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# Impersonal constructions in Slavic

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The issue of the impersonal—one of the main issues in Slavic languages—can be considered in a variety of ways, i.e. it may refer to grammatical person, verbal syntax, or voice usage. An extensive bibliography has been developed on this question (cf. first typologies of impersonal constructions in Creissels 2008 and Malchukov & Ogawa 2011). Impersonal constructions constitute only a part of this vast domain. While in some languages, such as Arabic, Persian, or Japanese, impersonal constructions are relatively rare, in Slavic languages, they turn out to be especially abundant. However, even in the Slavic languages this domain is varied. Among five Slavic languages belonging to three different groups, namely Russian, Polish, Czech, Serbo-Croatian<sup>1</sup>, and Bulgarian, it is in Russian that the system of impersonal constructions is most developed. These constructions exist to a lesser extent in other Slavic languages, but their development does not always appear to be a result of geographical language contact.

Impersonal constructions have been well known since antiquity; in particular they are well attested in Greek and Latin. In modern European languages, among non-referential markers of impersonal constructions we can point out *it* in English (*it's raining*), *es* in German (*es regnet*), or even the non-referential *il* in French (*il pleut*) and *ça* in colloquial French (*ça tonne*) (Maillard 1985). Often used to express meteorological phenomena or sensations, these constructions are based on verbal syntax that allows either a personal reading, or an impersonal one, depending on context (*je me souviens.../il me souvient...*). In Slavic languages, the domain of impersonal constructions is probably the richest in comparison to other European languages. This domain is very common and comprises various syntactic models with a large range of semantics, including expressing existence, sensations, physical or mental states, object of communication, and modality. Moreover, these constructions cannot be considered exclusively in the context of verbal syntax, because the core predicate can be expressed not only by a verb, but also by a predicative form (noun or adverb serving as a predicate), or even by the entire construction.

Below general issues associated with impersonal constructions in Slavic languages will be briefly discussed and presented in an overview of this vast domain.

## 1. Impersonal constructions: A problem of definition

Impersonal constructions are attested in all Slavic languages, although their variants do not appear in every language, and their frequency is not the same in different languages. Therefore, it is a heterogeneous domain, despite the fact that they originated from the same archaic Balto-Slavic model derived from the Indo-European one. Their heterogeneity and diversity have been examined in multiple studies devoted to this issue; however, Slavic impersonal constructions have not yet received a completely exhaustive description.

Diachronic studies have brought to light a variety of ways the impersonal constructions have evolved in each language. Historical data show that very often an identical or quasi-identical structure in two different languages is not necessarily the same linguistic phenomenon, and that visible resemblances may be misleading. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge that the role an impersonal construction plays in the system of one language may not be the same that it plays in another. This represents a serious difficulty for potential comparison between languages.

Another difficulty concerns terminology. The term *impersonal* refers to various syntactic constructions, and, according to the linguistic schools and traditions in each country, is used differently. As

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<sup>1</sup> Here we do not make a distinction between Serbian and Croatian.

early as in 1883 Franz Miklosich introduced the term of “subjectlose Sätze” to underline the absence of subject as a common property of these constructions, and since then, this term has known some development, in particular in the Czech and Polish schools. However, when referring to the notion of “sentences without a subject,” we have to know what subject is, because this notion is not always clearly defined and remains implicit in many studies. An attempt to provide further clarification consists in talking of sentences without the nominative case, since nominative is typically the case of the subject (Wolińska 1978; Guiraud-Weber 1984). Despite the inconvenience of the term *impersonal*, it has finally become accepted and universally recognized, in particular within studies written in Russian and English. It should be noted, however, that this is a purely conventional term, and many scholars have shown its inadequacy (Zolotova 1973; Creissels 1991; Malchukov & Siewierska 2011, and others).

## 2. The issue of subject

The conventional term of *impersonal construction* is now used, on the one hand, merely as a label applying to all sentences that do not conform to the basic pattern of « Subject in Nominative + agreed Predicate ». On the other hand, it is used in a narrow sense for designating constructions that one would call purely *impersonal*, and which one cannot classify according to morphological properties of the predicate alone (cf. Galkina-Fedoruk 1958 and other scholars pursuing this tradition), but according to syntactic and semantic properties of impersonal constructions as a particular syntactic structure. In this structure, in addition to the predicate, there is very often a recurring nominal element in an oblique case. The latter refers to the object or person concerned by the events designated by the predicate. And in this case, the non-agreed predicate takes the form of 3rd person of singular in present or the form of neuter then it is in past tense. The lack of nominative, which is the only case appropriate for designating voluntary action by an animated agent, is semantically justified. If the events designated by the predicate refer to a person, the person will be expressed by an oblique case and play the role of a simple observer, a passive participant, or, at best, an experiencer, but **never of an active agent**.

It has long been observed that some oblique cases in impersonal constructions behave similarly to a nominative subject. This is especially the case for dative (type (1a)), to a lesser extent for accusative (type (1b)), and even for instrumental (type (1c)).

(1) Russian

- a. *Мне хорошо.*  
*Мне хороšo.*  
 I:dat good:pred  
 ‘I feel good.’
- b. *Меня трясёт.*  
*Menja trjasët.*  
 I:acc shake:prs.3sg  
 ‘I’m shaking.’
- c. *Ветром сорвало крышу.*  
*Vetrom sorvalo kryšu.*  
 wind:inst tore-off:neut roof:acc  
 ‘The wind tore off the roof.’

These similarities are at the origin of a special term in Russian linguistics, namely *sub”ekt* (‘semantic or logical subject’), which is opposed to *podležaščee* (‘grammatical subject’). The frequency of these terms in Russian linguistics used in all Russian textbooks and papers shows the importance of this phenomenon in the Russian language, which explains why some linguists attempt to describe syntax in semantic rather than in formal terms (Zolotova 1973).

Studies devoted to the notion of subject in different world languages, in particular those by Edward Keenan (1976) and Bernard Comrie (1981), have shown that there is a certain number of morphological,

syntactic, and semantic properties that allow for identifying the subject, and that a number of languages contain subject-like obliques with behavioural subject properties (Seržant 2013). These features are not the same in all languages, but could be similar. If, in the case of Russian, we temporarily renounce to define the subject in discrete terms (as an argument that agrees with the verb in number, person and gender), it becomes apparent that certain subject properties (such as indispensability, control over the reflexive pronouns, position in front of the predicate, topic of the sentence) not only characterize the subject in nominative, but can occur in other oblique cases, in which case the latter plays the role of the argument enabling the predicate quality (see Table 1).

Subjectal features	Prototypical subject	Nominative	Dative	Genitive	Accusative	Instrumental
Predicative link	+	+	+	+	+	+
Agreement	+	+	-	-	-	-
Initial position	+	+	+	+	+	±
Animated	+	±	+	±	+	-
Agent	+	±	-	-	-	-
Control of reflexive	+	+	+	-	-	-
Control of gerund	+	+	+	-	-(+)	-

Table 1. Ranking of Russian nominal constituents in a subjectal scale (inspired by Guiraud-Weber 2003a).

This approach requires a scalar definition of the subject, such as some arguments will be considered more “subject” than others and will be placed closer to the nominative in a subjectal scale. From this point of view, it becomes possible to justify the linguistic insight that underlies the *sub“ekt / podležaščee* dichotomy. This approach has been adopted for Russian in Testelec 2001 and Guiraud-Weber 2003a. It supports preferential treatment of certain nominal arguments in oblique cases within impersonal constructions because these arguments express the quality of the predicate.

However, only Nominative (or its syntactic equivalents) can be considered as grammatical subject in Slavic. The choice of other cases is determined by general semantics of the construction. Thus, on examples from Slavic languages we can see that Genitive indicates the absence or non-existence; Dative, and sometimes Accusative case, designates physical and mental state; Instrumental characterizes the inanimate destructive force, and Locative – a space. In addition, the two latter cases can be used with prepositions to designate other specific situations (Guiraud-Weber 1984). This fact shows that not only the lexis, but also the syntactic structure takes part in forming the meaning of the construction.

### 3. Evolution of impersonal constructions in Russian and other Slavic languages

The domain of impersonal constructions in Russian is very broad, especially in comparison to other Slavic languages. Over many centuries it has continued to become richer. Diachronic studies have demonstrated the following trends:

1. Expansion of the negative existential constructions (see (2a)). Lexical means of predicates in these constructions have been continually renewed ever since the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century (Švedova 1964). This expansion, involving a great number of verbs in modern Russian, is described in a number of publications (Ickovič 1974; Babby 1980; Padučeva 1992; Guiraud-Weber 2003b ; Partee & Borščev 2007);

2. Emergence, at the end of XIX<sup>th</sup> century, of constructions with the nominal argument “s + instrumental” (see (2b)), obviously related to the deletion of the desemantized subject, like *delo* ‘fact’, *položenie* ‘situation’, *vopros* ‘question’ (Zolotova 1966);

3. Decline of passive impersonal constructions and their substitution with impersonal constructions using the nominal constituent “o + locative” (see (2c)) (Švedova 1964);

4. Lexical and syntactic reorganization of constructions with dative argument (see (3c–d)), which

since the XIX<sup>th</sup> century has had the semantic function of experiencer replacing the construction “*dlja* + genitive” (see (3a–b)). During the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, serious confusion prevailed in this domain (Švedova 1964), and variants with *dlja* are very rare in today’s Russian (about Russian dative impersonal constructions in XVIII<sup>th</sup>-XXI<sup>nd</sup> s. also see Say 2014).

- (2) a. *Ego ne vidno.*  
*Ego ne vidno.*  
 he:acc neg visible:pred  
 ‘He is not visible.’
- b. *C деньгами было плохо.*  
*S den'gami bylo ploxo.*  
 prep money:inst was:neut tight:pred  
 ‘Money was tight.’
- c. *Об этом говорилось в газетах.*  
*Ob etom govoriłos' v gazetax.*  
 about this:loc discussed:neut.ref in newspapers:loc  
 ‘This was discussed in the newspapers.’
- (3) a. *Для него казалось странным...*  
*Dlja nego kazalos' strannym...*  
 for he:gen seemed:neut strange:inst  
 ‘It seemed strange to him.’
- b. *Для него было приятно видеть...*  
*Dlja nego bylo prijatno videt'...*  
 for he:gen was:neut nice:pred see:inf  
 ‘It was nice for him to see.’
- c. *Ему казалось странным...*  
*Emu kazalos' strannym...*  
 he:dat seemed:neut strange:inst  
 ‘It seemed strange to him.’
- d. *Ему было приятно видеть...*  
*Emu bylo prijatno videt'...*  
 he:dat was:neut nice:pred see:inf  
 ‘It was nice for him to see.’

In West Slavic languages, in particular in Polish and Czech, the domain of strictly impersonal constructions appears to be less extensive; while constructions with indefinite human subjects—“*man*-constructions”—are abundant and diverse. In South Slavic languages, like in Serbo-Croatian, the domain of impersonal constructions is more limited, and it is especially restricted in Bulgarian because of the absence of noun declension but dative impersonal constructions have wider derivational schemas compared to Russian. What follows is a brief survey of the main types of impersonal constructions in Slavic languages.

## 4. Main types of impersonal constructions in Slavic

### 4.1. Constructions describing environment

**Impersonal constructions describing environment** exist in all Slavic languages. These impersonal constructions include predicates (4) and some impersonal verbs (5) describing environment. They regularly occur without any nominal support (5), but necessarily refer to a space, often where the speaker is located (according to deictic rules). In such impersonal constructions, the situations are always localizable, unlike non-localizable situations depicting feelings, emotions, beliefs, or psychical states of individuals (cf. Boguslavskij 1991). Thus, in this type of impersonal construction, the nominal element referring to location (4a) is not just an adverbial phrase, which, by definition, could be deleted. It semantically represents necessary support to the predicate, without which there would be no message.

- (4) a. Ru. *На улице холодно.*

*Na ulice xolodno.*  
in street:loc cold:pred  
'It's cold outside.'

b. Cz. *Je horko.*  
is:3sg hot:pred  
'It's hot.'

c. S-Cr. *Zadušljivo je.*  
*Zadušljivo je.*  
stuffy:pred is:3sg  
'It's stuffy.'

d. Bg. *Zadušno e.*  
*Zadušno e.*  
stuffy:pred is:3sg  
'It's stuffy.'

(5) a. Ru. *Смеркается.*  
*Smerkaetsja.*  
grows-dark:3sg  
'It is growing dark.'

b. Pl. *Grzmi.*  
thunders:3sg  
'It's thundering.'

c. Cz. *Setmělo se.*  
grown-dark:pst.neut ref  
'It got dark.'

d. S-Cr. *Смркло се.*  
*Smrklo se.*  
grown-dark:neut ref  
'It has grown dark.'

This first type of constructions is usually accounted for as “meteorological phenomena” (cf. Galkina-Fedoruk 1958; Birjulin 1994) even though it also comprises constructions like (6) having nothing to do with weather events. They simply describe the space concerned by the conversation, like construction (7) where the space is characterized from the olfactory perspective. Thus, the latter construction should also be included in this category (Guiraud-Weber 1979).

(6) Ru. *На лестнице тихо.*  
*Na lestnice тихо.*  
on stairway:loc quiet:pred  
'The stairway is quiet.'

(7) a. Ru. *В комнате пахнет яблоками.*  
*V komnate пахнет jablokami.*  
in room:loc smells:3sg apples:inst  
'It smells like apples in the room.'

b. Pl. *W piwnicy cuchnie wilgocią.*  
in basement:loc smells.bad:3sg humidity:inst  
'The basement smells bad damp.'

Besides, a part of predicatives occurring in these constructions are more likely to use dative referring to the person experiencing a feeling (cf. Say 2013); they are more “subjective” (see (8)) compared to the others (see (4–7)), more “objective”, referring to pure location.

(8) a. Ru. *Ему холодно.*  
*Ему холодно.*  
he:dat cold:pred  
'He is cold.'

b. S-Cr. *Загушљиво ми је.*

*Zagušljivo mi je.*  
 stuffy:pred I:dat is:3sg  
 ‘I feel stifled.’

c. Bg. *Задушно ми е.*

*Zadušno mi e.*  
 stuffy:pred I:dat is:3sg  
 ‘I feel stifled.’

## 4.2. Genitive constructions

**Constructions of negative existence with genitive** are extremely frequent in Russian (see (9) below) and involve a large number of verbs, including verbs that are not traditionally perceived as verbs of existence (*vyjti* ‘to go out’, *projti* ‘to pass through’, *vypast’* ‘to fall’, *rasti* ‘to grow’, etc.). In Polish, genitive may occur only in the existential constructions with the verbs *być* and *zostać* (both of which also function as auxiliary verbs). The verb ‘to be’ contains two forms: *być* and *mieć*, functioning in complementary distribution (10). No other verb can serve as a predicate of existence (Guiraud-Weber 2003b; Guiraud-Weber & Zaremba 2007). In Serbo-Croatian, existential constructions use genitive when the sentence is negative but have a tendency to use this case, in its partitive meaning, in affirmative sentences with uncountable nouns (11). However this construction is only limited to one single verb of existence represented by forms of the verbs *imati* – *biti*, used in complementary distribution like in Polish: the verb *imati* ‘to have’ is used in present tense, and *biti* ‘to be’ in other verbal forms. In contrast, in Czech, constructions of negative existence with genitive have disappeared. Their decline began in the 17th century, and is now complete (Hausenblas 1958). Even negative constructions with the verb ‘to be’ use nominative in Czech (12) (Žaža 1978), and the variant with genitive sounds archaic (12’: *Otce nebylo doma*). The nominative is also used in Bulgarian where the genitive case stopped its independent existence in the old Bulgarian even before its complete disappearance in modern Bulgarian (Feuillet 1992).

(9) Russian *Otca ne bylo doma.*  
 father:gen neg was:neut at-home  
 ‘The father was not at home.’

(10) Polish

a. *Jest / był chleb.*  
 is:3sg / was:3sg.m bread:nom.m  
 ‘There is/was some bread.’

b. *Nie ma / nie było chleba.*  
 neg has:3sg / neg was:neut bread:gen  
 ‘There is/was no bread.’

(11) Serbo-Croatian

a. *Kad ima хљеба, нема соли.* (Simić 1977: 34)  
*Kad ima hljeba, nema soli.*  
 when has:3sg bread:gen, has.neg:3sg salt:gen  
 ‘When there is some bread, there’s no salt.’

b. *Има / нема вина, хране, соли, шећера.* (Vojvodić, personal communication)  
*Ima / nema vina, hrane, soli, šećera.*  
 has:3sg / has.neg:3sg wine:gen, food:gen, salt:gen, sugar:gen  
 ‘There is (some) / no wine, food, salt, sugar.’

(12) Czech *Otec nebyl doma.*  
 father:nom.m was:m.neg at-home  
 ‘The father was not home.’

### 4.3. Dative constructions

Dative constructions in Slavic languages are the most diverse and heterogeneous type of impersonal constructions. They differ in their derivational lexical schemas, semantics, and syntactic structures.

#### 4.3.1. Constructions of emotional or psychological state

All Slavic languages use **the dative case for experiencer** with predicates describing a person's physical or mental state.

(13) a. Ru. *Мне непонятно и обидно.* (NKRJa<sup>2</sup> 2007)  
*Мне непонятно и обидно.*  
I:dat neg.understand:pred and sorry:pred  
'I don't understand and I feel bad.'

b. Pl. *Zimno mi.* (Zaremba, pc)  
cold:pred I:dat  
'I'm cold.'

c. Cz. *Je mi zima.*  
is:3sg I:dat cold:pred  
'I'm cold.'

d. S-Cr. *Лоше му је.* (Vojvodić, pc)  
*Loše mu је.*  
bad:pred he:dat is:3sg  
'He feels bad.'

e. Bg. *Радостно му е.* (Gradinarova 2018: 19)  
*Radostno mu е.*  
happy:pred he:dat is:3sg  
'He feels happy.'

In Serbo-Croatian we can find here both adverbial and noun predicates (13c': = *Зло му је. Zlo mu је.*) (Vojvodić, pc). Nowadays, dative impersonal constructions in *-o* are much more common in Bulgarian than in Russian because they can be derived not only from an adjective (cf. *гадно ми е, отвратително ми е, мъчно ми е, болно ми е, тъно ми е (coll.)*), but also from a participle (active or passive): *spokojno i usmixinato mi e* 'I feel calm and joyfull' (Gradinarova 2018). As for the forms indicating an emotional or psychological state of sadness, fear, or disgust, like *sramno, strašno*, they are seldom used as adverbial predicates with a dative but they are common as noun predicates with accusative case (see below). (*ibid.*).

#### 4.3.2. Constructions of predisposition to action

In this section have to be considered **impersonal constructions with a nominal constituent "do + genitive"**, which occur with negative predicate in most Slavic languages (14). Moreover, in Czech, in Serbo-Croatian, and to a lesser extent in Polish (15), this construction can also appear in an affirmative form (Mrázek 1990; Žaža 2002; Tanasić 1998). The noun in genitive denoting an action is used to be a deverbative.

(14) a. Ru. *Когда в стране хаос, обычным людям не до политики.* (NKRJa 2011)  
*kogda v strane chaos, obyčnym ljudjam ne do politiki.*  
ordinary:dat people:dat neg prep politics:gen  
'Then a country faces a chaotic situation, ordinary people don't care about politics.'

b. Pl. *Nie jest mi do śmiechu.* (Zaremba, pc)  
neg is:3sg I:dat prep laughter:gen  
'I don't feel like laughing.'

c. Cz. *Petrovi nebylo do smíchu.*  
Peter:dat was:neut.neg prep laughter:gen

<sup>2</sup> Nacional'nyj Korpus Russkogo Jazyka (National Russian Corpus) – ruscorpora.ru



‘Peter does not feel like laughing.’

d. S-Cr. Ко пева зло не мисли, а ко мисли, *није му до песме.* (Tanasić 1998: 89)

Ко пева зло не мисли, а ко мисли, *није му до песме.*  
is.neg:3sg he:dat prep song:gen

‘He didn’t think singing bad, and if he did, *he did not feel like singing.*’

e. Bg. *He ми е до шеге.*

*Ne ми е до шеге.*

neg I:dat is:3sg prep joke:gen

‘I do not feel like joking.’

(15) a. Pl. *Jest mi do płaczu.* (Zaremba, pc)

is:3sg I:dat prep cry:gen

‘I feel like crying.’

b. Cz. *Petrovi było do śmiechu.*

Peter:dat was:neut prep laughter:gen

‘Peter felt like laughing.’

c. S-Cr. *Њему је било до круне Немањића, а не до оних костију.* (Tanasić 1998: 89)

*Њему је било до круне Немањића, а не до оних костију.*

he:dat is:3sg was:neut prep crown:gen N.:gen, conj neg prep their borns:gen

‘He cared about Nemanic’s crown, not about their borns.’

Impersonal constructions describing a predisposition to action with a dative experiencer are also common in Slavic languages **with an impersonal intransitive verb**. They are restricted to some verbal predicates designating human or mental activity, or volition, used in pronominal form, although their non-pronominal forms appear in personal constructions with a nominative subject: cf. *Ja (zdes’) splju xorošo*. ‘I sleep well (here).’ ≈ *Mne (zdes’) xorošo spitsja*. ‘I feel like sleeping well (here)’. While some transitive verbs can appear in these constructions, the latter don’t comprise a direct object argument, except in Polish and in Bulgarian (16b, e).

(16) a. Ru. *Как вам работается на новом месте?* (NKRJa 2002)

*Как вам работаetsja на новом месте?*  
how you:pl.dat work-ref:3sg in new place:loc

‘How do you feel working in a new place?’

b. Pl. *Dobrze mi się czytało «Gazetę Wyborczą» w bibliotece.* (Fici & Zhukova 2012: 21)

good I:dat ref read:pst.neut ‘GW’:acc in library:loc

‘It felt good reading ‘GW’ in the library.’

c. Cz. *Pracowało se mi snadno.* (Librová, pc)

worked:neut ref I:dat easily

‘It was easy for me to work.’

d. S-Cr. *Дјеци се нешто спавало.* (Tanasić 1998: 91)

*Djeci se nešto spavalo.*

Children:dat ref something slept:neut

‘The children felt like sleeping.’

e. Bg. *Учи ми се (чужд език).* (Savova 2018: 9)

*Uči mi se (čuzd ezik).*

Learns:3sg I:dat ref (foreign language)

‘I feel like learning (foreign language).’

If these constructions are not accompanied by an adverb, they describe the attitude of the experiencer toward a state or action denoted by the verb, while constructions including an adverb denote an assessment of the experiencer’s state in the process of activity (Fici & Zhukova 2012). In their negative counterparts, a negative particle cannot be used with adverb.

(17)

- a. Ru. *Без этого России не спится, не живётся.* (NKRJa: 1998)  
*Bez ètogo Rossii ne spitsja, ne živëtsja.*  
prep this:gen Russia:dat neg sleeps-ref:3sg, neg lives-ref:3sg  
'Without this, Russia doesn't feel like sleeping or living.'
- b. Pl. *W życiu nie spało mi się dobrze w namiocie.* (internet)  
in life:acc neg slept:neut I:dat ref well in tent:loc  
'I never slept well in a tent.'
- c. Cz. *Nepracowało se mi snadno.* (Librová, pc)  
worked:neut.neg ref I:dat easily  
'It was not easy for me to work.'
- d. S-Cr. *He padu im se.* (Vojvodić, pc)  
*Ne radi im se.*  
neg works:3sg they:dat ref  
'They don't feel like working.'
- e. Bg. *He mi se ходеше много на този пазар.* (Armianov, pc)  
*Ne mi se xodeše mnogo na tozi pazar.*  
neg I:dat ref went:iperf3sg much prep this market  
'I don't feel much like going to this market.'

In Serbian, the affirmative construction of this type can be transformed to “do+genitive” construction (see above) without any semantic changes (16d': *Djeca je nešto bilo do spavanja.*) (Tanasić 1998: 92) due to the frequent usage of deverbal nouns in it. However, in Russian, this kind of transformation may be possible only with negative constructions but it is not systematic (cf. 17a': *Rossii ne do sna, \*ne do žizni.*).

#### 4.3.3. Constructions with modal predicate

Impersonal constructions with the modal predicate in Russian commonly use a few predicates. They are mainly *nado*, *nužno* 'necessary', *možno* 'possible/allowed' and *nel'zja* 'may/can not' which are used more often (18a-b).

- (18) a. Ru. *Извините, мне надо позвонить.* (NKRJa 2015)  
*Izvinite, mne nado pozvonit'.*  
excuse:imp.pl, I:dat need:pred call:inf  
'Excuse-me, I need to call.'
- b. Ru. *Все врут. Никому нельзя верить.* (NKRJa 2000)  
*Vse vrut. Nikomu nel'zja verit'.*  
nobody:dat should-not:pred trust:inf  
'Everyone lies. No one can be trusted.'
- c. Pl. *Spać nie bede, trzeba mi pracować nad dokumentem.* (internet)  
sleep:inf neg will:1sg, need:pred I:dat work:inf prep paper  
'I'm not going to sleep, I need to work on a documentary.'
- d. S-Cr. *Неопходно му је да дође на вр(и)јеме.* (Vojvodić, pc)  
*Neophodno mu je da dođe na vr(ij)eme.*  
need:pred he:dat is:3sg conj comes:3sg in time  
'He should come in time.'

While this kind of impersonal constructions exists in other Slavic languages (18c-d), they tend to be replaced by personal constructions (19, 20). Thus, most impersonal constructions with modal predicate in West Slavic languages have been replaced by personal constructions with loan-translations from German *müssen*, *dürfen*, and *haben*. This is the case of Polish and Czech where the verbs pl. *musieć* and *mieć*, from one side, and cz. *muset*, *smět*, and *mít* from another, require a nominative subject (19) (Wolińska 1978; Weiss 1987, 1988; Žaža 1998). In Bulgarian, the nominal argument isn't expressed; the subject is marked by a verbal flexion, therefore in a personal construction (20).

- (19) a. Pl. *Muszę pracować nad dokumentem* (Zaremba, pc)  
 must:1sg work:inf on paper  
 ‘I have to work on a documentary.’  
 b. Cz. *Musím jít do školy.*  
 must:1sg go:inf prep school:gen  
 ‘I have to go to school.’

- (20) Bulgarian (Armianov, pc)  
 a. *Трябва да работя.*  
*Trjabva da rabotja.*  
 need:pred conj work:1sg  
 ‘I need to work.’  
 b. *Не трябва да пуши.*  
*Ne trjabva da puši.*  
 neg need:pred conj smokes:3sg  
 ‘He/she should not smoke.’

#### 4.3.4. Infinitive constructions

Originally occurring in Old Slavic, Russian **infinitive constructions** like (21) are common nowadays. Such constructions combine modal and temporal (future) structural meanings. Their usage, however, remains syntactically and stylistically limited (Veyrenc 1979; Maurice 1996; Fortuin 2000; Israeli 2013).

- (21) Russian (NKRJa 2013)  
 a. *Мне уйти?*  
*Mne ujti?*  
 I:dat leave:inf  
 ‘Should I leave?’  
 b. – Что такое аппендицит? – Вам не понять.  
 – Что такое аппендицит? – Вам не поня́т’.  
 what this appendicitis:nom – you:pl.dat neg understand:inf  
 ‘– What is appendicitis? – You will not be able to understand.’ (NKRJa 2011)

Dative infinitive constructions are neither common nor productive in other Slavic languages. They have completely disappeared in Bulgarian and Czech (Žaža 1998). Only some of their remnants remain in Serbo-Croatian and Polish (22) (Wolińska 1978; Weiss 1993). In Serbo-Croatian these constructions are mostly found in poetic and archaic style: their function is now transmitted by ‘*da* + present’ construct, which does not combine with dative (22b’: = *Šta treba da činimo*) (Vojvodić 2007: 575). Instead of the missing infinitive constructions, Slavic languages use other morphosyntactic forms, like future and past tenses, subjunctive mood, future or present of modal predicate (srb. *morati, moći, trebati*, etc.; pl. *mieć, móc, mosieć*, etc.) combined with a dependent infinitive, and so on. (*ibid.*).

- (22) a. S-Cr. *Нама је сутра зором путовати.* (Vojvodić 2007: 575)  
*Nama je sutra zorom putovati.*  
 we:dat is:3sg tomorrow dawn:inst travel:inf  
 ‘We’ll be traveling at dawn tomorrow.’  
 b. S-Cr. (coll.) *Шта нам је сада чинити?*  
*Šta nam je sada činiti?*  
 what we:dat is:3sg now do:inf  
 ‘What should we do now?’  
 c. Pl. *Po cóż mi być świadkiem?* (*ibid.*)  
 conj I:dat be:inf witness:inst  
 ‘Why would I be a witness?’

Thus, there is an obvious disparity between impersonal constructions with a dative experiencer that are widely used in Slavic languages on the one hand, and, on the other hand, infinitive impersonal constructions with dative attested only in some Slavic languages. The both constructions also present functional differences. This leads some scholars to suggest that these constructions contain two different types of dative “resulting from distinct case-marking strategies” (Franks 1995).

## 4.4. Causative constructions

### 4.4.1. Accusative constructions

The accusative argument is also common in impersonal constructions in Slavic languages. However, these **constructions with accusative** are limited only to the designation of a physical illness or reaction and to metaphoric uses. Unlike other Slavic languages, Russian constructions with accusative are less common with only a limited number of verbs denoting mostly physical diseases; there are impersonal verbs like *lixoradit*, *znobit* ‘to tremble’, *tošnit* ‘to vomit’, and personal transitive verbs like *lomit* ‘to feel pain’ or *trjasti* ‘to tremble’ (23a). In other Slavic languages, accusative constructions can, however, include not only a verbal predicate, but a predicative as well. So, in Bulgarian, as well as in Serbian (24), accusative constructions appear frequently with nominal predicates indicating an emotional state of sadness, fear, and disgust (*gnus go e*, *strax go e*) (Gradinarova 2018), while Russian requires for this semantics a dative constituent (*emu strašno* ‘he is scared’, see above). On the other hand, this type of impersonal constructions is not attested in Czech (Holk 1983: 151), where there is a personal construction, which includes an experiencer-possessor in dative (*hrdlo se mi svíralo* ‘my throat was clutching’).

(23) a. Ru. *Меня трясёт от смеха.* (NKRJa 2002)

*Menja trjasët ot smexa.*

I:acc trembles:3sg prep laughter:gen

‘I am trembling from laughter.’

b. Pl. *Łamie mnie w kościach.* (Zaremba, pc)

feels.pain:3sg me:acc prep bones:loc

‘I feel pain in my bones.’

c. Bg. *Трепе ме.* (Armianov, pc)

*Trese me.*

shakes:3sg I:acc

‘I am shaking (from fever).’

(24) a. S-Cr. *Страх вас је било.* (Vojvodić, pc)

*Strah vas je bilo.*

scary:pred you:2pl.acc is:3sg was:neut

‘You were afraid.’

b. Bg. *Срам го е.* (Gradinarova 2018)

*Sram go e.*

shame:pred he:acc is:3sg

‘He’s ashamed.’

The accusative argument should not be confused with a direct object in accusative because the impersonal construction uses an intransitive verb. This type of accusative is thus an argument of an intransitive verb. In contrast, in the construction (25a) below, the accusative *kryšu* ‘roof’ is a regular direct object of the transitive verb *sorvat* ‘to tore off’.

### 4.4.2. External force constructions

**Constructions depicting damage caused by an external force**,—a natural phenomenon or an unknown force,—occur in Russian with the instrumental case (25), while they use no nominal argument in a corresponding construction in West Slavic languages (26). In Serbian, where the instrumental case used

in a subject function disappeared very early (Ivić 1954), the external force constructions are usually nominative active constructions, and are rarely passive (27).

(25) Russian

a. *Бурей залило двор и здания.* (NKRJa 2009)  
*Burej zalilo dvor i zdanija.*  
 storm:inst flooded:neut courtyard:acc conj buidings:acc  
 ‘The storm flooded the courtyard and buildings.’

b. На ноге, повыше колена, осколком вырвало кусок мяса. (NKRJa 1994)  
 Na noge, povyše kolena, oskolkom vyrvalo kusok tjasa.  
 shrapnel:inst tore.off:neut piece:acc flesh:gen  
 ‘The shrapnel tore a piece of flesh off his leg, above the knee.’

(26) a. Pl. *Zasypało drogę.*

covered:neut road:acc  
 ‘The road was covered.’

b. Cz. *Souseda ranilo.*  
 neighbor:acc wounded:neut  
 ‘The neighbor was wounded.’

(27) Serbian

a. *Цело небо су прекрили облаци.* (Babić 2015: 106)  
*Celo nebo su prekrili oblaci.*  
 all sky:acc are:3pl covered:3pl clouds:nom  
 ‘The entire sky was covered with clouds.’

b. *Цело небо је прекривено облацима.* (Vojvodić, pc)  
*Celo nebo je prekriveno oblacima.*  
 all sky:nom is:3sg covered:part.pst.neut clouds:inst  
 ‘The entire sky was covered with clouds.’

According to most scholars of comparative Slavic studies, the “impersonal” instrumental, which is used, as we know, for a meteorological phenomenon or a force endowed with its own energy, takes a central place in East Slavic languages, in particular in Russian, but it has a rather peripheral status in other Slavic languages (Mrázek 1964; Ivić 1965). From the structural point of view, we can refer to R. Mrázek, who was aware of the specificity of the “impersonal” instrumental and its structural indispensability, and compared it to a subject (Mrázek 1964), although this form should be placed at the far end of the subjectival scale (see above, § 2). On the other hand, from the typological point of view, it is possible to compare these models to ergative constructions that assign an oblique case to the subject of transitive verbs. But the neutralization of the role of agent is proper not only to ergative and impersonal but also to passive constructions (see § 6) (for impersonals and related constructions in Slavic languages, see Kor Chahine (ed.) 2013).

## 5. Constructions with indefinite subjects

It is worth mentioning another problem related to identifying impersonal constructions. In order to identify strictly impersonal constructions, we must eliminate all instances when the subject is missing due to the influence of context or because of pragmatic, lexical, and stylistic constraints, i.e. all elliptical or deleted subjects. The cases of zero subject must be eliminated as well. The ellipsis and zero subject always denote a significant absence. The elliptical subject may, however, be reinstated, which is not possible for zero subject: no lexeme can substitute a zero subject without changing the meaning of the construction. Among constructions without a nominative subject, i.e. impersonal constructions “in a large sense,” are those types which refer to a generic or indeterminate subject. These constructions have different characteristics in each Slavic language, and their typology is yet to be examined.

There are two well-known variants of such constructions: **constructions with zero subject**, designating a person or a group of indeterminate persons, and, in principle excluding the speaker; and **constructions including a generic human subject**, among them the speaker. These constructions are common not only to Slavic domain but also to other languages of Europe (Siewierska 2011). Both constructions, unlike impersonal constructions in a narrow sense, generally include an action verb. They also have a very real, although indeterminate, agent.

## 5.1. Constructions with zero subject

**Constructions with zero subject** occur in most Slavic languages. While the impersonal construction strictly speaking has a predicate in the 3rd person singular, which can be considered a mark of non-agreement, in constructions with indefinite subject, the verb is in the 3rd person plural and refers to a human subject, which can be determined by a local argument or by the situation.

- (28) a. Ru. *На заводе бастовали.*  
*Na zavode bastovali.*  
 at factory:loc struck:3pl  
 ‘There was a strike at the factory.’
- b. Pl. *W fabryce strajkowali.*  
 at factory:loc struck:3pl  
 ‘There was a strike at the factory.’
- c. Cz. *V továrně stávkovali.*  
 at factory:loc struck:3pl  
 ‘There was a strike at the factory.’
- d. S-Cr. *У фабрици су штрајковали.*  
*U fabrici su štrajkovali.*  
 at factory:loc are:3pl struck:3pl  
 ‘There was a strike at the factory.’
- e. Bg. *B завода стачкуваха.*  
*V zavoda stačkuvaha.*  
 at factory struck:3pl  
 ‘There was a strike at the factory.’

## 5.2. Constructions with generic human subject

**Constructions referring to a generic human subject**, or “universal person”, exist only in Russian. They contain a verbal predicate in the 2nd person singular which includes any referent comprising the speaker :

- (29) Ru. *Никогда не знаешь, что может понадобиться в дороге.* (NKRJa 2015)  
*Nikogda ne znaeš’, čto možet ponadobit’sja v doroge.*  
 ‘One never knows what can be useful on a trip.’

Most Slavic languages express the generic human subject by constructions comprising a word etymologically related to the lexeme ‘man’ (such as *Man* in German or *on* in French) (pl. *człowiek*, bg. *čovек*, cz. *člověk*, s.-cr. *čov(j)ek*). For this reason, these constructions are used to call « *man-constructions* » (cf. Siewierska 2011). However, these Slavic constructions are personal by their syntactic structure.

- (30) a. Pl. *Człowiek nie wie, co ma robić.*  
 ‘One does not know what to do.’
- b. Cz. *Člověk nikdy neví.*  
 ‘One never knows.’
- c. S-Cr. *Чов(j)ек никад не зна шта га чека сутра.*  
*Čov(j)ek nikad ne zna šta ga čeka sutra.*

- ‘One never knows what to expect tomorrow.’  
 d. Bg. *Čovek ne znae nikoga kakvo može da se sluči.*  
 ‘One never knows what might happen’.

### 5.3. Constructions with indefinite subject

A third variant of these impersonal constructions, **constructions with indefinite subject**, realizes in Russian in constructions like (31) which not to be confused with strictly impersonal constructions. The zero subject here can either refer to a indefinite person or to an animal, as well as to an indefinite object (Georgieva 1969, 1978). In other words, it does not necessarily refer to a person (like in the two types presented above), and its predicate is in the 3rd person singular.

(31) Russian

- a. *Под кроватью зашевелилось.*  
*Pod krovat'ju zaševalilos'.*  
 under bed:inst moved:neut  
 ‘Something moved under the bed.’
- b. *Над головой гудело.*  
*Nad golovoj gudelo.*  
 over head:inst buzzed:neut  
 ‘Something buzzed over his head.’

One can observe a certain correspondence of such constructions with the constructions existing in other Slavic languages that also use a verb in the 3rd person singular without an explicit subject, but in this case the zero subject refers to a person (not to an inanimate object), and very often to the speaker. Such constructions always use a reflexive verb. It's worth to note that in colloquial Czech, a reflexive marker can also be applied to an entier chain of coordinated verbs (34b).

(32) Polish

(Zaremba, pc)

- a. *Robi się.*  
 does:3sg ref  
 ‘[I/we/they] do it.’
- b. *Czyta się.*  
 reads:3sg ref  
 ‘[I/we/they] read.’

(33) Serbo-Croatian

(Vojvodić, pc)

- a. *Pađu se.*  
*Radi se.*  
 does:3sg ref  
 ‘[I/we/they] do it.’
- b. *Говорило се.*  
*Govorilo se.*  
 talked:neut ref  
 ‘[I/we/they] talk.’

(34) Czech

(Poljakov 2010: 121)

- a. *A jede se dál.*  
 conj does:3sg ref further  
 ‘And [I/we/they] go on.’
- b. (coll.) *Pilo se, bavilo, fotbalkovalo...*  
 ate:neut ref, had-fun:neut, played-football:neut  
 ‘[I/we/they] ate, had fun, played football.’

It is precisely these forms of indefinite subject that have not been lexicalized in Slavic languages.

## 6. Impersonal and related constructions

The absence of agent or its occasionally minor status makes impersonal constructions closer to other models that share some of their features. This often makes identifying these constructions difficult.

While similarities between impersonal and passive constructions can be observed on the synchronic level, they can be seen on the diachronic level as well. In the history of Slavic languages, the development of impersonal constructions is often related to passive constructions. Thus, in Polish, the passive suffix *-no/-to* became an impersonal marker (Pisarkowa 1984), which can be found in constructions like (35), with a direct object making the passive reading impossible. Today, they function as active constructions and are very common.

(35) *Podano herbatę.*  
 served:part.neut tea:acc  
 ‘Tea was served.’

Similarly, in Russian, the relatively late emergence of impersonal constructions with instrumental, such as (25a) may have originated from the expansion of the instrumental agent in passive constructions. In Old Russian, the agent was expressed by the form “ot + genitive,” which subsequently became outdated and fell out of use (Ivić 1965). It is interesting to note that in similar modern Serbo-Croatian structures the “real” passive construction is used: an inanimate agent is encoded by the instrumental (36a), while an animate agent is encoded by the phrase “od + genitive” (36b).

(36) Serbo-Croatian (Vojvodić, pc)

a. *Пут је затрпан снегом.*  
*Put је zatrpan snegom.*  
 road:nom.m is:3sg covered:part.m snow:inst  
 ‘The road is covered with snow.’

b. *Он је одликован од стране председника.*  
*Он је odlikovan od strane predsednika.*  
 he:nom is:3sg awarded:part.m by side:gen president:gen  
 ‘He was awarded by the president.’

Furthermore, there are similarities between passive constructions and constructions with “o + locative”, such as (37), which replaced the former impersonal passive (see § 3 above) (Švedova 1964).

(37) *В књигах и в кино о любви говорилось очень много.* (NKRJa 1970)  
*V knjigax i v kino o ljubvi govorilos’ očen’ mnogo.*  
 in books:loc and in films:loc about love:loc discussed:neut.ref very much  
 ‘There was a lot of talks about love in books and movies.’

The classification of these constructions among impersonal constructions is not always unanimous. In this construction, the postfix *-sja* attached to a verb can be seen as a morphological marker of impersonal subject originating from a verbal derivation, which is often confused with the process of passivization (see various types of passive constructions in Plungjan 2016).

In addition to these examples of direct links between the impersonals and passive, it should be noted that the domain of impersonal constructions has been gradually expanding at the expense of the passive. Thus, in Russian, in constructions with zero subject including a predicate in the 3rd person plural, the role of the agent is minimal, which makes them closer to passive constructions where the agent plays a peripheral role. Some scholars think that this construction compensates for an absent position in the passive paradigm, which does not possess all aspect and tense forms (Wiemer 1996). Besides, it is also possible to view impersonal constructions as a type of construction where the voice opposition is neutralized.

On the other hand, the relationship between impersonal and reflexive constructions is based on operations that affect the predicate-argument structure. From a certain point of view, this operation, which detransitivizes a transitive construction, can be linked to the phenomenon observed in ergative languages where this type of construction contains a dedicative anti-passive marker.



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