

# What can nominativeless sentences tell us about genericity? A multifactoral approach to some [-AGR] sentences in Polish.

Patrycja Matera

Université Paris 3, LACITO & Paris 8, UMR 7023, patricia.matera@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION: Nominativeless constructions in Slavic have recently received much attention as far as the definition of the subject is concerned (cf. Schoorlemmer, 1994, Bondaruk & Szymanek 2007). Given that these expressions share in all Slavic languages several common properties such as: (a) absence of the nominative argument; (b) 3sg neutral predicate, (c) presence of non-selected, non nominative elements, our attention here turns to different issues that have not been taken into consideration until now. As the nominative subject is absent, issues that have been brought into light turn either upon the (non) existence of the subject position and null expletives in those sentences (Babby 1989, Moore & Perlmutter 2000, Fehrmann & Junghanns 2008), or the necessity of postulating an independent Extended Projection Principle (EPP) (Lavine, Fredin 2002, Miechowicz-Mathiasen, 2009).

The aim of this paper is to provide a new analysis of nominativeless sentences that re-evaluates associations between the nature of the predicate and factors that yield a generic interpretation. This analysis reveals some further generalizations about non-selected arguments, which have an ambiguous status as far the argument structure is concerned.

## 2. MULTIFACTORAL APPROACH:

**SELECTION PROBLEM:** First, by comparing Polish and Russian with respect to the absence of the nominative argument I will outline a short typology of nominativeless sentences in Slavic. One could very quickly bring its analysis to the issue of impersonal constructions in other IE languages but I think that the major focus should rather be placed on the presence/absence of different argument-like elements (datives, accusatives, instrumentals) that have been considered as being quite optional. As a matter of fact, their status raises some important questions concerning argument selection. Here, I show that their optional character is actually more restricted.

**DIFFERENT FACTORS:** In this presentation I will focus on nominativeless expressions of sound and light emission (1-3), used with a locative PP expressing a body part, in Polish. Concerning this class of verbs, the solution (Cienki 1993, Haspelmath 1999, Sarič 2008) regarding the presence of the dative case argument has always been related to external and inalienable possession.

Here, I will present some empirical findings based on a corpora research where one can notice a clear split between some expressions that can be used generically (3) and those that can receive a specific interpretation (2). I will argue that at least three factors intervene in examples like (3), which receive **a generic interpretation**<sup>1</sup>, mainly:

a) IMPERFECTIVE ASPECT: inspired by Dahl's 1995 "Minimal Marking Tendency", I argue that in order to obtain a **generic interpretation** in impersonal sentences, imperfective aspect is required at least in Slavic.

b) ABSENCE OF ARGUMENT-LIKE ELEMENTS (non nominative DPs/pronouns): the generic interpretation is found with a very high frequency when argument-like elements are absent. Here I make the assumption that in the presence of such arguments a generic interpretation may be obtained only if the verb's aspect is imperfective.

c) PRESENCE OF CAUSAL PPS: this generalisation comes from our research findings in Polish Corpora (IPI PAN), from the web, as well as from questionnaires submitted to

---

<sup>1</sup> *Genericity* is understood here as a general (characterizing) property (cf. *The Generic Book*, 1995) i.e.: 'a proposition which do not express specific episodes or isolated facts, but instead reports a kind of general property, that is, a regularity which summarizes groups of particular episodes or facts.'

several native speakers. Omitting dative argument when the verb is imperfective is not a sufficient condition to obtain a generic interpretation. Indeed, (1) has been judged by all speakers as requiring a context. A research from the web and from the Polish Corpora sheds light on another essential element that is to say, a PP that has clearly a causal value and a regular morphology ( od+DP<sub>GEN</sub> 'from+DP<sub>GEN</sub>). Interestingly, there is no possibility to obtain this kind of generic interpretation in case when the DP is nominative, and the predicate [+AGR] (cf. 4).

In conclusion, I argue that the combination of these three factors is necessary in establishing rules that indicate us when the non-nominative argument is obligatory/optional and when it is prohibited.

- 1)# *W głowie szumi* [-AGR]  
 In head.LOC whistle.3.sg.n.IMPERF  
 It's getting dizzy in (one)'s head.  
 Lit. '(It) whistles in one's head'
- 2) *Zaszumięło/zabrzęczało mi w uszach.* [-AGR]  
 PERF.whistle/buzz.3.sg.n.past 1sg.DAT in ear.pl.LOC  
 I could hear a buzzing/whistling in my ears  
 Lit. '(It) buzzed/whistled me in ears'
- 3) *Od szampana szumi w głowie* [-AGR]  
 From champagne.m.GEN whistle.3.sg.n.IMPERF in head.LOC  
 Champagne makes (one) dizzy in the head.  
 Lit. 'From champagne (it) whistles in one's head'
- 4) *Szampan szumi w głowie* [+AGR]  
 Champagne.m.sg.NOM whistle.3.sg.m.IMPERF in head.LOC  
 The champagne makes (one) dizzy in the head.  
 \*Champagne makes (one) dizzy in the head. (Generic interpretation)  
 Lit. 'The champagne whistles in one's head'

Abbreviations: NOM- Nominative, DAT- Dative, LOC- Locative, n- neuter, m- masculine, sg- singular

#### References:

- Babby, L. (1989) "Subjectlessness, External Subcategorization, and the Projection Principle." *Journal of Slavic Linguistics*, p. 341-388.
- Bondaruk, A., Szymanek, B. (2007) "Polish nominativeless constructions with dative Experiencers: form, meaning and structure". *Studies in Polish Linguistics* 4, p. 61-97.
- Carlson, G., Pelletier, F.J. eds. (1995) *The Generic Book*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Cienki, A. (1993) "Experiencers, Possessors, and Overlap Between Russian Dative and u+Genitive." In: *Proceedings of the Nineteenth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistic Society*. Berkeley: Berkeley Linguistic Society, 76-89.
- Dahl, Ö. (1995) "The Marking of the episodic/generic distinction in tense-aspect systems." In G. Carlson and F.J. Pelletier, eds., *The Generic book*, p. 412-425. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Fehrmann, D., Junghanns, U. (2008) "Subjects and Scales". *Linguistische Arbeits Berichte* 86, Universität Leipzig.
- Haspelmath, M. (1999) "External possession in a European areal perspective". In: Payne, Doris L. & Barshi, Immanuel (eds.) *External possession*. (Typological Studies in Language, 39.) Amsterdam: Benjamins, 109-135.
- Lavine, J., Freidin, R. (2002) "The Subject of Defective T(ense) in Slavic." *Journal of Slavic Linguistics* 10, p.253-289.
- Miechowicz-Mathiasen K. (2009) "There is no independent EPP in Slavic, there are only EP-effects." In: Zibatow, G., D. Lenertova, U. Junghanns, and P. Biskup (eds.) *Studies in Formal Slavic Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Semantics and Information Structure: Proceedings of FDSL-7*, Leipzig 2007. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang Verlag, PAGES.
- Moore, J., Perlmutter, D. (2000) "What Does It Take to be a Dative Subject?." *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, Vol. 18, No. 2, p. 373-416.
- Sarič, L. (2008) "On the semantics of the 'dative of possession' in the Slavic languages: An analysis on the basis of Russian, Polish, Croatian/Serbian and Slovenian examples." *The Slavic and East European Language Resource Center*.
- Schoorlemmer, M. (1994) "Dative Subjects in Russian". In: *Formal Approaches to Slavic Linguistics* 1, ed. Jinřdich Toman. Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 249-270.