Active Transitive Impersonals and the typology of Voice

In this talk, we examine Active Transitive Impersonals (ATIs, the term due to Schlund 2020, also referred to as Adversity Impersonals by Babby 1994, a.o.). ATIs are impersonal active voice constructions: they lack an overt nominative subject, the (transitive) causative verb is in the third person singular neuter form and the verb's complement is in the accusative case, as shown in (1):

(1)   Całą   dziurę   zsypało   odłamkami.

        entire hole.ACC   covered.IMP   shrapnel.PL.INST

Focusing on Polish ATIs, we address the following issues: (i) the causative meaning of ATIs, (ii) the nature of instrumental DPs (see (1) above), (iii) the presence of a syntactically projected external argument in ATIs, (iv) the source of accusative case marking on the complement (cf. (1) above), and (v) the validity of Burzio's Generalisation (BG).

The main claim that we make here based on (i) anaphor binding, (ii) availability of unaccusative verbs, and (iii) control into adjunct clauses (Landau 2010, Legate et al. to appear), is that Polish ATIs are derived with a non-agentive active causative Voice head. As instrumental DPs in ATIs should be treated as theme arguments co-occurring with locative objects marked for accusative (Rappaport Hovav 2018), and not as causer arguments in Polish (unlike in Russian), we suggest here that Polish ATIs contain an active Voice head that introduces the causer theta role, but does not project it to the syntax. We refer to the Voice head in causative structures lacking an agent such as ATIs as Voice$_{C(AUSE)-E}$. Voice$_{C-E}$ introduces a variable for an eventuality that is the cause of a causing v(V)P event (Martin 2020). Following Šereikaité (2020a, b), we further suggest that the variable for the external argument of Voice$_{C-E}$ is existentially bound in the Lexicon and not in the syntax, blocking the saturation of the causer theta role by an oblique causer. Voice$_{C-E}$ in Polish ATIs is associated with a kind of primitive accusative case feature, i.e. a feature that is combined with a particular Voice type (Šereikaité 2020a, b), which a thematic Voice head can assign to the verb's complement in the absence of a syntactically projected external argument, contra BG. Unlike in Lithuanian Active Existentials, argued to be derived with a Voice head whose external argument bound in the Lexicon is an initiator, i.e. an agent or an inanimate causer (Šereikaité's 2020a, b), the thematic argument of the Voice head deriving Polish ATIs cannot be human, and hence it cannot be an agent. This shows that active Voice is not limited to introducing an agent (cf. also Martin 2020), contra Lavine and Babby (2019).

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