

# An Analysis of Old English Passive Agent Marker in Comparison with Latin Counterpart Seeking a Description of Dative Case

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## Abstract

The dative case per se is problematic and vague due to its wide usage. This article seeks a clearer description of the dative case by comparing Latin passive agent phrases with the Old English translation. Comparison between a Latin text and the Old English translation provides insights into characteristics of the dative case. It seems legitimate to claim the features of animacy and indirectness are the core characteristics of the dative case. In addition, the paper presents an account of Old English periphrastic passive agent phrases.

## 1. Introduction

One of the most prominent studies on the Old English case is *Old English Syntax* by Bruce Mitchell. Exhaustive examples from Old English texts are categorized with meticulous analysis there. It appears that the study of the Old English case system is complete. The fundamental question, however, is yet to be answered. "What is the dative case?" The real examination of the dative case cannot be fulfilled by simply classifying exhaustive examples. Comprehensive description is more suitable for the Old English dative case because of its wide range of usage. Comparing the elements of the dative case among languages should lead to a fair study. This paper is written with the primary aim of presenting an inclusive description of the dative case by comparing agent phrases in Old English passives with those in Latin.

## 2. Comparison between Old English and Latin

Old English passive agent markers are often prepositionless in the dative case. If one can find a specific reason why the dative case is used for a passive agent in Old English, it is possible to state that a certain characteristic of the dative case is detected. The statement is verified by comparing Old English with Latin, since Latin has an ablative case, which Old English does not. Languages with a different case system are worth comparing because it is feasible to peel off a layer of semantic roles and clarify them in light of semantics of other case sys-

tems. Additionally, the more languages are investigated, the more credible argument is produced.

This paper compares instances found in the two versions of *The Gospel of Saint Matthew*, which was translated into the West-Saxon dialect of Old English from Latin in the ninth century. The procedure of comparison here is as follows. First, the periphrastic passive agent phrases in the Latin text are picked up. Second, the corresponding translated phrases are picked up from the Old English version. Third, the two versions of the agent phrases are compared. Two correspondences are found. One is that the Old English accusative case is used to translate every Latin agent phrase in the accusative case. The following is just one example out of the fourteen instances. The accusative governing the preposition ‘ þurh ’ is always used in the Old English text to translate the Latin accusative governing preposition ‘ per. ’

St. Matthew 8: 17

Old English: þæt gecweden is þurh Esaiaþ þone witegan  
that say pp is by Esaias ACC the ACC prophet ACC

Latin: quod dictum est per Esaiaþ prophētam  
that say pp is by Esaias ACC prophet ACC

‘ That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet ’

The perfect match may be worth investigating, but this article does not deal with the correspondence since the other is much more intriguing. The Old English dative case is used to translate every Latin agent phrase in the ablative case. The examples below show the match. The dative governing prepositions, ‘ of ’ ‘ fram ’ and ‘ on ’ are always used in the Old English text to translate the Latin ablative governing prepositions ‘ dē ’ ‘ ā ’ and ‘ in ’ respectively.

St. Matthew 1: 16

Old English: of þære wæs ācenned sē Hælend  
of whom DAT was bear pp the NOM Jesus NOM

Latin: dē quā nātus est iesus  
of whom ABL bear pp is Jesus NOM  
‘ of whom (Mary) was born Jesus ’

St. Matthew 2: 16

Old English: he bepæht wæs fram þām tungelwitegum  
he mock pp was from the DAT wiseman pl DAT

Latin: inlūsus esset ā magis  
mock pp was by wiseman pl ABL  
‘ he was mocked by the wise men ’

St. Matthew 13: 57

Old English:   hig       wæron   geuntrȳwsode on him  
                  they 3pl were 3pl offend pp       on him 3sg DAT

Latin:           scandalizābantur in eō  
                  offend 3pl pass   in him 3sg ABL  
                  ‘ they were offended with him ’

Here a question arises. Why was a dative case chosen as a replacement for the Latin ablative case? The proposed reasoning consists of two assumptions about the characteristics of the Old English dative case; one is animacy and the other is indirectness. The features can be considered to be deciding factors for the dative case to function as a passive agent in translating from Latin into Old English. The features are discussed in the following sections.

### 2.1.1. Animacy and the Dative Case

Animacy seems to be one of the core features of the dative case. This assumption is based on my previous study on the dative case used as an object of a verb in Old English. It demonstrates that the main function of the dative case, indirect object, is expressed with the case due to its characteristic of less controlled-ness. In other words, an animate entity is obviously alive, has its own power and is less controllable by outside force. An indirect object receives a weaker level of effects from its main verb than a direct object. Therefore, the dative case, which has a strong relation to less controllable animacy, functions mainly as an indirect object. The same argument of the animacy can be true of the choice of the case to express an agent marker in passives when Latin was translated into Old English.

Let us think of the role of the passive agent here to support the above argument. The agent can be thought to be demoted from the position of the subject to the position of the oblique in terms of the grammatical relation (GR) hierarchy: “ subject<object<oblique.” (Croft, p.101) Though the position is syntactically demoted, the agent still semantically sustains control over the situation the sentence expresses. The feature of control-ness of animacy is well suited to the role of a passive agent. Therefore, the dative case, whose possible core feature is animacy, is used to express a passive agent. In the next section, another probable basic feature of the dative case, indirectness, is examined.

### 2.1.2. Indirectness and the Dative Case

The dative case in general is known to function as an indirect object, while the accusative case in general functions as a direct object. These two cases are thought to be different in the level of effects from the main verb. For example,

“ þe him           hringas   geaf  
   who him 3sg.DAT rings ACC give 3sg.past  
   ‘ who gave him rings ’” (Quirk,p.64)

The indirect object of the verb ‘ to give ’ is in the dative case with less effects from the main

verb. In other words, ‘ him ’ is a goal of the action of giving. It is simply receiving something passively. On the other hand, the direct object ‘ rings ’ is in the accusative case. It is directly moved from a giver to a received by the action of giving. Assigning the function of the indirect object to the dative case is somewhat easier, but it cannot be immediately clear if the indirectness is the core characteristics of the dative case. This matter is well illustrated with the following remarks referring to the two Latin constructions; one uses the dative as agent and the other has an ablative.

“ Haec mihi provincia est defendēnda  
 this.NOM 1sg. DAT province.NOM is defend. GERUNDIVE.NOM  
 ‘ This province is to be defended by me. ’

Haec provincia ā mīlitibus dēfensa est  
 this.NOM province. NOM by troops. ABL defended.NOM is  
 ‘ This province has been defended by troops. ’”

(Blake, pp.73-74)

The first sentence uses the dative case as an agent while the second has an ablative. The former “ could be translated as ‘ It is up to me to defend this province. ’ or ‘ This province is for me to defend. ’ As Rubio points out (1966: 150), the term ‘ dative of agent ’ is inappropriate. The dative in a sentence like [this] can be considered a dative of the person indirectly involved, i.e. a typical indirect object, with the sense of agency merely being entailed by the context of the gerundive.” (Blake, p.74) In other words, when compared with the ablative case, the dative case denotes an entity with less involvement in the state. The lower level of involvement is also found when one looks at double object constructions as in the previous section. It cannot or does not have to be decided which are the more basic characteristics of the dative case, indirectness or animacy. Rather, the introduction of “ fuzzy ” comprehension, leaving the relation between cause and effect vague, should be applicable in describing cases. The two features are strengthened by each other. Now let us introduce the notion of “ competing motivation ” in the next section to settle the reasoning discussed so far.

### 2.1.3. Why not Genitive?

The two reasons for the choice of the dative case to replace the ablative case are discussed above. In this section, one more analysis is made by answering the question, why was the dative case chosen as a replacement for the ablative case instead of the genitive case? The genitive case might have been used, since the genitive case is as open to many usages as the dative case. In order to answer the question, it may be wise that “ we speak more cautiously of motivations or enabling factors, understanding always that we are referring to potential not absolute factors.” (Hopper, p.63) If one can find stronger motivations for the choice of the dative case than the genitive case, the correspondence between the Old English dative case and the Latin ablative case seems more legitimate. One possible motivation is economy. “ There are great difficulties in defining the notion of economy in anything like rigorous terms... Nonetheless, there seems to be useful, if sometimes intuitive, notions involved.” (Hopper, p.64)

One pursues a maximum result with a minimum effort. This is economical. The same motivation seems to drive the choice of the dative case in translating an ablative, because morphologically and semantically, the two cases share some features. Morphologically speaking, they share a syncretism of the instrument case into themselves. Syncretism is a merger of different parts of a paradigm into a single form. In Latin, the syncretism of the dative and ablative is identified. It "is found in all plurals and in the singular of the second declension and third declension i-stem." (Blake, p.45) In addition, Proto-Indo-European the instrumental case ending can be found with the Old English dative plural. Semantically, the two cases, Old English dative case and Latin ablative case also share the role of instrumental. The Old English dative case covers the role of instrumental case, while "the [Latin] ablative expresses the semantic roles of source, location and instrument." (Blake, p.33) The common historically morphological and semantic features probably enforce the choice of the dative case over the genitive in translating the Latin ablative case.

#### 2.1.4. Translation Process

In the preceding section, reasons for the choice of the dative case in translating the Latin ablative case are discussed. The correspondence may have been just accidental. Alternatively, there may have been a conspiracy for the parallel. The notion of "conspiracy" means that several changes "feed, motivate, and reinforce each other in many ways" (Hock, p.366) Another piece of motivation may have to do with the process of translation, from Greek to Latin, and to Old English. This might have given an effect on the choice of the dative case too. "Greek dative covers the instrumental and locative functions of the Latin ablative." (Blake, p. 144) If those who translated Latin texts into Old English bore in mind the Greek dative functions, they might have simply replaced the ablative case in Latin with the dative case in Old English. This possibility needs further investigation, especially regarding the people working on translation.

#### 2.2. Periphrastic Expressions for a Passive Agent Marker

The focus of this article is to discuss the choice of the dative case to translate the Latin ablative case. It may be worth pointing out, however, the periphrastic expressions for a passive agent marker. Old English passive agents are not always periphrastic. The Old English translations examined here, however, are always periphrastic. This finding can be explained by consideration of the sound change. "It should be obvious that the structure of English was profoundly affected in all departments by the leveling of unstressed vowels." (Pyles, p.155) The distinctive endings of nouns were lost while stricter syntax was established to replace the function of the functional case endings, though one cannot determine which language or what specific factor affected the word order. One might be able to assume as follows. "Agentive passives are more marked, [i.e. agentive passives are less frequently used] than agentless passives, as can be seen in Navajo and Oku, a language spoken in Cameroon, which has a distinctive phrase for agentless passives but not for agentive passives." (Taguchi, p.29) Those who use agentive passives are rather literate and more readily influenced by the work

of translation, which can be considered as something less available to vulgar people. Thus, agentive phrases are easily introduced and reinforced by translation, not by the secular expressions. This assumption, however, needs thorough examination for possible causes of periphrastic passive agent phrases.

### 3. Conclusion and Remaining Questions

“ Changes are not, for the most part, comparable to meteorites falling from the sky. They usually originate from elements already in the language. ” (Aitchison, p.74) The innate characteristics of the dative case, animacy and indirectness, seem to trigger the choice as replacement of the Latin ablative case in translation. The languages studied here, however, have no living speakers. It is possible to say that they provide good samples because the languages do not experience diachronic changes. It is also possible to say that the dead languages do not supply native intuition, which can yield linguists clues for more conclusive analysis. More comprehensive and better-founded description of the dative case will be achieved in future research by investigating the living languages like Japanese and Korean. They would provide plenty of insights since they have postpositions, which are morphologically evident markers of cases. Besides, researching the non Indo-European languages will clarify not only the dative itself, but also part of the human cognition process.

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