

REFLEXIVE VERBS AS NULL OBJECT LICENSERS IN POLISH.
SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE REFLEXIVE *SIĘ*
AND SMALL *PRO*

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the problem of object drop, with particular attention put on reflexive verbs in Polish. Following Rizzi (1986: 501-512), null objects are phonologically empty but syntactically active elements and receive an “arbitrary” interpretation. However, Rizzi does not mention reflexive verbs as those which can allow null objects or *pro*. This article is a step toward accounting for null objects appearing after some verbs taking the reflexive *się* in Polish, thus extending the null object theory and its licensing schemata. Moreover, I suggest that in some cases the reflexive *się* shares certain properties with *pro* or an indefinite object pronoun, a view compatible with that of Rivero and Sheppard (2003: 117). I will attempt to compare and reconcile my proposal with theirs. My discussion of the narrow class of reflexive verbs will be also helpful in establishing further, more detailed criteria for what we can consider to be a true null object phenomenon.

1. Reflexive verbs

1.1. The division of reflexives in Polish

Some may claim that reflexive verbs cannot be taken into account as verbs allowing true object deletion, because the presence of the reflexive *się* itself makes object drop obvious (as *się* may be treated as replacing an object). However, it seems that the presence of *się* does not mean at all that we can drop the object. Sometimes the sentence without an object remains unacceptable, despite the fact that the reflexive is there, as in (1):

- (1) *Zosia opiekuje się (kim? czym?).
Zosia-Nom. nurse_{3SING.PRES.REFL.} (whom_{INSTR?}? what_{INSTR?})
'Sophie nurses (somebody).'

Obviously, here we must extend the theory of object drop to dyadic predicates whose internal argument is not necessarily in the accusative case. For comparison, let us now look at (2):

- (2) Marysia myje się.
 Marysia_{NOM.} wash_{3SING.PRES.} REFL.
 'Mary washes herself.'

In this example, *się* behaves as an overtly realized reflexive pronoun, functioning as an anaphor for the antecedent *Marysia* appearing in the same clause. Thus, we cannot call this example an instance of object drop. Compare it with (3), which contains Polish counterpart of English 'beat' or 'fight':

- (3) On się bije. [child language]
 he_{NOM.} REFL. fight_{3SING.PRES.}
 'He fights (other people).'

Here, the clitic *się* is no longer functioning as an anaphor in the form of an overtly realized reflexive pronoun, the subject pronoun *on* 'he', not being the antecedent for *się* any more. Instead, *się* (just as an empty category or *pro*) refers to *one, us* or *people in general*. Consequently, the reference is generic, not associated with the discourse topic or the matrix subject. This indicates that the real-world "victim" is not encoded linguistically, but it is determined entirely on pragmatic grounds. Therefore, we can say that *się* behaves here exactly like the indefinite, implicit *pro*, whose referential possibilities are, according to Rizzi (1986: 510-512), arbitrary. The object itself is omitted and the reference is conveyed by the overt reflexive *się*, which refers to something that qualifies as a typical object of the verb – the property recognized as important for licensing object deletion (it cannot be *plants* or *cars*, for instance). All in all, it seems that we can list the reflexive variant of the verb *bić* (i.e. *bić się*) as one participating in the Polish version of Levin's (1993: 33) verb class called Unspecified Object Alternation, which includes verbs that drop the objects that are typical of them. I hold that example (4) is also an instance of an object drop construction, since *się* does not refer to the subject of the sentence, but to the typical object of the verb:

- (4) Janek pakuje się.
 Janek_{NOM.} pack_{3SING.PRES.} REFL.
 'Jack is packing things (not *himself*, but things that belong to him – unspecified, typical object).'

Thus, the reflexive verbs can be analyzed in various ways, sometimes on a par with true null object constructions, where *się* – just as *pro* – refers to *one, us* or *people* (generic reference) and implies something that qualifies as a typical object of the verb (*On się bije* 'He fights' (other people)). In other cases *się* exhibits properties similar to those of overtly realized referential expressions or anaphora and for that reason we cannot refer to such instances as true object deletion constructions. Still in other cases we deal simply with lexically reflexive verbs which do not drop the object, *się* being just an integral and inseparable part of the verb (*opiekować się* 'take care of someone'/'nurse someone'). Summing up, we can divide reflexive verbs as follows:

I. Reflexive verbs licensing null objects (true null object constructions – UOA).

II. Lexically reflexive verbs:

- (a) not allowing object deletion, as *opiekować się* (the reflexive *się* is an integral part of these verbs and – just as the object occurring after it – can never be omitted; transitive verbs);
 (b) not allowing overt objects, as *spóźniać się* 'be late', *naburmuszyć się* 'pout, get moody' (intransitive verbs).

III. Reflexive verbs, whose reflexive has an antecedent in the same clause or sentence, and thus functions merely as an overtly realized reflexive pronoun or anaphora (intransitive uses of transitive verbs: *myć dziecko* vs. *myć się*).

To conclude, the reflexive verbs used in examples (3) and (4), contrary to those presented in (1) and (2), seem to allow true null objects, so they belong to the first type of reflexive verbs proposed before, being at the same time included in Unspecified Object Alternation (UOA) for Polish. The reflexive verbs shown in (1) and (2) belong instead to the second and third type respectively, resembling ordinary transitive verbs and their intransitive uses, respectively.

1.2. An example from Russian

My proposal seems to work for Russian as well, although there is some difference concerning the reflexive occurrence, i.e. the verbs that take a reflexive in Russian do not necessarily take it in Polish. Consider:

- (5) (Russ.) Sobaka kusaetsja. vs. (Pol.) Ten pies gryzie.
 dog_{NOM.} bite_{3SING.PRES.} REFL. this dog_{NOM.} bite_{3SING.PRES.}
 'The dog bites.' 'This dog bites.'

Polish equivalents of this particular type of examples do not involve the reflexive marker, but the meaning does not change. Both the Russian and Polish sentences in (5) imply the same generic/habitual interpretation, and in Russian, just as in Polish, the implicit object refers to people in general, and not to the dog. In a word, Russian *sja* does not have the antecedent in the sentence, referring to the typical object *people*, and thus, according to our hypothesis, we can treat it, just as *się* in (3), i.e. as a counterpart of *pro*. Thus, the verb *kusaet* can be probably included in the first class of reflexive verbs listed above, i.e. UOA for Russian. Compare:

- (6) ?Ten pies gryzie się.
 this dog_{NOM.} bite_{3SING.PRES.REFL.}
 'This dog bites himself.'

(6) has a syntactic structure identical to the Russian sentence in (5) but, despite this fact and contrary to its Russian equivalent, it is not an instance of object deletion. If we consider (6) grammatical at all, the only possible reading can be that the dog has fleas (and bites some parts of his own body in order to get rid of the unpleasant feeling of itching). Then, however, the antecedent of *się* (*pies* 'dog') is present in the sentence (*się* functioning as an overt reflexive pronoun), and thus the whole verb belongs in this case to the third group of reflexives.

1.3. More evidence for the existence of Polish UOA reflexive verbs

As we have seen in section 2.1., two reflexive verbs may also be included in our alternation, i.e. *bić się* and *pakować się*. The first of them (together with its non-reflexive variant) is not listed by Levin (1993: 33) among UOA for English. Yet, it is a member of the Polish alternation. The latter is the Polish reflexive variant of English *pack*, which, on the other hand, is included by Levin in UOA. Let us now take another pair of verbs included by Levin (1993: 33) among English UOA, i.e. 'play' and 'learn' and their Polish equivalents: *bawić się* and *uczyć się*, respectively. It may appear that some of their uses can also be listed among verbs participating in Unspecified Object Alternation for Polish. Consider example (7), and then compare it with (8):

- (7a) Joanna bawi się.
 Joanna_{NOM.} play_{3SING.PRES.REFL.}
 'Joanna is having a good time.'
- (7b) Joanna bawi się (zabawkami).
 Joanna_{NOM.} play_{3SING.PRES.REFL.} (toys_{INSTR.})
 'Joanna is playing (with toys).' (interpret.: 'Joanna is a child and likes to play.')

- (8) Joanna myje się mydłem.
 Joanna_{NOM.} wash_{3SING.PRES.REFL.} soap_{INSTR.}
 'Joanna is washing herself with soap.'

The verb *bawić się* presented in the sentence (7a) is a lexically reflexive verb that cannot take any object and that is why it is similar to intransitive verbs. The subject *Joanna* is not the antecedent for the clitic *się*, either. Therefore, this particular use of *bawić się* belongs to the second type of reflexive verbs (subtype 'b'), proposed in section 2.1. On the contrary, the sentence in example (7b) is similar to that in (8), although the reflexive *się* does not refer to the subject, and thus has no antecedent in the sentence. The clitic is here, instead, an inseparable part of the verb and stresses the activity itself (just as in any lexically reflexive verb). On the other hand, *bawić się*, being here a dyadic predicate, can drop the Instrumental object *zabawkami* (contrary to the verb *opiekować się* 'take care of'/'nurse', which cannot omit the Instrumental *kimś* 'somebody') and in this way is similar to the verb *bić się (kijem)* 'beat others (with a stick)'. For these reasons, we can conclude that *bawić się* behaves here exactly as an UOA verb. Compare:

- (9a) Joanna uczy się (matematyki).
 Joanna_{NOM.} learn_{3SING.PRES.REFL.} (mathematics_{GEN.})
 'Joanna is studying (mathematics).'
- (9b) Joanna uczy się.
 Joanna_{NOM.} learn_{3SING.PRES.REFL.}
 'Joanna is studying.'

Example (9a) displays an 'actual' present reading of the sentence with the use of the verb *uczyć się*, and the object can, but does not have to be, omitted. Consequently, it seems that we can classify this use of verb *uczyć się* in the first class of reflexive verbs listed above, i.e. UOA – the more so that *się* does not have an antecedent in the sentence, being an integral part of the verb. Example (9a) should be opposed to the sentence in (9b), which, on the other hand, possesses two generic readings: 'Joanna is a pupil' or 'Joanna is diligent'. However, these generic interpretations can be induced only if the object is not present, i.e. the object must not appear, just as in the case of intransitive verbs. On this account, I suggest that *uczyć się* belongs in this case to those lexically reflexive verbs that do not allow overt objects (type 'II b'). Therefore, it seems that there can exist two different uses of the same reflexive verb, i.e. intransitive use and null object use, and so we should treat them as semantically different, separate instances.

Concluding, to our list of simple verbs participating in Polish Unspecified Object Alternation we can also add the reflexives *bić się* and *pakować się*, as well as some uses of other reflexive verbs. These uses are, for instance, the 'actual' present use of the verb *uczyć się*, and that interpretation of the verb *bawić się* which refers to child-like behaviour.

2. Similarities and differences between *się* and *pro* in Polish

Now, focusing on reflexive verbs that belong to Unspecified Object Alternation for Polish, I would like to point out the syntactico-semantic similarities and differences between the reflexive clitic *się* and *pro* in Polish. First, let me outline briefly Rivero and Sheppard's (2003: 92-96, 102) hypothesis concerning the nature of *się* and check it for some of the examples discussed so far. Then, reconciling their view with mine, I will draw relevant conclusions regarding the empty category phenomenon.

2.1. Rivero and Sheppard's view

Rivero and Sheppard (2003: 92-96) refer to reflexive pronouns in Slavic languages as Nominative Indefinite Pronouns and Accusative Indefinite Pronouns. The first are found in Polish impersonal constructions with the clitic *się* and cannot co-occur with an overt Nominative NP, so the sentences containing them seem nominativeless, as in (10):

- (10) Tutaj się pracuje/pracowało sporo.
 here Refl. work_{3SING.PRES./PAST} much
 'Here people work/worked a lot.'

Rivero and Sheppard (2003: 93, 102) claim, however, that when the verb is transitive, it must appear with an overt NP in the Accusative bearing a Patient/Theme role, which is to indicate that the pattern is active and support the view that the reflexive clitic is Nominative (Nom). They provide Polish *czytać* as an example of such a transitive verb and hold that it must occur with an overt accusative NP in affirmative clauses, as in (11), and a genitive NP in negative clauses, as in (12):

- (11) Tę książkę czyta/czytało się z przyjemnością.
 this book_{ACC.} read_{3SING./NEU.PRES./PAST.REFL.} with pleasure
 'People read this book with pleasure.'
- (12) Tej książki nie czyta/czytało się z przyjemnością.
 this book_{GEN.} NOT_{NEG.} read_{3SING./NEU.PRES./PAST.REFL.} with pleasure
 'People do/did not read this book with pleasure.'

In what follows I would like to argue against this view. First of all, I suggest that *czytać* is not a transitive verb but instead it belongs to UOA, i.e. a separate class of verbs, neither transitive, nor intransitive. As has already been said earlier, the verbs belonging to this class allow object drop, since the deleted objects are typical of them. Therefore, the verb *czytać* does not need an overt Acc (or Gen) NP function-

ing as its object and, still, the sentences remain grammatical and the pattern is active. The object is, instead, an empty category that appears after the reflexive verb, as in (13):

- (13) Tutaj (nie_i) czyta/czytało się *e*-ACC/(GEN_i) z przyjemnością.
 here (NOT_{NEG.}) read_{3SING./NEU.PRES./PAST.REFL.} with pleasure
 'Here people (do/did not) read with pleasure.'

This empty category seems to be null object, although the verb is reflexive. It is because the information about the object is not conveyed by *się*, which – bearing an Agent role – refers to the subject of the sentence. The clitic *się* should be opposed to little *pro*, which refers to the typical object of the UOA verb and bears Patient/Theme role, as in (3). In other words, when *się* refers to object, bearing Patient/Theme role, small *pro* is conveyed by it and the object after the reflexive verb is redundant; on the other hand, when *się* refers to subject, it is just Nom Indefinite bearing an Agent role, and the object can, but does not have to, be overt. We can conclude that when Nom Indefinite, as Rivero and Sheppard (2003: 92) call it, occurs in the form of the reflexive clitic, the deletion of an object after this clitic is optional, as in (14):

- (14) Tutaj czyta się (książki) / nie czyta się (książek) z przyjemnością.
 here read_{3SING.PRES.REFL.} (books_{ACC.}) / NOT_{NEG.} read_{3SING.PRES.REFL.} (books_{GEN.}) with pleasure
 'Here people read books/do not read books with pleasure'.

However, when small *pro*, i.e. implicit object, is overtly realized by *się*, we must obviously drop the object after the reflexive *się* in order to avoid unnecessary repetition, as in (15):

- (15) On się bije.
 he_{NOM.} Refl. fight_{3SING.PRES.}
 'He fights'. (other people)
 vs.
 *On się bije innych.
 he_{NOM.} Refl. fight_{3SING.PRES.} others_{ACC.}
 'He fights others'.

Summing up, following Rivero and Sheppard (2003: 115-117), I assume that in (15) and (3) the clitic *się* can be called an overt counterpart of object small *pro*. This, however, raises an important question, namely whether we can refer to null object as *pro*. Since, as illustrated in (15), we cannot have *pro* in the place of *się* and object drop after the reflexive verb at the same time, it may be the case that zero object and *pro* must be one and the same thing.

Nevertheless, small *pro* and null object differ at least in one respect. Namely, while *pro* is claimed by many (see Rizzi 1986: 509-512, 517-518) to be human in nature, implying *one, us, me, them* or *people* as object (as in (3)), zero object or empty category *e* does not always have to correspond to humans or any sentient beings, as we have seen in (13), but simply replaces a typical object of the verb (*czytać książki* 'read books'). Therefore, again, we must not only extend the theory of *pro* to non-accusative objects, but also revise it, subtracting [+human] feature, and adding [+typical] feature, instead. What is more, it is now clear that zero object or *pro* is distinct from Nom Indefinite not only in reference: while the feature [+human] is not important as far as empty object is concerned, it is crucial for Nom, which always means people, and not things.

According to Rivero and Sheppard (2003: 95), *się* in (3) or (15) should function as Accusative Indefinite Pronoun. Rivero and Sheppard (2003: 115-117) claim that Acc Indefinites show the following properties:

- They must bear Accusative Case (hence, Acc Indefinites).
- "They resemble pronouns rather than anaphors". For instance, the gloss in (3) indicates that subject *on*, i.e. 'he', "does not bind an object and is not coindexed with clitic *się*". Rivero and Sheppard (2003: 116) hold that sentences like that in example (3) "do not describe reflexive actions, but actions involving two different sets of participants". On this account, they argue (Rivero and Sheppard 2003: 116) that the verbs of such sentences "are not reflexive-marked and their clitics cannot be reflexivizers", being rather defective pronouns, instead. Besides, they propose (Rivero and Sheppard 2003: 116) that "Acc Indefinites are objects of verbs that do not favour reflexive readings and facilitate pronominal readings because they often describe actions detrimental to the Agent". As examples of Polish verbs used with Acc Indefinites, they give *kopać* 'kick', *pchać* 'push', *bić* 'beat' or 'fight' and *drapać* 'scratch' (characteristic for child language). We can also add to this group *przezywać* 'to call somebody names', *przdrzeźniać* 'tease' and *wyśmiewać* 'make fun of somebody', but the list is, of course, much longer than that and the interpretation implies always 'other people' or the speaker, but not 'himself'.
- The third property is that "Acc Indefinites denote a human or sentient being" and lack gender and person.
- Another feature is indefiniteness.

What is more, Rivero and Sheppard (2003: 117) mention that, according to some previous work done on this subject, Accusative Indefinites can be perceived as "overt counterparts of object arbitrary little *pro*". Finally, they draw the conclusion that there are indefinite versions of pronouns for objects and these are Accusative Indefinites.

2.2. An exception to the rule

A reflexive verb such as *pakować się*, which has gone unnoticed in Rivero and Sheppard's (2003: 89-155) account, questions the theory of Acc Indefinites outlined above, although it belongs together with the verb *bić* or *bić się* to one class of verbs, i.e. the Polish equivalent of Levin's UOA, which is of main interest to us here. The clitic *się* in (4) *Janek pakuje się* shows some similarities with Acc Indefinite present in example (3): *On się bije*. The *się* in (4) fulfils four of the characteristics of Acc Indefinite listed by Rivero and Sheppard, i.e. it is in the Accusative Case, lacks gender and person, is not anaphoric and is indefinite. The difference is that the action is not detrimental to the Agent at all and the object is [-human]. The *się* in (4) must not be compared to the clitic in (10), for instance. It is [-human] and it does not refer to the subject, but to the object of the sentence, and therefore null object cannot occur after the verb, being already conveyed by the reflexive. That is why the sentence in (16), similarly to that in (15), is ungrammatical. Here the overt object (i.e. *rzeczy*) is redundant, too, being already implied by *się*:

- (16) *Janek pakuje się (swoje) rzeczy.
 Janek_{NOM} pack_{3SING.PRES.REFL} (his_{POSS}) things_{ACC}.
 'Jack is packing (his) things.'

3. Conclusions

All in all, to our list of simple verbs participating in Polish Unspecified Object Alternation we can also add the reflexives *bić się* and *pakować się*, as well as some uses of other reflexive verbs, such as the 'actual' present use of the verb *uczyć się* and *bawić się* meaning child-like conduct. The verb *pakować się* is even more peculiar, because of the particular nature of its reflexive. Throughout this article I have been trying to prove that *się* in (4) *Janek pakuje się* is very much like an overt realization of *pro*, although it does not display the feature [+human], listed by Rizzi (1986: 517-518) and Rivero and Sheppard (2003: 95) as an important characteristic of *pro* or an object/Accusative indefinite pronoun. However, also Rivero and Sheppard's Acc Indefinite differs in other aspects from Rizzi's *pro*: namely, the verb taking it must describe the action that is detrimental to the Agent, being characteristic for child language at the same time. In a word, both Accusative Indefinite and *się* in (4) differ in some distinct aspects from little *pro*. Nonetheless, they resemble it in indefinite interpretation. Moreover, both the clitic in (3) and that in (4) can appear with verbs that are listed among UOA, functioning as typical, pragmatically understood objects of these verbs. Therefore, Acc Indefinite in (3) and *się* in (4), due to their similarities, should be labelled as just one type of reflexive that can be compared to the overt equivalent of an indefinite empty category or 'little' *pro*. Here, we

have to revise Rizzi's (1986: 509-512, 517-518) theory of null object or "generic pronoun" *pro*, which seems to be adopted by Rivero and Sheppard for Acc Indefinites or "generic reflexives" (2003: 95, 115-117). I propose to extend the indefinite reading of zero objects or indefinite object pronouns from sentient beings to inanimate things understood as typical of a particular UOA verb, thus replacing the feature [+human] with the feature [+typical], which has not been mentioned by the linguists cited above. Moreover, I change somewhat Rivero and Sheppard's (2003: 115-117) view of Accusative Indefinite, already characterized as an overt counterpart of *pro*, and accordingly of *pro* itself as well, by ignoring both the detrimental reading of the sentence and child language as potential licensers of *pro* in the position of a reflexive clitic in Polish. Since usually *pro* refers to 'other people' or 'things', and its reference cannot be recovered from the sentence, being indefinite and generic in reading, I regard the features [+plural], [+indefinite] and [+generic] as influential with respect to the null object phenomenon or *pro*, a view compatible with that of Rizzi (1986: 517). Summing up, little *pro* seems to be a null object indefinite, displaying five characteristics: [+plural, +indefinite/unspecified, +generic, +typical, -anaphoric].

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