

The case of things that rain and snow: Reconstructing weather expressions in Proto-Germanic

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In this paper we propose a reconstruction of argument structure and case patterns of NPs with a subset of weather verbs in Proto-Germanic. The reconstruction is based on evidence from Old Germanic languages, involving cognate lexical material and the relevant argument structure. We furthermore trace the diachronic development of the status of the NPs with these verbs from adjuncts to arguments which result in oblique subjects in Modern Icelandic. A crucial part of the analysis is the assumption of a semantically void argument with verbs of this type already in Proto-Germanic.

In both Old Icelandic (1a) and Modern Icelandic (1b) a dative NP is attested with the verb ‘rain’.

- (1) a. Sáu menn að **blóði** hafði rignt í skúrinni
saw men that blood.DAT had rained in shower-the
‘Men saw that it had rained blood in the rain shower’ (Olc; Eyrbyggja saga, ch. 51)
- b. **Glerbrotum** rigndi þegar rúða brotnaði...
shards-of-glass.DAT rained when window broke
‘Shards of glass rained down when a window broke...’
(ModIc; News headline *Víkurfrettir* 05.11.2017)

Dative NPs are attested with ‘rain’ in Gothic, as well (2).

- (2) ...usiddja Lod us Saudaumim, rignida swibla jah **funin** us himina
went-out Lot from Sodom rained sulphur.DAT and fire.DAT from heaven
‘... Lot left Sodom, sulphur and fire rained down from heaven’ (Luke 17.29)

The Gothic datives in (2) correspond to nouns in the accusative in the Greek Bible text (Streitberg 2000).

- (3) ...ἔβρεξεν **πῦρ** καὶ **θεῖον** [*ebrexen pur kai theion*]
rained fire.ACC and sulphur.ACC ‘it rained fire and sulphur’ (Luke 17.29)

It may be noted that Latin also has accusative NPs with ‘rain’ in this context: *pluit ignem et sulphur* ‘rained fire(ACC) and sulphur(ACC)’ (Luke 17.29). Finally, a dative occurs with ‘rain’ in Old English (4a), but there are also examples with an instrumental (4b). In accordance with traditional assumptions (Krahe 1969), we argue that the original instrumental case syncretized with the dative. Thus, although occurring in the same text (Wulfstan), the instrumental is diachronically older than the dative.

- (4) a. **Hit** ágan rínan xl. daga and xl. nihta tósomne **ðæm mæstan réne**
 it began rain 40 days and 40 nights together the.DAT most.DAT rain.DAT
 ‘It started to rain the greatest rain for forty days and forty nights’
 (Wulfstan, Napier 1883:216-17)
- b. And **hit** þa ongan rínan feowertig daga and feowertig nihta tosomne **þy mæstan rene**
 and it then began rain 40 days and 40 nights together the.INSTR most.INSTR rain.INSTR
 ‘And then it started to rain with great rain for forty days and forty nights’
 (Wulfstan, Napier 1883:206)

Based on comparative evidence, it can be shown that the instrumental/dative in this case is specific to Germanic, deviating as it does from the accusative in Greek and Latin. We assume that the instrumental/dative NP was an adjunct in the earliest Germanic. Incidentally, such an analysis would be supported by the Modern English expression *It rains with cats and dogs* with a PP adjunct, which exists as an alternative to the more common phrase *It rains cats and dogs*.

Having established the case marking pattern for Proto-Germanic, we now turn to the argument structure of the relevant verbs. It has been proposed that weather verbs have a semantically void argument which can be either overt or covert (Eythórsson and Sigurðardóttir 2016, Wood 2016, Haider 2017). We adopt this view and furthermore follow the proposal of Wood (2016:28–30) that there is a silent external argument with certain verbs that have oblique subjects in Modern Icelandic (see also Schäfer 2008, 2012, Sigurðsson 1989, Haider 2001, Platzack 2006). Such an analysis of a dative with ‘rain’ in Modern Icelandic is shown in (5); the internal argument moves past the covert semantically void argument (CL_{NOM}) to the subject position.

- (5) a. Glerbrotum rigndi
 shards-of-glass.DAT rained ‘Shards of glass rained down.’
- b. [TP glerbrotum_{DAT} T_{[VoiceP CL_{NOM} Voice[rigndi <glerbrotum_{DAT}>]]]}

We propose that the covert semantically void argument was already present with weather verbs in Proto-Germanic that could occur with or without an adjunct NP denoting the manner and means of the precipitation. Positing a void argument already in Proto-Germanic allows us to account for the later development in the Germanic languages (including Icelandic and English). The void argument became overtly expressed in Old English as *hit* (2), but mostly remained covert in Icelandic (1), although occasionally expressed by the element *hann*, homonymous with the 3rd person pronoun masculine (‘he’), in later Icelandic (cf. Wood 2016, Eythórsson & Sigurðardóttir 2016). The NP adjunct was reanalyzed as an internal argument which in Modern Icelandic moves to the subject position (5).

In conclusion, the reconstruction we have proposed is in line with the Comparative Method in combination with insights from Syntactic Theory. Building on cognate lexical items in the Germanic languages, we identified an idiosyncratic pattern in which an archaic instrumental case syncretized with dative. We argued that the instrumental/dative NP was originally an adjunct which was later reanalyzed as an argument, at least in Icelandic, where it is an oblique subject. Finally, we assume that there is a semantically void argument occurring with weather verbs, both in old and modern Germanic languages. The assumption of the void argument and an optional NP adjunct in Proto-Germanic allows us to derive the situation in later stages in the different Germanic languages, and is moreover compatible with current theoretical views on weather verbs, void arguments and the movement of oblique NPs to the subject position.