

Grammatical Voice in Serbian. A Dependency-Based Description

Abstract

The paper proposes a formal description of the grammatical voice in Serbian within the dependency-syntax approach of the Meaning-Text linguistic theory. Its goal is to establish the voice types in Serbian on the basis of a universal calculus of logically possible voices (Mel'čuk 1993 and 2004) and to test the adequacy of the calculus itself against data from this particular language.

The definition of voice is based upon the notions of *grammeme* [= a meaning belonging to an inflectional category] and *diathesis* of a lexical unit L [= correspondence between the semantic and the deep-syntactic actants of L, henceforth SemAs and DSyntAs]. Voice is the inflectional category of the verb such that its grammemes modify the basic [= lexicographic] diathesis of a verbal lexeme L (without changing its propositional meaning).

A zero modification of the basic diathesis corresponds to the *active* voice. There are three diathesis-modifying operations: *permutation* of DSyntAs of L with respect to its SemAs, *suppression* of DSyntAs of L and *referential identification* of L's SemAs. Applied to the basic diathesis, they give rise, respectively, to *passive*, *suppressive* and *reflexive* voice types. Together with the active, these constitute the four basic voice types. Within all voice types except the active, further differentiation into particular voices is possible, according to the subtype of the operation involved; thus, a suppressive can be subjectless (the expression of the subject is suppressed), objectless (the object is suppressed) or absolute (both the subject and the object are suppressed). For a transitive bi-actantial verb, the total number of theoretically possible particular voices is twelve.

Applied to Serbian data, the above calculus identifies as voices some phenomena not treated as such in current descriptions. Thus, along with the uncontroversial *active*, (*full promotional*) *passive* and (*objectless*) *reflexive*, three additional voices are recognized: *agentless promotional passive*, *full demotional passive* and *subjectless suppressive*. For instance, sentence *Ovde se dobro spava* lit. 'Here itself well sleeps' = 'One sleeps well here' is analysed in the present framework as featuring a mono-actantial intransitive verb SPAVATI ('X sleeps') in the subjectless suppressive, and not, as traditional accounts would have it, a 'deagentivized' active. An illustration of the three 'problematic' voices and a justification for considering them as voices is provided.

Other issues to be addressed include:

1) the problem of partial voices, stemming from the fact that not all voices existing in Serbian (reflexive, demotional passive and suppressive) are admitted by all the verbs of this language; 2) use of the same means of expression (pronominal marker SE) to mark some voices (inflection), some verbal derivations and all inherently pronominal verbs; 3) status of the instrumental NP in some passive sentences (agentive phrase or cause/instrument circumstantial?); 4) incompatibility of the pronominal passives with the perfective aspect; 5) expression of the Agent with the pronominal variant of the (full promotional) passive, 'officially' declared impossible, but attested (*Ti projekti se finansiraju od strane države* lit. 'These projects themselves finance on part of state' = 'These projects are financed by the State').

Selected References

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