traditions of both dependency grammar and construction grammar (two schools of thought whose past is much longer than their history), potentially informing their integration as well.

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