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Language and Philosophy: An Analysis of the Turn to "Subject" in Modern Philosophy with Historical Linguistic Approach*



Ahmad Hosseini

*Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University,
Email: ahmadhosseinee@gmail.com*

Abstract:

The Philosophy of Descartes marked the starting point of modern philosophy. One of the main characteristics of this French rationalistic philosophy, which was followed by English empiricism and German Idealism, is a special attention to the "subject" instead of the cosmos, being or God. But the question is what caused such a turn to "subject"? With a historical linguistic approach it can be shown that the replacement of old languages of philosophy, namely Greek, Arabic and Latin by modern European languages, namely French, English and German can be one of the causes of this turn to "subject". In this research, we will concentrate on the word order and the possibility of the omission of the subject in the sentences of languages pertaining to different philosophical traditions from different historical contexts. In modern European languages of philosophy (French, English, German) there is an insistence on the subject to appear at the beginning of the sentence. These three languages are among the very limited number of Non Null Subject languages which do not permit the subject to be omitted from the beginning of the sentence. These languages were null subject in the course of their history, but at the same time with the appearance of modern philosophy (first half of the 17th century) they became non null subject languages.

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1. Introduction

Modern Philosophy refers to some philosophical traditions of a period in the history of philosophy which has the rationalistic philosophy of Rene Descartes as its starting point and continues with Cartesian Rationalism of the 17th century. This period covers also the English Empiricism of the 18th century and culminates in the philosophy of Kant and German Idealism of the 18th and 19th centuries. But what are the general characteristics of Modern Philosophy? What do they all have in common to bring them all under a single one name: Modern Philosophy?

Modern Philosophy is generally considered as a freedom from the limits of the medieval philosophy. Victor Cousin sees the philosophy of early modern period as a release of human mind from the slavery of the authority of the medieval period. He describes modern philosophy with such terms like “absolute independence”, “entire independence” and “definitive revolution”. (Cousin, 1852, 77) Modern Philosophy shows a freedom from church and religious doctrines. Unlike medieval period, most of the prominent modern philosophers were not priests nor do they come from churches. The second and maybe the most important feature of modern philosophy is the preoccupation with the study of human thought. (Copleston, 1960: 6-7; Cousin, 1852, 79) This characteristic is the superiority of the subject over other philosophical themes like cosmos, being or God.

There is no doubt that in the course of history of philosophy, subjects like the nature of human being and his knowledge – in the form of philosophical psychology - have always been at the center of philosophical investigations. But with the rise of the modern period, human being was studied – not as an object of the philosophical investigation but – as the subject and the knowing agent. In previous periods, the human intellect used to be studied as an object in the world, but from this period onward the independent reason and the basis of knowledge was studied. In Cartesian Rationalism the human intellect and its contents – the innate ideas – was studied and analyzed by philosophers. In English Empiricism it was the content of human experience and its classifications and procedures that was studied. In German Idealism too the meaning and human consciousness was the axis of all discussions. From here one can conclude that - despite all the serious differences between these philosophical schools – there is a similarity between all these philosophies in their concentration on the knowing subject. In other words, in these philosophies, instead of the world outside the mind, the consciousness and the process of the human knowledge is studied. In the philosophies of this period, “I” is equal to knowledge and consciousness and this consciousness is regarded as what makes man as what he is. In this period, unlike the ancient and medieval ages, man is not considered as a substance with the accident of knowledge. From this period, which begins exactly with Descartes, the definition of “I” as the knowing subject and also the relationship between this subject and the world has changed dramatically. Now the subject makes the world as its object. This means the independence of the subject.

Although the philosophical aspects of the revolution made by Descartes was studied seriously, the causes of such a revolution is less considered. The question is what causes made such a huge and revolutionary turn in human thought? The answer to this question is especially important because it can offer a deeper knowledge of such an evolution. This article tries to answer this question in a comparative way by the help of the historical linguistics. In some works the role and the importance of language in such a change is mentioned. For example Copleston says that in the modern period the mother language of the philosophers like French or German substituted the formal language of scholarship, namely Latin. (Copleston, 1960: 4) But these works do not explain how this change in language could result in a change in philosophy. The present article is aimed at showing how the substitution of the Latin language by modern European Languages, namely French, English and German could result in a turn to subject. Therefore it will become clear that the concurrency of the rise of the modern philosophy with the writing in languages other than Latin is not accidental. On this basis, the attention of English Empiricism and the Idealism of Kant and Hegel to Subject will be justified in a similar way.¹

This study is comparative in two ways: first it considers two fields of language and philosophy together. Here we are going to show the interconnection between the modern European languages and the modern philosophy. Second, even in the language side, it brings together several languages to provide a richer analysis. In this way, some philosophical languages like Greek, Arabic, Latin, French, English and German will be compared. In so doing, it considers languages in a historical way. We will compare the languages of modern philosophy namely French, English and German on one hand with other languages belonging to other philosophical traditions on the other hand. These second set of languages include: the language of ancient philosophy namely Greek and the languages of medieval philosophy Arabic, Persian and Latin. This comparison shows a parallel similarity between modern languages and modern philosophy.

On the philosophy side, we are mostly preoccupied with the philosophy of modern era, namely the European philosophical tradition started in the 17th century by Cartesian rationalism and continued by English Empiricism and German Idealism. Of course there would be several references to other philosophical traditions in order to underline the fundamental differences between these traditions.

In our analysis of languages we will concentrate on the role of subject in the sentences of different languages. So, based on the findings of Greenberg on the word order and also based on the Null Subject possibility, we will study the place of subject and the state and importance given to it in sentences of different philosophical languages.² Greenberg showed that based on the world order of Subject, Verb and Object, all languages can be classified in three main groups namely VSO, SVO and SOV. (Greenberg, 1966: 77) before the rise of modern philosophy the Subject in language was mostly on the sidelines or even omitted. In

ancient and medieval ages, philosophical languages were mostly VSO or the VSO combinations were predominant in them. But the rise of modern philosophy was simultaneous with a serious change in word order of modern European languages in a way that most of the word orders of these languages are SVO or SOV. Furthermore, it is only with the beginning of modern period which these three languages turned to Non-Null Subject languages. These main changes could result in a major turn in thought and philosophy. To show the revolutionary change of the modern languages we must survey the languages of different philosophical traditions. So Greek as an ancient philosophical language will be compared with languages of medieval philosophy namely Arabic, Persian and Latin and all of them with the languages of modern philosophy, namely French, English and German. Even at the end some other modern European languages which did not lead to modern philosophy – like Italian and Spanish - will be tested based on the theory presented in this article.

2. The Place of Subject in the Languages of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy

By Ancient philosophy we mean both the Hellenic and Hellenistic periods in the history of philosophy in which the main language of philosophy was Greek. In Medieval period two traditions of Islamic and Christian philosophies flourished. The languages of the former were mostly Arabic and Persian and the latter Latin. So in this part four languages of Greek, Arabic, Persian and Latin will be surveyed with an attention to the place of Subject in the sentence.

3. Language of Ancient Philosophies

3.1. Greek

Although the subject usually comes before the verb in Old Greek grammar, but this order is not definitive and permanent. The word order is variable from one author to another and even in different works of one single author. In Greek, the subject can be mentioned before or after the verb. (Dover, 1960: 12, 25-31) According to this grammar the subject can be even omitted and the verb can appear at the beginning of the sentence Null Subject. (Goodwin, 1900: 197) In this case, the verb conjugations are without subjects and the verb endings substitute the subjects and show the person, the number and the gender. (Bopp, 2009: 608) In this way, the verbs is at the center of attention and the subject is of less importance.

4. Languages of Medieval Philosophies

4.1. Arabic

Considering the place of subject in the sentence, Arabic is at the end of the list of all languages treated in this article. The word order in Arabic is VSO and the verb is usually at the beginning of the sentence and the subject is always after the verb. (Ouhalla, 1994: 41-42; Ramsay & Mansour, 2006: 447-448) Similar to Greek, here the subject is usually clung to the verb in the form of connected pronoun as if

it is the last part of the verb. Even in some cases the subject is omitted and hidden or concealed and cannot become visible even in the form of a pronoun. (Alhawary, 2007: 217) For example, in two verbs *zhabu* (ذهبوا) and *yazhabuna* (يذهبون) the subject is clung to the verbs in the form of the subject pronoun *Waw* (واو) but in two verbs *zhaba* (ذهب) and *yazhabo* (يذهب) the subject is hidden or concealed. It may seem interesting that in two verbs *azhabo* (أذهب) and *nazhabo* (نذهب) the two letters of *Alef* (الف) and *Nun* (نون) are not subject pronouns but they do only show the form of the verb conjugation. In these verbs too the subjects are hidden.

One may suppose that in Arabic the appearance of nouns at the beginning of the sentences could mean the attention to the subject, but this is not true. In this language, the sentences are whether nominal or verbal. Nominal sentence start with a noun and verbal sentences with a verb. But the point is that the nouns at the beginning of the nominal sentences are not real subjects which influence a verb, rather they are just beginners to await some predicate say something about them. In this way, in nominal sentences, the beginner is more passive than active because some predicate is said about them. Sometimes in nominal sentences, the predicate may cause the beginning noun not to be taken into consideration, because the predicate is not necessarily a noun but it can be a nominal or a verbal sentence. For example in the sentence *علي ابوه عالم* (literally translated as: Ali, his father is a scholar.) the word *Ali* only in a syntactic analysis is a beginner but semantically his father is paid more attention, although it is in the predicate part.

4.2. Persian³

This is true that in Persian, unlike Arabic, the basic structure of the sentences is SOV, but these two languages do not differ radically in respect of the attention to the subject. It is normally mentioned in Persian grammar books that the subject is placed at the beginning of the sentence, but this only means that in this language the subject can appear at the beginning but this appearance is not necessary, because Persian is a Null Subject Language and its grammar lets the subject be omitted from the sentence. In practice, in most of the cases, the subject is omitted and it appears as a suffix of the verb. Sentences like *غذا را می خورم* (literally Food (as object) eat I (as subject)) or *تو را می بینم* (literally You (as object) see I (as subject)) in which the subject is omitted from the beginning of the sentence or even sentences like *می بینمت* (literally see I (as subject) you (as object) meaning I am seeing you) or *می خورمش* (literally eat I (as subject) it (as object) meaning I am eating it) are not only grammatically correct but also more common than sentences like *من غذا را می خورم* (literally I eat the food) or *من تو را می بینم* (literally I see you).

4.3. Latin

Normally Latin is considered as a SVO language but in practice there is a lot of cases in which the verb precedes the subject or even the subject is omitted from the sentence. (Axel, 2007: 64) In Latin a verb alone can make a complete sentence and

the subject and the object could appear as suffixes at the end of the verb. For example the verb “potest” can appear at the beginning of a sentence without any need to a subject and it includes the verb and the sign of the subject and makes a complete meaning. (Bopp, 1989: 23)

It may seem interesting that even in Descartes’ famous expression in Latin: “Cogito ergo sum” which is considered as the turning point to the modern philosophy, we see two verbs at the beginning of two sentences and in none of them the subject is clearly mentioned. In these verbs the subject is suggested by the conjugation of the verb. But it must be noted that Descartes did not think in Latin but in French. In fact, his original French sentence was “*Je pense donc je suis*”, and then it was translated into Latin. As it is clear from the original French, the subject (je) is specified two times and at the beginning of two sentences. In fact the exact literal translation of Descartes’ French sentence in Latin would be: *ego cogito ergo ego sum*.

5. Languages of Modern Philosophy

After Latin ceased to rule Europe, Modern European languages including French, English, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, etc. started to flourish. These new languages follow the Subject-Verb-Object word order and therefore are *generally* considered as SVO languages. Here the term “generally” indicates that the SVO word order in these languages is the main structure of the sentences and the predominant order but it is possible that other orders like VSO or VOS appear too. But from the 17th century a radical change happened for three of these modern European languages namely French, English and German. From this period onward, they became Non-Null Subject Languages. In these languages there is a special emphasis on the appearance of subject at the beginning of the sentence. (Sornicola, 2000: 110)

5.1. French

French is especially important in our research because it is the language of Descartes - father of modern philosophy. It is true that before Descartes there were sporadic books written in some languages other than Latin in France and Italy, however the fact that Descartes wrote his major philosophical works in French around 1640 was of great importance.

French, like other Romance languages namely Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, follows the SVO order; but it can be asserted that at the same time French is an exception. While in those languages it is equally correct to make an inversion and move the subject rightward and put it after the verb, in French it would be considered a grammatical mistake and it is not allowed. In this way, it can be asserted that the SVO word order is a rigid rule and principle in French in the sense that the subject must appear before the verb right at the beginning of the sentence.^{4,5} (Hulk and Pollock, 2001, 9; Degraff, 2005: 297)

What may seem interesting is that this property in French is a modern one, in the sense that with the rise of modern period the French language became a Non-Null Subject Language, but in earlier periods, the French language used to omit the subject. (Sten, 1995: 59)

5.2. English

The oldest English words and sentences go back to the 7th century C. E. and the oldest integrated texts belong to the 9th century C. E. Old English is considered to exist between 450 and 1150. The Oxford Dictionary considers Middle English to exist between 1150 and 1500. Early Modern English belongs to 1500 to 1650. From then, the period of Modern English begins. The grammar of Old English is very different from that of Modern English. In Old English, like in Latin, the place of subject is variable and the subject can come before or after the verb or even can be omitted. (Ogawa, 2001: 86)

However according to the syntax of Modern English, it is necessary for the subject to appear at the beginning of the sentence. This time, the SVO formula is mandatory. According to English grammarians in both simple and complicated English sentences the subject must come first then the verb and at the third place the complement. This subject could have different kinds – noun, pronoun or even a noun phrase – but in any case it is necessary that the subject appear before the verb. (Azar and Hagen, 2009: 439)

This may seem interesting that in English verb conjugation, five out of six verbs – except for the third person singular - have the same conjugation form. This could be explained by the fact that as the subject is always mentioned before the verb, there would be no need for a change in the verb to show the person and the number of verb conjugation but the subject itself would be sufficient.

5.3. German

The history of German language dates back to the early middle ages. This language experienced its Old and Middle periods and then reached to its Early Modern period. The oldest German manuscript dates back to the 6th century C. E. and the oldest texts to the 8th century. The texts of this period until the second half of the 11th century is considered as belonging to the Old High German. (Axel, 2007: 2) Middle High German belongs to a period between 1050 to 1350 CE. (Howell, 2002: 40) some consider this period to last until 1500 C. E. (Wright, 1917: 1) After this period, the Early Modern German appears which lasts until around 1650 C. E.

In German syntax, the subject is placed in the first position and the verb is always in the second position. Although it is possible that sometimes the verb precedes the subject, but it is important to note that the verb is always in the second position. It may seem interesting that unlike the modern German, in the Old German there was not such a rule to place the verb in the second position. In Old German, like in Latin, the verb could occupy the first position before the

subject or the second position after the subject or even could come at the end of the sentence. In that period it was even possible to omit the subject from the sentence. (Axel, 2007: 4-12, 63, 113-114) The Old German was highly influenced by Latin but the more German became independent from Latin, the more emphasis was on the rule that the verb must be at the second position so that in the Middle German the second place was reserved for the verb. (Howell, 2002: 38-43) In the Modern German this rule became so rigid that the verb cannot posit itself in the first position. (Axel, 2007: 27)

So as it became clear, the German language has changed in the course of time in terms of the attention paid to the subject. Similar to French and English, the German language became Non-Null Subject Language and this happened at the beginning of the 17th century - the same time of the emergence of the modern philosophy. Now with this emphasis of the German language on the appearance of the subject, it becomes clear why most of the modern and subjective philosophies like that of Kant, Hegel and Husserl belong to German tradition. One can clearly see that the formula which Husserl suggests for the phenomenological expression, matches word by word by the syntax of modern German – and even French and English – sentence. According to him, “I” - as the subject of consciousness - must be mentioned first, then the action as a verb and at last the object.

So far, we have shown that the main languages of modern philosophy – French, English and German – are Non-Null Subject languages and they gained this property at the same time with the rise of modern philosophy. In these languages it would seem impossible to construct an active affirmative sentence without a direct and explicit reference to the subject. In almost all cases the subject must appear at the beginning of the sentence, before the verb.⁶ In these languages the verb cannot occupy the first position and come at the beginning of an active affirmative sentence and will always come in next positions - even sometimes the second position is reserved for the verb, like in German.

6. Other Modern European Languages

It may seem interesting that none of the other modern European languages – other than the three main languages of modern philosophy discussed above namely French, English and German – turn to Non-Null subject languages in their course of historical evolution. For the purpose of brevity, we will examine only three most important languages which used to pave the way for ancient and medieval philosophies, namely: Spanish, Italian and Greek.

6.1. Spanish

In Spanish the position of the subject is highly undetermined. This language is so much similar to Latin in terms of the position of the subject in the sentence. In Spanish sentences the subject can appear after the verb or even can be omitted. (Bradley and Mackenzie, 2004: 284-289; Casielles-Suarez, 2004: 53-55)

6.2. Italian

In Italian, like in Spanish, the subject can come at the beginning of the sentence or after the verb or even can be omitted. (Lepschy and Lepschy, 1988: 163-164) It may seem interesting that although French is a romance language and along with Spanish and Italian is among the languages derived from Latin, but in terms of the place of the subject, it is classified with English and German in Non-Null Subject languages.

6.3. Modern Greek

Like Old Greek, Modern Greek has no rigid rule as to the word order or the position of the subject and the verb. As Greek language is highly inflectional it is the word itself or with help of some other pronouns or propositions – and not the position of the word – that shows its syntactical role. So in Greek sentences the word order is rather free and the words could occupy almost any position. (Warburton, 1985: 113-114; Simonson, 1911: 361) Furthermore, the Modern Greek is a Null Subject language, in the sense that it is possible to make a sentence without clearly specifying the subject.

After examining some other main European languages, and after showing that none of them are Non-Null Subject languages, it may now seem clear how and why none of these languages did not provide the conditions for the growth of modern philosophy. While in previous periods, the areas where these languages started to flourish, were favorable conditions for the growth of ancient or medieval philosophies.

7. Conclusion

At the same time when Descartes started to write philosophy in his mother language, and at the same time when Luther translated the Bible to his mother language, the conditions for the rise of the modern philosophy got favorable and suitable. It can be asserted that at the same time with a linguistic turn to subject, a turn in philosophy from the world of objects to subject has come about.

It is true that Greenberg equally describes all European languages as following the SVO pattern, and it is true that the SVO pattern has a emphasis on the subject, but what our research was mostly based upon, was a special property which puts a special emphasis on the role of the subject and which only three languages gained it simultaneously in their course of evolution. From the comparative historical study of philosophical languages one can conclude that the three modern European languages – French, English and German – which are the main languages of modern philosophy – are the only Non-Null Subject languages. Furthermore we came to this conclusion that these languages did not have this property from the beginning of their history, but they became Non-Null Subject around the first half of the 17th century – right at the beginning of the rise of modern philosophy.

The priority and superiority of the subject in the sentence, brought about a special attention to the role of the subject in philosophy. The Non-Null subject

property is not a simple one, but could have dramatic results. A language which does not let the subject to be omitted from the beginning of the sentence, draws attentions to the role of the subject. Furthermore, in a Non-Null Subject language, it is the subject – and not the verb – that determines the fate of the sentence. In this case, the verb would be an action taken by the subject – not merely a predicate attributed to it.

Notes

1. The historical linguistic approach of this article is not to deny other possible approaches to analyze the causes of the rise of the modern philosophy. This phenomenon can be analyzed from sociological and psychological points of view. The religious reform movement and the rise of the modern science can also be considered as among other causes of modern philosophy. Most of the works on this subject paid attention to the religious and epistemological causes and neglected the linguistic ones. (for some remarks refer to Rutherford, 2006)
2. As we are preoccupied with the place given to the subject, we will confine our research on affirmative active sentences, rather than negative or interrogative and passive ones.
3. Most of the Muslim medieval philosophers who wrote in Arabic were ethnically Persian so they thought in Persian and wrote in Arabic. Hence it seems necessary that the role and the place of subject in Persian language be studied.
4. Here we are preoccupied mostly with the indicative active phrases in which the subject is expected to be present in the fullest way. But in other kinds of phrases like in interrogative or passive phrases there can be an inversion or even the subject can be omitted from the sentence. And there are other kinds of inversions too like stylistic inversion in French. (Hulk and Pollock, 2001, 3-4)
5. This is true that there is a kind of subject inversion in French called Stylistic Inversion. (Hulk and Pollock, 2001, 3-5) But it should be noted that, unlike in Italian or Spanish, this kind of inversion is very rare and exceptional and occurs merely in very high literary texts. Therefore it cannot be considered as a violation to our theory here since in our research we do not consider very high literary or poetic sentences which may sometimes violate the grammatical rules for aesthetic reasons.
6. One of the signs of this great change in the three abovementioned modern languages is that, it is not possible to conjugate a verb in one of these languages without mentioning the subject – whether in the form of a noun or a pronoun. In the verb conjugation of the three languages under discussion - unlike other languages like Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Persian, Greek, etc. - it is necessary to mention the subject before the verb.

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