DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE ANALYSIS OF THE IMPERSONAL SENTENCES IN ENGLISH

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Abstract. The article aims at analysing the functional potential of the impersonal sentence structures in fiction, assuming that the type of the sentence structure under study objectivises a certain cognitive substratum. Having the Cognitive Grammar theory developed by R.W. Langacker as the theoretical assumptions' basis, as well as considering research into the cognitive nature of the impersonal structure subject, the article aims at detecting the constituent of the canonical event model which is profiled by the impersonal structure subject. It follows from the research undertaken that the specific function of the impersonal sentence structure is coding of the setting. Here lies the principal distinction of the structures under study from the canonical ones. The capacity of the impersonal structure to code the setting stipulates one of its discursive properties described in the article. Besides, the setting parameters relevant for it to take part of a participant (trajector) in the event model are dwelt upon.

Keywords: impersonal sentence, canonical event model, impersonality, cognitive substratum, profile-setting, figure-ground.

РАЗЛИЧНЫЕ ПОДХОДЫ К АНАЛИЗУ БЕЗЛИЧНЫХ ПРЕДЛОЖЕНИЙ В АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ

Аннотация. Целью статьи является анализ функционального потенциала безличных предложений в художественной литературе, предполагая, что тип изучаемой структуры предложения объективирует определенный когнитивный субстрат. Имея в качестве основы теоретических положений теорию когнитивной грамматики, разработанную Р. У. Лангакером, а также рассматривая исследования когнитивной природы субъекта безличной структуры, статья направлена на выявление составляющей канонической модели события, которая профилируется субъектом безличной структуры. Из проведенного исследования следует, что специфической функцией безличной структуры предложения является кодирование обстановки. В этом заключается принципиальное отличие изучаемых структур от канонических. Способность безличной структуры кодировать обстановку обуславливает одно из ее дискурсивных свойств, описанных в статье. Кроме того, рассматриваются параметры обстановки, значимые

для того, чтобы она могла выступать в качестве участника (трактора) в модели события.

Ключевые слова: *безличное предложение, каноническая модель событий, безличность, когнитивный субстрат, постановка профиля, фигура-фон.*

Introduction. The cognitive nature of grammar, its outstanding contribution to organizing and structuring the lexicon has been widely recognized by the researchers. Though the massive segment of recent grammar research focuses on the structural side of grammar (see the Generative Grammar approach), the principle assumption of the Cognitive Grammar approach leads to better understanding of the mechanisms of grammatical structures having the constitution they have in languages. From the cognitive perspective, the grammatical structures are deemed as meaningful constructing patterns which project (1) human perception of the world, on the one hand, and (2) cognitive processing of the perceived, on the other hand. Thus, we accept and follow the principal assumption of the cognitive grammar that all valid grammatical constructs have some kind of conceptual import" [26, P. 282], though the claimed above conceptual import projected in the grammatical entities could be described as highly abstract [28, P. 87]. Cognitive approach in grammar is a vast field nowadays which is united by the above-mentioned principle guideline that all the units of the language are meaningful, so it does not accept any purely structural and otherwise meaningless entities in natural languages, including sentence patterns. Notwithstanding the fact that the cognitive approach has been applied to grammatical entities of various description widely in recent years (an outline of different approaches towards grammar see in: [7]), syntax has rarely been in focus. Among presumably the most recent research into the field, we could mention N.N Boldyrev [8], A.V. Kravchenko [22], V. Kapatinski [21], L.A. Furs [12], [13], [14], S.Y. Rakhmankulova [9], [10], [11]; O.A. Berezina [2] and a few others.

The outline of some basic assumptions of R. Langacker's Cognitive Grammar

The key notion in R. Langacker's Cognitive Grammar is imagery, which is explained in terms of the speaker's ability of construing the event or situation alternatively at the mental representation level, which is manifested in diverse patterns of further grammatical coding [24].

Thus, it could be taken as the principle assumption that the cumulative semantics of a linguistic unit embraces not only the denotative meaning, but also its mental constructing pattern, while the grammar rules ought to be considered "constructional schemas" [28, R 91]. Lexicon and grammar are conventional imagery repositories of the respective languages, therefore if in one language a particular meaning is verbalized as cold, or as have cold, or as it is cold to me, it follows that these utterances differ semantically, while representing identical experience, as there is diverse imagery emerging in respectively diverse segmenting and coding of otherwise identical meaning

[25, P. 47]. Thus, the cognitive theories of grammar highlight the bilateral character of grammatical units, since variations in grammatical forms reflect various respective meanings, and the slightest syntactical transformation ought to bear a certain semantic, or pragmatic effect (see: [26, P. 53]).

Within the framework of R. Langacker's Cognitive Grammar, the notion of the focus of attention is put forward in describing the grammar structures meaning. According to his theory, attention is "<...> intrinsically associated with the intensity or energy level of cognitive processes, which translates experientially into greater prominence or salience. Out of the many ongoing cognitive processes that constitute the rich diversity of mental experience at a given time, some are of augmented intensity and stand out from the rest as the focus of attention" [25, P. 115]. The linguistic units correlate with the situations ("scenes") perceived through the mental representations in which the attention of the perceiver is focused dynamically on a definite segment of the "scene" - this process was described by R. Langacker as focal adjustment, the latter determining the speaker's choice of a particular sentence structure. Focusing attention in a particular aspect, and thereby structuring the perceived scene respectively, the speaker imposes a particular construct on the scene, or to be more precise -constructs it mentally (see: [18, P. 536]).

Thus, all the theories wherein the sentence structure is projected as a result of the prototypical sentence structure transformations generating all the diversity of the sentence structures are claimed void.

In cognitive grammar focal adjustment is revealed in tree aspects which render diversity of the surface structures: (1) selection, (2) perspective, and (3) abstraction [18, P. 536], among which selection is highly relevant for the impersonal sentence structure semantics studies.

Selection determines the segments of the perceived event, with various degrees of salience, which attract the attention, and is closely associated with the notion of conceptual domain. R. Langacker distinguishes among a number of basic conceptual domains: space, colour, temperature, pressure, etc. (see for details: [25], [18, P. 537]). In his theory, the emergence of a mental representation of a perceived event is preceded by selecting a particular conceptual domain and further "conceptually highlighting some aspect of a domain" [18, P. 538], which results in its profiling. Thus, profiling results from selection of a certain segment of the background which becomes a conceptual entity needed for adequate construal of a language unit [ibid.]. At this stage of the focal adjustment process, the mental representation of the perceived event is formed, wherein two interdependent segments become distinct - figure (profile) and ground (setting). The figure-ground dichotomy is fundamental for human perception, so it has been widely investigated within the framework of Gestalt psychology. The figure-ground dichotomy explicates the cognitive structure enhanced by the ability of humans to interpret sensory information by

segmenting the visual field. In Gestalt psychology, the figure-ground principle is considered one of the basic forms of perceptual organization, wherein a certain segment of the visual field becomes its focus (figure), while the rest of the visual field stands in the background (ground).

Moreover, this process of selecting the figure and focusing on it as standing against the ground takes place automatically and is obligatory within the perception process.

The cognitive substratum for the "impersonal it" semantics

Describing the sentence structure in general, R. Langacker developed the so-called canonical event model, with the assumption that any sentence reflects the cognitive image of the event it projects. It embraces the participants (TR and LM), the setting of the event, the viewer and the relation between the participants. There is a minimum of two participants [23]: Agent (AG, also treated as Trajector - TR) and Patience (PAT, also treated as Landmark - LM) which interact and thus engage in a relation. The Trajector is the source of the relation, while the Landmark is the object or target of the relation and undergoes some transformation as the result of its interaction with the Trajector. As has been stated before, the participants come into a relation, and thus constitute the relation profile (figure) enclosed within the setting (ground), the latter not being included within the profile. The position of the viewer is claimed beyond the profile. The model described above can not be accepted as the universal sentence structure pattern, which R. Langacker stated himself. He noted that the canonical event model described above can be applied as the conceptual basis for SVO type of the sentence structure exclusively. Besides, he mentioned the universally recognized fact that in natural languages there is a massive variety of sentence structure patterns reflecting their respective conceptual event models [23, P. 209-219]. Thus, the impersonal sentence structure definitely belongs to the repertoire of this vast area of event model constructs, as their existence in languages is universally recognized and their specific nature is commonly described across various languages as absence of the constituent which could be assigned with the Agent role.

Nevertheless, with few attempts at describing the impersonal sentence structure within the framework of cognitive linguistics, the "impersonal it" has been the focus of researchers' attention occasionally. Being overt and placed in the subject position in the sentence structure, the "impersonal it" ought to be reflecting an entity within the profile. The attempts at describing it show that the "impersonal it" correlates with the setting in Langacker's event model: «<...> it profiles an abstract setting» [24, P. 462]. As well as it is construed as the Trajector. The similar element of the impersonal sentence structure was investigated in German (see: [28, P. 102-122]) and in English (see: [1], [6]). This leads to the conclusion that the initial it in the impersonal sentence structure contributes really significantly towards the impersonal semantics in general, being semantically, structurally and functionally meaningful.

Besides, the fact that the "impersonal it" is not semantically empty, but is meaningful or referential, has been argued for in various studies (see: [15], [19], [20], [27]).

The impersonal sentence functional potential in fiction

This aspect of the conceptual import of the impersonal sentence, i.e. mental representation of the event general setting coded by the "impersonal it", determines one (among others) of the impersonal sentence structure functions in fiction - if the parameters described above for a sentence structure could be extrapolated on a wider context. The database analysed in the research has been compiled by means of the continuous sampling method from XIX-XXI cent, fiction of diverse genres (novels, poems, critical essays, etc.) to access a wide range of literary works. The samples embrace not only the impersonal sentences under description, but also their immediate functional context (about the importance of considering the contextual factors there is a wide reference base; for the impersonal sentence in particular, see: [5]). The total number of samples analyzed in this respect has amounted to 253 text fragments, among which the number of impersonal sentences used for the setting objectification at the initial stage is 23% of their occurrence in the texts (58 samples). The description "initial stage" is applied to the cases wherein an impersonal structure is detected at the piece beginning, a new chapter/part/paragraph opening, or the pragmatic perspective being shifted, a new viewer (perceiver, or character) being introduced, a new event being perceived by the character(s).

The nature of fiction makes it absolutely necessary for the author to create a certain "ecological niche" for the reader to be involved in the narration, i.e. a zone of all the possible interactions for the characters. This entails creating the base, or the "stage setting" profiled at the initial stage. Besides, at the beginning of a narration or a particular turn of the narration it is really important to advance another participant of the event model to the forefront - the viewer, since the event model is rooted in perception as it is generated within the perception process. Thus, one of the setting profiling techniques in fiction is introducing impersonal sentences in the initial text segments (the text/new chapter beginning, introduction of certain new parameters, characters, pragmatic perspective shift etc.):

1. (beginning of the novel) Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall, stood smoking a cheap cigarette on the back doorstep of Number Sixteen Hell Close. It was a cold afternoon in late summer. Occasionally she turned to watch her husband, Charles, the Prince of Wales, clattering the luncheon pots in the red washing-up bowl he'd bought on impulse that morning from the 'Everything A Pound'shop (Townsend 2007, P. 1).

In the text fragment above which opens the novel, the impersonal sentence It was a cold afternoon in late summer describes the parameters of the environment in which the reader finds the characters (participants).

Besides, the author introduces the participant that is bestowed with the function of the viewer (Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall). The immediate obviousness is made explicit lexically by the infinitive to watch, as well as morphologically by two participles I (smoking, clattering). Thus, in this text fragment, the author successively describes the constituents of the setting for the reader to obtain a solid starting point.

The following text fragment (2) contains an impersonal sentence (It was late afternoon) opening a new chapter where the setting changes and a new character (Roger) is introduced. So, the author introduces the parameters of a new environment and a new viewer by means of an impersonal sentence:

2. (new chapter beginning) It was late afternoon. Roger sat on one of the sofas in his office, opposite the man who more than any other was going to help him earn his million-quid bonus, and the man who was going to play the single biggest role in deciding whether or not he was paid it (Lanchester 2012, P. 23).

In the further extract (3) a new character is introduced (though it does not open a new structural fragment of the narration) - Jack Barker, leader of the Cromwell Party, Prime Minister and architect of the Exclusion Zones, thus a new setting is involved, which is highlighted with an impersonal sentence (It was ten thirty in the morning). The immediate obviousness is made explicit morphologically - with a participial phrase (listening to Big Ben striking the minutes and hours of his life away), describing the setting as physically perceived by the character introduced:

3. (new character introduction) Jack Barker, leader of the Cromwell Party, Prime Minister and architect of the Exclusion Zones, could not get out of bed. It was ten thirty in the morning and he had already missed three appointments. He lay under the duvet in his bedroom at Number Ten Downing Street, listening to Big Ben striking the minutes and hours of his life away (Townsend 2007, P. 14).

In all the above-described examples, the viewer is overt, while in certain contexts the viewer might be implicit in describing the setting:

4. (new chapter beginning) It was a Sunday afternoon, gay and brilliant after abundant rains, and the spirit of youth dwelt in it, though the season was now autumn (Foster 1990, P. 121).

As could be seen in the text fragment above, there is no explicit mention of the viewer, which indicates coincidence of the pragmatic factors "the narrator" and "the viewer".

It must be noted that, within the corpus analyzed, the most frequent meaning of the functional type described feature the temporal parameters of the setting (63% within the corpus).

The temporal parameters as the setting coded by means of the impersonal structure could be featured basically in two ways:

- time proper:

5. (beginning of the novel) It was the day after Doune Fair when my story commences (Scott 1993, P. 301).

- physical properties of a particular time of the day/season:

6. (new diary entry beginning) Apr. 15. It was a threatening misty morning - but mild (Wordsworth 1993, P. 293).

The latter instant could involve a wider context:

7. (new paragraph beginning) It was breakfast time, but the gas was alight, owing to the fog (Foster 1993, P. 1913).

In the extract, the description of the temporal parameter of the setting (breakfast time) is enriched by characterizing the illumination parameter (the gas was alight), as well as meteorological factor (owing to the fog).

Considering other semantic types of the impersonal sentence as means of verbalizing the setting for the further narration in fiction, it must be stated that their use in this respect is scarce.

The impersonal sentences proper with a verbal predicate (It was raining type) constitute only 3% of the corpus (for detailed classification of the impersonal sentence structures, see: [3], [4]).

The rest of the instances are shared among the periphery impersonal sentence patterns like in the following fragment containing a sentence with the anticipatory it:

8. (new chapter beginning) It was a heavy disappointment for Maggie that she was not allowed to go with her father in the gig when he went to fetch Tom home from the academy; but the morning was too wet, Mrs. Tulliver said, for a little girl to go out in her best bonnet (Elliot 1993, P. 1334).

Practically, the research demonstrates that the structure of the setting in the event model features time (rather than space) as predominandy conceptualized domain, which contradicts the traditional view on and widely-recognized assumption of the conceptual domains of comparative salience which claims that space is predominant in this respect. Apparently, it is the temporal factors that are conceptually salient in the relation profile developing process. The contradiction claimed above is eliminated if time and space are deemed as the converged time-space conceptual domain (as in philosophy — the fundamental time-space category is universally recognized). Linguistically, the setting is coded in the structures under study by means of the sentence initial it, which testifies to its meaningfulness.

Conclusion. The cognitive approach, for which there is nothing "empty" in the language, claims the import of the initial pronoun into the cumulative semantics of the impersonal sentence structure significant, which induces the conclusion that the impersonal sentence is not semantically subjectiess.

The subject of the impersonal sentence thus represents the perceptual field of the speaker (or, rather, the viewer) holistically, incorporating the latter unlike it is demonstrated in Langacker's event model with the viewer being extracted from the setting and placed beyond it. Thus, it can be concluded that the initial pronominal constituent of the impersonal sentence structure objectivises the mental representation of the event general setting, embracing the event perceived and its parameters integrally and co-ordinately. This presumably takes place within the process of perception and cognitive processing prior to the relation profile constituents becoming conceptually salient, i.e. before the profile with definite discrete participants has been formed.

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