

## **Non-canonical subjects: Emergence, evolution and conventionalization**

Workshop proposal for SLE 2026, Osnabrück

convenors: Pierre-Yves Modicom, Joren Somers & Jóhanna Barðdal

corresponding person: P.-Y. Modicom ([pierre-yves.modicom@univ-lyon3.fr](mailto:pierre-yves.modicom@univ-lyon3.fr))

### **Presentation**

At least since Keenan (1976), prototypical subjects have been defined in terms of coding and behavioral properties, such as case marking, clause-initial position, subject-verb inversion, conjunction reduction, raising, and control. These diagnostics have been successfully applied to several languages and have thus led to the discovery of non-canonically case-marked subjects in Icelandic (Andrews 1976, Thráinsson 1976, *inter alia*) and the South Asian languages (Masica 1976, Kachru, Kachru & Bhatia 1976, *inter alia*). Later, such non-nominative subjects were documented in additional Modern Germanic languages like Faroese (Barnes 1986) and German (Barðdal 2006, Somers et al. 2025, *inter alia*), alongside a substantial body of work on the early Germanic languages, like Gothic, Old English, Old Saxon, Old Norse-Icelandic and Middle High German (cf. Barðdal 2023 and the references therein). Further Indo-European languages featuring non-nominative subjects are Russian (Moore & Perlmutter 2000), Old French (Mathieu 2006), Romanian (Iliescu 2023), and Latin and Ancient Greek (Barðdal et al. 2023, Cluyse, Somers & Barðdal 2025).

In addition, structures involving non-nominative subjects have been found to exist in Japanese (Shibatani 1999), Korean (Yoon 2004), Hebrew (Landau 2009, Pat-El 2018), native American languages (Hermon 1985), the Dravidian languages (Verma & Mohanan 1990), the Dardic languages (Steever 1998), the Tibeto-Burman languages (Bickel 2004), the Cariban languages (Castro Alves 2018) and the Tsezic languages (Comrie, Forker & Khalilova (2020).

The current workshop is devoted to the emergence and subsequent evolution of non-nominative subjects, of which, at least the first one, is a heavily under-researched area (see, however, Barðdal & Eythórsson 2009, Pooth et al. 2019, Barðdal 2023: 140–152 and the references therein). In principle, there might also be as many explanations for their emergence as there are types of constructions involving non-nominative subjects. For some of the relevant structures, like oblique anticausatives or alternating Dat-Nom/Nom-Dat verbs, there certainly exist viable hypotheses of their emergence in the Indo-European languages (cf. Barðdal et al. 2020 on oblique anticausatives and Barðdal 2025 on the alternation between Dat-Nom and Nom-Dat), although this is far from true for the majority of the relevant types, nor is it true for languages outside the Indo-European family. We thus particularly welcome contributions focusing on this issue in or across different and diverse languages around the world. This also includes the issue of whether the emergence of the category of non-nominative subjects in a language is tied to specific alignment systems.

Another topic of great interest relates to the place of non-canonical subjects within their respective language system. That is, do these form a residual or epiphenomenal set of phenomena, or do they belong to the core system, as for instance in Classical Latin or Greek? This is a particularly pertinent question as emergent work on Modern Dutch even suggests that oblique subjecthood may be maintained in non-case languages (cf. Somers 2023). Furthermore, how can we decide between two options, i.e. of belonging to the core of grammar or being residual? Should productivity be invoked to evaluate the synchronic status of non-canonical subjects? Or should we apply syntactic tests such as deletion, raising or reflexive binding to determine whether predicates with non-canonical subjects are formally frozen or not? And how do non-canonical subjects relate to voice phenomena and differential argument marking in their respective languages (cf. Barðdal et al. 2020)?

Today, 50 years after Keenan's monumental work, the aim of this workshop is to once more bring non-nominative subjects to the fore and to specifically focus on:

- **the emergence of the category of non-canonical subjects in different types of alignment systems.** Reanalysis, grammaticalization, productivity

- **systematic alternations of non-nominative subjects and other structures** like oblique anticausativization (Barðdal et al. 2020) and alternating Dat-Nom/Nom-Dat and Acc-Nom/ Nom-Acc predicates (cf. Barðdal 2023, Cluyse, Somers & Barðdal 2025, Illoaia, Van Peteghem & Barðdal 2025, Somers et al. 2025, inter alia), which may contribute to our knowledge of how non-nominative subjects may arise
- **the mechanisms behind their maintenance, evolution or loss** (e.g. “dative sickness”, “accusative sickness” and “nominative sickness” in languages with accusative alignment, cf. Eythórsson 2002, Barðdal 2011, Dunn et al. 2017, Danesi 2017, Dewey & Carey 2018)
- **the place of non-canonical subjects within their respective language system:** do they form a residual or epiphenomenal set of phenomena, or do they belong to the core system?

Please submit your abstract of one page, excluding references, to pierre-yves.modicom (AT) univ-lyon3.fr before November 15th, 2025.

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