

OLD NORSE SUBJECTS IN SENTENCE FINAL POSITION  
– A PROPER CASE OF MARKEDNESS?

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**Summary**

The aim of this article is threefold:

- to study what characterizes the sentences with subject in final position compared to those with the subject in more canonical positions in Old Norse
- to present briefly some of the relevant subject properties of Old Norse and Modern Mainland Scandinavian
- to try to answer the question why such a deviant word order is permitted in Old Norse but not in Modern Mainland Scandinavian.

**Introduction**

Word order in Old Norse differs from that of Modern Scandinavian in many respects, although the major patterns are similar: we find the finite verb form in second position (V2), and both stages exhibit typologically SVO as the unmarked word order in the Greenbergian sense.

The older stage of the language, however, demonstrates a somewhat greater freedom of word order than does the modern stage. One of these freedoms of word order is focussed in this article: in some cases the grammatical subject of a sentence seems to have moved out of its canonical position just after

the finite verb form. It may even be sentence final, resulting in the string (T)VXS(Y) as in (4) below.

I shall present a characterization of the sentences with subject in final position compared to those with the subject in more canonical positions, and examine some of the so-called subject properties of the two stages.

### Grammar and pragmatics in historical linguistics

Incontestably there has been a very strong tendency in modern linguistics to limit grammatical or syntactic explanations exclusively to the level of grammar and syntax, except for different varieties of functional linguistics, which since long has looked at pragmatic and rhythmic factors as well. The Norwegian linguist, Jan Terje Faarlund, considers information structure as an important factor also for historical syntax and for syntactic change, see in particular Faarlund 1985, 1990a. He claims that information structure may even be the ultimate cause for major word order change, for example the change from OV- to VO-order, which is elsewhere often explained as an “afterthought” phenomenon leading to a typological change. Faarlund, however, seeks the very explanation of the shift from OV to VO in Germanic in pragmatics: Because the object normally is focus of the sentence, or non-thematic, he says, the VO-order leads to a better correspondence with the normal thematic structure of the sentence than does the reverse order. However Harris & Campbell 1995: 218ff criticize this view.

Grammatical and pragmatic relations also interact when it comes to explaining why final subjects do occur in Old Norse.

### The position of the subject in the corpus

The text I base my conclusions on is a legal document from around 1275, *The Law of Magnus Lagabøte (ML)*, published by Keyser & Munch (1848). The edition is based mainly on a manuscript from about 1350 (AM 60 qv). I refer to page and line in this published edition when citing examples from the text. I render my examples in a normalized Old Norse orthography here, and the translation into English is very literal.

The major syntactic surface structures in the main clause in this legal text are the following:

- (a) SVX, exhibiting S (subject) in first position (23.6 %), as in
- (1) *fleir garðar eru gildir at lögum* (122.5)  
*those fences are valid according to the law*

- (b) (T)VXS, where S follows immediately after the finite verb (68.6 %), as in
- (2) *Skulu fleir fletta fé taka i Niðarósi...*(12.16)  
*they should take this merchandise in Niðaros...*
- (c) (T)VXS(Y), where S is in a later/final position (7.8 %), as in
- (3) *flar skal mæta horn horni...* (130.6b)  
*there shall meet horn horn...*

The unmarked word order SVX (or SVO) as in (1) is not the most frequent one, the most frequent order being the order as in (2) with the subject just after the finite verb form. When the subject is not topicalized, the position just after the finite verb form seems to be the normal position, occurring in nearly 70 % of all the main clauses of the text. Thus, the canonical positions of the subject is just in front of or just after the finite verb form.

Nearly 8 percent of the main clauses in ML have the subject in later or final position, as in (3). It appears that other nominals, a nonfinite verb form, an adverbial, or even two constituents at a time, may precede the subject, as the examples below in (d) to (g) will demonstrate:

- (d) Another nominal phrase precedes the subject:
- (4) *ok finna hann aðrir menn* (149.3a)  
*“and find him other men”*
- (5) *Nú sækir skip fyrnska* (34.6)  
*“Now “seeks” ship old age”*
- (6) *Nú skulu flat aðrir vátta bera* (89.23)  
*“Now shall that other witnesses testify”*
- (7) *...flá skal sínum húsum hverr ráða* (109.19)  
*“...then shall his houses everybody keep in order”*
- (e) A nonfinite verb form precedes the subject:
- (8) *flá skal mæta horn horni...* (130.6b)  
*“then shall meet horn horn...”*

- (9) flá skulu bera .ij. menn... (55.19)  
 "then shall testify two men..."
- (10) Dýragarða ok dýragrafir skal gera *hverr er vil* i almenningi. (146.2)..  
 "animal fences and animal traps shall put up whoever wants it"  
 in common land
- (11) flat skal sækja *bóndi hver er býzt fyrir ok bóndanafn ber* (43.6)  
 "that shall attend every farmer who lives there and carries the name of a farmer"
- (f) An adverbial phrase precedes the subject:
- (12) ok flyti eptir boðburð *allir ór bø* (141.3)  
 "and move according to the law all (the people) off the farm"
- (g) A nonfinite verb form and an adverbial phrase precede the subject:
- (13) ok eru flá lokin *ausla gjql d* (124.5)  
 "and are then paid the fines"

Thus, it seems that any constituent may in principle precede the subject.

### The structure of the subject

A relevant question is whether there are any formal characteristics that distinguish the subjects in final position compared to those in canonical position. Subjects in canonical positions may take any form: simple nouns, noun phrases of different complexity or length, and simple and more complex pronouns, determiners and quantifiers as well.

Subjects in final position demonstrate much of the same variety, as is shown in the underlined subjects of the examples above. But a striking trait is that a very frequent class of pronominal forms is totally lacking in final position, namely the anaphoric pronouns. Forms like *hann*, *hon* or *fleir*, as exemplified by the form *fleir* in (1) and (2), do not occur at all as sentence final.

This leads to the conclusion that there is a rather strong restriction on final position when it comes to referentiality: Pronouns, determiners or quantifiers in final position are cataphoric or deictic and not anaphoric, whereas the same classes in the canonical positions may be either anaphoric or cataphoric.

The reason why the deviating word order occurs must therefore be sought in pragmatics.

### The pragmatics of the subject

A study of the information structure of the sentences in this legal text demonstrates that there in fact is a very strong correlation between position and thematicity. Thematicity is here considered to be a gradient parameter. Phrases may be given in a certain context, regardless of their position, therefore the position of the theme in a sentence is by no means only restricted to first or topic position.

The different nominal positions imply various degrees of thematicity: Nominals in *topic position* may be thematic, but combined with heavy stress, fronted nominals are often focussed, and thus nonthematic, as well.

Subjects in the *canonical position* (just after the finite verb form) are almost without exception thematic, while the *final subjects* are non-thematic. Quantifiers, like *annarr* and *hverr* as in (4), (6), (7), (10) and (11), are typical of final position: *annarr*, par example, literally introduces a new person on the stage, and *hverr* is in no way a prototypical theme, usually carrying heavy stress, in contrast to pronominals like *hann*, *hon* or *fleir*, which are clearly anaphoric and thematic.

A simplified scheme of the gradient thematicity of the nominal positions of the main clause may be presented as in (h):

(h)	topic	just after V <sub>fin</sub>	after V <sub>fin</sub> (X)
	+/- theme	+ theme	- theme

(Christoffersen 1993: 341)

Thus, the higher degree of freedom of word order in Old Norse compared to Modern Scandinavian when it comes to the position of the subject seems to be governed first and foremost by pragmatic factors.

### Markedness

The (T)VXS(Y) order in (3) is consequently a proper case of syntactic markedness, but the information pattern in these deviant constructions, on the other hand, is in correspondence with the normal one when no constituent carries any particular stress: The less thematic of the nominal constituents comes last.

This deviant order poses crucial problems for most syntactic models, because it seems that these nominals in the nominative case so to speak end up in

the canonical object position. Subjects in final position share their non-thematicity with canonical objects.

A fundamental question to be asked is whether such a subject has first been raised to the canonical subject position for then to move out of this position later, a so called *Heavy NP-shift*, see Platzack 1987: 378.

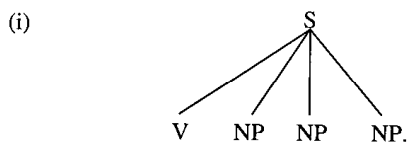
Another structural labelling of the process going on, for example, in (4) and (6), where a relatively unstressed pronominal phrase (functioning as a direct object) precedes the subject, might be the well known *Clitization* (Harris & Campbell 1995: 233f).

But as my main purpose here is not to give a more profound structural description of the deviant sentence structure, but rather to explain why this deviance occurs at all, I shall proceed to the second question posed in this paper: Why is it that such a deviant word order, albeit not a very frequent one, is permitted in Old Norse and not in Modern Mainland Scandinavian?

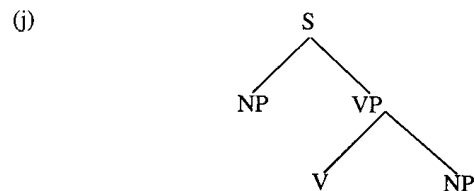
#### Sentence structure and the subject role at the two stages

In order to answer this question, we will have to take a look at some of the syntactic and pragmatic differences between the two stages, in particular differences which concern the role of the subject and the various subject properties in the sense of Keenan 1976.

According to Faarlund 1990: 83, Kristoffersen 1996: 22ff, Rögnvaldsson & Thráinsson (1990) among others, Old Norse should best be described as having a relatively flat sentence structure, as in (i):



The sentence of the Modern Mainland Scandinavian stage, however, is usually described by binary branching, as in (j):



This structural difference is partly due to more general syntactic divergencies between the two stages, but is basically bound up with the role of the subject, see Mørck 1992, 1994 and Faarlund 1990a.

Among the general syntactic differences between the two stages are the Old Norse case and concord. Case and concord lead to the incontestable fact that constituents are clearly functionally marked, allowing, at least theoretically, a greater freedom of word order at the older stage, a freedom which we only see fully exploited in the skaldic poetry.

It is important to notice that this freedom of word order literally means a freedom of *word* order, and not only of *constituent* order. From a modern point of view, we have a surprising lot of discontinuous constituents in Old Norse. There are also vacillating orders between heads and modifiers. This evidence leads Faarlund, among others, to conclude that Old Norse is nonconfigurational in the sense that all nominal phrases have the same functional relation to the verb, and that a proper verb phrase in the modern sense does not yet exist. Consequently, the sentence structure should be described as flat. The subject itself is not "privileged" in the same sense as in Modern Mainland Scandinavian; it is not an obligatory constituent in Old Norse. In principle, a finite verb form suffices to form a sentence. Old Norse is, to a certain extent, a so called Null-subject language, see Platzack 1987 and 1994.

And, since the sentence in Old Norse does not need an obligatory subject, the language does not need a dummy subject either.

Thus, the subject in Old Norse has not yet become an external argument of the verb phrase. It is, at least more or less, on the same level as the other nominal phrases of the sentence in relation to the verb. The subject may, consequently, behave like other nominal phrases, in order to match the information structure of the sentence.

Grammatical function and position are, however, far more closely linked in Modern Mainland Scandinavian. The first nominal in a sentence, either in topic position or just after the finite verb form, will automatically be identified with the grammatical subject at the modern stage. Only emphasis or particular semantic relations may yield or legitimate other readings. Thus, the subject should be defined by position in Modern Mainland Scandinavian while it should be defined by nominative case in Old Norse.

In order to qualify as a subject in Modern Mainland Scandinavian, the actual constituent must of course be a nominal phrase, the phrase must be "nominative" – that is commutable with a pronominal form where grammatical case comes to the surface, it must occupy the first position in the sentence or be positioned just after the finite verb. Further, it must be definite, it is normally

agentive, it must be part of the theme of the sentence, that is, carry given information, and it must convey the speaker's empathy in Kuno's sense (1972).

In order to qualify as a subject in Old Norse, a constituent likewise needs to be a nominal phrase, it must be nominative, but it is not obligatorily bound to topic position or the immediate postverbal position. Further, it usually fills the agentive role, but it does not need to be definite to the same degree as in Modern Mainland Scandinavian, and it does not need to carry given information or convey the speaker's empathy to the same degree as at the modern stage.

Oblique nominals, like the accusative *mik* in the topic position in the often cited example: *mik hungrar*, have been reanalysed as subjects in Modern Mainland Scandinavian: *Jeg er sulten* – and such oblique nominals in Old Norse are consequently often labeled *oblique subjects* in the recent scholarly literature. This is due to the fact that these nominals are more subject-like than object like, except for their deviating oblique case: They are most often highly thematic, that is, they are high up in the Reference and empathy hierarchy, a term applied by Faarlund 1990b.

Contrarily, the reverse seems to be true for our subjects in final position: They are lower in the Reference and empathy hierarchy than the preceding nominals. They do not share the most prominent property of the modern subject, which probably is givenness, therefore they tend to be reanalysed as objects at the modern stage, as in one of the much cited examples: *fleim er gefin dagverðr*. The oblique nominal *fleim* is here reanalysed as a subject while the final grammatical subject, *dagverðr* in its turn, ends up as the object of the sentence at the Modern Norwegian stage: *De ble gitt lunsj* (*They were given lunch*).

Another alternative which copes with the nontypicality of the old final subject at the modern stage, is to introduce a dummy-subject in the topic position: *Det ble gitt dem lunsj* (*It was given them lunch*).

## Conclusion

Modern Mainland Scandinavian does not accept final subjects for two reasons. The first reason is due to the breaking down of the case system, blurring the functional relations between the nominals in sentences and clauses, leading to the automatic interpretation of a final nominal as an object. Such a syntactically marked word order could not survive the breakdown of the case system.

The second reason why the modern stage does not accept final subjects is their nonthematicity. The very definition of the constituent we traditionally call the subject in Modern Mainland Scandinavian is in fact more pragmatic than grammatical, reflecting that the most salient modern subject property is thematicity.

The (T)VXS(Y)-order in Old Norse, treated in this paper, is a proper case of syntactic markedness, but the information pattern is coherent with the normal pragmatic pattern: The less thematic of the nominal constituents comes last, even if it is the grammatical subject. This is a word order which is no longer possible in Modern Mainland Scandinavian.

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