Semantically Unifying the Slavic Reflexive Particle

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Abstract

The modern Slavic reflexive, descended from the short-form, accusative common Slavic anaphor *sę,* has had much research devoted to it. It has come to be used not only for reflexive constructions, which would be expected as a logical extension to anaphora, but also for making passives and the middle voice. This seemingly wide range of application has made it hard to locate any one commonality to such reflexive constructions. While many syntactically focused systems have attempted to do so to varying degrees of success, I assert that a semantically driven approach, conducted within the framework of semantic formalism as laid out by Coppock and Champollion (2022), built off of Heim and Kratzer's (1998) earlier formalism, can concisely and intuitively identify the common thread which unifies all uses of this *sę* particle. The *sę* particle has been grammaticalized across Slavic languages as a valency-reducing functional morpheme that always reduces the valency of a verbal function by one argument; this is ultimately accomplished via a replacement function. This valency reduction enables 3 possible interpretations (i.e., 3 different replacement functions) and any time *sę* is used in modern Slavic, the role it carries out can be said to be either: reflexive, passive, or middle. The reflexive meaning is rendered by replacing the variable denoting the theme (direct object) of a relation with that denoting the agent, shown in formal notation in (1) with an example in (1.1). The passive is rendered via the existential quantification of the agent (subject) which is denoted by (2) with an example in (2.1), showing both the definite and indefinite readings. One added strength of this analytical system is the ability to more concretely define "middle voice," as this term is nebulous and hard to define within the current literature. I propose that the term "middle voice" be confined to instances wherein the theme of a relation has been existentially quantified, as denoted by (3) and exemplified by example (3.1). Within this system, many instances that are typically thought of as 'middle voice' are actually interpreted as passive or perhaps reflexive, for example anticausatives, which group with the passives and is depicted in (4). This semantically driven system enables us to understand passives and middles in a cognitively intuitive way, yet its possible application does not end with Slavic languages, as other language families, such as Romance, have very similar constructions which could perhaps also lend themselves to the adoption of this system for analysis.

1. **Reflexive-sę: [λR.λx.R(x,x)]**

    1.1. Jan goli się. (Pol)

        Jan shaves/is shaving.

        Jan = j

        Shave(j, j)

2. **Passive-sę: [λR.λy.∃x.R(x,y)]**

    2.1. Książka się czyta. (Pol)

        The/A book is read/being read.

        (Indef.) ∃x.∃y.Book(y) ^ Read(x,y)

        (Def.)   ∃x.Read(x, ιy.Book(y))

3. **Middle-sę: [λR.λx.∃y.R(x,y)]**

    3.1. Jan buduje się. (Pol)

        Jan is building [something] [for himself].

        Jan = j

        ∃y.Build(j, y)

4. **Dzerkalo rozbilosja. (Ukr)**
    The/a mirror broke.

    ∃y.∃x.[Mirror(y)^Break(x,y)]

    ∃x.Break(x,ιy.Mirror(y))

Citations

Coppock, Elizabeth & Lucas Champollion. 2022. Invitation to Formal Semantics. Under
      revision.

Heim, Irene & Angelika Kratzer. 1998. Semantics in generative grammar. Oxford: Blackwell.