

**On Subjects and Predicates in Russian:  
Syntax/Semantics Interface**

by

**Alona Soschen**

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**ON SUBJECTS AND PREDICATES IN RUSSIAN**

by

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Submitted to the Department of Linguistics  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of

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**Thesis supervisor: Maria-Luisa Rivero**

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## Table of Contents

Title Page.....	1
Abstract .....	5
Acknowledgments .....	10

### Chapter I. Russian Impersonal Sentences

1.1 Introduction.....	12
1.2 Russian impersonal sentences.....	14
1.3 Major approaches to Adversity-impersonal sentences.....	16
1.4 Instrumental subjects of Adversity-impersonal sentences.....	22
1.5 Comparative analysis of Adversity-impersonal and unaccusative structures.....	31
1.6 Resultatives. Sentences with locative PPs.....	39
1.7 Consistency of the resultative structures.....	43
1.8 Null subject phenomena in Slavic languages.....	48
1.9 'Absolute' and impersonal sentences with Dative and Accusative subjects.....	50
1.10 Case assignment and impersonal sentences.....	57
1.11 Conclusions.....	61

### Chapter II. Pron in Russian and Hebrew, and *SER/ ESTAR* in Spanish

2.1 Introduction.....	63
2.2 Pron in Hebrew.....	64
2.3 Russian N-Pron.....	67
2.4 Adjectival predicates in Russian.....	75
2.4.1 Two forms of adjectives in Russian.....	75
2.4.2 Adjectives with long forms only.....	78
2.4.3 Short vs. long form adjectival predicates.....	81
2.5 Syntactic structures of Russian and Hebrew sentences with adjectival predicates.....	88
2.6 Identity sentences in Hebrew and Russian.....	92
2.7 Distribution of <i>SER</i> and <i>ESTAR</i> . Stage- and individual-level predicates in Spanish and Portuguese.....	99
2.8 Summary and conclusions.....	106

### Chapter III. On Small Clauses and Predication

3.1 Introduction.....	107
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3.2	Some approaches to Small Clauses.....	108
3.3	Formal approaches to predication .....	118
3.4	Russian Data. Instrumental Case of predicates in SC.....	122
3.5	Types of predication.....	133
3.5.1	Symmetric vs. asymmetric predication.....	133
3.5.2	Predication as a set ordered of functions.....	135
3.6	Predication within Russian NPs modified by adjectives.....	140
3.7	Focus and predication in Russian and Bulgarian.....	146
3.7.1	Focus and predication within NPs.....	146
3.7.2	Contrastive focus and first/second-order predication.....	153
3.8	Summary and conclusions.....	154

#### **Chapter IV. On Reflexivity, Passivization, and Case Assignment**

4.1	Introduction.....	155
4.2	Romance and Slavic reflexive verbs.....	158
4.2.1	Romance and Slavic verbs with reflexive clitics and Russian verbs with SJA- postfix.....	160
4.2.2	Russian reflexive and Hebrew Hitpa'el verbs.....	162
4.3	<i>De Se</i> and <i>De Re</i> readings of reflexives.....	170
4.4	Inherent and impersonal reflexives in Russian.....	178
4.5	Middles and passives in Russian.....	182
4.6	Mechanics of passivization and Case-assignment in Ukrainian.....	187
4.7	On the Resultative structures with locative PPs.....	193
4.8	Cognate objects that are not objects.....	198
4.9	Conclusions.....	201

#### **Chapter V. A Minimalist Approach to Subjects and Predicates**

5.1	Introduction.....	203
5.2	Agreement in terms of the Minimalist Program.....	204
5.2.1	Tense and Agreement.....	204
5.2.2	Agreement in Russian, Hebrew, and Spanish.....	207
5.3	Agreement in Russian and Hebrew existential sentences.....	210
5.3.1	A Minimalist approach to expletive and non-expletive subjects.....	210
5.3.2	Russian Data.....	217

5.3.3	Definiteness Restriction effects.....	220
5.3.4	Hebrew Data.....	222
5.3.5	Lack of Agreement between verb (Present Tense) and logical subject in Modern Russian.....	226
5.3.6	Case requirements of Russian expletives.....	226
5.4	Specificity feature of T.....	232
5.5	Sentential subject positions and VP-subjects.....	238
5.6	Resultative structures and predication.....	243
5.7	Types of predicates and Minimalism.....	246
5.8	Summary.....	248
	References.....	251

## ***On Subjects and Predicates in Russian***

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Submitted to the Department of Linguistics in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Linguistics

### *Abstract*

The present dissertation under the title On Subjects and Predicates in Russian discusses relevant linguistic theories in connection with subject positions and predication relations, and presents some issues that have not, in my view, been addressed in the linguistic literature so far. I offer a new approach to sentential structure in light of the most recent developments within the framework of Chomsky's Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1993, 1995, 2001a, 2001b). The aim of this dissertation is to integrate the cognitively based lexical semantics and formal analyses with relation to philosophy and logic of language. This study employs case theory and predication theory in a way of relating semantic components to formal syntactic descriptions. The thesis has the following structure:

- Chapter I. Russian Impersonal Sentences
- Chapter II. Pron in Russian and Hebrew, and *SER/ ESTAR* in Spanish
- Chapter III. On Small Clauses and Predication
- Chapter IV. On Reflexivity, Passivization, and Case Assignment
- Chapter V. A Minimalist Approach to Subjects and Predicates

Subjectless sentences are not uncommon in Russian. Whether verbs appear in a sentence with or without their subjects varies considerably across languages; yet, subjects are always represented by a set of properties that

can be defined from the point of view of their semantic roles. In the first Chapter of this dissertation I analyze Russian verbs that appear in impersonal constructions, with an emphasis on the 'Adversity impersonal' (Babby, 1993) structure of the kind *Lodku uneslo volnoj* (the boat was carried away by the tide). Null subjects deserve special attention, to answer the question of how these (empty) elements are interpreted by the conceptual system.

In connection with which, I argue for the existence of two subject positions in Russian VPs of resultative types, which parallels and is a direct extension of Chomsky's (1995) idea concerning double subjects. To support my view, I introduce a definition of direct and indirect agents, and explore the way of treating them from the point of view of their participation in the event as primary and secondary causers. In Russian Adversity-impersonal sentences, out of the two subject positions, the position of *pro* is that of the indirect agent (causer of event). Russian impersonal verbs with Accusative and Dative logical subjects are regarded as having a covert *pro* on their argument grid as well. *Pro* is an expression of the exclusion function, in that no other element may appear in its position.

The differences in formation of related personal, impersonal, and unacusative structures of verbs with the same core meaning can be explained depending on the manner in which semantic structures are projected into syntax. This approach corresponds to Pustejovsky's (1991) treatment of resultative structures. It also implies that Nominative, Instrumental, Dative, and Accusative Case can be predicted in certain semantic configurations. A detailed analysis of resultative structures thus helps establish a connection between semantic properties and the syntactic realization of Case.

In order to proceed to the analysis of two subject positions in a sentence (Chapter II), I argue for the existence of the marker of Agr in modern Russian (N(ull)-Pron(oun)). According to this approach, Agr has content in certain languages. N-Pron in Russian in general corresponds to the



pronominal copula (Pron) in Hebrew. The presence vs. absence of N-Pron in Russian and Pron in Hebrew is in agreement with the semantic individual vs. stage-level distinction of adjectival predicates, which are reanalyzed in this thesis as the meanings of unsaturated functions that may require a particular ('relativizing') argument. Predicates appear as linked to two functional heads Agr and T, which in their turn are associated with the features Generic and Specific. As a conclusion, this Chapter offers a unifying analysis of sentences with copular elements and two types of predicates that appear alongside these copulas in Russian, Hebrew, and Spanish. The roles of Pron in Hebrew, N-Pron in Russian, and *SER/ ESTAR* in Spanish are thus made explicit.

Chapter III deals with the formation of Small Clauses (SC) in Russian and English as a continuation of a longstanding discussion concerning the syntax and semantics of SCs. I revise recent approaches to predication within SC, and develop certain points presented in Chapter I against the analysis according to which Instrumental Case is assigned to (secondary) predicates by a functional category Pred in Russian (Bailyn & Rubin, 1991). The conclusions in this Chapter are drawn following Chomsky's (2001a) suggestion that predication can be viewed as an operation of a direct Merge on two syntactic elements. It follows that Case is assigned to the secondary predicates in question either by concord (Nominative) or by the verb (Instrumental).

The following part of this research explores the ways predication relations are established within NPs modified by adjectives; the issue that has not, to my knowledge, been addressed before. Predication is reanalyzed as the set of ordered functions, where not only their number but also their direction is of importance. This Chapter also draws a parallel between Focus in NPs and predication within SCs.

To continue the analysis of the semantic component of transitive verbs, Chapter IV offers a comparative survey of Russian SJA-inflected verbs and Romance verbs with reflexive clitics. Slavic and Romance reflexive clitics are extensively used in impersonal sentences (M.-L. Rivero, 2002, 2001, 2000). The role of SJA-inflection is similar to that of reflexive cliticization. I will suggest a new approach to reflexive verbs, which is aimed at reconciling two major theories (the 'unaccusativity' and the 'reflexive reduction' analyses). The semantic difference between SJA-suffixed verbs and verbs with reflexive objects is explained by applying Chierchia's (1989) *De Se* and *De Re* treatment of verbs with reflexive objects. In connection with SJA-suffixation of Russian verbs and their subsequent lack of transitivity, middle formation and passive formation are reanalyzed from the point of view of their sub-event structure. To establish the semantic context in which resultative structures might apply I discuss cognate objects, and show which of them are to be considered true objects.

Chapter V concludes this thesis with the extended summary of some major points of the preceding argumentation. To promote the discussion of expletive elements in Russian started in Chapter I, I postulate the existence of *pro* (*expl*) in existential sentences. The Definiteness Restriction (DR) effects show that the expletive has a categorial feature 'specific' both in English and in Russian. I assume that in Russian, in contrast with English, the EPP feature can be checked not only by NPs, but also by PPs, in which case DR effects are absent. The Chapter also addresses the issue of agreement, and presents some ideas concerning Genericity and Specificity feature checking. I assume that Genericity is associated with Agr and Specificity with T positions. The individual- and stage-level distinction of predicates is accounted for by checking of Genericity Feature (GF) of Agr and Specificity Feature (SF) of Tense.

It is tentatively suggested that the sentential structure with two subject positions in Russian is in fact the projection of a verbal lexical (micro-) structure. Lexical arguments are assessed from the point of view of their ability to either cause an event/ state or to undergo a change caused by the event (as in Chapters I and III). Thus, no additional semantic role labeling is needed, and the distinction between true arguments and other (optional) arguments is made clear.

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One of the major reasons I am a linguist is that I believe we can make a change – through our efforts and the unprejudiced research that knows no boundaries, limited only by the extent of our cognitive ability. It is a great honor to be a linguist and a researcher – and this is the opportunity to acknowledge the people who have made it possible for me. First and foremost, my very special thanks should go to Maria-Luisa Rivero, who has helped me throughout the process of writing this thesis, who has always had time and patience for me, no matter how busy the day. Her insightful observations and competent guidance have made my work a memorable and fulfilling experience. I can never thank her enough for always being there for me, for our inspiring discussions - and for being caring and thoughtful all the time. I consider myself very fortunate to have Maria-Luisa Rivero as a research advisor.

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## CHAPTER I. Russian Impersonal Sentences

### 1.1 Introduction

The range of impersonal constructions in Russian is vast, although they all share lack of a Nominative agent. This Chapter is an attempt to establish the criteria for a lexical range of some Russian verbs that appear in impersonal constructions, with a focus on Adversity-impersonal sentences (A-Is) such as in (1). The name 'Adversity-impersonal' reflects the idea that the object is adversely affected in some way.

- (1) Lodku                    uneslo                    volnoj.  
boat-Acc.                carry-away-sg.neut.Past        tide-Instr.  
'The boat was carried away by the tide.'

In the linguistic literature A-Is are analyzed as either a special subtype of the common agent-patient-instrument pattern with a phonetically null natural-force subject (Mel'cuk, 1974, Sal'nikov, 1977), or as impersonal passives derived from the corresponding active Adversity-personal sentences (A-Ps) (Mrazek, 1964, Xodova, 1958). I support Leonard H. Babby's position that A-Is are not passive variants of A-Ps (Babby, 1993).

After a brief overview of four major types of impersonal sentences in Russian (Absolute, Accusative, Dative, and Adversity-impersonal), I will argue for the existence of two subject positions in Adversity-impersonal constructions verbs, one of which is occupied by *pro* carrying phi-features (number, gender), while the other is reserved for an Instrumental subject. This suggestion is an extension of the proposal concerning two subject positions in a sentence (Pollock, 1989, Chomsky, 1995), which will be developed further in Chapter II.



## 1.2 Russian Impersonal sentences

Impersonal sentences in Russian range from Absolute, Accusative, and Dative, to Adversity impersonal sentences. Sentences of the Absolute type, as in (3 a-c), usually denote natural phenomena events. In these sentences neither an agent nor a patient are selected and, in contrast with the English impersonal sentences, there is no explicit (pleonastic/ NP) subject:

(3)a. (\*Eto/ \* utro) rassvetaet.  
it morning dawn-3d.sg.Pres.  
'It is dawning.'

b. (\*Eto/ \*večer) temneet .  
it evening get-dark-3d.sg.Pres.  
'It is getting dark '

c. (\*Eto/ \*dožd') morosit.  
it rain drizzle-3d.sg.Pres.  
'It is drizzling.'

In both Accusative and Dative impersonal sentences the event is understood as internal with regard to the participant (patient). For example, in sentence (4) the Accusative patient is *menja* (me-Acc.). In sentences of this type, the Accusative (logical) subject is obligatorily present.

(4) \*(Menja) tošnit i znobit.  
me-Acc. nauseate-3d.sg.Pres. and have-fever-3d.sg.Pres.  
'I am nauseous and feverish.'



By contrast, the Dative logical subject is optional in (5 a). In case it is absent, the position is as a rule occupied by a locative PP ( *na ulice* – ‘in the street’ in (5 b)).

(5)a. (Mne) xolodno.  
me-Dat. cold  
‘I feel cold.’

b. (Na ulice) xolodno.  
in street cold  
‘It is cold outside (in the street).’

Russian verbs used in A-Is such as (1) mostly denote physical events that adversely affect human beings or objects (e.g. *razbit’*- break, *vybrosit’*- throw away, *pereexat’* - run over etc.). A-Is differ from other impersonal sentence types in that a causing Instrumental element of A-Is *volnoj*-tide-Instr. in (1) is optional (vs. obligatorily absent in Absolute sentences).

In the following parts of this thesis I will show that a unified analysis of impersonal structures supports the view according to which all impersonal verbs in Russian have an implicit subject *pro* (in agreement with Franks, 1995, among others). The approach based on a double subject position idea continues the discussion whether Dative arguments of impersonal Russian sentences are subjects or objects (Schoorlemmer, 1994, Moore & Perlmutter, 2000).

### 1.3 Major approaches to Adversity-impersonal sentences

This part will concentrate on three major approaches that have been undertaken in the linguistic literature, in an attempt to account for the formal and semantic properties of Adversity-impersonal sentences.

According to one of the theories (Mel'čuk, 1974, Sal'nikov, 1977), all A-Is have a phonetically null natural-force subject. Thus, A-Is are a special subtype of the agent-patient-instrument sentence pattern, the only difference being that the subject NP is headed by a phonologically null neuter third person singular noun denoting an unknown natural force that employs the Inst. NP as its instrument. Babby (1993) argues that the 'unknown force' is identified by the Inst. NP itself in those A-Is that involve a natural force, while in A-Is that do not (involve a natural force) the event is understood as being brought about by the instrument itself, and not by some force using the instrument. For instance, following Babby, the only acceptable 'force' is *sudoroga* (cramp) and not *xolodnaja voda* (cold water) in (6).

(6)a. Nogu        svelo            sudorogoj/ \*xolodnoj    vodoj.  
leg-Acc.    seize-Neut.    cramp-Instr./ cold-Instr. water-Instr.  
              'The leg was seized with cramp.'

b. Sudoroga            svela                    nogu.  
cramp-fem.Nom.    seized-fem.Past    leg-Acc.  
              'The leg was seized with cramp.'

If we accept Babby's suggestion that the semantic roles of NP *sudoroga* (cramp) in (6 a) and in (6 b) are identical, it is not clear what causes the redundancy of expression both by means of A-I in (6 a) and by what is identified in this Chapter as a regular agentival sentence in (6 b).

In addition, we have to account for the fact that instruments such as *veter* (wind-Instr.) in A-I (7 a) easily become subjects (7 b).

- (7)a. Dom                      razrušilo                      vetrom.  
house-Acc. destroyed-neut.Past wind-Instr.  
'The house was destroyed by the wind.'
- b. Veter                      razrušil                      dom.  
wind-masc.Nom. destroyed-masc.Past house-Acc.  
'The wind destroyed the house.'

As a rule, instruments are controlled and thus cannot appear as subjects (8); however, there are cases where the instrument is perceived as a regular subject (9).

- (8)\*Ručka              napisala              pis'mo.  
pen-Nom. write-Past letter-Acc.  
'The pen wrote the letter.'

- (9) Ego ruka              nezno              tronula              ejo volosy.  
his hand-Nom. tenderly touch-Past her hair.  
'His hand tenderly touched her hair.'

In contrast, instruments of Adversity-impersonal sentences can always appear as agents. In (1) and (2), repeated here as (10) and (11), the NP *volna* (tide) can be both an instrument (10) and an agent (11).

- (10) Lodku              uneslo                      volnoj.  
boat-Acc. carry-away-sg.neut.Past tide-Instr.  
'The boat was carried away by the tide.'

(11) Volna unesla lodku.  
 tide-Nom.-sg.fem. carry-away-sg.fem.Past boat-Acc.  
 'The tide carried away the boat.'

It will be shown in this Chapter that semantic roles of Instrumental subjects of A-Is and Nominative subjects of corresponding personal sentences can be identified as carrying two different sets of semantic features.

A second hypothesis (Mrazek, 1964, Xodova, 1958), which views A-Is as impersonal passives of corresponding A-Ps, runs into certain problems. There are similarities between regular active and passive pairs and A-I / A-P pairs: both are formed from transitive verbs that denote activities and both have an optional Instrumental NP. It might be argued, however, that A-I / A-P pairs occasionally allow intransitive verbs, as in (12 a) and (12 b):

(12)a. V auditorii zašumelo, zašuršalo gazetami,  
 In auditorium make-noise-neut.Past rustle-neut.Past.newspapers-Instr.  
 zatopalo, zadvigalo stol'jami.  
 stamp-feet-neut.Past move-neut.Past chairs-Instr.  
 (lit.) 'In the auditorium it made noise, rustled the newspapers,  
 stamped the feet, moved chairs.'  
 'They made noise, rustled the newspapers, stamped their feet and  
 moved chairs in the auditorium'.

b. V auditorii studenty zašumeli, zašuršali  
 in auditorium students-Nom.pl. make-noise-pl.Past rustle-pl.Past.  
 gazetami, zatopali, zadvigali stol'jami.  
 newspapers-Instr. stamp-feet-pl.Past move-pl.Past chairs-Instr.  
 'The students made noise, rustled the newspapers, stamped their  
 feet, and moved chairs in the auditorium.'

Secondly, there is no passive morphology in A-Is. Passive forms cannot be formed by means of a copular verb *bylo* (*byt'*-neut.Past - be). The examples (13) and (14) are passive variants one would expect of A-Is in (15) and (16), respectively.

(13)\*Dom            bylo            razrušeno            vetrom.  
house-Nom. was-neut.Past destroyed-neut. wind-Instr.  
'The house was destroyed by the wind.'

(14)\*Lodka            bylo            uneseno            volnoj.  
boat-Nom. was-neut. carried-away-neut. tide-Instr.  
'The boat was carried away by the tide.'

(15) Dom            razrušilo            vetrom.  
house-Acc. destroyed-neut.Past wind-Instr.  
'The house was destroyed by the wind.'

(16) Lodku            uneslo            volnoj.  
boat-Acc. carry-away-neut.Past tide-Instr.  
'The boat was carried away by the tide.'

In order to further support the claim that A-Is are not derived by the lexical rule of passivization from the initial argument structure underlying A-Ps, I will briefly review the semantic and morphosyntactic peculiarities associated with passive formation.

Passive constructions in Russian can be formed either by adding a suffix SJA to the verb (Imperfective), or by means of a copular verb and a passive participle (Perfective). Practically any Nominative NP subject can appear in the Instrumental in a passive sentence regardless of its semantic characteristics. Example (17b) is a passive variant of (17 a); (18 b) of (18 a).

(17)a. Arxitektory            obsudili            plan.  
architects-Nom.    discussed-pl.Past.    draft-Acc.  
'The architects discussed the draft.'

b. Plan                            byl                            obsuždjon            arxitektorami.  
draft-masc.sg.Nom.    was-masc.sg    discussed-Part.    architects-Instr.  
'The draft was discussed by the architects.'

(18)a. Sobaka    ukusila    učenika.  
dog-Nom.    bit-sg.Pres.    pupil-Instr.  
'The dog bit the pupil.'

b. Učenik                            byl                            ukušen            sobakoj.  
pupil-masc.sg.Nom.    was-masc.sg.Nom    bitten-Part.    dog-Instr.  
'The pupil was bitten by the dog.'

By contrast with (18), A-I example in (19) cannot be analyzed as a passive variant of a corresponding A-P (20). The NP *sobaka* (dog) can appear as an agent in (20) only.

(19) \*Parket    poportilo/                            bylo                            poporčeno    sobakoj.  
parquet-Acc.    spoil-neut.sg.Past    was-neut.sg.Past    spoiled-Part.    dog-Instr.  
(lit.) 'It spoiled the parquet by the dog.'

(20) Sobaka                            poportila                            parket.  
dog-fem.Nom.    spoil-fem.sg.Past    parquet  
'The dog spoiled the parquet.'

Passive formation is ruled out in A-Is. Example (21 b) is a regular passive variant of (21 a); if (21 c) were a passive variant as well, we would have to account for the redundancy of expression.

(21)a. Čto-to                                  tjažoloe                                  udarilo                                  voditelja  
 something-neut.sg.Nom.heavy-neut.sg.Nom.hit-neut.sg.Past driverAcc.  
 'Something heavy hit the driver.'

b.Voditel'                                  byl                                  udaren čem-to                                  tjažjolym.  
 driver-masc.sg.Nom.was-masc.sg.Past hit-Part.something heavy-Instr.  
 'The driver was hit by something heavy.'

c.Voditelja                                  udarilo                                  čem-to                                  tjažjolym.  
 driver-Acc.                                  hit-neut.sg.Past.                                  something-Instr.                                  heavy-Instr.  
 'The driver was hit by something heavy.'

Furthermore, the Instrumental phrase is obligatorily absent in sentences with SJA-affixed 'adversity' verbs, the form one would expect to find according to the rules of Passive formation of the Present. The example of a regular Present passive is given in (22). The fact that (23 a) cannot be derived from (23 b) provides strong evidence that Passive sentences are not derived by the lexical rule of passivization from the initial argument structure underlying A-Ps.

(22) Plan                                  obsuždaetSJA                                  arxitekturami.  
 draft-sg.Nom.                                  discuss-SJA-Pass.Pres.                                  architects-Instr.  
 'The draft is discussed by the architects.'

(23)a. \*Voditel'            udarjaetsja            kamnem.  
 driver-sg.Nom.    hit-SJA-sg.Pres.    stone-Instr.  
 lit. 'The driver hits by the stone.'

b. Kamen'            udarjaet            voditelja.  
 stone-sg.Nom.    hit-sg.Pres.    driver-Acc.  
 'The stone hits the driver.'

To summarize, I have shown in this part that the analysis of Adversity-impersonal sentences as a passive variant of Adversity-personal sentences is problematic.

#### **1.4 Instrumental subjects of Adversity-impersonal sentences**

According to Hypothesis III (Babby, 1993), Adversity sentences come in pairs that have the same set of theta-roles realized differently at the morphosyntactic level. When the argument that appears in the Instrumental in A-Is is externalized, the sentence looks like the ordinary active transitive sentence. These sentences are referred to as 'demiactive'. Then demiactive sentences corresponding to Adversity-impersonals (24 a, b) will have the forms of (25 a, b), accordingly.

(24)a. Lodku            uneslo            volnoj.  
 boat-Acc.    carry-away-sg.neut.Past    tide-Instr.  
 'The boat was carried away by the tide.'

b. Pešexoda            pereexalo            gruzovikom.  
 pedestrian-Acc.    run-over-sg.neut.Past    truck-Instr.  
 'The pedestrian was run over by the truck.'



(25)a. Volna                      unesla                      lodku.  
    tide-fem.Nom.    carry-away-fem.Past    boat-Acc.  
    'The tide carried the boat away.'

b. Gruzovik                      pereexal                      pešexoda.  
    truck-masc.Nom.    run-over-masc.Past    pedestrian-Acc.  
    'The truck ran the pedestrian over.'

"Transitive verbs that normally denote a physical event can occur in the real world either with or without the participation of a human agent" (Babby, 1993). Following this assumption, the argument structure of the verbs that appear in A-P/ A-I constructions is represented as having an optional external agent role. Babby analyzes characteristic semantic properties of the nouns marked by the Instrumental in A-Is, and concludes that they can be neither a human agent nor a controlled instrument.

The analysis presented here shows that definition of the Instrumental agent excluded from A-I-sentences is broader than contemplated by Babby, and relates to what might be called 'a possessor of personal/ independent willpower' (PPW). **PPW is a category the defining characteristic of which is causing another entity to perform an action.** It can apply not only to humans, but also to animals, as well as to the objects that are inanimate in nature but self-controlled. Such objects are, for example, mechanical appliances capable of performing independent actions (e.g. incubators and robots). Examples of +PPW Nominative subjects are given in (26 a) and (27 a). Instrumental subjects of A-Is appear as lacking the PPW feature; thus, the NPs *sobakoj* (dog-Instr.) and *robotami* (robots-Instr.) are excluded in (26 b) and (27 b).