

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF IMPERSONAL SENTENCES

JANINA GUT

Warsaw University

This paper is concerned with impersonal sentences; such sentences cause a lot of confusion as it is difficult to say precisely what their nature is and how they should be defined. Indeed, very few linguists use this term, but describe these and other sentences in various other terms, for example, in terms of subjectless sentences, generic pronouns, impersonal verbs, etc. What follows is in the first place an examination of these different approaches with the consideration of some of the objections to them. Then an attempt to find additional criteria will be undertaken.

The range of sentences recognized as impersonal varies from one linguist to another and different definitions even contradict one another. The same is true of the characteristics, number, and range of potential subgroups that can be differentiated within the whole class of impersonal sentences. Thus, Gołąb, Heinz and Polański (1968: 90) seem to identify an impersonal sentence with a subjectless one and describe it as:

A sentence the predicate of which is an impersonal verb or an impersonal form of a verb; for instance *Nad miastem świtało; Należało się pośpieszyć; Dyskutowano do późna w noc*. An identical function to that of impersonal verbs and impersonal forms of verbs can be fulfilled by expressions symbolizing states, and to a certain extent by infinitives, e.g., *Żal mi go było; Nie widać nikogo; Nie słychać niczego*. [translation mine¹].

¹ The original is:

Zdanie, w którym w funkcji orzeczenia został użyty czasownik bezosobowy lub bezosobowa forma czasownika, np. *Nad miastem świtało; Należało się pośpieszyć; Dyskutowano do późna w noc*. Identyczną funkcję jak czasownik bezosobowy wzgl. bezosobowe formy czasownika mogą pełnić pewne wyrażenia symbolizujące stany i w pewnym zakresie bezokoliczniki, np. *Żal mi go było; Nie widać nikogo; Nie słychać niczego*.

where sentences such as "Chodzi do gimnazjum (np. mój brat)" are not considered subjectless.

Further on (Gołąb, Heinz, and Polański 1968: 80), an impersonal verb is defined as one

functioning as a predicate and expressing tense, aspect, mood, etc., without indicating a definite person in the grammatical subject, as in Polish *świta, grzmi, trzeba*. In general Indo-European languages employ the third person sg. (neuter) for such cases, although it is also possible to use other forms, such as *Mówią, że zima będzie ostra*, and the like. In most cases impersonal verbs denote certain phenomena of nature the ontological subject of which cannot be specified, for example, *dnieje*, and such psychophysical states of the body that do not depend on our will, such as *Mdli mię*, as well as moral states, like *trzeba, należy*.² [translation mine²].

The objections to this description are two:

1. Both *Chodzi do gimnazjum* (np. *mój brat*) and *Mdli mię* have equal rights to be qualified as subjectless (or impersonal) as only the surface structures of these sentences have been taken into account.

2. Psychophysical states of the body which are independent of will cannot be employed as a criterion for they can be expressed both in subjectless sentences and in sentences which have subjects, cf. *Mdli mię* and *Rejent pobladnął*, where neither *I*, nor *Rejent* could help being sick or pale.

Szober (1953: 308) has used several different criteria to describe this kind of sentences:

Subjectless sentences are used:

- (1) With verbs denoting all kinds of phenomena of nature, such as: *chmurzy się, błyska się, grzmi, dżdży, mży, marznie, taje, świta, dnijeje, rozwidnia się, zmierzcha się, ciemni się*, and the like, e.g., *Od czasu do czasu błyskało. — Rozwidnia się coraz bardziej.*
- (2) With verbs denoting various states of mind or body: *boli, kłuje, pali, mdli, nudzi, swędzi*, e.g., *W oczach mu się śmiło.*
- (3) With impersonal expressions consisting of the auxiliary verb: *jest, było, będzie, staje się, robi się, czyni się*, and a noun or a prepositional phrase, infinitive or adverbial; the auxiliary *jest* usually being omitted, e.g., *Poloneza czas zacząć. — Nie do śmiechu było heroinie naszej. — W wielu miejscach małe widać łaki. — Było mi i smutno i miło.*

² *Bezosobowy czasownik* ... Czasownik użyty w funkcji predykatywnej (zob. Predykacja) z uwzględnieniem czasu ewent. aspektu, trybu itd., ale bez wyrażenia określonej osoby podmiotu gramatycznego, np. pol. *świta, grzmi, trzeba*. W językach typu ie. używa się tu w zasadzie 3 os. sg. (neutr.), ale możliwe są tu sekundarnie również inne formy, por. *Mówią, że zima będzie ostra* itp. Znaczeniowo czasowniki bezosobowe wyrażają najczęściej pewne zjawiska natury, których podmiotu ontologicznego nie da się sprycyzować, np. *dnijeje*, stany psychofizyczne naszego organizmu niezależne od naszej woli, np. *mdli mię*, oraz ogólne stany moralne, np. *trzeba, należy*.

- (4) With any verb, provided that no subject is expressed by means of a separate word or a personal ending, e.g., *Dziś nam szlachectwa przeczą*. [translation mine²].

In this analysis, however, criteria (1) and (2) belong to semantics, and (3) and (4) are surface structure descriptions. It is not surprising, therefore that *Nie do śmiechu było heroinie naszej* and *Było mi smutno i miło* enumerated under (3) in the above description can also serve as perfect examples for (2).

Furthermore (4) sounds contradictory, as Szober requires that one of the conditions for a sentence to be subjectless is that no personal ending be present in it, giving at the same time an example in which such an ending, namely *-ą*, is present.

Klemensiewicz (1968: 36) says that both personal and impersonal sentences should be distinguished within the class of subjectless sentences — the difference between them being that only for personal subjectless sentences is it possible to deduce what the missing subject is and name it with the help of a suitable noun or pronoun, whereas impersonal sentences give no such possibility. Thus, the following are said to be personal: *Czytaj! — Mylisz się. — [...] Powiadają. — Mówiono. — Uprasza się. — Będzie słycać muzykę. — Było widać Warszawę. [...] Na plewy starego wróbla nie złowisz*. These on the other hand he classifies as impersonal: *Zaczęło padać. — Przeszanie grzmieć. [...] Szarpnęło drzwiami. — [...] Ciągnie mnie na przechadzkę. — Zebrało się jej na płacz. — Zapragnęło mu się niecierpliwie napotkać i nareszcie ujrzeć to mityczne wojsko polskie. (St). [...] Jest późno. [...] Do miasta było daleko. [...] Można iść. (=mogę iść, możesz iść, itd.). — Trzeba (potrzeba) iść (=potrzebuję, potrzebujesz iść, itd.). — Powinno się iść (=powiniennem, powinieneś iść, itd.).*

Again it is evident that the above classification contradicts the principle according to which it has been made. Although the principle demands that

² Zdania bezpodmiotowe używane bywają w następujących wypadkach:

- 1) Przy czasownikach oznaczających najrozmaitsze zjawiska zachodzące w przyrodzie: *chmurzy się, błyska się, grzmi, dżdży, mży, marznie, taje, świta, dnijeje, rozwidnia się, zmierzcha się, ciemni się* itp. Np. *Od czasu do czasu błyskało. — Rozwidnia się coraz bardziej.*
- 2) Przy czasownikach oznaczających rozmaite stany duszy lub ciała: *boli, kłuje, pali, mdli, nudzi, swędzi*. Np. *W oczach mu się śmiło.*
- 3) Przy wyrażeniach nieosobowych składających się ze słowa posiłkowego: *jest, było, będzie, staje się, robi się, czyni się* i rzeczownika z przyimkiem lub bez, bezokolicznika lub przysłówka, przy czym każde słowo posiłkowe *jest* w czasie teraźniejszym bywa zazwyczaj opuszczane. Np. *Poloneza czas zacząć. — Nie do śmiechu było heroinie naszej. — W wielu miejscach małe widać łaki. — Było mi i smutno i miło.*
- 4) Przy każdym w ogóle czasowniku, jeżeli tylko nie oznaczamy wyraźnie podmiotu za pomocą oddzielnego wyrazu lub końcówki osobowej: Np. *Dziś nam szlachectwa przeczą.*

the group of impersonal sentences be such that there is no way of specifying or naming their subjects, and that the group of personal sentences offer such a possibility — neither: *Mówiono.* — *Uprasza się.* — *Będzie słycać muzykę.* — [...] *Na plewy starego wróbla nie zlowisz,* classified as personal, nor: *Można iść.* (=mogę iść, możesz iść, itd.). — *Trzeba (potrzeba) iść.* (=potrzebuję, potrzebujesz iść, itd.). — *Powinno się iść* (=powiniennem, powinienes iść, itd.), classified as impersonal make it possible to supply them with subjects. On the whole it seems a much better solution to recognize only *Czytaj!* and *Mylisz się,* as personal, since it is only with respect to these two sentences that one can really tell what the missing subject is.

Yet another approach contradicting those of Polański, Szober, and Klemensiewicz is represented by Wierzbicka (1966: 177 - 195), who maintains that there is no such thing as a subjectless sentence; for each sentence contains a slot to be filled by a subject, no matter whether this slot is actually filled or not (zero subject), and no matter how indefinite the subject may be.

Therefore, identifying impersonal sentences with subjectless ones on the basis of their surface structure seems wrong — it is not necessarily the surface structure subject of a sentence that contains the element of 'impersonality' or 'indefiniteness', as can be seen in the following examples:

- (1) *Nie wiadomo co robić.*
- (2) *One doesn't know what to do.*
- (3) *There is nothing to peg one's hopes on, anyway.*
- (4) *Apples are good for you.*
- (5) *Nawet nie pozwolisz człowiekowi odpocząć.*
- (6) *This system makes a man work.*
- (7) *"When someone's killed who's been in love with one, it makes it all so terribly poignant."* (Schibsbye 1965: 227)

It is evident that both (1) and (2) are impersonal although only (1) is a subjectless sentence. Similarly: when we compare the Polish *W taką pogodę spać się człowiekowi chce,* where *człowiekowi* is not the subject but the indirect object, with its English equivalent *One feels sleepy in weather like this* we can see that the English version does have a subject, a subject corresponding to the Polish dative functioning as an indirect object. This suggests that sentences like *W taką pogodę ...* and (1) - (7) are impersonal.

Sentences recognized as impersonal in one language are often expressed by means of other structures in another, the passive voice with indefinite or deleted agent being one of them. This also suggests that they are all impersonal, as they are different realizations of the same deep (semantic) structure:

- (8) *He's well known here.* = *Znają go tu dobrze.*

- (9) *Niczego nie stwierdzono.* = *Nothing has been found.* = *On n'a rien trouvé.*
- (10) "It was not until the spring of 1919 that Dibich was detailed for dispatch on a troop train... Tol'ko vesnoj 1919 goda Dibiča naznačili k otpravke s ešelonom..." (Borras and Christian 1961: 180) = *Ce n'est qu'au printemps 1919 qu'on designa Dibitch pour partir avec le train...* [translation mine].
- (11) "The boats were moved and steered with short handled paddles that had broad leaf-shaped blades". (Tolkien 1966a: 388) = *Łódki poruszało się i sterowało za pomocą krótkich wiosel mających kształt liścia.* = *On déplaça les bateaux en les dirigeant à l'aide de petites rames qui avaient la forme de feuilles* [translation mine].
- (12) "Istynbula bu yoldan gil-il-ir ('Istanbul-to this route-by is gone', i.e. 'This is the route for Istanbul' or 'One takes this road for Istanbul'..." (Lyons 1969: 379).
- (13) "Es wird heute abend getanzt ('It will be this evening danced' i.e., 'There will be dancing this evening')" (Lyons 1969: 379).

Sentences (12) and (13) show that it is possible to talk of impersonal use of the passive even with 'intransitive' verbs.

Furthermore, sentences like:

- (14) *They promise you a lot in those adverts.*
- (15) *Look at my income tax. They give you money with one hand and take it away with the other.*
- (16) "Stańmy trochę dalej, bo inaczej to zادهczą człowieka" (conversation in a bus).

show that more than one NP (when these are not conjoined) can carry the element of indefiniteness in a sentence, and consequently at least one of these NP's has to be excluded from the position of subject.

On these grounds it seems best to reject the idea that the absence of a surface structure subject is a necessary and sufficient condition for a sentence to be impersonal, and to assume that the lack of subject can only be one of the factors in formulating the characteristics of impersonal sentences. It also seems plausible to follow Fillmore (1968) in his assumptions that:

- (1) "The sentence in its basic structure consists of a verb and one or more noun phrases, each associated with the verb in a particular case relationship". (Fillmore, 21).
- (2) It is useful to differentiate between a sentence and a proposition, i.e., "a tenseless set of relationships involving verbs and nouns (and embedded sentences if there are any) separated from what might be called the modality constituent" (Fillmore, 23), i.e., negation, tense, mood, aspect.
- (3) The surface structure subject is the result of topicalization, i.e. rule governed choosing and making one of the deep structure NP's the topic of the sentence (cf. Fillmore, 56).

We could try to find out what impersonal sentences are by examining the nature of personal pronouns. From what is said in grammar books one could associate impersonal sentences with those in which a 'generic' pronoun has been used. Thus Schibsbye (1965) says that:

- (1) the pronoun *we* is sometimes used to denote "the speaker+everyone else: *we live to learn / we don't like to be contradicted*; this generic value approaches that of *you, one, etc.*, used in the sense of 'people'..." (Schibsbye, 84).
- (2) "*You* is frequently used of the person(s) addressed+others, indeed, even the speaker may be included..." (Schibsbye, 184).
- (3) "*One* can be an indefinite personal pronoun signifying 'I and others'..." (Schibsbye, 276).
- (4) "*They* may also be used in reference to a vaguely indicated group of people: *In Japan they generally marry without love / They make fine knives in Sheffield*, or still more vaguely to mean 'people in general': *They say the government will resign*. Here it approaches the generic value of *we, you, etc.*, described above (6.1.7f) with the difference that *they* does not include the speaker or the persons addressed" (Schibsbye, 194).

However, the generic pronouns account only for a subclass of impersonal sentences, sentences like *It was five o'clock in the morning, It's going to be tough on the top of that mountain, Nie było widać nawet Palacu Kultury, Wszczęto dochodzenia*, being left out. For this reason they cannot be used as a criterion for the definition of the whole class of impersonal sentences.

It is possible to try to deduce what impersonal sentences are by finding out what the category of person means and testing how these sentences behave with respect to this category.

Langedoen (1969: 153) gives the following definition:

Person. The reference of an NP with respect to the speaker, or the writer and the one(s) addressed. If the reference of an NP includes the speaker or writer, the NP is said to be first person. If it includes the one(s) addressed, but not the speaker or writer, it is second person. If it includes neither speaker, or writer, nor the one(s) addressed it is third person.

The definition given by Lyons (1969: 276) is similar:

The category of person is clearly definable with reference to the notion of participant-roles: the 'first' person is used by the speaker to refer to himself as a subject of discourse; the 'second' person is used to refer to the hearer; and the 'third' person is used to refer to persons or things other than the speaker and hearer.

Both definitions explain 'person' in terms of reference of an NP to either the speaker (+I=*I, we*), the hearer (+II=*you*), or everybody and everything else (+III=*he, she, it, they*). Now one could try to determine which person is present in the following sentences:

- (17) *Thou shalt not worship any God but I.* +II
- (18) *They say the world is coming to an end.* +III

- (19) *Przynieśli mleko.* +III
- (20) *One wouldn't like a thing like that happen to one.* ?
- (21) *Za okupacji człowiek był bity na każdym kroku.* ?
- (22) *Tak się nie mówi.* ?
- (23) *Niczego nie widać w tych ciemnościach.* ?
- (24) *Podano do stołu.* ?
- (25) *Rozpadało się na dobre.* +III
- (26) *Odjęło mu mowę.* +III

For some of them it is possible to state which person they refer to, but the others seem to be indefinite with respect to person or form combinations of two or even three persons. The picture should become clearer if all possible combinations of persons are introduced as in Postal (1970: 222):

$$\left[\begin{array}{c} +III \\ +II \\ +I \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} +III \\ +II \\ -I \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} +III \\ -II \\ -I \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} +III \\ -II \\ +I \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} -III \\ -II \\ -I \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} -III \\ -II \\ +I \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} -III \\ +II \\ +I \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} -III \\ +II \\ -I \end{array} \right]$$

Thus, sentences (20), (21), (22), and (23) should be marked as (+I, +II, and +III) whereas (24) has the specification (+I, -II, +III). As can be seen from this the marking for different impersonal sentences varies.

What is lacking in the definition of impersonal sentences is a uniform criterion, one which would apply to the whole set of impersonal sentences and only to this set. What all impersonal sentences seem to share in common is that even in those cases in which it is possible to determine grammatical person, it is impossible to identify and name the referent(s) of one or more deep structure NP's because it is always unspecified, but the validity of this criterion has yet to be tested. In this article the following proposal is being put forward: to take the sentences which are commonly recognized as impersonal and see how they behave with respect to the criteria discussed above, namely:

- (1) Whether the deep structure NP recognized as indefinite always functions as the surface structure subject of the sentence.
- (2) Whether the NP in question is the agent.
- (3) Whether it is possible to indicate which grammatical person the NP refers to.
- (4) Whether the NP is generic or not.
- (5) Whether the referent(s) of this NP can be specified.

In Table I all five criteria will be analysed in the same order in which they have been introduced, i.e. columns 1 - 5 are respectively devoted to the notion of subject, agent, grammatical person, genericness, and reference as a criterion. Thus, the negative sign "-" in column 1 (=subject) means that it is another NP in the impersonal sentence and not its surface structure subject that is responsible for its impersonality. The positive sign "+" in column 1 means that

Table I

	1	2	3	4	5
1.	+	+	+III	-	-
2.	+	-	+III	-	-
3.	+	+	+III	-	-
4.	-	+	+III	-	-
5.	+	+	+III	-	-
6.	+	?	+III	-	-
7.	+	-	+III	-	-
8.	+	+	+III	-	-
9.	+	-	+III	-	-
10.	-	+	+I +II +III	+	-
11.	+	-	+I +II +III	+	-
12.	-	+	+I -II +III	-	-
13.	+	+	-I -II -III	?	-
14.	+	-	+III	-	-
15.	+	-	+III	-	-
16.	-	+	+I +II +III	+	-
17.	+	+	+I +II +III	+	-
18.	+	?	+I +II +IIIz	-	-
	+	-	+III	-	-
	+	-	+I -II +III	?	-

"It grew slowly dark indoors". (Tolkien 1960a: 78)

"It is nearly midnight". (Tolkien, 81)

"It is getting late..." (201)

"Robi się późno..." (Tolkien 1961: 247)

"It went on raining". (Tolkien 1966a: 214)

"Bombur was now so fat that he could not move himself from his couch to his chair at table, and it took six young dwarves to lift him". (241)

"So it has been for many lives of men". (258)

"It is a fair song in our woodland tongue; but this is how it runs in the western

speech, as *some* in Rivendell now sing it". (353)

"It's wonderfully quiet here". (376)

"The boats were moved and steered with short-handled paddles that had broad leaf-shaped blades". (388)

"I thought I heard some soft splashing; but you hear a lot of such queer sounds by

river at night". (399 - 400)

"It was decided that Aragorn and Legolas should at once go forward along the shore,

while the others remained by the boats". (406)

"None have ever done so yet". (410)

"You have spoken more than enough, Uglúk', snarred the evil voice.

"I wonder how *they* would like it in *Lugburz*. *They* might think that Uglúk's shoulders

need relieving of a swollen head". (Tolkien 1966b: 45)

"Yes', he said. 'I can manage it. *Lembas* does put heart into you". (61)

"I don't know, but it felt as if something that grew up in the ground — asleep, you

might say, [...] had suddenly woken up, and was considering you with the same

slow care it had given to its own inside for endless years". (65)

"He has now Isengard to fear as well as Minas Tirith. If Minas Tirith falls it will go

ill with Saruman". (101)

"A man may love you and yet not love *Warntongue* or his counsels," said Gandalf". (120)

	1	2	3	4	5
19.	-	-	+I -II +III	-	-
20.	+	+	+III	-	-
21.	-	-	+I +II +III	+	-
22.	-	-	+I +II +III	+	-
23.	+	-	+I +II +III	+	-
24.	-	-	+I +II +III	+	-
25.	+	+	+I +II +III	+	-
26.	-	+	+I +II +III	+	-
27.	-	+	+I +II +III	+	-
28.	-	+	+I +II +III	+	-

"Mercy, Lord! [...] Have pity on one worn out in your service". (124)

"Men said that in the far-off days of the glory of Gondor the sea-kings had built this

fortress with the hands of giants". (133)

Beer is good for a bloke.

W taką pogodę spać się *człowiekowi* chce.

In weather like this one feels sleepy.

Niczego tu nie *widać*.

This system makes a man work.

They promise you a lot in those adverts.

Niczego nie *stwierdzono*.

Nothing has been found.

the indefinite NP making a sentence impersonal is also its surface structure subject. The "+" sign under 2 indicates that the NP in question is an agent in contrast to experiencer, instrumental, locative, etc., where *I* is said to be experiencer in sentences like *I saw him*, whereas in sentences like *I looked at him* it is said to be an agent (cf. Fillmore 1968).

It is assumed that the best criterion will be the one that applies uniformly to all these sentences, i.e., it will not change its character (sign) throughout all the sentences.

From the analysis of sentences 1 - 28 it follows that criteria 1, 2, and 4 should be rejected as:

(1) Criterion 1, i.e., lack of surface structure subject, is too narrow; in fact the majority of impersonal sentences proved to have subjects (see sentences 1 - 3, 5 - 18, 20, 21, 23, 25, 26 and 28).

(2) Criterion 2, i.e., indefiniteness of the agent in a sentence, is not clear; in some cases it is difficult to say whether the 'impersonal' NP is an agent or not (sentences 6 and 17). It also is too narrow since not every sentence must have an agent (cf. sentences 2, 7, 9, 11, 18, 21, 22=23, 24, and both sentences in 14, where *They might think...* = 'It might occur to them...').

(3) The notion of genericness (criterion 4) is also too narrow and not clear enough (cf. sentences 13 and 18). Sentences 1 - 9, 12, 14, 17, 19, 20, 27, and 28 are not generic.

Criterion 3 is acceptable although it covers only those sentences for which it is impossible to state which person they refer to (sentences 10, 11, 13⁴, 15, 16, 21 - 25), and even sentences like 12, 18, 27, and 28 do not destroy its validity in this respect. This criterion, however, drastically reduces the scope of impersonal sentences by rejecting sentences like 1 - 9, 14, 17, 20, and 26. For further analysis it may be useful to employ a wider criterion.

Table I shows that it is the concept of *unspecified reference* that should be made the criterion for the definition of impersonal sentences, since it applies to all of them and it does so in a uniform way, i.e. its value (sign) remains unchanged with respect to each sentence recognized as impersonal. Thus, *a sentence is said to be impersonal when at least one of its deep (semantic) structure noun phrases has no clear reference i.e. its referents (existing really or in the speaker's imagination) remain unspecified*. For each impersonal sentence it was impossible to point out the NP's referent(s) and consequently to name it (them).

Another reason why impersonal sentences should be defined in terms of reference and not in terms of the category of person is that reference is logi-

⁴ It is possible, it seems, to approach the pronoun *none* in sentence 13 in two ways: either treat it as IIIrd person (the set denoted by it having zero members), or as a pronoun indefinite with respect to person and specified as (-I, -II, -III).

cally prior to that category, i.e., the category of person is definable in terms of reference and not vice versa.

Diagram I is the proposed model of the deep structure of an impersonal sentence, where:

proposition = a set of relationships between the verb and its NP's (represented here as variables).

K = deep structure case in the Fillmorean sense (Fillmore 1968): Agentive, Objective (=Patient), Dative (=Experiencer), Instrumental, Locative, etc..

x_1 = *John, my best friend, one, you, it, etc.*

x_2 = *George's neighbour, the man who lives round the corner, etc.,*

a, b = referents in the outside world

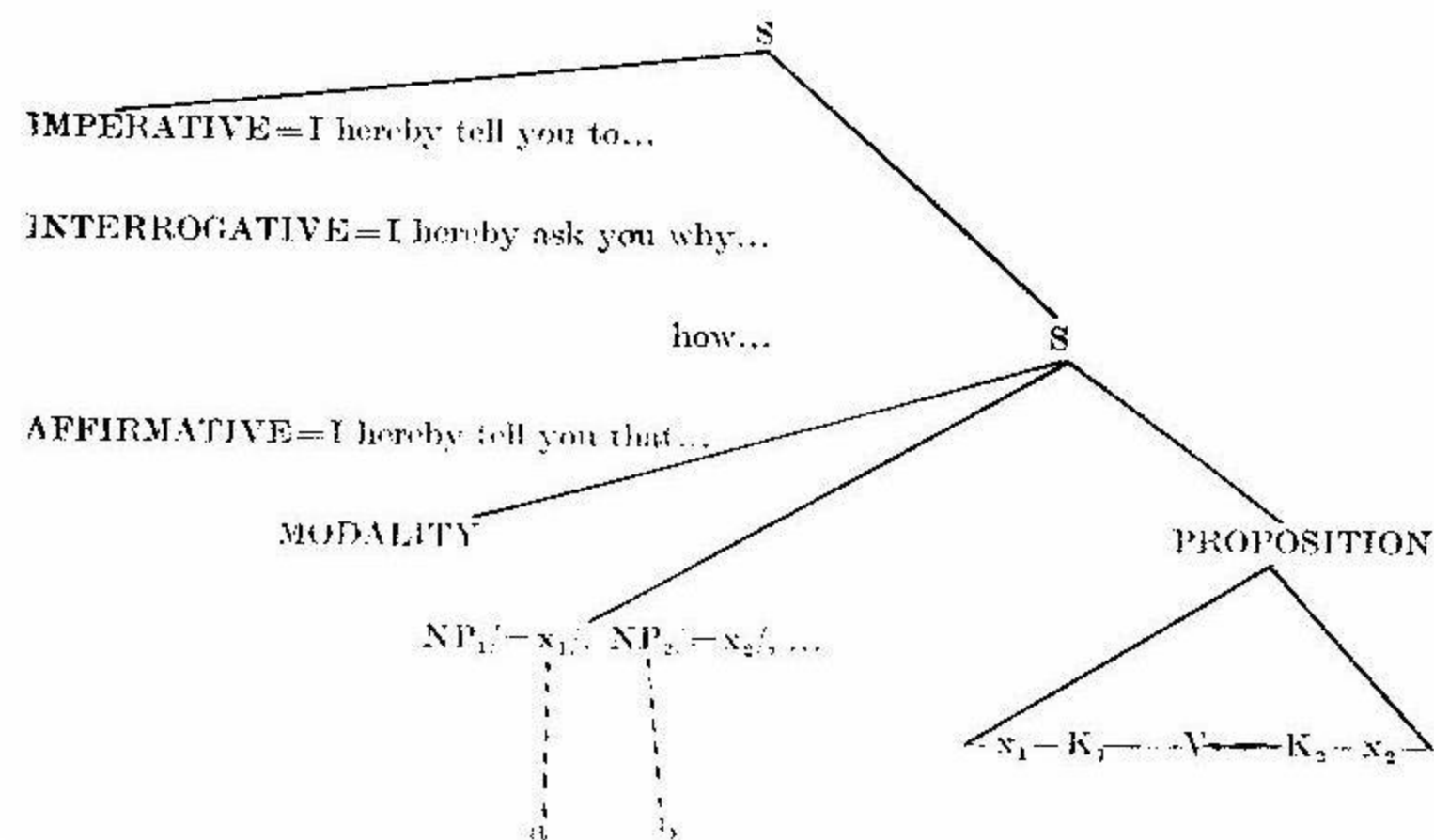


Diagram I

In the diagram the NP's have been removed from the proposition and placed elsewhere, as otherwise it would have been impossible to account for the ambiguity of: *John said he saw George's neighbour*, where *George's neighbour* can be:

- (1) the result of John's having said: '*I have seen George's neighbour*'
- (2) the result of John's having said: '*I have seen the man who lives round the corner*', in which case it is

the speaker who identifies the '*man who lives round the corner*' with *George's neighbour* (cf. McCawley 1970: 172 - 175).

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