THE ADVANCEMENT ANALYSIS OF IMPERSONAL PASSIVES
AND THE 1-ADVANCEEE PRESERVATION LAW

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This paper is a squib rather than a full-fledged article and concerns an
unnoticed possibility of analyzing impersonal passive constructions. In linguist-
ic literature written in the Relational Grammar fold two analyses of
impersonal passive constructions were vying for priority: the demotion
analysis, which had its adherents in Keenan (1975), Comrie (1977), Jain (1977)
and Wachtel (1979), and the advancement analysis proposed by Perlmutter
(1978) and, in a somewhat revamped form, reiterated by Johnson and Postal
(1980) and Perlmutter and Postal (1984). In this paper I wish to present a third
logically possible analysis, which combines the advancement analysis of
impersonal passives with the proposed by Wachtel (1979) 1-Advancee Preser-
vation Law. The rationale for such amalgamation of elements from the two
antagonistic analyses will be provided by data from Polish.

Keenan (1975), Comrie (1977) and Jain (1977) all believe that impersonal
passives involve spontaneous demotion of the initial subjects in these construc-
tions to the status of chōmeurs. According to these authors this is the decisive
factor which allows to explain the verbal morphology of impersonal passives in
terms analgogous to those employed in explaining the verbal morphology of
passive constructions. While Perlmutter (1978) does not contest the view that
impersonal passives should be provided with an analysis akin to that of passive
constructions, he objects to the idea of spontaneous demotion. According to
Perlmutter (1978) impersonal passives involve the advancement of dummy
nominals to subjecheood. Thus, the only difference between passives and
impersonal passives would be that the first ones involve the advancement to
subjecheood of initial direct objects (i.e. direct objects present in the initial,
semantically most relevant strata in the representations of these constructions)
while the latter ones involve the advancement to subjecheood of noninitial
dummy nominal direct objects (i.e. direct objects not present in the initial, semantically most relevant strata in the representations of these constructions). In both cases any demotion of initial subjects would have to be triggered by the advancement of another nominal to subjecthood, i.e. spontaneous demotion is nonexistent. Perlmutter (1978) claims that his advancement analysis of impersonal passives is superior to the earlier proposed demotion analysis because, when combined with the Unaccusative hypothesis and the 1-Advancement Exclusiveness Law, it is capable of explaining why in Dutch impersonal passives with initially unaccusative predicates are ungrammatical while impersonal passives with initially unergative predicates are quite acceptable. Unlike earlier analyses, Perlmutter’s (1978) account correctly rules out stratal diagrams like (1) and specifies well formed diagrams like (2).

Examples like (3) are according to the Unaccusative Hypothesis initially unaccusative (i.e. in their initial strata they have direct objects and no subjects). This is the reason why one advancement to subject would be required in cases like (3). Dummy nominal advancement purported for impersonal passives would require another advancement to subject, this time of the dummy nominal. 1-Advancement Exclusiveness Law would allow the advancement of the dummy nominal in (4), which is initially unergative, and would block it in (3). This is so because examples like (3) would seem to require double advancement to subjecthood unlike examples like (4). Thus, Perlmutter (1978) feels at liberty to conclude that the advancement analysis of impersonal passives is superior to Comrie’s (1977) demotion analysis.

Wachtel (1979) shows that Perlmutter’s (1978) conclusion was premature since it partly rested on taking for granted the 1-Advancement Exclusiveness Law. According to Wachtel (1979) the 1-Advancement Exclusiveness Law may be superseded by the 1-Advancee Preservation Law (5) which has all the desirable consequences of the 1-Advancement Exclusiveness Law but does not require the presence of dummy nominals and therefore may corroborate an analysis of impersonal passives based on spontaneous demotion.

(5) The 1-Advancee Preservation Law: Any clause C that contains a non-1-arc for a nominal N in stratum ck of C, a 1-arc for N in stratum c_{k+1} of C, and a 1-arc for N in stratum c_{k+n} of C, where n>1, is ill-formed.

According to Wachtel (1979) a sentence like (3) would correspond to a stratal diagram like (6) which contradicts the 1-Advancee Preservation Law by virtue of demoting a nominal previously promoted to subjecthood.

(3)* Er werd door dat blok hout goed gabrand
'It was burnt well by that block of wood'

(4) Er wordt door de kinderen op het ijs geschaatst
'It is skated by the children on the ice'

(4) would correspond to (7), well-formed according to the 1-Advancee Preservation Law.
Unlike Perlmutter (1978) Wachtel (1978) does not need to rely on the presence of dummy nominals in postulated stratal diagrams to explain the grammaticality of (4) and ungrammaticality of (3). While Wachtel (1979) does not prove that his variant of demotion analysis is superior to Perlmutter's (1978) advancement analysis, since both analyses appear to be completely equivalent in their predictions, he does claim that pending any further data, his analysis is preferable on grounds of elegance, i.e. is favoured by Ockham's razor.

Neither of the two analyses of impersonal passives is capable of providing a comprehensive account of Polish impersonal constructions. As Neubauer (1979) noticed, Polish impersonal constructions, if analyzed as impersonal passives along Perlmutterian lines, must flagrantly violate the 1-Advancement Exclusiveness Law. That this must be the case is clearly exemplified by cases like (8).

(8) Obecnie często umiera się na raka
  'Nowadays often die self on cancer = Nowadays people often die of cancer'

Data like (8) puts any adherent of Relational Grammar in the uncomfortable situation of having to claim that either constructions like (8) are not impersonal passives (thus by-stepping the entire issue) or that 1-Advancement Exclusiveness Law is not valid. Neubauer (1979) choses the former option and in doing so loses a natural explanation for the presence of się in (8) and examples similar to it. Any advancement analysis of impersonal passives can easily account for the presence of się by invoking dummy nominals which upon being promoted to subjecthood leave a reflexive copy behind (similarly to reflexive passives and inchoatives). Abandonment of dummy nominal advancement analysis is equivalent with the abandonment of the handy explanation for the presence of elements like się. This is the reason why neither Neubauer (1979) nor Wachtel (1979) is capable of providing any reason for the presence of się in Polish impersonal constructions and hence neither of the two accounts would provide a comprehensive analysis of Polish impersonal constructions.

Kubiński (1984) takes the opposite stance claiming that Polish impersonal constructions are impersonal passives and should be analyzed along the lines proposed by Perlmutter (1978) for impersonal passives. In taking this option Kubiński (1984) retains a straightforward explanation for the presence of pseudo-reflexive się in the discussed constructions but must forsake the 1-Advancement Exclusiveness Law. Thus, in its classical form, Perlmutter's advancement analysis is also inadequate to deal with Polish data.

If the 1-Advancement Exclusiveness Law must go down the drain how can one hope to explain the facts connected within Perlmutter's (1978) Dutch examples within a dummy nominal advancement analysis? It seems that the only option left is to claim that an advancement analysis of impersonal passives may neatly account for both Polish and Dutch data only if coupled with the 1-Advancee Preservation Law. A stratal diagram like (9) could then correspond to Polish structures like (8) while (10) would correspond to Dutch examples like (3).
(9) clearly does not violate the 1-Advancee Preservation Law (the initial direct object nominal promoted to subjecthood is ultimately erased and not chômeurized while (10) is equally clearly at variance with the 1-Advancee Preservation Law. Thus, Polish example (8) would be classified as well-formed while Dutch (3) would be ruled out by the grammar. Characteristically, Polish impersonal passives never cooccur with chômeurized subjects while Dutch impersonal passives may do so, as conveniently shown in (4). Given the above observations, it would seem to follow that languages which, like Dutch, allow chômeurization of subjects in impersonal passives, should in principle disallow impersonal passives with initially unaccusative predicates. On the other hand, languages like Polish, which do not allow chômeurization of subjects in impersonal constructions, should by virtue of this fact be immune to the 1-Advancee Preservation Law and therefore should possess impersonal passive constructions with initially unaccusative predicates. If this conclusion was confirmed by data from other languages, the proposed here analysis of impersonal passives would be on much safer grounds. Polish data seems to favour on the one hand the advancement analysis of impersonal passives (the presence of się in impersonal constructions) and on the other hand the 1-Advancee Preservation Law (examples like (8)). It is therefore only logical to attempt to combine elements of the two different analyses. Pending more conclusive evidence it may be provisionally maintained that the argument based on the Polish data overrides Wachtel’s (1979) elegance considerations. Thus, provided that strong arguments to the contrary are not found, the proposed here hybrid of a solution to the problem of impersonal passives seems to be marginally more adequate than the two earlier juxtaposed solutions.

REFERENCES


