A NOTE ON ME SUBJECTLESS SENTENCES

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In her paper on subjectless sentences in Modern English Susan Schmerling (1973) discusses the examples of the type:

(1) Going to lunch?

(2) Looks like an accident

which in their outer appearance do not have any structure which can function as the grammatical subject. They are claimed to be elliptical constructions in which the depletions of appropriate NP’s take place late at a level of “shallow structure” or the output of the cyclic rules, but not at a level of surface structure (Schmerling 1973: 583). Another type of subjectless sentences has been recently described by Jacek Fisiak (1976) with reference to Middle English which offers structures nonexistent any more in Modern English like

(3) For he had power of confessions, As seyde hir-self (Chaucer, C.T.A. Prol. 218)

(4) I rede a tale, and tell-eth this (Gower, C. A. III. 1331)

Accepting a somewhat extended, Fillmorean framework as the basis of his analysis and interpretation Fisiak also treats such sentences as the output of the subject deletion transformation. However, he does not speculate on whether this deletion operates on the surface or just below it; in other words, he is not interested in at which place of the derivation such a transformation occurs. In both presentations the authors set conditions for constraints imposed on subject deletion and convincingly support their generalizations with ample and specific evidence from the language data themselves. Although there are different aims, different approaches and different language materials, both papers agree in their conclusive statements that the lack of subject involves some earlier process of deletion after subjectivization,
A completely different problem is encountered when one is faced with such ME examples as:

(5) Me langes (Hampole, Lyrics 417)
(6) and et this when the hungheth (Langland, P. Pl. C. XVI. 262)
(7) Thancret full throyly (Destr. Troy 3691)

for which no structurally corresponding sentences can be found in Modern English, since

(5a) *Me longes
(6a) *and et this when the hungers
(7a) *Thancret very severely

are clearly ungrammatical. Such and similar examples have been nicely accounted for by assuming that subjectivization did not take place. There is no doubt about the optional character of this transformation; in general, a deep relation, or “deep case”, can be variously topologized in the surface structure not necessarily by subjectivization, which results in placing the case before its appropriate verb and/or making it agree with this verb in number, person and possibly gender under special conditions in some languages, e.g. Polish. Me hunges in

(5) Me langes, lede me to pl lyght, and festen in pe al my thought

expresses the relation of the experiencer which is indirectly affected by a psychological state identified by the verb longes(n). Me in this ME sentence has the same function as ModE: if in long, where the experiencer has been subjectivized. A number of similar examples can be explained in this way, provided they realize deep cases in one form or another. Thus there is topologization of the ME sentence but not subjectivization as in its ModE equivalent, and as long as there are some surface NPs the sentences would not posit further difficulties. Much more tricky is the example (7), which is explained by Fisiak similarly to examples (5) and (6) (i.e. as a sentence on which no subjectivization operated) with additional information that this lack of subjectivization is the consequence of the fact that “the verb was not associated with any deep case” (Fisiak 1976:206). It seems to me that this postulate is rather too far going and perhaps not sufficiently grounded within the framework adopted by Fisiak for his analysis. If I understand Fillmore correctly (1968.1971), a verb must be associated with at least one case category. Although it is not stated so categorically, the rule which expands the P constituent does not set any condition as to the optionality of case; and for the insertion of verbs no empty case frame has been mentioned either. Since for Fillmore (1968.24) “the case notions comprise a set of universal concepts which identify certain types of judgments human beings are capable of making about the events that are going on around them...” it is impossible to imagine that some judgment of an event is made without identifying it by some concept (i.e. case). In short, there is no proposition which consists of a verb and zero argument. Since this is so, there must be some notion, or concept associated with thancret in (7), as well as there must be some case identified by sniud where in an OE sentence.

(8) norpan sniude (Seafarer 31)

Compare also much more numerous examples found in Polish: gremi, pada, leje, duje, zmierzhalo, etc. Once it is assumed on theoretical grounds which provide a basis for Fillmore’s case grammar that the proposition consists of a verb and at least one case associated with it, remains to explain the process which results in the absence of the case form in the surface.

The examples (7) and (8), and also Polish sentences, all refer to meteorological phenomena taking place in physical world which surrounds human beings. Such verbs identify certain physiologically observable situations and are being used in judgments people make about such situations. The verb thancret typically implies a sound being the effect of a discharge of atmospheric electricity, sniude clearly indicates a particular kind of weather (falling snow), dawne denotes morning twilight, daybreak, beginning to grow light in the morning, etc. Following Fillmore’s cases I would be inclined to associate these verbs with instrument, which is “the case of the inanimate force of object causally involved in the action or state identified by the verb” (Fillmore 1968.24), “the stimulus or immediate physical cause of an event” (Fillmore 1971:376). However, it seems to me that the term ergative may be a better concept when used in the sense defined by Anderson (1971) as the initiator of some process. That these verbs have such properties is strongly corroborated by a number of examples which overtly express such notions, e.g.

(9) Ye clonges thondered, any thy aroues wente abrede (Coverdale, Ps. Ixxxvii.17)
(10) As je snow pat is snouwyng (Chat. d’Amour 722)
(11) Hr throte, al-so wyht of heue

As snow on braunches snowed rove (Chaucer, R.R. 557–8)
(12) I praye to god, that never dawe the day

That I no sterve, as foule as womman may (Chaucer, C.T.E. Merchant 2195)
(13) Tyel the day dawde these darseles dauned (Langland, P. Pl. C. XXI. 471)
(14) And sayth nowe, the day daues (Towneley Pl. 55.108)
(15) Forst seall freusoun (Gnomle Verses 138.72)

1. Of Ajdukiewicz (1974: 16) “A proposition (in the psychological sense of the term) is any thought which is a statement of fact, i.e., states that something is so and so, or that something is not so and so.”
2. For the discussion see Kennecke (1958), Klemensiewicz (1969), Doree (1975).
3. Some of these verbs may be used with other cases, e.g. “preachers had thundered hatred of the South”, “the watery smile dawned on Joe’s face”, etc. (Webster’s dictionary).
(16) When pe first fresep, mucho chele he byd (Man in the moon 160.5)
(17) When the frost fresep, feode hem bi-hotone (Langland, P. Pl. A. VIII.115)

In normal situations, however, the events identified by the verbs referring to meteorological phenomena are perfectly well understood without NP’s associated with them since the verb snow is conceptually the same as the snow snows, the verb freeze means the frost freezes, and the verb dew means the day dewes. It appears that the verbs under discussion may incorporate the meaning of their appropriate cases and for this reason the latter need not be expressed by syntactic constituents (cf. Fillmore 1971:373).

1 thus take the position that for each verb of this kind there exists an underlying case with which it is associated and which may be left out of the surface. This deep case may be deleted as in the examples (7) and (8) where no subjectivization takes place; it may be actualized on the surface through subjectivization (examples 9—17), and finally, there may be pseudo-subjectivization, which is very common, e.g.

(18) Hit hwilum sumrap (Aelfred, Booth xxix §3)
(19) it fresep more stronymly in po countrees pan on this half (Mandeville, Trav. 84.5)
(20) Hit rime and snive and styme nate (Bede’s Ecc. Hist. 134. 28)
(21) er that it dawe, I wol go crepen in by my felawe (Chaucer, C.T.A. Revo 4249)
(22) Within a whole hit dawed (Malory, Arthur 984.2)

There are many interesting facts in this particular group of verbs which have been ignored in this short note. My main concern was to show that there must be an underlying case in such examples as (7) and (8) which is deleted because it is subsumed as a part of the meaning of the verb. It is clear to me that these sentences exemplify the lack of subjectivization for the simple reason that the appropriate cases have been deleted earlier.

REFERENCES