

Introduction

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Impersonal constructions have always intrigued syntacticians because they run counter to the traditional definition of a sentence as including a nominative subject and an agreeing predicate. Therefore, as Siewierska (2008b: 115) puts it, “[t]he notion of impersonality is a broad and disparate one”. The Slavic languages, as is well known, are particularly rich in impersonal constructions, which is why their analysis has long been a center of interest.

Research about impersonals in Slavic began with the advent of the first handbooks and grammars dealing with syntax at the turn of the twentieth century (above all, Miklosich 1883; Jagić 1899; Potebnja 1899; Peškovskij 1914; Vondrák [1906] 1928; not to forget Havránek’s 1928, 1937 fundamental works). The first specific studies of impersonals, including monographs, appeared in the 1950s (e.g., Fodor 1957; Galkina-Fedoruk 1958; Micklesen 1968; Doros 1975; Wolińska 1978). During the last third of the twentieth century, generative accounts have taken up a growing share of the literature, with two related but distinguishable points of focus. Accounts with the first type of focus seek to integrate impersonal structures into a broader typology of diathesis (e.g., Růžička 1986; Kosta 2021). Other generativist studies have analyzed impersonals against the background of syntactic unaccusativity (e.g., Harves 2002; Szucsich 2007; Lavine and Franks 2008; Lavine 2010, 2014).

The last two decennia have seen a peak in interest in impersonal constructions, with an emphasis on comparative studies and typology, both within and outside of Slavic linguistics. One pioneering effort regarding Slavic linguistics is the overview of impersonal structures provided by Mrazek 1990. The growing interest in impersonality also appears in anthologies, some with and some without the consideration of Slavic languages (e.g., Siewierska 2008a; Kor Chahine 2013; Redder 2012; Herbeck, Pöll, and Wolfgruber 2019).

One of the most influential recent typological accounts is the functionally based outline given in Malchukov and Ogawa 2011. With reference to Siewierska 2008b, Malchukov and Ogawa include impersonals in the domain of agent-defocusing devices (other such constructions are passives or de-causatives). Given that impersonal constructions lack a full-fledged subject not only in terms of formal (structural, behavioral) but also functional (that is,

semantic and pragmatic) criteria (Malchukov and Ogawa 2011: 22), the authors distinguish impersonals with respect to the semantic-pragmatic subject property they mostly lack as Agentivity impersonals (A-impersonals), Reference impersonals (R-impersonals), and Topicality impersonals (T-impersonals).¹ Typical examples of A-impersonals are weather impersonals (e.g., Russian *gremit* ‘it thunders’), impersonals denoting physical and emotional states (e.g., Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian *dosadno mi je* ‘I am bored’; lit. ‘it is boring to me’), and modal impersonals (e.g., Bulgarian *trjaba da* ‘it is necessary to’).² R-impersonals involve a human agent; crucially, the referential status of this agent is decreased. A typical instance of R-impersonals in Slavic is 3PL impersonals, traditionally referred to as *neopredelënno-ličnye predložénija* ‘indefinite-personal sentences’ in Russian. T-impersonals are not very frequent in Slavic, because they signal non-topicality of the subject referent. As is well known, Slavic languages make use of word order to signal non-topicality of the subject referent by putting the subject constituent in post-verbal position. Therefore, Slavic languages are not in need of specialized T-impersonals.³ Some existential constructions, however, may also be classified as T-impersonals in Slavic. Cases in point are existential constructions with the verb ‘have’ in Polish and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, or the Russian reflexive existential verb *imet’sja*.

There is also a growing body of work suggesting typologies of impersonals, either for individual languages (e.g., Kibort 2008 for Polish; Babby 2010 and Schlund 2018 for Russian) or for subsets of impersonal constructions across languages (e.g., Siewerska and Papastathi 2011; Gast and van der Auwera 2013).

A new strand of research in impersonality seeks to assess how particular impersonal constructions are actually used—that is, how they function in discourse. Zinken’s 2016 study of (impersonal) requesting strategies in Polish and English and Mazzitelli’s 2019 analysis of Lithuanian reference impersonals are pioneering studies in this regard.

This Special Issue takes up the empirical, typological, and discursive trend of analyzing impersonal constructions. The contributions by Anastasia Bauer, as well as Maria Katarzyna Prenner and Daniel Bunčić, are concerned with the empirical analysis of R-impersonals. Whereas Prenner and Bunčić focus on three types of R-impersonals in Polish, Bauer offers a comparative study of various linguistic strategies used in six Slavic languages to render arbitrary human reference. In a careful quantitative study, Bauer analyzes more than

¹ Note that most instances of impersonal constructions are mixed types, typically with one factor predominating over the others.

² Interestingly, these three types of A-impersonals form the oldest layer of impersonal constructions in Indo-European languages (Bauer 2000: 96f.).

³ An illustrative case of a T-impersonal is the “presentational inversion construction” (Creissels 2019: 6, 11) in French.

5,300 examples and singles out 18 strategies used in the Slavic translations of the German impersonal pronoun *man*.⁴ This allows her to reveal differences in the use of these strategies across languages and groups of languages. Bauer also pays due diligence to potential caveats with regard to her study design. She shows, for instance, that the language of the original is a crucial predictor of the translation strategy used in the Slavic target language.

Jasmina Grković-Major investigates when and why certain types of Proto-Slavic A-impersonals evolved into personal constructions in contemporary Slavic. She focuses on impersonal constructions with accusative and dative experiencers, some of which have developed into middle and personal constructions in contemporary Slavic languages. These constructions were built from \bar{e} -statives (infinitives in *-ěti*) denoting sensations, emotions, perception, and cognition. Carefully evaluating data from historical stages of Slavic languages, Grković-Major shows that the transformation of these impersonals into canonical (personal) constructions with nominative-accusative alignment included primarily \bar{e} -statives whose experiencers were marked with the agentivity features of volition and control. Such experiencers occurred in impersonals denoting emotions because emotions imply a conscious, human participant and not merely an animate participant. Constructions denoting negative bodily sensations, in turn, imply a lesser degree of volition and control on the part of the primary participant, which is why most of these constructions have retained their status as impersonals up to the present day. Grković-Major points to the parallelism in markedness in semantic and morpho-syntactic terms manifest in this latter construction type.

Maria Katarzyna Prenner and Daniel Bunčić investigate the factors motivating the variation between three “quasi-synonymous” Polish R-impersonals. The three constructions are the *-no/-to* construction, the reflexive impersonal, and the 3_{PL} impersonal. All three constructions include a demoted, arbitrary human participant with reduced referentiality. The authors extract predictions about the use of the *-no/-to* construction, the reflexive impersonal, and the 3_{PL} impersonal from the available literature and test them in an explorative corpus study and with an acceptability judgment test among native speakers. Investigating the morphological and contextual variables, Prenner and Bunčić draw a detailed picture of the variables underlying the choice between the three constructions in contemporary Polish, including register, tense, generic vs. specific reading, and, for the first time, also the category of aspect. The multifactorial analysis provides insight into the complex interplay of these variables, makes it possible to estimate their relative weight, and points to potential additional factors.

⁴ The study is conducted on the data collected in the ParaSol corpus, a parallel corpus of Slavic and other languages (von Waldenfels and Meyer 2006–).

Katrin Schlund examines the notorious issue of quantified subjects (Qs) and agreement in Polish. The referential status of Qs is typically reduced, particularly with Qs denoting numbers higher than five or unspecific quantifiers. Therefore, Qs constructions are associated with R-impersonals, but the subject properties of agentivity and topicality are often also reduced. Comparing the strict rules of agreement resolution with Qs in Polish with the pragmatically and semantically motivated variation observable in Russian and, to a minor extent, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Schlund asks why there is no semantically and pragmatically determined variation in the agreement resolution in Qs in contemporary Polish. Data from historical texts and previous analyses show that the resolution of Qs historically has likewise tended to mark Qs with strong subject properties (such as the animacy, strong agentivity, referentiality, and topicality of the Qs) with semantic (that is, plural) agreement, and weak subject properties with grammatical (that is, singular) agreement. Finally, focusing on the deviant behavior of Polish virile Qs with paucal numbers 2–4, Schlund takes the side of the “accusative hypothesis”, assuming that these oblique forms (*dwóch*, *trzech*, and *czterech*) are accusatives, and points out that they developed later than the regular nominative virile forms of *dwaj*, *trzej*, and *czterej*. A short corpus analysis suggests that in contemporary Polish the now-vanishing nominative virile forms are still preferred over the accusative forms precisely in contexts of increased referentiality and for pure naming. From this perspective, the nominative and accusative forms of Polish virile Qs can be interpreted as instances of differential subject marking.

The papers gathered in this volume look back at a “joint history” of presentations and discussions at various occasions, including conferences, exam colloquia at the University of Cologne, and numerous lunch and coffee breaks, which are, we hope, pleasantly remembered not only by ourselves but also by our colleagues. Jasmina Grković-Major, Maria Katarzyna Prenner, and Daniel Bunčić participated in a panel on impersonal constructions at the Conference on Explanation and Prediction (CEP) held in February 2019 at the University of Heidelberg.⁵ In September 2019, Katrin Schlund chaired a panel about impersonal constructions at the Congress of the German Association of Slavists in Trier, Germany, in which Anastasia Bauer, Daniel Bunčić, and Maria Katarzyna Prenner presented the development of their research.⁶

All contributions have undergone a thorough double-blind reviewing procedure. We would therefore like to thank the anonymous reviewers for

⁵ The conference was funded by the German Research Foundation and organized by the editors of this volume (cf. Kosta and Schlund 2021).

⁶ We regret that Aleš Půda (Heidelberg), who gave an inspiring talk about impersonal reflexives in Russian and Czech on this occasion, was unable to publish in this volume.

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