

How much inversion is there in Polish existential sentences? A view from Simplest Merge and feature-free syntax

Przemysław Tajsner. Adam Mickiewicz University

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The focus of the analysis are Polish existential sentences like (1) and their alleged affinity to locative sentences like (2):

(1) *Na stole był wazon.*
on table was vase_{NOM}
'There was a vase on the table'

(2) *Wazon był na stole.*

An established line of analysis (e.g. Witkoś 2000) is to derive both types from the same underlying SC in (3), by raising either of the two arguments (locative or theme) over the copula, as in (4) or (5):

(3) BE [_{SC} NP_{THEME} PP_{LOCATION}]
(4) NP_{THEME} BE [_tNP PP_{LOCATION}] *locative*
(5) PP_{LOCATION} BE [NP_{THEME} t_{PP}] *existential*

cf. Błaszczak (2018: 4)

Alternatively, (1) may be an outcome of *Predicate Inversion* with the subject of predication staying “lower” than the (locative) predicate, as in (6) below (den Dikken 2006, 2007; Moro 1997, 2000):

(6) [_{XP}[_{PREDICATE} na stole] [[_X był] [_{SUBJECT} wazon]]]

Błaszczak (2018) argues against these accounts proposing a solution based on different underlying structures for existential and locative sentences:

(7) [_{VP} PP_{LOC} [_v v [_{VP} V NP_{THEME}]]] *existential*
(8) [_{VP} NP_{AGENT} [_v v [_{VP} V PP_{LOC}]]] *locative*

cf. Błaszczak (2018: 17)

This proposal lets Błaszczak (2018) analyze the facts of Genitive of Negation; in (7) GoN applies because the theme NP is an internal argument of the verb, whilst in (8) it doesn't because the agent NP is the external argument. Some provisions are needed for *feature valuation* and *Agree* (Pesetsky and Torrego 2007) to work: (i) nominative Case is dissociated from T (avoiding problems with PIC), (ii) Woolford's (2003) *Universal Case Markedness Hierarchy* (UCMH) is adopted, (iii) structural cases can be “overridden” by genitive under negation, (iv) there is “ ϕ feature-sharing” between T and the v-V complex.

Given these provisions, the technical implementation appears successful, but a few questions remain: (i) why doesn't GoN apply for Polish unaccusative verbs? (ii) why does GoN apply to a single argument? (*Nie było czasu*_{GEN} ‘There was no time’), (iii) if the v in (7) is *stative* taking a locative argument (a kind of Possessor (Bennis 2004: 84)), why cannot other stative verbs, e.g. *posiadać* ‘own’, do the same?, (iv) what is the actual PF mechanism of “case overriding”.

My alternative analysis applies a feature-free approach of Boeckx (2015) and adapts the idea that sentence Nuclear Stress (NS) falls on a constituent in the first spell-out domain (Cinque 1993,

Zubizarreta and Vergnaud 2005, Reinhart 2006, Tajsner 2008). GoN applies when Negation and the NP are transferred simultaneously. It so happens (under neutral, non-contrastive intonation) for (9), but not for (10), hence no GoN in the latter.

(9) *Na stole nie było WAZONU*

(10) *Wazon nie jest NA STOLE.*

Boeckx's (2015) rejects any lexical "coding" of syntax; there are no arguments of V, and no lexical categories visible to syntax. Syntactic asymmetry arises from Phases and a distinction between two types of *lexical precursor cells*; phase heads and non-phase heads. These are being merged in an alternate rhythm (**ph**>non-ph>**ph**>non-ph, etc.) with a possible addition of a Specifier of a non-phase head. Each phase head triggers TRANSFER. *Simplest Merge* (Chomsky et al. 2019) holds but *Agree* is abandoned. When two precursors freely merge (preserving Phase rhythm) neither projects. Case inflection and lexical insertion are expelled from syntax, and so is information structure.

Within these bonds, the derivation of (9) is, roughly, (11) (lexemes and names of phase heads (v, Neg) are only expository):

(11) non-ph (*było*)>**ph** (v)> non-ph (*nie*)>Spec.ph (NP, *wazonu*)> **ph** (Neg) >>
TRANSFER: {*wazonu nie było*}

For comparison, for (10) the first transferred part is {*na stole nie jest*}, hence no GoN. With negated unaccusative verbs NS can only fall on the verb (*Odpowiedź nie NADESZŁA/*Nie nadeszła ODPOWIEDŹ*) – evidently the NP is not transferred together with negation, hence no GoN. The analysis may be extended to variants of existential sentences like (12) in which the bracketed part is freely merged and inserted as a Specifier of a non-phase head:

(12) [*Wazonu na stole*] nie BYŁO.

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