

Non-canonical agreement in predicational copular clauses: Evidence from Polish

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In his influential paper arguing that finite verbs agree with *the highest accessible phrase* – not necessarily the subject – Bobaljik 2008: 303 classifies Russian as having “rather boring morphological case systems, where [morphological case] tracks GF [i.e., grammatical function] fairly neatly,” adding that “the interest comes from languages in which case and GF do not always line up”. We show that Slavic languages are, in fact, of interest: GF and case do not always line up. We demonstrate this by examining certain understudied or controversial copular constructions in Polish (but also present in Russian), in which the finite copula agrees with the $\langle e, t \rangle$ -type predicate – arguably, a complement of Pred – rather than the subject:

- (1) ... z Pauliny był niezły gagatek.
of Paulina.SG.F.GEN was.SG.M not.bad rascal.SG.M.NOM
‘Paulina (lit. of Paulina) was quite a rascal.’ (Polish Web 2019 via Sketch Engine)
- (2) To był prawdziwy skandal.
TO was.SG.M real scandal.SG.M.NOM
‘It was a real scandal.’ (National Corpus of Polish)
- (3) Leki to była ostateczność.
medicines.PL.M.NOM TO was.SG.F last-resort.SG.F.NOM
‘Medicines were a last resort.’ (Corpus of Contemporary Polish)

We argue that this pattern arises because the predicate happens to be *the highest accessible phrase in the relevant agreement domain*. We uncontroversially assume that the *agreement domain* in such sentences is TP and phrases *accessible* for agreement are nominative KPs. Below, we argue the predicates in (1)–(3) are the *highest* such accessible phrases.

In (1), neither the genitive *Pauliny* nor the PP *z Pauliny* is an accessible (nominative) phrase, only the nominative predicate *niezły gagatek* ‘quite a rascal’ is. Interestingly, the non-canonical PP[*z*] subject introduces a presupposition requiring the predicate to be evaluative (see (4)); omitting the evaluative adjective renders the sentence unacceptable (see (5)).

- (4) $\llbracket z \rrbracket = \lambda x_e. \lambda P_{\langle e, t \rangle} : \text{EVALUATIVE}(P). P_{\langle e, t \rangle}(x_e)$
- (5) Z Janka był #(*świetny*) lingwista.
of Janek.GEN was.SG.M excellent linguist.SG.M.NOM.
‘John was {a great linguist / #a linguist}.’

In (2) and (3), the subject is a demonstrative item that we call here to_n . The word *to* in these sentences systematically differs from *to* found in typical nominal positions (called here to_K), as summarised in (6). First, to_n cannot combine with adjectives (**Samo to był skandal*

- (6)
- | | to_K | to_n |
|------------------------------|--------|--------|
| in nominal positions | + | – |
| combines with adjectives | + | – |
| nominalises CPs | + | – |
| only ϕ -less antecedent | + | – |
- (7)
- $$\begin{array}{c}
 \text{KP } (=to_K) \\
 \swarrow \quad \searrow \\
 nP (=to_n) \quad K \\
 \swarrow \quad \searrow \\
 \pi \quad n
 \end{array}$$

‘This alone was a scandal’ vs.
✓ *Samo to mnie zaskoczyło* ‘This alone surprised me’). Second,
 to_n cannot serve as an overt nominal head of a CP (*[*To, że przyszedł,*] *był skandal* ‘That he came was a scandal’ vs. ✓[*To, że przyszedł,*] *mnie zaskoczyło* ‘That he came surprised me’).

We argue that these differences follow from the fact that to_n is structurally reduced: while to_K projects a full nominal projection (it is a KP, able to host adjectives and CP), to_n is the bare demonstrative base π (simply a referential feature, the root of feature geometry, Harley and Ritter 2002), just nominalised (see (7)). This allows us to explain the final, third difference: to_K can only refer to ϕ -less antecedents, which follows from the fact that it competes with personal pronouns (which must refer to ϕ -bearing antecedents): both personal pronouns and to_K are KPs, and hence they compete for exponence. In contrast, to_n can refer to any antecedent, including human, as it does not compete with personal pronouns. Hence,

one can say ✓*To był.SG.M miły chłopak.SG.M* ‘This (=to_n) was a nice man’, but not #*To mnie zaskoczyło* ‘This (=to_K) surprised me’, when referring to a man. Crucially, due to its lack of case, to_n is inaccessible for agreement, so agreement is again with the nominative predicate. Note that a demonstrative non-nominal base π is independently motivated, as it occurs, for instance, in demonstrative adverbs *t-ak* ‘this way’ and *t-u* ‘here’ and in the numeral *t-yle* ‘this much’. (Note also that, by contrast, to_K inflects for case as expected, e.g., *tego.GEN*, *temu.DAT*.)

Finally, in (3), the initial nominal projection (henceforth, KP₁) is base-generated outside TP – contrary to, for instance, Citko 2008 and Bondaruk 2013, but in line with Rutkowski 2006. This claim is supported by the fact that KP₁ blocks *wh*-movement and topicalisation across it – effects triggered precisely by the presence of KP₁, since such movement is possible across *to* in (2). These intervention effects would be unexpected if KP₁ were located within the TP, whether in Spec,TP or, as in the recent analysis of Russian *éto* by Burukina et al. 2024, inside a ‘big DP’ headed by *to*. (We show that all known arguments against the analysis saying that KP₁ is base-generated above TP are at best arguments against a *hanging topic* analysis of KP₁, and not against the more general claim that KP₁ is base-generated above TP.)

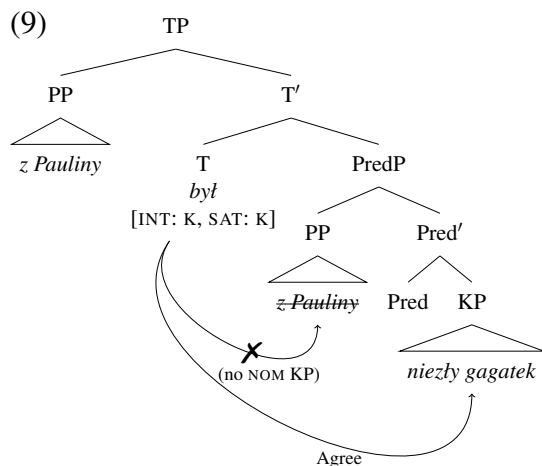
Non-canonical subjects (to_n, PP[z]) can only occur with the defective Pred_∅, which imposes no restrictions on its subject and assigns no case to the predicate (Citko 2008). KP subjects do not occur with it because there exists a non-defective Pred_{INS} – requiring a KP subject and assigning the instrumental case to the predicate (*Janek był lingwistą.INS* ‘John was a linguist’). KP subjects thus do not occur with Pred_∅ due to Pāṇinian blocking, given the dedicated Pred_{INS}.

Our analysis is further supported by long-distance agreement – a phenomenon that, to our knowledge, has not previously been analysed in the context of Slavic linguistics: see (8), where the matrix verb agrees with the nominative predicate embedded within its copular complement.

- (8) Marysia to {musiał / #chciał} być dobry lekarz.
 Mary.SG.F.NOM TO had. SG.M wanted.SG.M be.INF good doctor. SG.M.NOM
 ‘Mary {had / #wanted} to be a good doctor.’

We show that all three types of structures exhibit long-distance agreement when embedded under raising verbs. Interestingly, none of them can be embedded under control verbs (such as *chciał* ‘wanted.SG.M’ in (8)), which follows from the standard assumption that control verbs generate their own subjects in Spec,vP, rather than raising them from the PredP. Crucially, while lexical verbs normally combine with KP subjects, the defective Pred_∅ allows for non-KPs (PP, to_n).

We provide a formal analysis in terms of the interaction-satisfaction framework (e.g., Deal 2024) – see a sample derivation in (9) (for (1)). The probe on T (abbreviated to [INT: K, SAT: K] in (9)) interacts with nominative KPs and is immediately satisfied by such a nominative KP. The first such a nominative KP within the agreement domain of this probe is the predicate *niezły gagatek* ‘quite a rascal’, as the higher *z Pauliny* ‘of Paulina’ is a PP containing a genitive KP.



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