

Zero anaphora vs. zero person marking in Slavic: A chicken/egg dilemma?

Andrej A. Kibrik

Institute of Linguistics, Russian Academy of Sciences
B. Kislovskij per. 1/12, Moscow 103009 Russia
kibrik@comtv.ru

Abstract

This paper draws attention to the patterns of discourse anaphora in the Slavic languages. Russian, the best known among these languages, has the anaphoric system that is quite close to English or German: very restricted use of zero anaphora, unrestricted use of pronominal anaphora, and the absence of pronominal clitics. However, this system, shared also by other East Slavic languages, is a relatively recent innovation in Slavic, as demonstrated by the data of old Slavic languages and modern languages of the West and South branches. The historical rise of the modern Russian system is discussed. The main cause responsible for the historical change in East Slavic is the loss of subject person marking in the verb that happened in late Old Russian period in the perfect/past tense clauses. This loss entailed the expansion of subject pronouns that later on spread onto otherwise tensed clauses as well. This development is in concordance with the loss of clitics in East Slavic: both processes contributed to the decrease of head marking and increase of dependent marking in East Slavic.

1. Introduction

Despite the significant progress in typological knowledge of anaphora in the recent years, the vast majority of information we possess about anaphora comes from the Germanic and Romance languages. In this paper, I would like to draw attention to the third major group of European languages, namely Slavic, and review the patterns of discourse anaphora in Slavic, especially the use of zero anaphora vs. pronoun in the subject position.

2. Subject zero anaphora in Slavic

Among the Slavic languages, the most widely known language is Russian. The Russian system of referential devices is characterized by the prevalence of personal, including anaphoric, pronouns, very limited usage of zero anaphora, and the lack of pronominal clitics. The Russian system is thus similar to that of English or German. These

properties are largely shared by other modern East Slavic languages: Ukrainian and Belorussian. However, the major languages of the West and South branches of the Slavic groups, such as Polish, Czech, Slovak, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Serbo-Croatian and Slovenian, are very different in this respect and resemble the “Southern Romance” (Spanish, Italian) pattern: they normally employ zero anaphora in the subject position and abundantly use direct and indirect object clitics. The data in Table 1 demonstrates the difference between Russian (East Slavic) and Polish (West Slavic) in the dominant patterns of subject reference. (Parallel texts, excerpted from Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale “The tinder box”, were taken from Wordtheque, the internet site of multilingual literature.

Russian	Polish	English
“Эх, как бы на нее поглядеть”, – думал soldat <...>	“Chciałbym ją zobaczyć” – pomyślał żołnierz <...>	"I should like very much to see her," thought the soldier <...>
Жил on теper' куда как весело:	Tymczasem więc Ø pędził wesołe życie,	However, he passed a very pleasant time;
Ø xodil v teatry,	Ø chadzał do teatru,	Ø went to the theatre,
Ø vyezżał na progulki v korolevskij sad	Ø zwiedzał ogród królewski,	Ø drove in the king's garden,
i Ø mnogo deneg razdaval bednjakam,	a biednym Ø dawał zawsze dużo pieniędzy,	and Ø gave a great deal of money to the poor,
i Ø xorosho delal!	co było bardzo ładnie z jego strony:	which was very good of him;
Ved' on po sebe znal, kakovo sidet' bez groša v karmane.	Ø pamiętał bowiem z dawnych czasów, jak to niedobrze być bez grosza!	he remembered what it had been in olden times to be without a shilling.
Nu, a teper' on byl bogat,	Teraz Ø był bogaty,	Now he was rich,
Ø razodet v pux i prax <...>	Ø miał piękne ubrania, <...>	Ø had fine clothes <...>

Table 1. Comparison of the patterns of subject reference in Russian, Polish, and English

All subjects referring to “the soldier” are boldfaced in the excerpts. The syntactic occurrences of the zero anaphor are indicated with the symbol \emptyset , and the discourse-based ones with \emptyset . Apparently, the syntactic occurrences, taking place in coordinate structures, are parallel in all three languages, while the discourse-based zeroes occur only in Polish and consistently correspond to

3rd person pronouns in Russian (*on* ‘he’) and in English. Russian and Polish are grammatically quite similar, but there is a crucial difference that is clearly related to the difference in the patterning of subject reference: Russian past tense forms, such as *znał* ‘knew’ in the third last line, are not specified for person and can equally refer to 1st, 2nd, or 3rd person. (They are, however, specified for

number and gender – masculine singular in this case.) Thus the Russian past tense verbs do not provide a clue for subject person, which is, quite naturally, marked by the personal subject pronouns. In contrast, the Polish past tense verb *pamiętał* ‘he remembered’ is specified for person (as well as number and gender): it unequivocally indicates that its subject must be 3rd person, since other persons would require extra inflectional markers. Thus in Polish the subject person is indicated within the verb form, and personal subject pronouns are missing.

As some authors have pointed out (e.g. Miller and Weinert, 1998: 212ff.), Russian is somewhat more inclined to use subject zero anaphora than English. However, as a very typical example in Table 1 illustrates, on a scale between the unrestricted use of subject zeroes as in Polish, and very restricted subject zero as in English, Russian is much closer to the English end. The quite strict discourse principles regulating the relatively rare use of subject zeroes in Russian are not yet sufficiently studied. These principles are also sensitive to differences between spoken and written modes and discourse genre differences.

3. Person marking in the history of East Slavic: expansion of subject pronouns and the loss of copula

The Polish system zero anaphoric subject + person-marked verb is typical of Slavic in general. It has preserved, with minor changes, the original Slavic system that is documented in the oldest written Slavic languages: Old Church Slavonic (South Slavic) and Old Russian (East Slavic). Old Russian possessed the analytic perfect tense, the prototype of the Russian and Polish past tense, for example:

- (1) \emptyset *jestь* *osnova-l-ъ* *cerkovь*
 Cop.Pres.3.Sg found-Partic-m.Sg church
 ‘He (has) founded a church’
 [Laurentian chronicle (1377): 139]

The analytic perfect consisted of the auxiliary, or copula, ‘be’ marked for subject person and number, plus the so-called *l*-participle marked for subject gender and number. In Old Russian, especially during the late period of the 13th and 14th centuries, this kind of forms was gradually supplanted by shorter forms in which the copula, and therefore person marking, was removed from the clause. Later on, the bare *l*-participles took over the role of the past tense completely. Modern Russian has thus diverged from the original system: it lost verbal marking for person in the past tense (although preserved it in the present, see below). The modern Russian counterpart of (1), that became allowable already in late Old Russian, is:

- (2) *on osnova-l-ø* *cerkov’*
 he found-Past-m.Sg church
 ‘He (has) founded a church’

Along with the morphological change, subject pronouns came to be used, as (2) demonstrates. This process is not limited to the 3rd person but equally applies to all persons and numbers. Thus the change zero anaphoric subject + person-marked verb → pronominal subject + person-unmarked verb took place in the history of East Slavic. Zero anaphora was replaced by pronominal

anaphora. Using the familiar western European analogs, this can be called a transition from a Southern-Romance-type system (which is still kept in most Slavic languages) to a Germanic-type system (found e.g. in English and Scandinavian). This evolution is not restricted to perfect/past verbal clauses alone, but also applies to clauses with nominal/adjectival predicates; the meaning ‘he is free’ was expressed literally as \emptyset *is free* at an earlier stage, and as *He free* at a later stage.

It is a well- and long-known fact that the use of subject pronouns and the use of personal inflection on the verb in the world’s languages are two related phenomena. There is a cross-linguistic tendency to employ subject zero anaphora depending on whether the subject person is already coded in verb morphology. Person marking on the verb renders subject pronouns redundant. This principle is very functional and economical: subject pronouns are avoided whenever the subject person is marked anyway, and become necessary, when there is no person marking on the verb. Some people have attempted to formulate this tendency as a universal rule (this is what the generative “null subject parameter” is about). Formulated in such a way, it is clearly untenable, in particular because there are languages that pay no attention to person marking at all, e.g. Japanese, and there are languages that redundantly mark it twice, e.g. German (for a discussion see Huang, 2000: 50–77). But the case of Slavic clearly indicates that the tendency is real. In Proto-Slavic, in early Old Russian, and in modern West and South Slavic, whenever there is some marking of person on the verb, the subject pronoun is missing. Now, person marking on the verb underwent decay only in East Slavic, and the unlimited use of subject pronouns spread only in East Slavic; these two changes cannot be unrelated. Moreover, both of them occurred historically approximately at the same time: in late Old Russian.

4. What caused what?

Now, the question of **what is the cause and what is the effect** is relevant. The view commonly expressed by Slavicists (Ivanov, 1982:100ff., Zaliznjak, 2004: 172) is: the subject pronouns expanded beyond their original limited usage (namely, the contexts of emphasis or contrast), which caused the gradual decay of the *be*-copulas with their verb-hosted person marking. At least two other options are open: (a) both processes were inherently concordant, that is, we face a chicken/egg dilemma here; (b) the loss of person marking on the verb entailed the expansion of subject pronouns. I believe there are several pieces of evidence showing that the latter view is correct. There are 4 logical possibilities of where subject person can be marked, demonstrated in Table 2 below.

Apparently, the transition from system ❶ to system ❹ cannot happen in a flash (and this is another reason why the “parameter setting” ideology is inept). This development could have proceeded diachronically either via stage ❷, or via stage ❸, or by both routes simultaneously. The extant Old Russian discourses point to the evolution via stage ❷.

First, the perfect tense clauses without the copula appear in the documents much earlier than expansion of subject pronouns takes place. Second, in the documents of the 13th and 14th centuries there are many occurrences of

types ❶ and ❹, illustrated in examples (1) and (2), respectively. In addition, there is a significant minority of occurrences displaying type ❷ (Ivanov, 1982: 105), for instance:

- (3) *∅ narek[-l]-v ju dščerъju sobě*
 name-Partic-m.Sg her as.daughter to.self
 ‘He named her the daughter of himself’
 [Laurentian chronicle (1377): 34]

Clearly, this kind of structure is underspecified for person: the subject person can be identified only from a wider discourse context, as in the case of Japanese-style zero anaphora.

Person marking in subject NPs	Person marking on the verb	
	+	-
-	The common ❶ Slavic system	❷
+	❸	❹ The modern Russian system

Table 2. Potential routes of development from the common Slavic to the modern Russian system

In contrast to examples of this kind, there are almost no examples belonging to type ❸. Apparently, what happened in the history of Old Russian, still at the stage of the unity of the East Slavic linguistic continuum, is that at first the copulas started getting eliminated, and when this trend was already firmly in place the language summoned personal pronouns to mark the subject person.

The final piece of evidence demonstrating that the loss of the copula entailed the subject pronoun expansion comes from a comparison of clauses with different tenses. The unrestricted use of subject pronouns originated in the perfect/past tense clauses where person marking on the verb was in decay. At the same period of time in which subject pronouns were already widely used in the perfect/past tense clauses, they remained predictably unused in the present tense clauses that did have (synthetic) person marking on the verb (see Ivanov, 1982: 55-67), e.g.:

- (4) *∅ oružъje jeml-etъ*
 weapons take-Pres.3.Sg
 ‘He takes the weapons’
 [Laurentian chronicle (1377): 91 back]

Later on, the unrestricted use of subject pronouns generalized to the present tense clauses in all East Slavic languages. The neutral counterpart of (4) in modern Russian is (5); this structure requires double marking of subject person in the clause:

- (5) *on ber-ët oružie*
 he take-Pres.3.Sg weapons
 ‘He takes the weapons’

Therefore, the patterning of person marking in modern East Slavic is only partly functional and economical: every standard present tense clause contains double marking of subject person (similarly to German, where this happens in all tenses).

5. Parallel development in western West Slavic

It is interesting to note that some westernmost West Slavic languages – Sorbian and especially Kaszubian –

demonstrate a development that is parallel to East Slavic: unlike their immediate neighbor Polish, they do not always require person marking in the past tense and, in concordance with that, have developed a wider use of subject pronouns (Stone, 1993a, Sergej Skorwid, p.c. on Sorbian, Stone, 1993b, Dulichenko, in press on Kaszubian). Dulichenko (in press) emphasizes that in Kaszubian the perfect clauses without copula that mark person exclusively on the subject pronouns have an unrestricted range of uses. In the case of Sorbian and Kaszubian, this development is usually attributed to a massive influence from German (Stone, 1993a: 668). This explanation apparently is not appropriate in case of East Slavic.

6. Slavic clitics and head/dependent marking

The process of changing person marking in East Slavic can be understood as a drift from head marking to dependent marking clause structure (a typology of languages proposed in Nichols, 1986). Subject person used to be marked exclusively on the verb (the head), and it still is in West and South Slavic. But in East Slavic it is primarily marked on the subject NPs (the dependents). Interestingly, this process is observed not only with subject person, but with the category of person in general. Old Slavic languages and modern West and especially South Slavic languages make an abundant use of direct and indirect object pronominal clitics. Thus anaphora in non-subject positions is primarily performed by clitics, cf. Bulgarian (South Slavic, from Franks, 1998: 49):

- (6) *Ti si mu gi pokazva-l-a*
 you Cop.Pres.2.Sg him(Dat) them(Acc)
 show-Partic-f.Sg
 ‘You (feminine) have shown them to him’

Pronominal clitics were common at the Proto-Slavic stage, as is documented by Old Church Slavonic and Old Russian texts. West and especially South Slavic languages, pretty much in the Romance fashion, have expanded the use of clitics and developed a highly head-marking, nearly polysynthetic pronominal structure. In

contrast, East Slavic has taken a different route. During the Old Russian period, East Slavic completely lost the pronominal clitics and replaced them with phonetically free object pronouns (in all persons), thus developing a consistently dependent-marking pattern of clause structure. (It seems that there are some remnants of the system of clitics in some varieties of Ukrainian.) Thus the different evolution of object person marking in East Slavic and the rest of the Slavic languages is perfectly coordinated with the evolution of subject person marking. In both domains the evolution headed towards more consistent dependent marking in East Slavic and more consistent head marking in West and South Slavic.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I discuss the anaphoric patterns of the Slavic languages. Russian, the most widely known Slavic language is shown to be quite unusual among its close relatives in terms of anaphoric patterns. Moreover, the modern Russian pattern of employing independent pronouns rather than zero anaphora or pronominal clitics is demonstrated to be an innovation originating in late Old Russian.

I argue that the patterns of discourse anaphora are closely interwoven with the language's fundamental morphosyntactic properties. First, in the history of East Slavic the expansion of subject pronouns was triggered by the prior process of losing the copula in the perfect/past tense. Second, the divergent evolution of subject person marking in East and West/South Slavic is in concordance with the materially different evolution of object person marking in these two clusters of Slavic languages.

Abbreviations in glosses

Acc – Accusative
 Cop – copula
 Dat – Dative
 f - feminine
 m – masculine
 Partic – participle
 Pres – present
 Sg – singular

Acknowledgements

Research underlying this article has been supported by research grant #03-06-80241 from the Russian Foundation for Basic Research and by the grant “Problems of theory, typology, and comparative study of Slavic languages” from the Russian Academy of Sciences, Department of History and Philology.

I would like to express my gratitude to the colleagues who provided useful comments: Anna A. Pichkhadze, Sergej S. Skorwid and Andrej A. Zaliznjak. I alone am responsible for the interpretation of their input.

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