

On the nominative object in Latvian, with particular reference to the debitive

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The paper deals with the nominative object in some Latvian sentence types, especially in sentences containing the debitive. An attempt is made to determine to what extent the relevant constructions with "nominative objects" were motivated within the syntactic development of Latvian itself, and which elements are likely to reflect Fennic patterns.

Several Latvian constructions, notably several types of constructions with verbs in the debitive, have been cited in connection with the "nominative object". As is known, Latvian, Lithuanian and the North Russian dialects have a number of constructions with infinitives, the objects of which occur in the nominative, if they are indeed to be interpreted as objects; cf. North Russian dial. *ryba nado lovit'*, Lithuanian *reikia rugiai pjauti* etc. The Latvian constructions with the debitive also seem to belong to this category, as the debitive is historically related to the infinitive. As in Fennic the object of the infinitive systematically occurs in the nominative in impersonal (subjectless) constructions, it has been assumed that Latvian, Lithuanian and the North Russian dialects have borrowed this pattern from Fennic (Timberlake 1974), or perhaps retained or generalised some archaic IE pattern under Fennic influence (Kiparsky 1969). Though I do not doubt the correctness of this view, I think the facts of Latvian should be carefully examined in order to render possible an accurate assessment of the problem with specific reference to this language. In every single case some point of departure must have been initially given in the language itself, and only in the course of subsequent development there arose, under the influence of a Fennic substratum or adstratum, what we could now properly call a nominative object. An attempt



should be made to set apart those elements which are a natural consequence of the initial pattern from which the relevant constructions developed, and those which may be viewed as instances of deviation from this pattern under presumable foreign influence.

Here I will be concerned mainly with debitive constructions, as these are specifically Latvian. I will compare the debitive constructions to some other types, which are not specifically Latvian, but can be found in Lithuanian as well, and are probably even more frequent there.

With regard to the constructions under discussion one should attempt to answer the following questions:

(a) is the status of the nominative NP the same in all cases? In other words, is it possible to formulate one general rule underlying all uses of the nominative object?

(b) what further syntactic implications does the use of the "nominative object" have? The use of the nominative is normally one of a set of features associated with what is commonly described as subjecthood. Another essential feature is agreement. It should therefore be examined whether there is agreement with the noun phrase occurring in the nominative or not. If there is no such agreement, the nominative NP differs in this respect from the subject of a normal active sentence; if there is, then the notion of nominative object should be reconsidered.

In discussions of the debitive, it is often forgotten (or ignored) how this construction actually arose. As was discovered more or less simultaneously by Endzelīns and Prellwitz, the element *jā-* which is part of the debitive form, represents a case form of the relative (originally anaphoric) pronominal stem **jō-* (Endzelīns 1905:320). This element was originally prefixed to the infinitive, as can still be seen from the form *jābūt* (Endzelīns 1901:66-68). Accordingly, Latvian *Man jāēd maize* originally had the same structure and meaning as the present-day construction *man ir maize, ko ēst* (a meaning which is attested even in the modern dialects of Latvian). It follows that the basis of the debitive construction is constituted by a possessive construction of the type *man ir (mihi est)*¹. We may therefore assume that in all cases where alternative use of the nominative and accusative may be observed, the

¹The dative occurring in debitive constructions is therefore a possessive dative. It is not clear to me why Schmalstieg (1990:427) follows Endzelīns' (1901:68) original suggestion and interprets it as a dative of agency used with an infinitive, ignoring the obvious implications of Endzelīns' later view on the debitive.

nominative is the original, historically motivated variant.

But, from a historical point of view, the nominative in the debitive construction also represents a normal subject. In possessive constructions of the *man ir* type the nominative subject has the essential surface features normally associated with subjecthood (even though other features normally associated with subjecthood, such as control of reflexivisation, are lacking). The verb shows agreement with the nominative whenever agreement is possible, i.e. in the compound forms containing participial forms. The following example contains a compound form of the *modus relativus*:

(1) *Kādam tēvam bijuši divi dēli.*

In the debitive construction, however, this rule is not consistently observed. The number of cases where this type of agreement can occur is rather small. It is restricted to debitives containing compound forms of the auxiliary *būt*, sc. the compound tenses of the indicative on the one hand, and the compound forms of the conditional and the relative mood on the other. The participle sometimes shows agreement in number and gender with the noun phrase occurring in the nominative, but the invariable masculine singular form is also used². The Academy Grammar gives examples of both constructions in the case of the *modus relativus* (Bergmane e.a. 1959:618):

(2) *Lini bijuši jākaltē, un vecais tēvs tos labi pratis izraudzīt.* (J. Akuraters)

(3) *Jau lemešu uzasināšanai ogles bijis jāaizņemas no kalēja.* (E. Birznieks-Upītis)

With regard to the compound conditional it is explicitly stated that both possibilities exist, and that the construction with agreement is less frequent (Bergmane e.a. 1959:617). The same is stated by Endzelīns (1951:981) for the relative mood of the debitive. The overall frequency of debitives with compound forms of the auxiliary is not particularly high, and this is probably

²Schmalstieg (1990:430:431) compares *Man ir bijuši jābūco Anglijas karalienei pirksti* and *Man ir bijis jābūco Anglijas karalienei pirkstus*, and speculates on possible differences of meaning. Apart from the fact that the latter variant is not considered correct in the standard language, both cases would not, in natural circumstances, co-occur in the idiolect of one single speaker, as in the case of nouns the distribution of the nominative and the accusative is, as it seems, a matter of dialectal differentiation (cf. Endzelīns 1951:971, Gāters 1977:148). If they do co-occur, it is only because a Latvian using the accusative in his native dialect must also be aware of the variety with the nominative, which is prescribed by the standard language. There is also no necessary connection between the choice of the case form and the presence or lack of agreement.

the reason why grammarians just note both possibilities without bothering to prescribe either of them as representing correct usage³.

In those cases where no agreement occurs, the debitive construction appears to be an impersonal construction with a nominative object, which is, of course, strongly reminiscent of analogous Fennic constructions. A similar situation may be observed when a personal pronoun functions as object. This pronoun is then normally in the accusative, and no agreement occurs.

(4) Man tevi jāmāca.

There is, however, an alternative construction with the pronoun in the nominative, and, accordingly, agreement of the auxiliary with this subject:

(5) Tu man esi jāmāca.

The latter construction is much rarer, and Endzelīns was not even aware of its existence when writing his first articles on the debitive (cf. Endzelīns 1901:72); but a few examples are cited in Endzelīns (1951:972).

Of course the choice between the two constructions has not only morpho-syntactic, but also purely morphological implications. In the language variety of those speakers who put the 1st and 2nd person pronouns into the accusative, and correspondingly apply no agreement in person, the debitive has no full conjugation, but 3rd person forms only. The question which needs to be answered here is whether this deviant treatment is characteristic of pronouns as such, or of the 1st and 2nd person pronouns.

The treatment of the reflexive pronoun provides no answer to our question. It is obvious that the application of the standard pattern with a nominative would involve the use of the nominative case of the reflexive pronoun, which is not available. As is known, the reason why the reflexive pronoun lacks a nominative is that reflexivisation is normally controlled by subjects. If the object of the basic (non-debitive) active construction were to become a real subject in the debitive construction (as it does in the passive construction), then one would expect the reflexivisation pattern to be reversed too, and the reflexive pronoun to appear in the place of the original subject (i.e., in the dative); in other words, instead of (6) we would have (7), which does not actually occur⁴:

(6) Cilvēkam vispirms jāizkopj pašam sevi. (E. Freimanis)

³Fennell (1973:220) describes the construction *Man ir bijis jālasa avīze* as "slightly sub-standard", but I have found no statement to this effect in Latvian grammars.

⁴The use of the reflexive possessive pronoun *savs* is controlled by the NP occurring in the dative too, as was noted by Fennell (1973:214).

(7) *Cilvēks vispirms ir jāizkopj sev pašam.

The lack of constructions like (7) also shows that the debitive construction (unlike the passive, which should probably not be regarded as a transformation of the active construction, but consists in an alternative assignment of grammatical relations) is derived directly from the basic (non-debitive) active construction, with the rules of reflexivisation already applied. As Fennell (1973) has demonstrated, other fundamental features of the basic (non-debitive) active construction with regard to the obligatoriness (and possibility of deletion) of subject and object are transferred without any change to the debitive construction as well. According to Keenan (1976) the dative NP would be the "subject" of the debitive construction in terms of semantic properties and of reference and control properties, though not in terms of coding properties.

As is known, the use of the accusative does not extend to 3rd person pronouns. But retention of the accusative may be observed in the case of the reciprocal pronoun *cits citu* in (8):

(8) Rietumniekiem jāturas kopā, jāaizstāv *citam citu*. (E. Freimanis)

However, the derivation of such constructions is not clear. The situation of the reciprocal pronoun should perhaps be compared to that of the reflexive pronoun, as both represent cases of coreferential pronominalisation. The use of the accusative in (8) should then be compared to what we observe in (6). Possibly one of the conditions of the use of the nominative is autonomous reference (the reference of the original object may not depend on that of the original subject).

The restrictions on the occurrence of the nominative object in Fennic seem to be determined by a kind of animacy constraint (Timberlake 1974:179ff.). There is no evidence that would unambiguously point to a similar constraint in Latvian⁵. The use of the accusative of 1st and 2nd person pronouns might be a purely morphological feature (due to the fact that the debitive did not develop a full conjugation), and in the 3rd person the conditions on the use of the nominative might be connected with autonomous reference. Perhaps

⁵In Finnish (as Timberlake 1974:181 points out) the constraint on the use of the accusative applies to personal pronouns of the 3rd person, which are used when referring to animates, but not to the originally demonstrative pronouns used when referring to inanimate objects. Though Latvian has a similar distinction between *viņš, viņa* and *tas, tā*, there is no similar differentiation in debitive constructions. It should be added, however, that the distinction between *viņš, viņa* and *tas, tā* is not consistently observed in Latvian.

the constraint on the nominative object in Latvian debitive constructions is a consequence of the origin of the debitive. As this construction developed from a possessive structure, the category of potential subjects was originally restricted to nouns; later on, it was extended to 3rd person pronouns capable of autonomous reference, but not further. To a certain extent, of course, the Latvian pattern may simply reflect the Fennic one.

The next case which has to be considered is that of sentences where the object occurs with an infinitive accompanying a debitive.

(9) Jāsāk *oāze* meklēt. (J. Greste)

(10) [...] jāliek apcietināt arī karoga *izkārējs*. (P. Rozītis)

(11) *Tas puika* tak jāmēģina kaut kur ietaisīt. (J. Greste)

The nominative object is optional here, and the accusative may be used as well; compare (11) and (12):

(12) Tagad tikai jāmēģina *kādu mazumiņu* iekrāt vecuma dienām. (P. Rozītis)

Though the difference between both constructions does not seem to be regularly associated with a meaning difference, topicalisation might be a factor favouring the use of the nominative, as is suggested by (11) when compared to (12).

At first sight, the constructions with the nominative are strongly reminiscent of certain passive constructions. Passive sentences often show promotion of the object of the embedded clause dependent on the passivised verb to the position of subject of the matrix clause:

(13) *Stāsts sāks* rakstīt vāciski, bet pabeigts latviski. (T. Zeiferts)

(14) Dažiem jēdzieniem *mēģināti* atvasināt *jauni vārdi*. (T. Zeiferts)

(15) [Selonijas krāsas,] *kas ... tam vēl nemaz nebija atļautas nēsāt* (A. Deglavs)

Passives like these compete with impersonal passives, with the object of the infinitive in the accusative. In (14) we might as well have ... *mēģināts atvasināt jaunus vārdus*. Constructions like (13-15) are determined by a syntactic rule promoting the object of the embedded clause to the position of subject of a passive matrix clause. The effect of this rule is similar to that of the rules of subject raising operating in various languages; the difference is that here the object of the embedded clause is raised to the matrix clause when the latter is passivised. There is no reason to regard such patterns as particularly archaic. They may arise in various languages at different times, without any genetic link existing between them. It is true that in Baltic

such constructions are particularly widespread (Lithuanian examples such as *piršlys baigiamas karti* are cited by Fraenkel 1928:14-15), and this is the only fact which might suggest a link with the Fennic nominative object.

There are, however, similar constructions without agreement. These appear to be impersonal passives with nominative objects. Examples are cited by Mühlenbach (Endzelins & Mühlenbachs 1907:207):

(16) Man ir *atļauts rieksti ēst*.

(17) Viņam *dots zirņi ēst*.

These constructions are remarkable, because in Latvian the lack of agreement which we observe here is not characteristic of passive sentences as a whole. Whereas in Lithuanian passive sentences with the participle in the invariable neuter form regularly occur, the passive normally requires agreement of the participle with the subject in Latvian (cf. Ambrazas 1990:200-201). The only examples without agreement known to me are those with embedded clauses cited by Mühlenbach.

In his review of a book by Eduard Hermann Endzelīns (1935:184) states that the Latvian construction *Man ir atļauts rieksti ēst* is "... gluži nejausa un neparasta un rakstu valodā neatļauta", whereas the comparable Lithuanian phrase *metas jau bus ir rugiai pjauti* is quite normal and regularly used. It is certainly true that this construction is not to be found in modern Latvian writings, and one may assume it to have been successfully ousted from the standard language. But it does not appear to be an accidental contamination of the constructions *man ir atļauts riekstus ēst* and *man ir atļauti rieksti ēst*, as Endzelīns (1951:1061) assumes. We may regard it as an impersonal construction with a nominative subject, a pattern which appears to have been borrowed from Fennic.

Among the remaining "impersonal" expressions commonly cited in connection with the nominative object two types should be distinguished as well. In the first type, the embedded clause depends on a predicative expression which normally takes a nominative subject:

(18) Visvairāk viņai patīk lasīt *Bībele*. (T. Zeiferts)

In a sentence like (18) the nominative could be interpreted either as a nominative object, or as the subject of *patīk*, since the verb *patīkt* takes a subject in the nominative. We could therefore regard (18) as an instance of an archaic pattern, for which Old Indic parallels were already cited in early publications on the North Russian nominative object (cf. Kiparsky 1969:142). However, such patterns may also arise at different times and places

independently of each other, and Kiparsky (1969:148) was clearly right in comparing them to Chomsky's example of "tough movement" *John is easy to please*.

The situation is different when the matrix clause contains an impersonal modal expression like Latvian *vajag* or Lithuanian *reikia*, as in (19), cited by Endzelīns (1901:72); examples for Lithuanian are cited by Fraenkel (1928:14-18):

(19) *Zirgs vajadzēs mazgāt.*

This case seems to be different because *vajag* does not normally take a subject in the nominative, but an object in the accusative or genitive⁶. Whereas in the passive constructions illustrated in (13-15) the promotion to subject is motivated by the change in voice (the object of the embedded clause is promoted to the position of subject, as in any normal passive construction, with the sole difference that it has to be raised to the matrix clause), no such motivation exists in sentences like (19).

The debitive constructions with embedded clauses seem to correspond, at first sight, to the pattern of the passive sentences illustrated in (13-15): the object of the embedded clause is raised to subject position in the matrix clause. It should, however, be noted that the use of the nominative in debitive constructions bears a slightly different character than in the other cases mentioned here. It probably results from a surface rule to the effect that the direct object of an infinitive following upon a debitive may be put into the nominative, even if this infinitive does not represent an embedded clause. This is the case with infinitives accompanying the debitive forms of motion verbs; such infinitives must be viewed as representing adverbial modifiers rather than verb complements. Historically, they probably continue supines rather than infinitives. Endzelīns (1901:72) formulated the rule for the objects of both infinitive and supine, without, however, giving any examples for the latter.

(20) *no rīta jāceļas slaucīt sniegs no koka stāpelēm.* (A. Deglavs)

I have observed no similar passive constructions, whereas with verbs like *mēģināt*, *sākt* etc. the promotion of the object of the embedded clause to subject status is observed in both passive and debitive constructions.

⁶Endzelīns (1951:552, footn.) notes that in some Latvian dialects *vajag* is construed with the nominative as well; but one may doubt whether this is a necessary condition of the use of the nominative in embedded clauses, cf. the numerous examples with Lith. *reikia*, which takes the genitive.

In the case of motion verbs there is a third possibility besides the above-mentioned constructions with the nominative and accusative: the object is in the nominative, but the infinitive is replaced by a debitive as well, which yields what could be called a double debitive:

(21) *Drīzi būs jāiet pļavā siens jāizārda.* (J. Poruks)

(22) *Pa Lieldienām būs jāiet jānošauj likšņā kāda līdaka.* (K. Skalbe)

The use of this double debitive (obviously corresponding to a basic construction with an infinitive dependent on a motion verb) seems to be a strategy allowing to provide the debitive construction with a nominative object also in those cases where the object is not directly dependent on the debitive.

The fact that the need for such a strategy was felt seems to indicate that the construction with a nominative object accompanying an infinitive dependent on a debitive constitutes a certain anomaly. The nominative object directly dependent on the debitive is (in the majority of Latvian dialects) completely grammaticalised; it is a feature of the debitive as such. Now it should be noted that from a diachronic point of view there is nothing anomalous about the use of the nominative object in either case, whether it is directly dependent on the debitive or not. If the debitive construction *man ir jāmeklē darbs* is derived from a construction originally meaning *man ir darbs, ko meklēt*, then it seems natural to derive *man ir jāiet meklēt darbs* directly from an analogous construction *man ir darbs, ko iet meklēt*. The historical priority of the nominative is obvious in both cases. At a later stage, the original syntactic and semantic structure of the debitive became opaque, but the nominative, which had originally been a subject, was retained and began to function as a nominative object characteristic of the debitive construction. But in constructions with infinitives dependent on the debitive the original subject began to function as the object of the infinitive. As a result, the nominative became more or less anomalous here, and the accusative began to be used alongside with the nominative.

However, this replacement of the nominative by the accusative was not consistent. The reason for this was probably that Latvian had a promotion-to-subject rule for the objects of embedded clauses, as illustrated in (16-18). This rule was well established in passive constructions in both Latvian and Lithuanian, and could easily be extended to the new debitive constructions. It was less easy to apply in the case of motion verbs, as the status of the infinitive was different here (it did not represent an embedded clause), and this probably led to the occasional use of an alternative strategy for retaining

the nominative, illustrated in (27-28).

Should the constructions with nominative objects in embedded clauses dependent on a debitive be considered, together with the above-mentioned Baltic and Slavonic constructions with infinitives dependent on impersonal expressions, as reflecting possible Fennic influence? Not more so than the basic variety of the debitive. Of course, the debitive construction is in itself reminiscent of Fennic, and could be connected with a Fennic substratum or adstratum. The very fact that such a construction developed instead of a modal verb being created from a verb comparable to Lithuanian *turėti* or Estonian *pidama* (both originally meaning 'to hold') is significant. But so is the further development of this construction. The restrictions on the use of the nominative in the case of 1st and 2nd person pronouns are shared by Fennic, as pointed out by Kiparsky (1969:147). It is also striking that the nominative often lacks subject properties (such as agreement in the compound forms) which we would have expected on account of the original syntactic structure the debitive was derived from, sc. a possessive construction of the *mihi est* type. What we observe here is a transition from an original *nominative subject* to a *nominative object* as it exists in Fennic. It is not the use of the nominative itself that is historically unmotivated within Latvian syntactic structure, but the fact that this nominative is treated as an object.

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