

SUBJECT- AND TOPIC-PROMINENCE IN POLISH AND ENGLISH

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In a paper by Charles N. Li and Sandra A. Thompson (Li 1976) it has been suggested that Subject /S/ is not a universal category and that there exist languages that are rather Topic-prominent (T-prominent) than S-prominent in the sense that the structure of sentences in these languages should include — among other elements — Topics /T/ rather than Subjects; and that also in basic sentences (basic in the sense of Keenan (1976)) not derived from some other sentence having a simpler structure. In Li and Thompson (1976) all Indo-European languages are classified as S-prominent; although it is admitted that from T-prominence to S-prominence there exists a continuous scale rather than polarity of the two types.

According to Lehmann's (1976) proposal Proto-Indo-European should be regarded as a T-prominent language. Comparing modern European languages — especially those of Germanic and Romance branches — the conclusion is inevitable that a drift from consistent T-prominence to highly consistent S-prominence has taken place. The speed of this change is not equal for all the subgroups of the Indo-European family and it is being suggested in this paper that Slavonic languages are less advanced and more conservative in the T- to S-prominence drift. This general conclusion is warranted — it is felt here — by the data gathered from the comparison of Polish and English.

English is far advanced in its drift from T- to S-prominence. S is obligatory in the language and is normally placed before V (Verb).¹ If for the reasons of pragmatic organisation of the sentence which, after Firbas (e.g. Firbas 1961), might be termed FSP (Functional Sentence Perspective) S must be placed

¹ S-V order in English is more grammatically fixed than V-O order; cf. sentences (32) and (33) at the end of this paper; also Halliday (1976:62).

further on in the sentence as required by the tonicity rules for unemotive (unmarked) sequences within information units (cf. Halliday (1976:101), then it leaves behind its formal "dummy" copy, known as anticipatory or slot-filling item, which agrees in number with V, i.e., acts as any other grammatical S, cf.;

- (1) *It was interesting to meet him there*
— to meet him there = notional S
(2) *There's some people in the waiting room²*
— some people = notional S

Slot-filling "it" and "there" have no equivalent in Polish; either historical or contemporary, except for cases of dialectal usage noted by Rospond (1973:354), e.g.,

- (3) *óno pada* — "it rains, it is raining"
(4) *óno go nie było widać* — "it him was not to see" =
= "he could not be seen"

and the interesting question would be whether (3), (4), and other such forms do not in fact represent some future trend for Polish — in full agreement with T- to S-prominence tendency — that is not being realised in standard literary Polish because of the normative system of schools and mass media.³

Contemporary Polish makes use of many S-less patterns (cf. Fisiak 1978), all their English equivalents obligatorily having semantic or dummy S. Generally S-less sentences would be expected when the semantic notion of agent is absent or need not be expressed (cf. Keenan's notion of basic sentences in Keenan (1976); cf. also definitions of S in many classical grammars and the affinity of S to agent referred to therein). For the Polish data it is only partly true. Despite the fact that S-less sentences with agent being inanimate, unknown or some other force irrelevant for communication are regarded as most typical — because most often quoted — examples of the structures in question; they constitute only what might be classified as one group of such structures. They typically express process;

- (5) *Dnieje* — "it is dawning"
Ściemniło się — "it grew dark",

or resulting state;

- (6) *Było zimno w pokoju* — "it was cold in the room".

² On S-V agreement in "there"-sentences, cf. Quirk (1972:958). We regard the normal V-NP agreement in such sentences as imposed by logicians and grammarians.

³ The dialect in case is that spoken around Łowicz, central Poland. Therefore it is hardly possible to speak about foreign influence. Other Polish dialects also use empty "ono". (cf. Klemensiewicz (1964:399)).

Showing syntactic and semantic affinity with the above group of sentences are patterns like;

- (7) *Było nam zimno* — "we were cold"

with the sufferer (we), constituting T if unstressed, being put in the oblique case and no proper S, the causal force (agent) unknown or not easy to define. With only slight modifications the above discussion is also relevant to sentences like;

- (8) *Chce mi się spać* — "I feel sleepy",

though the pattern is also applied in cases with agent clearly known;

- (9) *Udało mu się naprawić telewizor* —
— "he succeeded in mending the TV set".

Another large group of the discussed type are sentences with verbs of increase, decrease, or lack of something:

- (10) *Brakuje nam pieniędzy* — "we lack money"
Wody przybywa — "water is rising"

The genitive NP, if initial or enclitic to the verb then topical, cannot be regarded as S, the condition of its agreement in person, number, and gender with V not being fulfilled (cf. Gołąb 1958).

Somewhat similar to (10) is the last group discussed here; sentences with agentive NP containing a numeral which modifies the noun, the conditions for the numeral and also the nominal gender being given, for instance, in Szober (1969:307);

- (11) *Pięciu studentów zdało pomyślnie egzamin* —
— "five students satisfactorily passed the exam"
(12) *Trzy piękne córki było nas u matki* (from Szober (1969:307))
— "three beautiful daughters we were at our mother's"

It is very important to note that sentences like (12) are in free variation with historically more recent variant (13), where the same NP is in agreement with V thus constituting the proper S;

- (13) *Trzy piękne córki byłyśmy u matki* (Szober (1969:307)).

In order to account for the above phenomena Polish grammarians (Dorożewski, Szober) have introduced the notions of "logical subject", "grammatical subject", and "logico-grammatical subject". The word "studentów" in (11) will thus be logical S; logico-grammatical S is the normal subject agreeing in number, person, and gender with its V — as in (13) the whole NP; grammatical S may be exemplified by the numeral "miliony" in (14);

(14) *Miliony gwiazd świeciły na niebie*

where only this numeral agrees with V, the rest of NP "gwiazd" being in oblique case (genitive) (cf. Szober (1969); Doroszewski (1961:II; 188—189)).

It is clear that from our point of view only logico-grammatical S fulfills the conditions of being S; for other types of Polish NPs being the primary participators in the process (state) denoted by V and yet appearing in oblique case and without an agreement with this V the status of Topic and not Subject is proposed here.

Considering the above argument, especially the existence of Polish sentences like (9) and (11) with clearly identifiable agent, being also transitive⁴, we can postulate that the status of S in Polish is equal to the status of Complement or the Objects /O_{indirect}, O_{direct}/ in that V, being the only obligatory element (cf. sentences of the type (5) above) conditions the appearance of one, two, or three participant NPs, the primary participant being often anything but S.⁵ The choice of T, on the other hand, is not conditioned by the selectional restrictions of V and is governed by the general rules of T choice as discussed in Halliday (1976: 179—182) — also for Polish.

In contemporary English S constituent is in a privileged position in that it always necessarily appears and its position, since Middle English, is fixed to that before V.⁶

The above observations about the role of S in Polish can also be confirmed on syntactic grounds. Let us compare the following sentences.⁷

(17) E: It is *good* that you told me about it.

P: *Dobrze*, że mi to powiedziałeś.

(18) E: To swim in a river is *pleasant*.

P: *Pływać w rzece jest przyjemnie*.

(19) E: It is very *cold* today.

P: *Jest dziś bardzo zimno*.

(20) E: We were *cold* and *uncomfortable*.

P: *Było nam zimno i niewygodnie*.

In the above sentences Polish Adverb corresponds to English Adjective, the whole of the respective counterparts being equivalent in meaning and no

⁴ (11) may thus be regularly passivized;

(11.b) *Egzamin został pomyślnie zdany przez pięciu studentów*.

The restrictions on passive here are of general character, similar in Polish to that discussed in Granger-Legrand (1976).

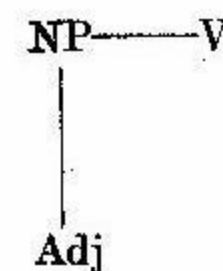
⁵ Cf.: "boli *mnie* głowa" = "I have a headache" — Polish primary participant NP is syntactically O_{dir}; "wydaje *mi* się, że..." = "it seems to me that..." — it is O_{indir}.

⁶ Cf. note 1. above.

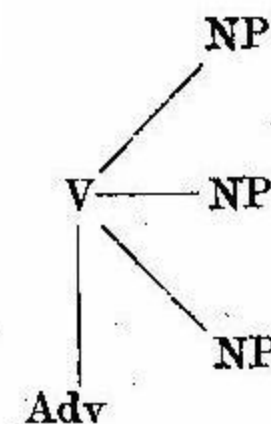
⁷ The examples (17), (18), and (19) we owe to Fisiak (1978:213—214).

other so close translation existing. This equivalence is discussed in Fisiak (1978: 213—215). Here we would like to propose some farther reaching causes of that phenomenon. Adjectives are known to typically modify Nouns, NPs, or Sentences. Adverbs typically modify verbal concepts. The structure of English and Polish counterparts, therefore, might be informally represented in the following way:

(21) E:



P:



Therefore the fact that in sentences like (17)—(20) above the structure of modification is different in idiomatic structures of sentences⁸ should be directly connected to the generally known tendency in English towards nominalizations; in accordance with the observations of Czech linguists (cf. Firbas (1959); 1961); also Rybarkiewicz (1977)). This tendency manifests itself in the preference for the structure: thematic NP + communicatively weak V (often copulative) + rhematic and stressed NP; with thematic NP constituting S.

In Polish and, generally, in Slavonic languages the communicative weight is put on the verbal concept which was once characteristic of early Germanic dialects, too, (cf. Gothic, also OE).

The expression of primary participant in Polish is often fulfilled by personal endings on V. These endings have S function in that they can be replaced by a pronoun or a NP agreeing with them in number (person) and thus constituting S proper. Nevertheless, they do not get deleted in this process, which constitutes a proof of their rather exceptional status as Subjects. Another factor is their unclear origin (cf. Lehmann (1976:454—456)). In other words, it is not at all certain that they represent old personal pronouns appended to verbal stems. Therefore, many actually spoken Polish sentences are, at

⁸ Of course, there is a possibility of translating the above into Polish using also adjectival modification; e.g. "dzisiaj jest dziś zimno" or "pływanie w rzece jest przyjemne" ("the day today is cold"; "swimming in a river is pleasant"). We do not regard these variants as either idiomatic or, sometimes, well formed.

least syntactically, if not morphologically, S-less:

(22) *Widział-em go niedawno* — "I saw him recently"

V Odir Adv

Primary participant
expressed by verbal
ending (morphologically)

(22) represents the same structure as that of (23); i.e. characteristic for OE coordinated sentences:

(23) *Her hiene bestael se here ... ond geridon Wesseaxna lond* — "In this year this army went stealthily ... and they attacked the land of Westsaxons" (Anglo-Saxon Chronicle; entry 878).

The appearance of S-less sentences in OE was much more restricted than it is in contemporary Polish, pointing toward the drift of English from T-prominent to S-prominent structure.

Both in English and in Polish T may be introduced using a sort of sentence equivalent "as to ...", "co do ... to ...", "odnośnie..." etc.;

(24) E: *As to John, he doesn't like apples.*

P: *Co do Janka, to on nie lubi jabłek.*

Yet, in contemporary usage, such structures express a marked, emphasized or contrasted T. Unmarked normal T is typically expressed by S in English and by any NP — very often in an oblique case — in Polish. The spread of sentences like (25) replacing (26):

(25) *Miliony gwiazd świecily na niebie.*

(26) *Miliony gwiazd świeciło na niebie,*

as well as the spreading colloquial use of non-contrastive personal pronouns reinforcing verbal endings reflect the fact that also in Polish T is expressed by S more and more frequently.

The important characteristic of T in T-prominent languages is that T is fully integrated into the sentence structure with or without any overt morphological marking but within one intonational pattern (Li and Thompson 1976). This T need not be — and what is important for our argument; it rarely is⁹ — the primary participant of the process (state) expressed by V. In fact, its connection with the rest of the elements in the sentence may be

⁹ Otherwise it would simply be S.

indirect and very general. Rendering such a structure word for word in English we get:

(27) *apples — John — likes*

(28) *linguistics — John — admires — Chomsky,*

meaning "as for apples, John likes them" and "considering (talking about) linguistics, John admires Chomsky" respectively.

In colloquial spoken Polish such intonational integration of loosely connected elements is observable. The examples (taken from actually heard speech) are:

(29) *Nasz nowy sąsiad to go zastanę?* —

— "Our new neighbour shall I find him in?"

(30) *A twój brat czy mu już przysłali to zawiadomienie?*

— "And your brother have they already sent him this notification?"

Standard Polish literary usage accepts such general Topics when they are introduced by a phrase called above „sentence equivalent” of a roughly adverbial nature, of:

(31) *Oдноśnie fizyki, Heisenberg to wielkie nazwisko*

— "As for the science of physics H. is a great name" =

= "In physics H. is a great name".

It is, therefore, not possible to claim that the Polish T-scale is comparable to that of, for instance, Chinese (Li and Thompson 1976). What does seem possible is to look at the Polish flexibility in choosing T — in contradistinction to English where T now tends to be at the same time S — from the point of view of this T- to S-prominence scale. That such flexibility exists may once again be shown and confirmed by the fact that in Polish no restrictions so far exist on T being something else than the primary participant NP, i.e., that only S is accepted as T. In English the sentences that go beyond the scope of this restriction are either ungrammatical or very highly "marked", contrastive or emotive.¹⁰ Compare the following sentences:

(32) P: *Tę książkę kupił Janek.*

E: (a) *This book John bought.*

(b) *This book was bought by John.*

(33) P: *Jankowi Marysia dała książkę.*

E: (a) *To John Mary gave a book.*

(b) *John was given a book by Mary.*

¹⁰ Cf. Fisiak (1978:38—40) on the problem of word order and promotion to initial position in Polish and English.

English sentences of the type (a), when they do appear, are highly contrastive and are realized phonologically as two information units, with the so-called "marked theme" (cf. Halliday (1970: 159), also Halliday 1976). In Polish sentences of the type exemplified by (32) and (33) the initial element may be both "marked" or totally neutral depending only on contextual requirements. For Polish sentences with preposed *O_{indir}* there exists only one option, as in (33), *O_{indir}* never becoming S of the passive sentence in Polish. Normal, unmarked and non-contrastive English equivalents of similarly unmarked non-contrastive Polish sentences of the type (b) where T becomes the primary participant NP, i.e., S of the sentence.

Summing up the above argument, Polish, together with other Slavonic languages like Czech or Russian¹¹, seems still highly T-prominent language — more T-prominent than even OE — and its colloquial register even more so. Not admitting such loosely attached topical NP's as fully T-prominent languages do; it, nevertheless, must be placed further back on T- to S-prominence scale of historical development than in the case of both contemporary and Old English.

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¹¹ Cf. Kovtunova (1976) on Russian word order from the point of view of FSP.