Topics in the syntax of nonagreeing predicates in Slavic

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates the comparative syntax of predicates lacking subject-predicate agreement. Primary data are drawn from Russian, North Russian dialects, Ukrainian, Polish, and Lithuanian. The central claim of this work is that the licensing operations that canonically refer to a subject position, such as the checking of nominative case, subject-predicate agreement, and the subject-positional constraint known as the Extended Projection Principle (EPP), may apply independently and target more than one constituent. In this way, nonagreeing predicates instantiate the minimalist claim (Chomsky 1995a, b) that the notion of subjecthood can be reduced to the checking requirements themselves, which are, by hypothesis, the syntactic primitives that drive derivations. An empirical advantage of this type of approach is that it allows for a principled analysis of two nonagreeing predicate types that have been the source of much controversy: (i) predicates in which the constituent satisfying the EPP is non-nominative; and (ii) predicates in which the presence of a nominative argument does not induce agreement or EPP-effects. The result is that the EPP can be teased apart from the lexical semantics of predicates as an independent syntactic property of the clause.

A surprising finding of this study is the wide range of crosslinguistic variation that is associated, at least superficially, with the same nonagreeing (passive-participial) morpheme. In particular, the nonagreeing passive-participial predicate in Polish emerges as active and personal, with a fully-thematic (pro-arb) external argument. In contrast, the corresponding construction in Ukrainian obligatorily contains a non-thematic subject and is shown to pattern with canonical passives. Though both the Polish and Ukrainian constructions occur with accusative objects, in the case of the Ukrainian passive, a
derived unaccusative, this is exceptional from the point of view of Burzio’s Generalization. The Ukrainian facts, together with evidence from accusative-case-assigning unaccusatives in standard Russian, suggest a general link between nonagreement and the class of “accusative unaccusatives.”

In North Russian and Lithuanain, it is argued that the same nonagreeing morphology is responsible for an incipient ergative construction, in which a fully-thematic, oblique subject patterns with a nominative object. The formal licensing of nominative objects is shown to present a serious challenge to current checking-theory.
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