

Subject dependency

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Central question:

Does a subject dependency phenomenon indicate the presence of a subject?

1. *-er* nominalization

- (1) a. read-er
b. bewonder-aar ‘admirer’ (Dutch)

- (2) “I propose that the *-er* head values a PR-feature” (Talsma 2025: 129)

- (3) a. Jan is een bewonderaar van **zichzelf** (Dutch)
John is an admirer of himself
b. [Bewonderaars van **zichzelf**] doen zoiets niet
admirers of oneself don’t do such things
(Zwart 1989)

>> subject dependency in the absence of a subject

- (4) the PR-features of the verbal root are apparently relevant:
a. admirers of oneself b. *bicycles of oneself

- (5) proposal: **subject entailment (SE)**

- a. the presence of the PR-feature **entails** the presence of a subject
b. SE suffices for anaphor binding

- (6) NB binding is postsyntactic spell-out of a variable referential element (PRON)
> intended coreference with an entailed subject: spell-out as anaphor

Note: it’s not the valued PR-feature that binds the anaphor, but the fact that the PR-feature is (interpreted as) valued (by *-er*) suffices for SE, and hence for ‘binding’ by (6)

2. Passive

- (7) only slightly different from (4a) is:
a. emails to oneself b. problems with oneself
Here there is no verbal root, hence no PR-features

>> still, there is no subject

- (8) the contrast between (7) and (4b) suggests:
nouns may entail a state/event (*sending emails, having problems*),
which may in turn entail a subject (SE), and that suffices for spell-out as an anaphor

- (9) next to (7a) we have (Collins 2024):
emails **sent** to oneself
- (10) Collins takes the binding in (9) to betray the presence of a subject internal to the vP
>> but this ignores the parallel with (7a), where no verb is present
- (11) a. Jan werd geprezen door zichzelf (Dutch)
John was praised by himself
b. Jan_i [_{vP} PRO_i praise_{PASS} t_i]
>> this incurs a Principle C violation
- (12) Talsma (2025):
Passive suppresses the ‘external argument’ PR-feature
>> but the PR-feature is still present, and we may suggest it yields SE
>> this accounts for (7a) and (9) along identical lines

3. Subject entailment (SE)

- (13) SE is not a syntactic property, but something that is determined by the speaker/hearer
>> hence it belongs to the Conceptual/Intentional interface (LF)
>> as does the determination of reflexivity
- (14) realization of PRON as a pronoun or anaphor is also postsyntactic (PF)
>> this supports a model of grammar in which LF feeds PF (Zwart 2025)

4. Control

- (15) subject dependency suggests an empty subject (PRO) in control infinitives
a. John tried [PRO to win the race] b. John tried [PRO to perjure **himself**]
>> but now: perhaps (these) infinitives have SE instead of an actual subject
- (16) some problems of the PRO-hypothesis
a. it is a sui generis empty category with very limited distribution
b. it doesn’t cause Weak Crossover effects (17)
c. it lacks a *de re* reading (only *de se*) (18)
- (17) Who_i did PRO_i/*his_i getting fired upset t_i
- (18) [The amnesiac]_i expects PRO_i/himself_i to get a medal
with PRO: ✓ the amnesiac has this belief about self (*de se*)
 ✗ the amnesiac has this belief about s.o. else who happens to be self (*de re*)
with himself: both readings are possible
- >> for (17)/(18) it’s just as if there is no embedded subject at all
- (19) an account in terms of SE now requires:
>> WCO effects are not caused by entailed subjects
>> *de re* readings are not made available by entailed subjects

- (20) what is a subject?
 >> proposal: subject is integral to the concept of **assertion**
 >> assertion = a particular nexus (subject-predicate) stating that sth is the case
- (21) infinitives lack assertion > infinitives lack subjects
 >> but the verb in an infinitival clause may still entail the presence of a subject (SE)
- (22) Naeem's argument (Naeem 2025)
 Ram-ne_i Sita-ko_j [PRO apnii_{i/j} kitab laa-nee-ko] kəh-aa (Hindi/Urdu)
 'Ram told Sita [to bring self's book]'
 >> *apne* is strictly subject-oriented
 >> that *apne* may be object oriented in (21) is explained if there is an object-controlled PRO
- (23) but *laaneeko* 'bring' may give rise to SE,
 and that may suffice to account for the spell-out of PRON as *apne*

5. Other subject dependencies in control constructions

- (24) These include (cf. Landau 2013):
 a. subject oriented adverbs (*John wanted to leave **together***)
 b. split antecedence (*John proposed to Mary to **get married***)
 c. subject obviation (*Jan beloofde Piet **diens** dochter op te halen*)
 d. case agreement with secondary predicates (Russian, Icelandic)
- (25) subject-oriented adverbs (24a)
 >> if the infinitive yields SE, there is no reason why a subject-oriented adverb could not be meaningfully employed
- (26) split antecedents (24b)
 >> if the infinitive yields SE, there is no reason why the entailed subject should not be conceived of as a plurality
- (27) subject obviation (24c)(Postma 1984)
 a. Jan beloofde Piet [PRO diens dochter op te halen]
 'John promised Pete to pick up his (i.e. Pete's) daughter.'
 b. # Jan vroeg Piet [PRO diens dochter op te halen]
 'John asked Pete to pick up his (no resolution) daughter.'
 >> the analysis would have to be that obviation is sensitive to SE
- (28) case agreement with secondary predicates (Andrews 1982)
 a. Hana vantar peninga 'She_{ACC} lacks money' (Icelandic)
 b. Ég vonast til að vanta ekki **einan** peninga
 'I_{NOM} hope to not lack money alone_{ACC}.'
 >> this can only be demonstrated with nondefault case (quirky case)

- (29) these non-default case-markings are arguably associated with thematic roles
>> Talsma (2025):
there are no thematic roles, just PR-features
- (30) the facts follow if we are allowed to say:
>> if a PR-feature is associated with a quirky case, then so is the SE of that PR-feature
>> then if secondary predicates (like adverbs) are SE-oriented, we may expect spell-out of case to reflect that

6. Conclusion

>> There is room for doubt that subject dependency necessarily indicates the presence of a subject.

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