

A Double Perspective of Mathesius's Study of the Subject-Verb Relation

Jiayi Wei, Xiao Li, Jianhua Chen*

Beijing Union University, Beijing 100101, China

*Corresponding author: Jianhua Chen, wljianhua@buu.edu.cn

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Abstract: By making a thorough study and comparison of the parts concerning verb and subject in Mathesius's linguistic characterology, this paper argues that his approach to subject-verb relation takes two different perspectives. Based on detailed analysis, the present study argues that Mathesius's interpretation of the subject-verb relation not only takes the perspective of the verb while focusing on the sentence's argument structure but also takes the one of the subject and emphasizes the utterance's information structure. This reflects not only the difference between the sentence potential and the utterance actualized but also reflects one of Mathesius's basic thoughts of functional linguistics, that is, taking the speaker's standpoint in language analysis.

Keywords: Vilém Mathesius; Linguistic characterology; Functional onomatology; Functional syntax; Subject-verb relation

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1. Introduction

On more than one occasion, Mathesius mentioned that functional grammar, or a functional linguistic study, should include functional onomatology and functional syntax. According to Mathesius, functional onomatology is the study of naming units, i.e. linguistic units applied to name the elements of the content of thought subjected to selective analysis. Functional syntax is the study of how naming units are brought into mutual relation. Both functional onomatology and functional syntax involve a study of the verb. In the classification of words, both ontological and syntactic considerations are necessary, as the verb is best defined as the naming unit denoting the changeable aspect of things in the form required by the predicative function. This paper investigates the relationship between the verb and the subject which is elaborated in functional onomatology and functional syntax.

2. Verb-center in Mathesius's functional onomatology

When Mathesius introduced the components of functional linguistics, he mentions morphology, which he takes

as a branch of linguistic study that runs across functional onomatology and functional syntax rather than ranks next to them ^[1]. When speakers solidify them by using words, a linguistic unit combining a formal expression and a concept, they build a relationship between the linguistic system/world and the extra-linguistic world. This means that the various forms of a word found in a concrete utterance are motivated by, or the result of, the speakers' selective analysis providing the elements capable of being denominated by language and the further activity of bringing these elements into mutual relation in the act of sentence formation ^[2]. This is exactly what modern functional semantics means ^[3]. The dynamic process, in which the tangible and concrete words or word forms, are just the result or endpoint of the encoding process, a component of verbal communication, which takes as its immanent feature the fulfillment of a communicative or an expressive function. Thus, in functional onomatology, the classification of the verb depends more on the speaker's interpretation of the action itself, including its course, its position on the time axis, and its relation to reality.

2.1. Subject-verb relations elaborated in categorical transition

There are different views on whether the subject or the verb is the decisive element in sentence construction. For instance, to Otto Jespersen and K. F. Sundén, the subject takes a more central role than the verb. Jespersen takes nominal phrases, i.e. subject and object as the primary, while the verb is secondary. Although Jespersen also admitted that the primary was more specific than the secondary, he always believed that a less special term is used to further specialize what is already to some extent special ^[4]. Hence, the identification of the verbal part rather than the nominal part as the secondary in a nexus is a logically consistent assumption based on Jespersen's system. Sundén also took a subject-centered view. In his analysis of the two sentences "this book owns Charles and this book belongs to Charles", he remarked that they "have the same substantial elements, and these elements must be considered to have the same degree of substantiality. The import of the predicate is not such that it can determine the subject as an agent of an action or the bearer of a quality" ^[5]. In other words, the predicate verb is not the decisive factor. He claimed that in English, the word order may be a linguistic criterion for distinguishing the grammatical subject from the nominal part of the predicate. Danilenko also mentioned that Sundén subscribed to the subject-centered view ^[6].

Mathesius took a different view from the above-mentioned authors. To him, onomatology is about how the content of the speaker's thought can be named by appropriate linguistic units. The verb as a naming unit is to denote the changeable aspect of entities required by the predicative function and the highlighted factor in their classification is the syntactic function. Although both the ontological and syntactic categories are reflected in different word categories, in the process of sentence formation, nouns are linguistic units mainly applied to denote the entities or objects in the extra-linguistic reality. Verbs, especially in their finite form, are the specific means of predication. While verbs express the changing aspect of an object, Mathesius did not elaborate on the relation between the entity involved and the action in his study of the categorical transition of the noun. Rather, what is involved in the transition of the abstract into a concrete noun, of subjective into objective conception, of permanent into temporary quality, and so on. This takes the ontological properties of the entity itself as a major consideration. On the contrary, the categorical changes of English verbs focus on the different relations between the participants and the activity in the extra-linguistic reality, which may be denoted in the different relations between the subject and the verb. This illustrates the syntactic function of the predicate verb.

Mathesius not only noticed the central position of the verb but also noticed that aspectual modification does not change the basic meaning of a verb, while the categorical transition may entail a change in the meaning of

the word. The analysis and the examples given reveal that what is changed here is not the lexical meaning of the verb but its syntactic meaning. For instance, in the following sentences, “He continued his walk and... he continued to be visited...”, the verb “continue” in these two sentences means “keep doing it and do not stop.” However, in the first sentence, the verb denotes the subject’s intentional activity while in the second sentence, it does not denote actions related to the subject’s will, but mainly beings in relation to a continuing activity. In today’s terminology, the difference between these two subject-verb relations lies in the volitionality or causativity of the entity denoted by the subject. These are essential semantic components studied in different approaches of today’s syntactic semantics research, which includes Fillmore, Jackendoff, Kuno and Takami, Langacker, and Talmy, among others ^[7-11].

A brilliant point of Mathesius’s analysis here is that no concrete semantic roles were given to the sentence subject, rather he demarcated these different roles by either exploiting the relations between the arguments and the verb or by taking the verb meaning as a reference. This is what some current approaches in the syntax-semantic interface adopt to remedy the shortcomings of the semantic role approach, such as Fillmore’s frame analysis, Van Valin’s macrorole, Levin and Rappaport’s event templates, and Goldberg’s constructional approach, among others ^[12-15].

2.2. Asymmetry between the subject-verb and verb-object relations

A close investigation of Mathesius’s analysis shows asymmetry between the subject-verb relations and the verb-object relation. Although the three subject-verb semantic relations focus on causation and affectedness, the semantic relationship between the verb and the object is explained from a different aspect in functional onomatology. The verb-object relations are fully analyzed in the section “The object in English” in the functional syntax. Mathesius’s analysis of the object can also be taken as a consideration of the relationship between the predicate verb and its arguments co-occurring in the sentence. Under the title of accusative, dative, genitive, and double objects, his analysis developed more than ten different relations between the object and the predicate verb. In functional onomatology, from the verb’s perspective, the object is taken as a complement to the verb, thus the verb can be categorized in terms of whether it is complete in itself or not. For instance, in “to attend a course”, the verb “attend” is an objective verb, which denotes an action not complete in itself and requires a complement. While in “many civil officials attended”, the verb “attend” is a subjective verb, which denotes an action complete in itself. This shows that the object here is more basic to the event denoted by the predication and thus may have a closer relationship with the verb. A similar view can be found in Talmy’s analysis of the complexity of different types of semantic situations.

The semantic motivation of this approach encouraged some scholars to compare it to Tesnière’s syntactic theory. For instance, Danilenko put forward the view that concerning approaches to sentence-forming, Tesnière’s theory is predicate-centered and monocentric, while Mathesius’ theory is not only predicate-centered but also subject-centered, hence bicentric. Although researchers may find some similarities between the two analyses, they are quite different in nature. Mathesius’s approach is one of constituency, while Tesnière’s theory is one of dependency. In Mathesius’s analysis, words as naming units are at the same time constituents, and thus they are combined into larger constructions or phrase structures, which are then combined into even larger constructions. This constituency entails asymmetry between the object and the subject semantically and syntactically. This asymmetric relation echoes the different analyses of subject and object in functional syntax.

While in a dependency approach, there is no constituent structure; it usually shows a construct structure, which cannot be broken down into parts expressing consistent compositional meaning assignment to these parts

^[16]. In Tesnière's discussion of the structure of the simple sentence, he mentions although the subject-object distinction can be explained semantically, there is no structural opposition between the first and the second actant. Structurally the subordinate is usually a complement completing the governor. He even expressed overtly that the subject is a complement like the others ^[17]. Accordingly, the verb-centered approach here is both structural and semantic. The nouns are presented as actants structurally and as a subject and object semantically which develop a symmetric relation with the predicate verb.

In today's syntax-semantics interface research, this belongs to the study of argument realization, i.e. the realization of the argument structure at the surface level (this term is not used in the generative sense). One of the current cruxes may lie in the decisive semantic element of the argument realization. While the projectionist approach takes verb meaning as the decisive element, the constructionist approach takes the construction meaning as the core. At this point, traces of the first approach can be found in Mathesius's thought. His research shows that one grammatical sentence pattern may match several different semantic sentence patterns. This can also be found in Daneš's three-level approach ^[18].

3. Subject-center in Mathesius's functional syntax

As mentioned before, in Mathesius's linguistic characterology, functional syntax deals with how the selected linguistic units are put into mutual relations, to constitute a sentence. According to Mathesius, the sentence is defined as an elementary communicative unit denoting some reality or several items of the reality in a manner appearing to be formally customary and subjectively complete. Thus, a sentence in functional syntax is not a static notion; rather, it is a dynamic unit in communication, which is a reaction to some reality and entails the requirement of being an appropriate part of a whole or utterance. Meanwhile, a sentence is formally conventional and complete, which may put the encoding process under further constraint. Compared to Skalička, Mathesius emphasizes the speaker's judgment on the completeness of his thought. This is also evidence of his functional point of view, for language here is taken as a tool to fulfill its function of human communication. Although phrase structure is also important and may be more basic to human language, a pure description and explanation of the constituent structure is not the pursuit of Mathesius's present work ^[19]. Thus, after the possible sentence potential has been established, the next step is to build the linear structure of the utterance, or the realized sentence potential in real communication, which boils down to the choice of the initial point and the word order. Accordingly, in Mathesius's interpretation of the subject-verb relation in the functional syntax, the leading role here is the subject. It is not that the verb is not important here, but rather that priority is given to the consideration of the subject. This view can be seen in at least three aspects of his study of functional syntax.

3.1. The function of the subject

In functional syntax, Mathesius tried to account for the selection of the subject in terms of a sentence as a basic communicative unit. According to his theory, almost every sentence contains two basic content elements, i.e. a statement and an element about which the statement is made; the former is named the theme or the basis of the utterance, and the latter the rheme or the nucleus of the utterance. The patterning of a sentence into this distinction is termed functional sentence perspective, which is determined by the functional approach of the speaker. Mathesius proposes that the possible origin of the grammatical subject in English is a formally fixed expression of the theme of the utterance ^[20]. Traditionally, the subject is taken as a structural or formal unit

and although it coincides with the agent, it is difficult to explain why it usually takes the initial position in the English sentence. Jespersen once explained this from the diachronic perspective, saying that the obscurity in the distinction between the object and the subject results in the transition of the original object into the subject. For instance, in the Middle English sentence “pam cynge licodon peran”, the noun “peran” is a plural subject, and the verb “lician” is also plural. Later, the sentence changed into “the king likeden peares” and then “the king liked pears.” Consequently, modern English lost the dative case mark for “pam cynge” while its initial position in the sentence remains the same. This can be seen as an account of the English subject’s preference in the sentence ^[21]. On the other hand, Mathesius’s explanation is more functional and closely related to the speaker’s basic encoding process. In other words, when we take a sentence as an utterance, its performance on the one hand is constrained by the possible subject-verb and verb-object relations developed in the functional onomatology; while on the other hand, the selection of the theme and the rheme may be the major concern in the functional syntax. Since the subject in English usually expresses the theme of the utterance and the choice of the subject it may entail a change in the sentence patterning which reflects the speaker’s functional approach. The subject plays a decisive role in the performance of an utterance in a discursive stream. The next section will discuss the relation between the subject and the sentence word order in more detail.

3.2. Subject-center and word order

The leading role of the subject in a sentence formation is closely related to the four principles determining the order of words in a language, developed by Mathesius, i.e. the grammatical principle, the rhythm principle, the principle of functional sentence perspective (henceforth FSP) and the principle of emphasis. A close investigation of his analysis reveals that all of them are closely related to the subject ^[22]. The present paper will focus on a discussion of the first and the third principles. Just as Mathesius expressed overtly, the tendency to express the theme by the subject is connected with the fixed grammatical word order of English, which cannot otherwise satisfy the requirements of functional sentence perspective in the objective sense, namely, that a sentence should start with the theme. The paucity of the morphological change of the nouns in English attaches great importance to the grammatical principle in English, and its interaction with the FSP principle. In other words, FSP is a device to achieve the different linear orders in various sentences and it has a similar status to the grammatical factor in Mathesius’s system. This is different from Firbas’s analysis. In Firbas’s approach to FSP, the three factors, i.e. linear modification, semantic factors, and contextual factors may interplay and explain the FSP of the sentence, specifically each element’s value of communicative dynamism (henceforth CD) in the utterance. In this system, the linear other is just one device to achieve FSP.

These two views are different, but not contradictory. While Firbas took FSP as a starting point and tried to explain its multifarious varieties fully in real communication, Mathesius’s concern is to explain how the selected naming units are put into mutual relations to constitute a sentence. Although he took a sentence as a communicative unit, most of his research focused on context-free sentences rather than a sentence in the communicative stream. The relatively fixed word order of English sentences was the focus here and the natural SVO order became a point of reference, hence FSP is just a part of the functional explanation of the English word order. Context as an influential factor was represented in a few examples and was not fully studied. In terms of the four principles of word order, the FSP factor is a consideration of the contextual factor compared to the constraint developed in the grammatical principle. Only when a sentence is put in the context of an utterance is it necessary to talk about the base and the nuclear of a sentence. In the functional syntax, Mathesius mentioned the

role of the semantic factor in a few cases saying the local determination is selected as a theme and the speaker tells a piece of news to which the hearer responds but still it was not fully studied. Although in another section in functional syntax, he explained in detail the semantic relations between the verb and the object; he did not link them with his discussion of the FSP, which became an essential part of Firbas's later study ^[23]. The focus in Mathesius's study is the relationship between the syntactic functions and the patterning of FSP, which also supports the view that in the study of the subject-verb relation in functional syntax, Mathesius took the subject as its center.

4. Conclusion

The above analysis reveals that in the functional analysis of English, Mathesius took the subject-verb relation as the nucleus of an utterance providing relatively new information about the settled base. What is emphasized in this paper is that Mathesius's interpretation of the subject-verb relation in English is of double perspectives. On the one hand, in functional onomatology, he analyzed the sentence from the perspective of a verb and developed a new approach in the description and explanation of the categories of verbs, i.e. taking the effect of the verb's meaning on its structural relations with the nouns occurring in the same sentence or the argument realization of the verb. While in functional syntax, he took the perspective of the subject and illustrated how the change of the sentence's initial part, which is usually the subject, may bring a change to the arrangement of the words in the utterance or the utterance's information structure. The former can be taken as the more static side of a sentence and as a potential, while the latter can be taken as the more dynamic side and as what is actualized in the discourse. The study also reveals that although language function is the main thread here, in the former aspect, what is highlighted is the inner function of a language, i.e. the position an element may occupy in a larger linguistic unit; while in the latter aspect, what is emphasized is the communicative functions that a language may serve in use. Thus, by considering these two aspects of subject-verb relation, Mathesius convincingly demonstrated his taking a speaker's viewpoint in language analysis, which is one of his basic thoughts of functional linguistics.

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