

Reflection of the Status and Role of Social Structure in Agentive Impersonal Sentences in German

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Abstract – The article is devoted to the implicit representation of status and role groups in society on the material of impersonal sentences in the German language. The focus is set on the types of the implicit semantic subject, characterized by varying degrees of determination in context: indefinite-personal, generalized-personal and definite-personal semantic subject. The authors propose a tripartite paradigm of types of the implicit semantic subject on the basis of its social and role affiliation. Background knowledge of a sender and recipient, as well as the communicative intention of statement, in which the subjective-objective modality manifests itself make it possible to reduce semantic ambiguity of the implicit semantic subject.

Keywords – *status and role groups in society, social and role affiliation of grammatical agent (producer / source of action), implicit semantic subject, semantic structure of a sentence, impersonal sentence.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Today it is difficult to imagine a modern society that does not come into contact with culture, norms and values of other states. However, serious problems may complicate the processes of interaction between different countries. Among them there is a language barrier [1]. According to B. Bernstein, one of the founders of sociolinguistics, the language barrier should be considered as a non-prestigious language variant, limited code that prevents an individual from getting a good education, to take prestigious positions in society [2]. In order to adapt to a foreign language environment, a person needs to establish regular links with the social system through mental

and practical activities [3]. Consequently, learning a foreign language is possible only in combination with the culture of native speakers. Language is a mirror of culture, reflecting “not only the real world surrounding a person, not only the real conditions of his or her life, but also the people’s own self-consciousness, their mentality, national character, way of life, traditions, customs, morality, value system, perception of the world, world view” [4]. A language also reflects the relations between individuals in society, often determined by their social status. The term “social status” refers in sociology to the position of an individual in the social structure of a group or society associated with certain rights, duties, and functions. “Striving to achieve a goal through unification of efforts leads to the establishment of social connections between people who form a group or social structure. Participating in a group, a person can pursue many goals and, therefore, fulfill several roles. [5]. Sociologists interpret a social role as personal behavior society expects from the bearer of social status, typical of the corresponding status in this society, as “a function of social status of an individual, implemented at the level of public consciousness in expectations, norms and sanctions in the social experience of a particular person and determining his or her possible conflict behavior” [6]. P.L. Berger, one of the founders of status and role theory, describes social role as a “typical response to a typical expectation” [7]. In real life, every person who has a certain social status can act in various social roles, which often depend on his belonging to a particular social group, and in general – on the structure of society. According to E.A. Saikin, these roles, with all their apparent diversity and

implicit linkage to social statuses, are clearly defined and mostly fully fixed [8].

Language system has a certain set of lexical and grammatical means for explication of social status and social roles of the actors in a sentence. It should be noted that formally impersonal sentences, which express an action without indicating its source (performer), are not means of explication of status and role groups in society. However, the asymmetry of the linguistic sign allows considering language as a universal means in expressing a specific meaning, illustrating the differences between the formal and semantic plan. In particular, the structural-semantic features of impersonal sentences in German reflect the socio-culturological understanding of the picture of world represented by linguistic means, and show what additional, implicitly expressed information is transmitted by these sentences, taking into account the background knowledge of communicators and context of communication.

Increased interest in the semantic structure of impersonal sentences led to the revision of the typology of this kind of syntactic structures based on the nature of the semantic subject. According to O.V. Kuzmina, there are two main types of impersonal sentences: a) absolutely impersonal, semantically impersonal, impersonal agentless / actantless / subjectless sentences: *Es donnert / Es friert*, etc. ; b) impersonal subject / agent / actant, quasi-impersonal / formally impersonal sentences: *Es friert mich / Es wird von den Jugendlichen getanzt*, etc. [9]. This classification is associated with the idea of the presence of the superficial (formal grammatical) and deep (semantic-functional) structure of a sentence. Along with the explicit form of the semantic subject, the implicit "presence" of an actor is also recognized in the statement revealed on the basis of the lexical semantics of anthroposphere verbs, "manifesting" the subject by "projection" to the situation or to the encyclopedic knowledge of a native speaker, allowing to guess the implicit subject of impersonal sentences like: *Es klopft an die Tür, Es wimmelt auf der Straße*. In the process of analyzing the means of expressing the semantic subject of impersonal sentences, due to the asymmetry of the formal and semantic characteristics of subject element, as well as the variety of semantic types of predicates of impersonal sentences, the terms "agent" and "subject" are no longer sufficient: "subject" because of dual (formal grammatical and semantic) meaning, "agent" – because of the narrowness of a concept, since this term refers only to an active person. Thus, there is a need for a more differentiated approach to the analysis of the functional and pragmatic characteristics of a semantic subject. The system of case semantic "roles" or semantic / deep cases gradually develops, becoming widespread due to its universality and applicability to both direct and indirect (explicit and implicit) means of indicating a semantic subject, regardless of the type of a sentence (personal, indefinite-personal, impersonal). At present, the theory of semantic roles does not have a unified type system, but certain points of contact between these systems allow using this approach in the analysis of the deep structure of syntactic units.

II. EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT SEMANTIC SUBJECTS

The analysis of the semantic subject as a "participant" of the denotative situation puts researchers to the necessity of

identifying its types and describing its functions in the metalanguage of semantics. For the analysis of an explicit semantic subject represented in a sentence by means of direct or indirect nomination, scientists mostly use the classification developed in the 1960s and 1970s by the representatives of the so-called "case / role grammar" (in the works of C. Fillmore, W. Chafe, J. Anderson, G. Helbig, and others) in terms of the "semantic case / roles" (see also: *Kasus- / Subjektrollen, propositionale Kasus*) in order to distinguish between structural and grammatical meanings ("grammatical cases") and semantic functions ("semantic cases") of syntactic units. C. Fillmore was the first who introduced the concept of a list of semantic roles [10]. A similar approach usually assumes that every verb is associated in the dictionary with a specific set of semantic roles of its arguments. Linguists develop numerous hierarchies of roles according to two main strategies: 1) bottom-up mapping strategy - like, for example, R. Larson: "If a verb A determines theta-roles $\theta_1, \theta_2, \dots, \theta_n$, then the lowest role on the Thematic Hierarchy is assigned to the lowest argument in constituent structure, the next lowest role to the next lowest argument, and so on" [11]; 2) bottom-down mapping strategy [12].

Based on the attitude of a subject to verb attribute predicted by him, the authors distinguish different types of semantic subjects and their corresponding semantic cases, such as: agent, experimenter, beneficiary, possessor, determinant, elementative, mediator, etc. This typology can also be used for the analysis of implicit semantic subjects, but these characteristics do not fully describe their specificity.

III. PROBLEM OF CLASSIFICATION OF IMPLICIT SUBJECTS

Developing a typology of implicit subjects (which include only living actors), the researchers propose to use the categories of determination / undetermination / generalization, but the criteria for distinguishing between correlative grammatical and semantic categories have not actually been developed. The grammatical determination of a subject, i.e. the explicit expression of the lexically full lexeme does not always indicate familiarity of a real person, and the subject's grammatical undetermination, i.e. implicitness or representation by means of a lexically incomplete, desemantized lexeme is not always caused by the anonymousness of a bearer of an action in denotative situation: analyses of the material revealed few cases of "absolute" undetermination of semantic subject within implicitly personal sentences.

The authors consider it appropriate to classify semantic subjects taking into account not only the communicative intention of a speaker, but also the sociocultural programs, encyclopedic knowledge of both communicators, which determine the process of encoding / decoding of reported information. In accordance with this approach, the semantic subject fulfilling the agentive function in impersonal sentences can have in a specific statement an indefinite-, generalized- or definitite- personal meaning.

A. 3.1. Impersonal sentences with indefinite-personal subjects

The most common are impersonal sentences with indefinite-personal subjects. N.I. Dzents notes that the main communicative intention of statements with an indefinite-

personal subject is the representation of social role, belonging to a particular role group, on the basis of which various types of indefinite semantic subjects can be distinguished [13, 14]. The nature of the social role of an actor is evident from the precontext or background knowledge of communicators (general information about the role structure of society), and sometimes on the basis of indirect data within the statement itself. In the presented material the authors have found the following types (role groups, hereinafter – RG) of indefinite-personal subjects within the framework of the action model of impersonal sentences:

3.1.1. RG status

In this communicative situation, an actor is conceived and accordingly acts as a representative of a certain social community in a certain link of the social macrosystem, in the stratification structure of society, and therefore further gradation of the RG is possible [14]:

1) Professional and official RG (actors as carriers of certain production, economic and labor functions: doctors, architects, judges, lawyers, investigators, workers, artists, geophysicists, etc.):

(1) / Doctors at the Berlin Clinic have developed a new cure for cancer / *Zunächst muß in klinischen Studien überprüft werden, ob sich die Ergebnisse aus den Versuchen mit Mäusen auf den Menschen übertragen lassen* (KCh, 4/98, 53).

(2) / The engineers who worked with the theodolite leave, leaving Yunna on guard/ *Die Herren rufen Junnu zu, als sie gehen, daß es unter Strafe verboten sei, diese Pflöcke auszureißen, und verschwinden im Walde* (F.T., 131).

2) Social stratification of RG (a recipient realizes socio-economic, administrative and management, institutional functions of the subject of an action: ministers, members of the government / party, representatives of legislative bodies, the board of the joint-stock company, party leadership, trade union, etc.):

(3) / An employer in the Netherlands, according to the law of the Ministry of Labor Protection, is responsible for paying for the sick leave / *Gesetzlich wurde festgelegt, daß diese Leistung 70% des letzten Lohnes betragen muß* (KCh, 2/99, 25).

(4) / An article on Germany's education policy implemented by the governments of the federal states / *In Ländern, wo es öfter zum Wechsel von der einen Partei zur anderen kommt, gibt es demnach auch öfter Richtungsänderungen* (B&W, 4/98, 11).

3) Territorial ethnic RGs (actors are representatives of certain territorial and ethnic groups: regional groups, representatives of a certain nation / nation, residents of a particular city / village, etc.):

(5) / Opinion of V. Yerofeyev, who undertook a trip to Belarus together with correspondents of the German magazine GEO / *Wir hatten auch anderswo schon erfahren, daß die Weißrussen die Russen für faule und schlechte Arbeiter hielten. Und ich hatte bis dahin gedacht, daß so, mit einer gewissen Verachtung, nur in der Ukraine und in Polen über uns geredet wird* (GEO, 5/94, 98).

(6) / The residents of the village of Olumpos of the Greek island of Karpathos do not use fertilizer on their fields / *Gedüngt wird nicht, allein die Dreifelderwirtschaft bringt den Böden Erholung* (GEO, 4/94, 25).

4) "Small" status of RG (biological, psychological, family, contact, cultural, leisure, etc. RG: men, women, young people, elderly people, husbands, wives, family members, relatives, neighbors, members of the group / section / society, students of the class / schools):

(7) / The family celebrated their daughter's engagement / *Weder an Wein noch an Essen wurde gespart* (F.T., 10).

(8) / Family Gastl gets photographed / *...es gab ein langes Getue, bis ein jeder den passenden Platz gefunden hatte* (B., 8).

(9) / Ales Chobat explains to correspondents of GEO magazine that drivers in Grodno give way to pedestrians / *„Bei uns in der Stadt ist das so üblich“, sagte Ales stolz, ohne allerdings erklären zu können, wieso es zu dieser „unsowjetischen Sitte“ gekommen war* (GEO, 4/96, 104).

3.1.2. Positional RG

In these RG, the position of an actor in a certain social microsystem is determined by status and dictates his or her relation to other role partners in this subsystem; in a broad context, it is possible to observe confrontation of role positions: teacher / teachers – student / pupils, teacher – students, parents – children, boss – subordinate, drivers – pedestrians, etc.:

(10) / G.Flasmann, an expert on organized crime, talks about the clashes of eastern and western criminal groups after the unification of Germany/ *Zu Reibereien kam es dabei immer, aber die haben sich höchstens gegenseitig den Kiefer gebrochen* (Spiegel, 27/99, 20).

3.1.3. Situational / everyday RG

They act as some groups of a casual, temporary nature, as some variable social characteristics of individuals: customers, fellow travelers, guests, spectators, church members, restaurant visitors, tourists, demonstrators:

(11) / The restaurant had a lot of visitors / *Es wurde mit den Gläsern geklingelt* (B., 389).

(12) / About strict discipline of tourists on camping ground / *Wenn morgens um 7 Uhr im goldenen Licht der aufgehenden Sonne zusammengepackt wird, dann wird praktisch jeder Quadratzentimeter nach Abfall abgesucht* (Focus, 36/95, 110).

(13) / Hans' parents and guests celebrate the New Year's Eve. Hans has brought a glass of punch to the housemaid Christine / *Aber ich war schon bei Christine in der Küche, es lärmte undeutlich durcheinander, was sie drinnen im Zimmer hochleben ließen* (B., 295).

(14) / During the King's speech, everyone in the square took off their hats / *Ich ließ den Hut auf. „Hut ab!“ drohte es von allen Seiten* (B., 409).

3.1.4. Indefinite RG

The ambiguity of social roles lies in the fact that the statement does not give an idea of which of the several possible RG performs the action in the given situation:

(15) / Opponents question the purity of experiments with monkeys / *Oft wird behauptet, die Affen unterzögen sich dieser Prozedur nur, weil sie hungrig oder durstig gehalten werden* (KCh, 2/99, 49).

(16) / Lieutenant Colonel Bonnett, speaking of war, quotes Bebel / *Da hat ja der alte Bebel selbst gesagt: "... Wenn es gegen den Zaren geht, nehm ich die Flinte auf den Buckel!"* (B., 293).

(17) / Hans is sitting in the room and whistling "Internationale". Father came in and asked where these sounds were coming from / ... *gab ich zur Antwort: "Oben oder unten summt es und pfeift es in einem fort, vielleicht auch nebenan, es dringt durch die Wand durch"* (B., 289).

3.1.5. Unknown RG / Unknown Actor

In a particular context it is impossible to get an idea neither of a particular actor, nor of his social role. For such statements, as for the type of indefinite RG, only the action is essential:

(18) / Hans is trying to understand the meaning of life, what is he living for / *Angefragt habe ich bei allem und jedem, ich wollte mich schon durchfragen. Vielleicht wurde, mir auch geantwortet, und ich konnte die Antwort nur nicht richtig begreifen* (B., 285).

(19) / An article dedicated to the memory of Georg Solti / *In der Nacht ... starb Sir Georg Solti ... im Schlaf, wie es heißt* (KCh, 6/97, 26).

B. 3.2. Impersonal sentences with generalized-personal subjects

The semantic subject of an impersonal sentence can also have a generalized-personal understanding:

(20) *Geklaut wird nur, was gefällt* (KCh, 2/99, 20).

(21) / A young man who loses everything in a casino refuses to accept help from Mrs K. / *Mir ist nicht mehr zu helfen* (Z., 278).

(22) / Driving past the church, the young man took off his hat and waved it, which surprised Mrs K. a lot / *Wir seien an einer Kirche vorbeigefahren, und bei ihnen in Polen wie in allen streng katholischen Ländern werde es von Kindheit an geübt, vor jeder Kirche und jedem Gotteshaus den Hut zu ziehen* (Z., 292).

(23) *Die soziale und wirtschaftliche Zukunft unseres Landes hängt in großem Maße von der Qualität ab, mit der in Wirtschaft, Politik, Forschung und Industrie gearbeitet wird* (B&W, 4/97, 2).

Some of the examples in this group are an common clichés with prescriptive or directive meaning:

(24) *Es ist verboten, Personen in Brand zu stecken* (KCh, 4/94, 9).

Subjects in generalized-personal sentences can be represented by subjects of indeterminate role belonging (Sentence 20), professional and official RG (Sentence 23), status RG (Sentence 24). The highest degree of generalization is represented in Sentence 20, since the action is typical for all

people, for representatives of any social role group of society. Actions typical for individual role groups have a lesser degree of generalization (Sentence 23 and others).

C. 3.3. Definite-personal subjects

Definite-personal subjects can be found in impersonal sentences more often, while the bearer of an action is evident from the context or is indicated by means of indirect representation of the subject. The subject of the action in such sentences can be:

1) Author (speaker, writer):

(25) / The author of the article describes the problems of education in Germany / *Darauf wird weiter unten näher eingegangen* (B&W, 4/97, 8).

(26) / Father's behavior made Hans laugh / *Spitz lächelte es in mir irgendwo. Ich wollte das spitze Lächeln nicht wahrhaben, aber da lächelte es breit, böseartig aus mir herauf* (B., 275).

(27) / The director of the orphanage informed the parents in letters of all misconduct of pupils. The narrator tells about his fears that tormented him at that time / *Es war zu erwarten, daß Direktor Förtsch von meiner neuen Schweinerei dem Vater Bericht erstatten würde ...* (B., 174).

(28) / The waiter asked to pay the order immediately, to which the visitor responded: / *"Machen Sie keine Umstände, 's wird schon bezahlt werden!"* (B., 357).

2) "Third parties" (persons not directly involved in the act of communication, but known from the context):

(29) / George silently left the house of Cress / *Abschied hatte es keinen gegeben* (S., 403).

(30) / The landlady refers to Ellie, who is waiting for Franz / *"Sie brauchen doch nicht in der Küche zu bleiben", sagte die Wirtin, "wenn es schellt, leg ich die Schnitzel auf"* (S., 124).

(31) / Hans was waiting for a friend in the evening at the fountain. Afraid that the latter might get lost in a thick fog, Hans called him from time to time / *Ein letztes Mal wollte ich rufen, da antwortete es fern, undeutlich: "Hallo!". "Hallo! Ich höre dich!" antwortete es näher* (B., 283).

IV. CONCLUSION

According to the above mentioned examples, the awareness of the social role of a subject without individualization and numerical specification gives us sufficiently complete information for a particular denotative situation, represented within a specific speech communication, the social function of which is to serve for the exchange of information between society members (knowledge, opinions, estimates, hypotheses, etc.). The "social role" criterion is applicable not only to indefinite-personal subjects, but also to generalized-personal variants. In this case, the role groups of the subjects appear on the undetermination axis at the point "all". It explains why scientists still argue about the classification of a number of statements: some scientists attribute them to indefinite-personal sentences, other – to generalized-personal sentences, because

they generalize the actions of representatives of a particular role group, while others state facts typical of representatives of all role groups, i.e. for all people (in this case, the actions of a certain social group can often be elevated to the rank of “absolute” generalization due to figurative transference). In terms of social roles, it is also possible to describe definite-personal semantic subjects. In this case, subject performs the role of a certain empirical individual in an impersonal sentence, an individual with his or her “unique” repertoire of social roles and unique individuality. However, such understanding of a definite-subject requires an unambiguous precontext that excludes other subjects in denotative situation.

The problem of classification of semantic subjects is far from being solved, since recognition of the “indirect” forms of their representation, distinguishing of “inactive”, “passive”, etc. carriers of verbal features make the border between the semantic subject and the semantic object blur, which is why there is a problem of defining the concept of a semantic subject. The “magic” of the syntactic position, the grammatical criterion, continues to prevail over semantic categories. However, a complete negation of the role of sentence structure is also unacceptable, since the choice of the structure of a statement can reflect the intention (communicative attitude) of a speaker. Thus, this problem is controversial and requires its in-depth consideration. The specifics of impersonal sentences should be the subject of special research in relation to every particular language, since the structural types of such sentences are idioethnic.

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