

Intentionality, control, and the semantic notion of agent

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The notion of agency is a matter of controversy among linguists. While most theories assume that agent is a discrete and semantically invariable category, some linguists have argued for a more granular approach to agency based on the idea of the agent prototype (DeLancey, 1984; 1990; Dowty, 1991). On this view certain agents are more prototypical than others depending on the number of agent properties they involve. This difference is often reflected in morphosyntax, as less prototypical agents commonly receive a different morphosyntactic coding compared to the prototypical ones. Intentionality, causality, and control over the predicated event are some of the semantic properties commonly associated with the agent. A prototypical agent causes an event or a change of state in another participant; this causality is intentional and proceeds towards the intended outcome; the agent has control over the entire course of the event – the agent can see to that the event happens and is fully responsible for the intended outcome.

In what follows, I present evidence from dative reflexives in Slavic languages which supports the prototype approach to the notion of agent and furthermore implicates control over the event and its outcome as the fundamental property of agency. Examples below contrast prototypical nominative agent with the non-prototypical dative agent in dative reflexives in Slavic (Ivanova, 2014).

1) Ja rabotaju. *Russian*
I_{NOM} work.PRES.1.SG
'I'm working.'

2) Segodnja mne **otlično** raboaet -sja.
today I_{DAT} splendidly work.PRS.3.SG REFL
Lit: 'It works itself to me splendidly today.'
'Today my working goes splendidly.'

3) Az rabotja. *Bulgarian*
I_{NOM} work.PRES.1.SG
'I'm working.'

4) Raboti mi se.
work.PRS.3.SG I_{DAT} REFL
Lit: 'It works itself to me.'
'I feel like working.'

Dative reflexive construction is widely spread across all Slavic languages with the same basic morphosyntactic properties – the dative agent, the reflexive (anticausative) morphology, and a nonagreeing verb – and the same shared basic meaning that the noted eventuality is due to some factors which are beyond control of the dative agent (e.g., Rivero and Arregui, 2012 and the references therein; Ilic, 2013; 2014; Ivanova, 2014 among others). However, the specific interpretations differ. Dative reflexives in West Slavic (Polish, Czech, Slovak) and Russian represent subjective evaluations of actualized events with the meaning of “inexplicable ability to do something well” (Ivanova, 2014). “The agent perceives his own action as proceeding well (or not well) for reasons independent of him” (Wierzbicka, 1988). “The goal is achieved through luck and external conditions” (Dąbrowska, 1997), and the success is commonly attributed to “the environment in which the action takes place” (Wierzbicka,

1988). Examples (5) from Czech (Franks, 1995) and (6) from Russian (Ivanova, 2014) illustrate this point. Because they are subjective evaluations of the noted events, these constructions occur with an obligatory adverbial modifier that qualifies the event as proceeding excellently (5), or with difficulties (6) and (7) – as perceived by the speaker (the last example is from Polish, as cited in Franks, 1995).

- 5) Sestře se **tam** pracuje **výborně**. *Czech*
 sister_{DAT} REFL there work.PRS.3.SG excellently.
 ‘(My) sister is working excellently there.’
- 6) Mne **pri zakrytoj fortočke** **ploxo** spit-sja. *Russian*
 I_{DAT} with closed window badly sleep-REFL
 ‘My sleeping goes badly with the window closed.’
- 7) Ten artykuł **nie** pisze mi się dobrze. *Polish*
 this.NOM article.NOM NEG write.3.SG.PRS me_{DAT} REFL well
 ‘I just can’t write this article well.’

Dative reflexives in South Slavic, on the other hand, have the meaning of dispositions towards potential (non-actualized) events. They speak of uncontrollable “urges ...and impulses of the dative [referent], not actions in the ‘real world’... They report “dispositions that need not materialize” (Rivero and Arregui, 2012) and are “inexplicable” in their nature (Ivanova, 2014), as in (8) for Slovenian.

- (8) Janezu se spi. *Slovenian*
 Janez_{DAT} REFL sleep.PRS.3.SG
 ‘Janez is sleepy/Janez feels like sleeping.’

However, regardless of the interpretational differences illustrated above, eventualities expressed by dative reflexives in Slavic languages are conceptualized across the board as caused by some factors which are beyond control of the dative agent. Even when the event is interpreted as actualized and caused intentionally, as it is the case in West Slavic and Russian examples, the dative agent is not seen as the ultimate causal factor responsible for the event actualization and its outcome, but rather as a mediating cause. I provide evidence for the existence of a presupposed causal relation between the dative agents and the primary causal factors that facilitate (or prevent) event actualization in West Slavic and Russian and are responsible for the dative agent’s dispositions.

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