

The emergence of the nominative object construction in the Circum Baltic areas

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[SCOPE] The genesis of nominative object construction in the “Circum Baltic” areas, which refer to language convergence zones around the Baltic sea, is reconstructed with special attention to the North Russian dialect. The North Russian nominative object construction most often occurs with independent infinitives, (1). Aside from this distributional peculiarity, the following questions need to be properly addressed; (a) the apparent form-function mismatch, i.e., the nominative case for an object, (b) relatively robust word order, i.e., a noun followed by an infinitive and (c) modal meaning, i.e., necessity/possibility semantics in the apparent absence of modal verbs (cf. Filin 1969; Kiparsky 1969; Timberlake 1974).

[Developmental scenario: proposal] The nominative object construction is claimed to have arisen from the existential construction, whose skeletal structure would be BE – Noun_{NOM} – Noun_{DAT} (2-I). This assumption not only obviates the need to devise ad-hoc hypotheses to account for the problems (a) and (b) but also departs from the widely assumed account that this construction arose from *mihi est* construction (cf. Potebnja 1958; Bauer 2000:177; Ambrazas 2001:397). Crucial to the first stage is that *paxatei* (which would become an infinitive in a later development) is not a verbal, but a nominal category. The existential verb *esti* and the purposive dative *paxatei* combined produce the modal semantics, ‘there is a piece of land to plow’ > ‘It is necessary to plow the land’, and this development (existence/possession > necessity/possibility) is cross-linguistically very common (cf. Bhatt 1998; Heine 1993; van der Auwera & Plungian 1998). The second stage (2-II) is characterized by the category change of *paxatei*. The dative noun became a verbal category, i.e., infinitive (cf. Haspelmath 1989). And this is accompanied by the dependency change (that is, the emergence of argument structure for a verb), by which *zemlja* becomes dependent on the verb *paxat_*, creating an object-verb relation. By this change, (i) the case assignment became “quirky” (nominative case for the object), and (ii) the locus of modal semantics was transposed onto the existential verb *est’*, since the new combination, an infinitive plus its object, was not qualified for carrying the meaning (cf. Brugmann 1916:925 on the idea of shifting the meaning of designation, ‘suitableness’ (*Geeignet-sein*)). *Est’*, though saturated with the modal meaning, is syntactically not supported, for *zemlja* is no longer the asserted entity of existence, but an object of the following verb. Therefore *est’* dropped out, giving today’s structure, *zemlja paxat’* (2-III). This change causes the whole sentence to take over the modal semantics.

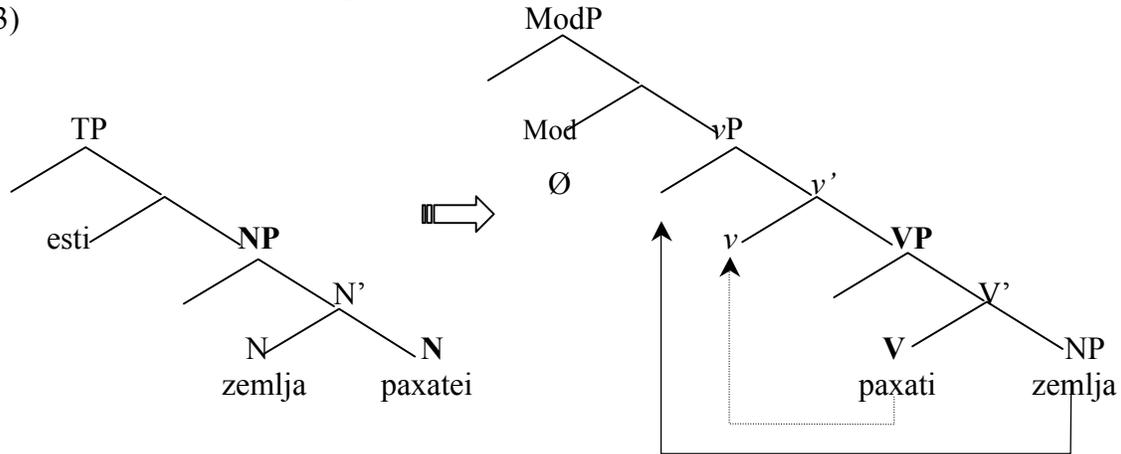
[Further claims] [1] The place where *est’* used to occupy, now a zero, might be seen as grammaticalized to assume the modal function, as represented in (3) (cf. Bybee 1994). The movement of the object to the specifier of *vP* in the current stage can be understood as the movement to the left edge of the phase for accessibility to its case assigner, ModP (cf. Franks and Lavine 2006). [2] The dative NP, having added as a later layer, is claimed as an argument adjunct, since it is optional despite its function as an external argument (cf. Grimshaw 1990; Babby 1993). It is worth to note that a dative NP in subject function lacks in most cases (for instance, no dative and the order of nominative object-infinitive in 5 out of 5 in North Russian Birchbark documents), especially in perception verbs. [3] The first locus for the nominative object construction is the verbs of perception, with which the possibility meaning is natural to evolve, as preserved in Baltic, exx. 4-5. This phenomenon of a particular semantic development confined to certain types of verbs is not surprising, given a similar situation in classical Latin and many other languages (cf. van der Auwera & Plungian 199:103). In contrast, the remaining verbs are to obtain the necessity meaning.

(1) Zemlja paxat' 'It is necessary to plow the land/one has to plow the land'
 NSg Infinitive

(2) Developmental stages of the nominative object construction

- I. Esti zemlja paxatei 'There is a piece of land to plow'
 3Sg-BE NSg DSg
- II. Esti zemlja paxat_
 3Sg-BE NSg Infinitive
- III. Ø zemlja paxat' (=1)
 NSg Infinitive

(3)



(4) I_ ia matyti namai
 from here see: inf house: nom
 'The house can be seen from here'

(Lith)

(Holvoet 2003: 468)

(5) Paz_t bija pora egli melnaj_m skuji_m
 recognize:inf be:pret3 marsh:gen fir-tree:acc black needles:dat.pl. (Latv)
 'One could recognize the fir-tree growing on marshy soil by its black needles' (ibid, 469)

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