

# The Subjectival Surface-Syntactic Relation in Serbian

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## Abstract

The paper focuses on the notion of (surface) syntactic subject in Serbian within the syntactic dependency framework of the Meaning-Text linguistic theory. Properties of the subject are described and its text implementations illustrated with data from a variety of contemporary texts.

## 1 The Problem Stated

The aim of this paper is to describe and illustrate, from a syntactic dependency viewpoint, the notion of syntactic subject as applied to Serbian. By doing so, the paper puts to test the adequacy of the conceptual and formal tools of the Meaning-Text dependency syntax, hoping to contribute to a broader understanding of the general notion of syntactic subject itself.

Syntactic subject is the dependent element of the subjectival surface-syntactic relation, a major valence-controlled syntactic-dependency relation. It is the most privileged dependent element of the clause in that it possesses properties that do not accrue to any other clause element. Understandably, the notion of syntactic subject has been vigorously investigated, especially in typological/cross-linguistic perspective, for instance, in Keenan (1976), Kibrik (1977), Foley & Van Valin (1997), Mithun & Chafe (1999), Lazard (2009), Creissels (2014) and Mel'čuk (2014), to mention just a few influential papers. Yet, a number of issues surrounding the notion remain controversial: null subjects, quirky subjects, psychological vs. grammatical subject, and so on; even the cross-linguistic nature of the notion has been questioned. For the viewpoint taken on some of these issues in this paper, see the next section.

As for the syntactic subject in Serbian, even though it has been described in studies such as Piper *et al.* (2005: 487-491), Klajn (2005: 225-227 and 256-257), and Mrazovac & Vukadinović

(2009: 525-527), the latter being dependency-oriented, to the best of my knowledge, there has been no comprehensive account of this syntactic role—at any rate, not in a formalized dependency framework of the type used here. For Croatian, studies dedicated specifically to issues related to the syntactic subject include Kučanda (1998), Buljan & Kučanda (2004) and Belaj & Kučanda (2007); given the proximity of the two languages, the findings for Croatian are valid for Serbian as well.

The research reported in the paper is part of a larger project on identification and description of surface-syntactic relations in Serbian. The linguistic data used in the research comes from two contemporary novels (Žurić 2009, Arsenijević 2013), the Corpus of Serbian language, and Serbian Internet pages, accessed through Google searches; some examples are my own.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical framework of the paper and introduces the necessary notions; Section 3 describes and illustrates the subjecthood in Serbian; Section 4 formulates a conclusion.

## 2 The Framework

Meaning-Text linguistic theory (Mel'čuk 1974, 1988, 2012-2013-2015; Kahane 2003) is a framework for the construction of functional models of languages, called *Meaning-Text Models*. These are dependency-based models, making use of three major dependency types: semantic, syntactic and morphological (Mel'čuk, 2009).

In a binary phrase  $L_1$ — $L_2$ ,  $L_1$  is the syntactic governor of  $L_2$ , its dependent, if  $L_1$  determines to a greater extent the passive syntactic valence, or distribution, of the entire phrase; we then write:  $L_1$ —*synt*→ $L_2$ . In most cases the syntactic governor also determines the dependent's linear position in the clause with respect to itself and/or its other dependents.

A Meaning-Text linguistic model has multi-stratal and modular organization, i.e., it presup-

poses several levels of representation of utterances and consists of sets or rules, or modules, operating between adjacent representation levels. In syntax, two representational levels are foreseen: deep- and surface syntactic levels. As mentioned above, the subjectival relation is one of valence-controlled surface-syntactic relations [= SSyntRel]. Valence-controlled, or actantial, relations are opposed to circumstantial relations, this opposition being fundamental in syntax; for the Meaning-Text take on actants, see Mel'čuk (2004). Unlike deep-syntactic relations, which are language independent, SSyntRels are language specific and need to be discovered empirically. Special criteria and tests have been developed to this end within the Meaning-Text framework; for their application for distinguishing the valence-controlled SSyntRels in French, see Iordanskaja & Mel'čuk (2009). Mille (2014) follows largely the same methodology for establishing the SSyntRels for Spanish.

A given SSyntRel is described by stating the properties of its dependent element. Building upon the seminal work of Keenan (1976), Mel'čuk (2014) establishes the properties of the syntactic subject, dividing them into *defining* (= *coding*) properties and *characterizing* (= *behavioral*) properties.

Defining properties of the SyntSubj are specified along the parameters given in Table 1. For a sentence element *L* to be declared the subject (in a given language), at least some of these parameters must apply to it (i.e., have the positive value).

Characterizing properties concern the subject's specific behavior in various syntactic operations: pronominalization, ellipsis, passivization, dislocation, extraction, etc. (for a fuller list, see Table 2 below). These properties accrue only to *prototypical subjects*, i.e., they are not necessarily valid for all subjects in a language and can apply to clause elements other than the subject.

The prototypical subject is the subject that is the least constrained in its co-occurrence with the MV; in other words, the one that “passes” with the highest number of governors. Thus, the prototypical subject in Serbian is a noun in the nominative case because an  $N_{\text{NOM}}$  can function as the subject of any verb, but an infinitive, for instance, is not a prototypical subject in this language because a  $V_{\text{INF}}$  can be the subject of only a small number of verbs (copular and some modal verbs).

1.	<i>L</i> depends only on the MV
2.	<i>L</i> cannot be omitted from the SyntS
3.	<i>L</i> has a particular linear position with respect to the MV
4.	<i>L</i> controls the agreement of the MV
5.	<i>L</i> 's grammatical case is controlled by the MV
6.	<i>L</i> 's morphological links with the MV are affected by the MV's inflection
7.	<i>L</i> 's pronominalization affects its morphological links with the MV

Table 1: *Defining Properties of the SyntSubj* (Mel'čuk 2014: 175)

The recourse to the prototypical subject means that in our approach the subject is characterized inductively: first the prototypical subjects are identified, and then the less typical ones are determined by analogy, as those sharing at least some properties of the prototypical subjects. (This is also Keenan's 1976 legacy.)

The above inventory of subject properties—including both the defining properties and the standard characterizing properties—is universal (= sufficient to identify the subject in any language); their specific combination for a given language, however, has to be discovered empirically, as it differs from one language to the next.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, the subject in any given language may have some other, language-specific, characterizing properties.

**Definition:** Syntactic subject (Mel'čuk 2014: 179)

The syntactic subject is the most privileged dependent of the Main Verb in (a clause of) a language *L*; its privileged status is determined by a list of properties elaborated specifically for *L*.

Under the postulate that there always is such a thing as the most privileged clause element, the above definition of the syntactic subject implies its existence in every language. Not everyone

<sup>1</sup> In the literature, there is a wide consensus as to subjecthood properties; cf., for instance, those mentioned in Creissels (2014: 3-4): marking by a special grammatical case and/or indexation on the MV (i.e., imposition of agreement on the MV) in conjunction with particular syntactic behavior: reflexivization, serialization, raising/control, topicalization, focalization, relativization, etc. It should be noted, though, that not everyone separates defining and characterizing properties as strictly as we do.

shares this point of view; thus, the universality of the syntactic subject is not recognized by a number of researches working in the typological perspective, including Kibrik (1997), Lazard (2009) and Creissels (2014). (This attitude is actually not new; already Martinet (1972) asked whether linguists should dispense with the notion.) The reluctance stems from a particular way in which these researchers approach the problem. Either they strive to isolate the core properties of the syntactic subject that are shared by all languages—which turns out to be impossible.<sup>2</sup> Or, while readily admitting that a universal definition of the syntactic subject is logically possible, they are not interested in finding one, focusing instead on (the limits of) cross-linguistic variation in the organization of the clause<sup>3</sup>. But for the proponents of Meaning-Text approach, this is exactly what is needed: a universally applicable, rigorously defined notion of subject. Because it is believed that many of the controversies surrounding the syntactic subjects arise precisely from the fact that in virtually all of the relevant linguistic literature the correspondent notion simply is not clearly defined.

This is not to deny the well-known fact that the identification of the subject is problematic in some languages: examples include syntactically ergative (or in our terminology, *deep ergative*) languages, as well as languages in which the communicative structure is the prevalent factor of clause organization. But even in such difficult cases, Meaning-Text approach does a very good job; see, for instance, Beck (2000) for the syntactic subject in Lushootseed, and case studies of subjecthood in several “problematic” languages (Amele, Archi, Lezgian, etc.) in Mel’čuk (2014).

A serious consideration in favor of maintaining the notion of syntactic subject, even though descriptions that do not make use of it are possible, is its utility for cross-linguistic comparisons.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Thus, in Lazard (2009: 152), we find (translation is mine–JM): “[...] the variations [in the inventory of the properties of the subject across languages–JM] are so great that it seems impossible to identify a single property that could be considered as defining the subject in all languages”.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Creissels (2014: 1-2): “[...] it is not about a quest for a universal notion of subject, which, if conveniently defined, should be identifiable in any language [...]”.

<sup>4</sup> As (Beck 2000: 317) puts it succinctly: “While treatments of Lushootseed grammar which avoid the term [syntactic subject–the author] meet the

### 3 Subjectival SSyntRel in Serbian

In this section I will describe and illustrate the properties of the SSynt-Subject in Serbian (3.1), as well as its implementation in the clause (3.2). I will start with some basic data about the language.

Serbian has three general properties relevant for our topic:

1) It is a PRO-Drop language, i.e., it features the obligatory deletion of a communicatively unmarked pronominal subject.

2) It has a number of impersonal sentence patterns containing a semantically empty zero subject.

3) It is a flexible word-order language in which the subject can occupy any linear position in the clause as a function of specific communicative conditions. The basic, communicatively neutral, word order in a simple declarative clause is SV(O) in clauses with a Theme ~ Rheme division, and V(O)S in all-rhematic clauses.

#### 3.1 Properties of the SSynt-Subject in Serbian

First the subject’s defining properties are discussed, followed by its characterizing properties.

##### 3.1.1 Defining Properties of the SSynt-Subject

The subject in Serbian possesses six out of seven defining subjecthood properties listed in Table 1 above.<sup>5</sup>

###### • Exclusive Dependence on the Clause Predicate

In a prototypical clause, whose head (= predicate) is a finite verb, the subject depends on this verb; all the examples in this paper except (1) illustrate this case. In a verbless sentence, the subject depends on the item in the role of the predicate: an interjection (1a) or a presentative (1b). Example (1b) also illustrates a non-canonical syntactic subject—in the genitive case; on genitive subjects in Serbian, see Subsection 3.2.2.

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criterion of language-specific descriptive adequacy, syntactic subject remains an important theoretical concept and a necessary benchmark for discourse-analysis and cross-linguistic comparison”.

<sup>5</sup> It lacks property 7: the pronominalization of the subject does not affect in any way the MV’s morphology. As an example of language where the MV is so affected, we can cite Breton, where the MV agrees with an elided subject pronoun, but does not agree with one overtly present in the clause.

(1) a. *A on←subj(ectival)→hop kroz prozor.* Lit. ‘And he off through window.’ = ‘And off he went through the window.’

b. *Eno←subj→Jovana.* Lit. ‘There of.Jovan.’ ‘There comes Jovan.’

• **Non-Omissibility from the Syntactic Structure**

Note that we are talking here about the non-omissibility of the subject from the syntactic structure of the clause—rather than the clause itself. Thus, a communicatively unmarked pronominal subject in a Pro-DROP language and the subject of a verb in the imperative, which do not appear on the surface, are present in the corresponding syntactic structures—if the language in question has agreement;<sup>6</sup> this is the case in Serbian. Sentences (2a), with an elided 1sg personal pronoun, and (2b), with this pronoun overtly present, have the SSyntSs shown in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

(2) [Q: *Zašto?* ‘Why?’]

a. *Ne zna+m<sub>1,SG</sub>.* Lit. ‘Not know.’

b. *Ja←subj[ne]→zna+m<sub>1,SG</sub>.* (*Ali neko možda zna.*) Lit. ‘I not know. (But someone perhaps does.)’

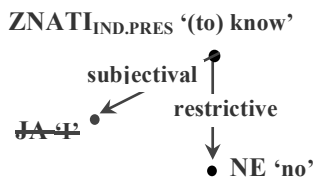


Figure 1: SSyntS of (2a)

The communicatively unmarked 1sg pronoun in the role the SSynt-Subject is earmarked for deletion (as indicated by a strikethrough of the corresponding node label) and “dropped” in the subsequent stages of text synthesis.

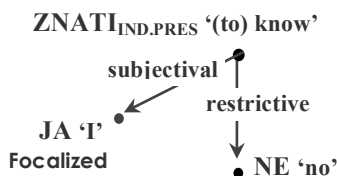


Figure 2: SSyntS of (2b)

The same pronoun in the same syntactic role, if communicatively marked as focalized, “survives” and eventually surfaces in the clause as an overt pronominal subject.

• **Specific Linear Position with Respect to the MV**

In Serbian, linear position of clause elements is determined more by communicative than syntactic factors. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, in an all-Rhematic clause, the MV is clause-initial, i.e., the Subject follows it, but in a communicatively articulated clause, a Subject expressing the Theme is clause-initial, i.e., it precedes the MV. Both of these states of affairs are illustrated in (3a). A Subject expressing the Rhematic focus is clause-final, i.e., it follows the MV, as shown (3b).

(3) a. [*Zatutnjaše←subj→bubnjevi,*]<sub>Rh</sub> [*oglasise←subj→frulica,*]<sub>Rh</sub> [*ali je oduvaše←subj→trube*]<sub>Rh</sub>. [*Trube*]<sub>Th</sub>←*subj*→[*su*]<sub>(MV)</sub> [*za sada samo otpuhivale*]<sub>Rh</sub>, *dok ...* Lit. ‘Thundered drums, was.heard flute, but her blew.away trumpets. Trumpets are for now only having. blowing.in.response, while ...’ = ‘There was a thunder of drums, there sounded a flute, but it was blown away by trumpets. The trumpets, for the time being, were only blowing in response, while ...’

b. [*Prvu nagradu dobio je*]<sub>(MV)</sub>]<sub>Th</sub>←*subj*→[*pesnik Z.G.*]<sub>Rh</sub>. Lit. ‘First prize-ACC having gotten is poet Z.G.’ = ‘The first prize went to the poet Z.G.’

Given the fact that the subject’s position vis-a-vis the MV can be determined, at least partially, by the communicative structure (= is not exclusively determined by the MV), does the Parameter 3 apply in Serbian (and other communicatively oriented languages)? I believe that it does because, if we exclude all-Rhematic sentences (namely, on the basis of their lesser frequency) and consider the simplest sentence possible, like [*Jovan*]<sub>Th</sub> [*je bolestan*]<sub>Rh</sub> ‘Jovan is sick’, in Serbian, the subject precedes the MV, whereas in Arabic, for example, it follows the MV.

• **Control of the Agreement of the V**

The subject controls the agreement of the MV in number and person (4a); in compound tenses, it also controls the agreement of the participle—in number and gender (4b-e). Example (4c) illustrates a more complex case of agreement, with the subject quantified by a numeral. In (4d)-(4e), we see the singular neuter agreement of the participle with a zero empty subject (see Subsection 3.2.1) and an infinitive/clausal subject, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> In languages that have the MV agreement with the subject, all sentences, including so-called “impersonal” sentences, necessarily have a subject, at least in their SSyntSs. But in a language without agreement, such as Lezguian, subjectless sentences—with no subject postulated in the corresponding SSyntSs—do exist (Mel’čuk 1988: 228-230).

- (4) a. *Dete*<sub>(N, neut)NOM.SG</sub> ← **subj**–*spava*+ $\emptyset$ <sub>3.SG</sub>. ‘The child is sleeping.’ ~ *Deca*<sub>(N)NOM.PL</sub> ← **subj**–*spava*+*ju*<sub>3.PL</sub>. ‘The children are sleeping.’
- b. *Dete*<sub>(N, neut)NOM.SG</sub> ← **subj**–*je*<sub>(MV)3.SG</sub> *spava*+*l*<sub>PAST</sub>+*o*<sub>NEUT.SG</sub>. ‘The child was sleeping.’ ~ *Deca*<sub>(N, neut)NOM.PL</sub> ← **subj**–*su*<sub>(MV)3.PL</sub> *spava*+*l*<sub>PAST</sub>+*a*<sub>NEUT.PL</sub>. ‘The children were sleeping.’
- c. *Osta*+*l*<sub>PAST</sub>+*e*<sub>FEM.PL</sub> *su*<sub>(MV)3.PL</sub>–  
[*dve*]**subj**→*jabuke*<sub>(N, fem)GEN.SG</sub>. Lit. ‘Were left two apple.’ ~ *Osta*+*l*+*o*<sub>NEUT.SG</sub> *je*<sub>(MV)3.SG</sub>–[*pet*]–  
**subj**→*jabuka*<sub>(N, fem)GEN.PL</sub>. Lit. ‘Was left two apples.’
- d. *Bi*+*l*<sub>PAST</sub>+*o*<sub>NEUT.SG</sub> *mi je*<sub>(MV)3.SG</sub>–**subj**→ $\emptyset$ <sub>(Pron, 3.SG.NEUT)</sub> *hladno*. Lit. ‘Being.been to.me is cold’ = ‘I was cold.’
- e. *Otići*<sub>(V)INF</sub> <[*Da se ode*]<sub>COMPLETIVE.CL</sub>> ← **subj**–*nije*<sub>(MV)3.SG</sub> *bi*+*l*<sub>PAST</sub>+*o*<sub>NEUT.SG</sub> *moгуće*. Lit. ‘To.leave <That REFL leaves> not being.been possible’ = ‘To leave <Leaving> was not possible.’

• **Government for Case by the MV**

Most often, a nominal subject in Serbian receives the nominative case imposed by the MV. In some special contexts it receives the genitive case; see below, examples (12)-(15).

• **Demotion Under Passivization**

Under passivization of the MV, the subject is demoted to the role of the Agentive Complement, while the former direct object gets promoted to the subject position. This is a standard feature of the subject of a passive verb and needs not be illustrated.

**3.1.2 Characterizing properties of the SSynt-Subject**

Recall that characterizing properties are valid only for a prototypical subject, which in Serbian is a noun in the nominative case [=  $N_{NOM}$ ]. Table 2 lists some of the characterizing properties of the Serbian subject.

1.	Target of cliticization	✗
2.	Target of relativization	✓
3.	Controller of reflexivization	✓
4.	Target of (pseudo-)clefting	✗
5.	Controller of an attributive actantial complement	✓
6.	Controller of anaphora	✓
7.	Controller of ellipsis in coordination	✓
8.	Left/right dislocation	✓
9.	Raising	✓
10.	Extraction from a completive clause	✓
11.	Reaction to negation	✗

Table 2: Characterizing Properties of the prototypical SyntSubj in Serbian

Properties 1, 4 and 11 do not apply: property 1 is not applicable because Serbian personal pronouns have no clitic forms in the nominative case, and property 4 because this language lacks the corresponding syntactic operations altogether. As for property 11, although some negated verbs can take either the genitive subject or the canonical nominative subject, this behavior cannot be tied exclusively to the negation since the same verbs in the positive polarity also allow for the genitive ~ nominative variation in the case of the subject; see example (12b) and (13a).

Illustrations for properties 3, 7-10 follow. (In the examples (5) and (6), the syntactic subject is boxed.)

• **Controller of Reflexivization**

- (5) a. *Jovan<sub>i</sub>* *pije svoj<sub>i</sub>* < $\neq$  *njegov<sub>i</sub>*> *čaj* Lit. ‘Jovan<sub>i</sub> drinks self<sub>i</sub> < $\neq$  his<sub>j</sub>> tea’ = ‘Jovan drinks his (= ‘his own’) tea.’

vs.

- b. *Jovanu<sub>i</sub>* *se pije \*svoj* <*njegov<sub>i</sub>*> *čaj*  
Lit. ‘To.Jovan<sub>i</sub> REFL drinks \*self<sub>i</sub> <his<sub>i</sub>> tea’ = ‘Jovan feels like drinking his tea.’

In (5a), the special form of the possessive determiner (SVOJ), is used, necessarily co-referential with the subject (JOVAN). But in (5b), with the MV in the reflexive form, within the desiderative (‘feel-like’) construction, where ČAJ, rather than JOVAN, is the subject, SVOJ is ungrammatical. The correct possessive form here is NJEGOV, which has an ambiguous reading (‘his own’ or ‘that person’s’), just like in English.

• **Controller of Ellipsis in Coordination**

- (6) a. *Petar<sub>i</sub>* *je sreo Kostu i rekao mu (je)...* Lit. ‘P. is having.met K. and having.told him (is) ...’ = ‘P. met K. and told him...’

vs.

- b. \**Petar<sub>i</sub>* *je sreo Kostu i *on<sub>i</sub>* mu je rekao...*  
Lit. ‘P. is having.met K. and he him is having.told ...’ = ‘P. met K. and he told him...’

As can be concluded from the ungrammaticality of (6b), under coordination, ellipsis of the subject in the second conjunct is obligatory (and that of the auxiliary, optional).

• **Dislocation**

Left dislocation is illustrated in (7a-b), and right dislocation in (7c); the dislocated element is boxed.

- (7) a. Colloq. *Jovan<sub>i</sub>* *on<sub>i</sub>* ← **subj**–*je super momak*  
Lit. ‘Jovan he is super guy’ = ‘As for J., he is a swell guy.’
- b. Colloq. *Francuzi<sub>i</sub>* *oni<sub>i</sub>* ← **subj**–*ručaju*<sub>(MV)</sub> *u podne*. ‘The French they lunch at noon’ = ‘As for French, they have lunch at noon.’
- c. *Nije*–**subj**→*on<sub>i</sub> naivan, taj tvoj* *drug<sub>i</sub>*. Lit. ‘Not.is he naïve, that your friend.’ = ‘He is not naïve, that friend or yours.’

Left dislocation, frowned upon by purists, is freely used in colloquial speech; its discourse function is *topic shifting* or *topic layering* (terminology taken from Delais-Roussarie *et al.* 2004). Right dislocation, not stylistically marked, serves the discourse function of *topic back-grounding*.

• **Raising**

(8) a. *Izgleda* [*da je*<sub>(MV)</sub>←**subj**→*Jovan bolestan* <*u pravu, to zaboravio*>]. Lit. ‘Seems that is J. sick/in right/this having.forgotten’ = ‘It seems that J. is sick/is right/has forgotten this.’

b. *Jovan*←**subj**→*izgleda*<sub>(MV)</sub> *bolestan* <*\*u pravu, \*to zaboravio*>. ‘Jovan seems sick <right, to have forgotten that>.’

Raising of the subject is allowed in Serbian only out of the subordinate clause whose MV is a copula controlling an adjectival attributive complement (“N+V<sub>(copula)</sub>+Adj”); it is thus more limited than in English or French, for instance, where the sentences corresponding to the starred Serbian examples are fully acceptable.

• **Extraction from a Completive Clause**

(9) a. *Ko misliš* [*da ko*←**subj**→*dolazi*]? Lit. ‘Who (you) think [that ~~who~~ comes]? = ‘Who do you think is coming?’

b. *Ko kažeš* [*da ko*←**subj**→*voli Petra*]? Lit. ‘Who (you) say [that ~~who~~ loves P.]? = ‘Who do you say loves P.?’

c. *Šta veruješ* [*da šta*←**subj**→[*se*]→*desilo*]? Lit. ‘What (you) believe [that what REFL having.occurred]? = ‘What do you believe happened?’

Subject extraction from a completive clause seems to be unrestricted at least with communication and opinion verbs in the matrix clause; the precise conditions under which this operation is allowed remain to be determined. From a discursive viewpoint, the extraction makes the subject of the subordinate clause the rhematic focus of the entire sentence.

Discussing the prototypical subject in Croatian, Belaj & Kučanda (2007: 4) ascribe to it only the defining properties 4 and 5 from our Table 1. As one of the subject’s behavioral properties, they indicate the following one: the subject is the addressee of the imperative provided it is the Agent or someone pragmatically conceived of as acting as an Agent. It is questionable, however, whether this is a purely syntactic property. Typologically, the syntactic subject of an imperative is not necessarily the Addressee: see Mel’čuk (1988: 194-196).

### 3.2 Implementation of the SSynt-Subject in Serbian

In addition to a prototypical implementation by an N<sub>NOM</sub>, the SSynt-Subject can be implemented in Serbian by items 2-7 in Table 3 below, some of which have already been illustrated in the preceding discussion.

In what follows, I will illustrate two less usual types of subject: zero (nominative) subjects, both semantically full and empty, and subjects in the genitive case.

1.	N <sub>NOM</sub>
2.	N <sub>GEN</sub>
3.	N <sub>(quant)NOM</sub> <Adv <sub>-quant</sub> > [→N <sub>GEN</sub> ]
4.	PREP→N <sub>GEN</sub> [→Num] <sup>7</sup>
5.	Clause (completive, interrogative, headless relative)
6.	V <sub>INF</sub>
7.	Direct speech fragment

Table 3: Implementation of the SyntSubj in Serbian

#### 3.2.1 Zero Subjects

These subjects are genuine lexemes, not to be confounded with null subjects of the generative syntax. The fact that there are lexemes that can only function as subjects speaks to the importance of this syntactic role. In Serbian, there are two such lexemes.

- Ø<sup>‘people’</sup><sub>(Pron, masc, 3,PL)</sub> is a semantically full zero subject. This is an **indefinite** personal (as opposed to **impersonal**) pronoun, meaning, roughly, ‘some unspecified people’ (cf. Fr. ON and Ger. MAN).<sup>8</sup> It is used within the “normal” personal construction and imposes the 3pl agreement on the MV and (in compound tenses) the plural masculine agreement on the participle.

(10) a. Ø<sup>‘people’</sup><sub>(Pron, masc, 3,PL)</sub>←**subj**→*Kaž+u*<sub>(MV)3PL</sub> *da je to davno bilo*. Lit. ‘Say that is that long.ago being.been. = ‘People <They#2> say that happened long ago.’

b. *O tome* Ø<sup>‘people’</sup><sub>(Pron, masc, 3,PL)</sub>←**subj**→*su*<sub>(MV)3PL</sub> *pisa+l*<sub>PAST</sub>+*i*<sub>MASC, PL</sub> *u novinama*. Lit. ‘About that are having.written in newspapers.’ = ‘They#2 wrote about that in newspapers.’

<sup>7</sup> Some prepositions allowed in this construction: OKO/CIRKA ‘around’, DO ‘up.to’, OD ‘starting.from’, PREKO ‘over’, etc.

<sup>8</sup> 3pl indefinite pronouns, both zero and non-zero, are common in the world’s languages (see Siewierska, 2010); they are sometimes (incorrectly) called impersonal pronouns.

This pronoun is of course not interchangeable in texts with the substitute 3pl personal pronoun form *oni* ‘they’ = ‘entities/facts the Speaker mentioned in the previous discourse, whose referents the Addressee can identify’. (English has an overt indefinite pronoun—THEY#2 in the translation of the examples in (10)—that corresponds to Serbian  $\emptyset^{\text{‘people’}}$  (Pron, masc. 3, PL).)

- $\emptyset$  (Pron, neut, 3, SG) is a semantically empty zero subject. This is an indefinite impersonal pronoun, which means that it underlies the so-called *impersonal construction*, imposing the 3sg agreement on the MV and the singular neuter agreement on the participle.

- (11) a. *Kreta*+*l*<sub>PAST</sub>+*o*<sub>NEUT,3,SG</sub> *se* [*je*<sub>(MV)3,SG</sub>–  
subj→ $\emptyset$  (Pron, neut, 3, SG)] *u* 8. Lit. ‘Being.left REFL is at 8’ = ‘The departure was at 8.’
- b. *Vesni se* [*je*<sub>(MV)3,SG</sub>–subj→ $\emptyset$  (Pron, neut, 3, SG)]<sup>9</sup>  
*spava*+*l*<sub>PAST</sub>+*o*<sub>NEUT,3,SG</sub>. Lit. ‘To.Vesna REFL is being.slept’ = ‘Vesna was sleepy.’
- c. *Zuja*+*l*<sub>PAST</sub>+*o*<sub>NEUT,3,SG</sub> *mi je*<sub>(MV)3,SG</sub>–  
subj→ $\emptyset$  (Pron, neut, 3, SG) *u* *ušima*. Lit. ‘Being.hummed.to.me is in ears’ = ‘It was humming in my ears’.

The impersonal construction is used in Serbian with (among other things): 1) meteorological verbs and expressions; 2) some verbal voices, such as absolute suppressive (11a); 2) some verbal derivations, such as desiderative, aka *involuntary state construction* ((11b) and (5b)), and 3) verbs and expressions denoting some sensations ((10c and (4d)) and feelings.

Impersonal constructions have received a widely varying treatment in the literature. Thus, (11a) is considered by some to be a “subjectless sentence” (Radovanović 1990, or else a “sentence with a generalized Agent” (Tanasić (2003). Sentences like those in (11b)-(11c) are sometimes described as featuring non-canonical subjects (*Vesni* ‘to.Vesna’ and *mi* ‘to.me’, respectively), variously called *dative*, *oblique*, *quirky* or *quasi* subjects (see Belaj & Kučanda, 2007 for Croatian, Rivero & Milojević-Sheppard, 2006 for Slovenian, and Moore & Perlmutter, 2000 for Russian). For us, however, the MV agreement is the key: since the MV clearly does not agree with the noun in the dative, the latter cannot be the subject; more on this at the very end of this section. For a treatment of

<sup>9</sup> Sentences (11a) and (11b) actually have a slightly different surface form, from which the clitic auxiliary *je* ‘is’ is deleted; the deletion happens in order to avoid the illegitimate clitic sequence *\*se je*. This is an interesting and rare case of deletion of the MV from the clause.

impersonal constructions in the Meaning-Text framework, see Milićević (2013) and (2009: 107-113).

### 3.2.2 Subjects in the Genitive Case

In what follows, I will distinguish the genuine use of the genitive to mark the syntactic subject, i.e., such that the subject is assigned the genitive case exclusively by the main predicate, from two apparently similar but very different situations: the genitive of the subject used in semantic capacity and in the context of quantification.

#### • Genuine genitive of the subject—imposed by the clause predicate

As we have seen, verbless sentences of type (1b) have the subject in the genitive case, assigned to it by the presentative functioning as the main predicate. In full-fledged sentences, subjects in the genitive case are encountered with the existential verbs IMATI/BITI ‘there.be’:

- (12) a. *Ima*<sub>(MV)</sub>–[*li*]–subj→*vode*<sub>(N, fem)GEN,SG</sub>  
<*\*voda*<sub>NOM,SG</sub>> *na Marsu?* Lit. ‘Be INTERR of water <*\*water*> on Mars?’ = ‘Is there water on Mars?’
- b. *Biće/Neće*<sub>(MV)</sub>–subj→*kiše*<sub>(N, fem)GEN,SG</sub>  
<*kiša*<sub>NOM,SG</sub>> *za vikend*. Lit. ‘Will.be/Will.not.be of.rain <rain> this weekend’ = ‘It will rain on the weekend.’

These verbs are suppletive in the following sense: IMATI (lit. ‘to have’) is used in the present tense, BITI (lit. ‘to be’) in the past and the future. The former takes only an N<sub>GEN</sub> as the subject, while the latter can also take a nominative subject—in some restricted contexts, with a slight difference in meaning (for the time being, I cannot make this statement more precise). This is a case bordering on the semantic use of genitive, to be discussed immediately below.

#### • Genitive of the subject used in semantic capacity

In some specific cases, for instance, with verbs having privative meaning, like NEDOSTAJATI ‘(to) lack’ or FALITI ‘(to) lack’, the subject can appear either in the canonical nominative or in the genitive, this alternation being accompanied by a semantic difference.

- (13) a. *Tebi (ne) nedostaje strpljenj*+*a*<sub>SG,GEN</sub>  
<*strpljenje*+ $\emptyset$ <sub>NOM,SG</sub>> Lit. To.you (not) lacks some.patience <patience>. = ‘You (do not) lack patience.’
- b. *Zafali*+*l*<sub>PAST</sub>+*o*<sub>NEUT,3,SG</sub> *mi je*<sub>(MV)3,SG</sub>–  
subj→*hleb*+*a*<sub>GEN,SG</sub> <*Zafali*+*o*<sub>PAST</sub>+ $\emptyset$ <sub>MASC,3,SG</sub>  
*mi je*<sub>(MV)3,SG</sub>–subj→*hleb*+ $\emptyset$ <sub>NOM,SG</sub>> Lit. Being.lacked to.me is some.bread <bread>.

In (13a), with the N<sub>GEN</sub> as the subject, the meaning conveyed is ‘You have some patience

(but not enough)', while with the  $N_{\text{NOM}}$  as the subject the meaning is 'You have no patience'; the same difference is observed in (13b). Here, the structural case is overridden, as it were, for semantic reasons: the genitive expresses more than it normally does ('a part of'), and the same is true for the nominative ('the whole').<sup>10</sup> This is different from what we observe in Russian, where the corresponding verbs take only a genitive subject and where the partial ~ total ambiguity persists: *Mne ne xvataet bumagi* < \*bumaga > Lit. 'To.me not suffice of.paper < \*paper >' = 'I don't have enough paper' or 'I do not have paper at all'.

Antonić (2005) treats both (12) and (13) as impersonal constructions, on the grounds of the default, 3sg neuter, agreement of the participle in compound tenses.

• **Genitive of the subject in the context of quantification**

A subject quantified by a numeral other than 1 or ending in 1 gets automatically the genitive case. This state of affairs is illustrated in (14), as well as in (4c).

- (14) a. *Trenutno se u bioskopu "Zvezda" prikazuje*<sub>(MV)</sub>-subj-[tri]→*film+a*<sub>(N)GEN.SG.</sub>  
Lit. 'Currently REFL in cinema "Zvezda" shows three movie' = 'Currently, three movies are playing in the cinema "Zvezda".'  
b. *Doći će*<sub>(MV)</sub>-subj→*oko*<sub>(Prep)</sub> *deset zvanic+a*<sub>(N)GEN.PL.</sub> Lit. 'Will.come around ten invitees' = 'Around ten invitees will come.'

The subjects FILM 'movie' and ZVANICA 'invitee' are imposed the genitive case (as well as the number) by the numerals<sup>11</sup>. But, while they are morphologically governed by the numerals, the nouns govern the latter syntactically.

Finally, note that quantifying nouns/adverbs, like those in (15), appear themselves in the role of syntactic subject, taking an obligatory  $N_{\text{GEN}}$  as their complement.

- (15) a. *Binu zaveja*<sub>(MV)</sub>-subj→*milion*<sub>(N, Quant)</sub> *šarenih konfet+a*<sub>(N)GEN.PL.</sub> Lit. 'The scene snowed.under a million of multi-colored confetti' = 'The scene was showered by a million of multi-colored confetti.'

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the same phenomenon occurring in *Imate li struj+e* <sub>SG.GEN</sub> < *struj+u* <sub>SG.ACC</sub> >?, with the direct object in the genitive or the accusative, which mean, respectively, 'Do you have power right now?', and 'Are you on the power grid?'

<sup>11</sup> Strictly speaking, the subject in (14b) is the preposition, rather than the noun in the genitive, since the dependency arrow (in the corresponding SSynt-structure) enters the node labeled by the preposition. I will allow myself to ignore this fact here.

- b. *Bez krova nad glavom ostalo je*<sub>(MV)</sub>-subj→*mnogo*<sub>(Adv, Quant)</sub> *ljud+i*<sub>(N)GEN.PL.</sub> Lit. 'Without roof above head stayed is many people' = 'Many people were left without a roof above their heads.'

I will conclude this section by illustrating the production of sentence (11c) within a Meaning-Text linguistic model of Serbian, starting from its Semantic Structure [= SemS] and "going up" to the Deep-Syntactic Structure [= DSyntS] and the Surface-Syntactic Structure [= SSyntS].

Figure 3 shows the SemS underlying the verbs of unpleasant sensations, such as ZUJATI '(to) hum' featured in (11c). The corresponding situation has two participants: the Experiencer of the sensation ('X') and the Body Part in which the sensation is localized ('Y'), representing, respectively, the verb's semantic actants (SemA) 1 and 2. (For ease of reading, the SemS is written in English although, strictly speaking, it should contain semantemes of Serbian.)

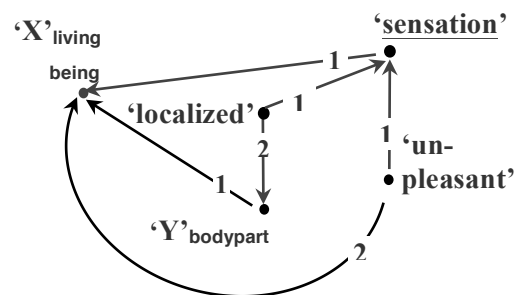


Figure 3: Incomplete SemS of (11c)

In the transition towards the DSyntS (Figure 4), the Experiencer is mapped onto the DeepSyntA II, and the Body Part, to the DSyntA III. At this stage, there is no DSynt-actant corresponding to the surface-syntactic subject.

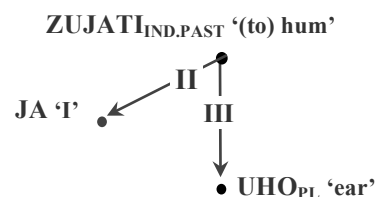


Figure 4: DSyntS of (11c)

This mapping is done using the information in the Government Pattern [= GP] of the verb ZUJATI, which is part of its dictionary entry:

$X_{\text{Experiencer}} \Leftrightarrow \text{II}$	$Y_{\text{Bodypart}} \Leftrightarrow \text{III}$
-indir-objectival → N-DAT	-obj.oblique → u <sub>in</sub> N-LOC

Figure 5: GP of ZUJATI '(to) hum'



The first row in the GP indicates the verb's diathesis, i.e., the correspondence between its SemAs and its DSyntAs; this correspondence is known in other frameworks as *linking*.

The implementation of DSyntAs by concrete SSynt constructions intervenes in the transition towards the SSyntS, using the information indicated in the second row of the GP above: the Experiencer ends up being an indirect object, and the Body Part gets the position of an oblique object. It is at this stage that the empty zero subject is introduced (by a special syntactic rule)—for the purposes of MV agreement. The resulting SSyntS is shown in Figure 6.

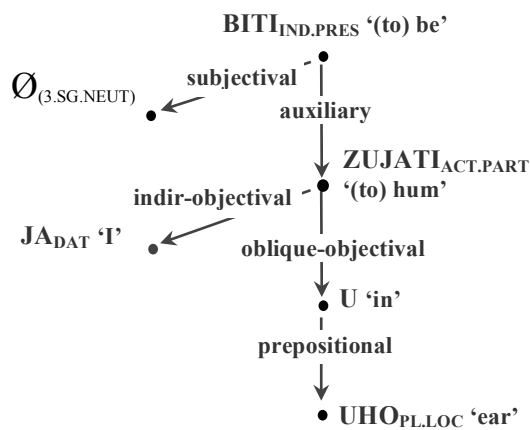


Figure 6: SSyntS of (11c)

As one can see, what is “quirky” is not the subject itself (at least not in the usual sense of the dative subject, although an empty zero subject is perhaps as deserving of the label), but the linking: the fact that in this case the Experiencer fails to correspond to DSyntA I of the verb, which itself corresponds to the SSynt subject.

#### 4 Conclusion

The syntactic subject in Serbian is a well-behaved Indo-European subject with some more specific Slavic features. While this is obviously no news, the paper's contribution consists in a systematic overview of these features and their presentation within a coherent, formal dependency-oriented framework.

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