

Constructional Compositionality and Blending: The Case of Polish SLVF Constructions

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0. Introduction

Building upon the frameworks introduced by Goldberg (1995), Fillmore, Kay, and O'Connor (1988), Fillmore and Kay (1999), and Fauconnier (1985 [1994], 1997), recent work in Construction Grammar and Mental Spaces (cf. Sweetser 1999, Dancygier and Sweetser 2005) suggests a new treatment of the emergence of constructional meanings. It is argued that some of the aspects of form found in grammatical constructions make meaning contributions of their own and can therefore reappear in different constructions, thereby prompting the emergence of specific aspects of meaning. For example, as was shown by Dancygier and Sweetser (2005), the tense configuration characteristic of predictive conditionals such as *If you follow the instructions, your application will be processed sooner* (Present Tense in P, predictive *will* in Q) prompts a predictive interpretation in a similar construction with *and*, as in *You follow the instructions and your application will be processed sooner*, as well as in a conjunctionless construction such as *You follow the instructions, your application will be processed sooner*. On the basis of such, and many other, similar constructions, Dancygier and Sweetser argue for the concept of *constructional compositionality*, understood in terms of form-meaning correlations which can recur in different constructions and contribute systematically to constructional meaning. At the same time, compositionality alone cannot exhaustively explain constructional meanings in all cases and it is often crucial to distinguish compositional aspects of meaning from those which arise conventionally.

This paper will look at a cluster of related constructions in Polish to further examine the applicability of the concept of constructional compositionality. The constructions to be analyzed use a number of specific formal features in different configurations. In all cases the forms used contribute consistently to how the constructions as wholes are interpreted. At the same time, many of the constructions involved also express conventional meanings, not attributable to any specific form-meaning mapping.

1. SLVF Constructions

Polish is an inflectional language in which verb forms commonly appear without their pronominal subjects. In standard cases, this happens when the referent of the omitted subject pronoun can be identified on the basis of the discourse context alone. However, omission of the subject seems required in the cases where *general-state* meaning is involved, and then the verb appears in *subjectless third person singular verb form* (henceforth abbreviated as SLVF). The most common examples of such general-state constructions are those describing weather phenomena, as well as emotional and physical states as experienced by unspecified, not profiled participants. Examples (1) and (2) show common instances of such SLVF constructions:

(1) Jest nudno. / gorąco. / smutno.
 be-3SG-PRES boring-ADV / hot-ADV / sad-ADV
 ‘The atmosphere is boring / sad. It is hot.’

(2) Ale wieje!
 how blow-3SG-PRES
 ‘What a wind!’

In (1), the general experience of a physical or emotional state is described, but no specific participant is profiled as the experiencer. Such sentences are typically understood as affecting the speaker, but other participants may be implicitly included. The SLVF usage represented in (1) and (2) is best seen as an example of a construction, since the seemingly deleted subject (presumably equivalent to *it*) cannot be introduced into the sentences. That is, a sentence such as **To jest nudno* is not acceptable.¹

Sentences (1) and (2) are SLVF constructions of non-transitive verbs. Transitive verbs can be used in this way as well, and then it is possible to profile the affected participant as the object, standardly appearing in the accusative case. The source of the experience remains unprofiled, but the sentences are no longer interpretable as general-state constructions. Example (3) illustrates such instances:

(3) Mdli mnie. / Trzęsie mnie.
 nauseate-3SG-PRES 1SG-ACC. / shiver- 3SG-PRES 1SG-ACC.
 ‘I feel nauseous. / I’m shivering’

Sentences in (3) appear to represent an independent construction, because of the standard profiling of the affected experiencer. As I will argue, only the SLVF form shown in (1) and (2) can further be used in other constructions, which build on the general-state meaning and combine it with other aspects of interpretation.

¹ It is acceptable to say *To jest nudne* ‘It/This is boring-ADJ’, but not in the general-state meaning.

2. Dative of “Experiential Sphere”

Many studies of Slavic case discuss the non-prototypical use of the dative (Wierzbicka 1988, Janda 1993, Rudzka-Ostyn 1992). Dąbrowska’s monograph on the Polish dative (1997) describes the use appearing in SLVF constructions as representing a participant’s *experiential sphere*. Common examples are sentences like *Tylko mi nie choruj!* (just 1SG-DAT not get-sick) ‘Just don’t get sick on me!’, where the dative form represents the participant typically not profiled by the verb, whose experiential sphere will nevertheless be indirectly affected by the sickness.

The dative of experiential sphere can also be used in general-state SLVF constructions. As a result, the experience is now localized, or represented from one participant’s viewpoint, but the participant mentioned is not fully profiled and the general-state meaning is not lost. Such constructions typically take one of two forms: either the adverb describing the state is fronted and the verb is omitted (as in (4)), or the dative is added after the verb (as in (5) and (6)):

- (4) Nudno **mi**.
boring-ADV 1SG-DAT
‘I feel bored.’
- (5) Jest **mi** nudno.
be-3SG-PRES 1SG-DAT boring-ADV
‘It is boring to me.’ (‘I’m bored; it’s my judgement that it is boring.’)
- (6) Jest **mi** gorąco / smutno.
be-3SG-PRES 1SG-DAT hot-ADV / sad-ADV
‘I’m hot / sad.’

Interestingly enough, the dative can also be added to an SLVF construction describing weather phenomena, if the sentence also contains the information on the specific manner in which the participant’s experiential sphere is affected. An example of such a use is given in (7):

- (7) Wieje **mi** w oczy.
blow-3SG-PRES 1SG-DAT in eyes-ACC
‘The wind is blowing in my eyes.’

The combination of general-state SLVF and dative shows how each of the forms involved contributes the meaning it represents to the overall interpretation of the construction. The resulting construction, though, is not interpreted merely as a combination of meanings brought by the specific forms. As the discussion below will show, the conventional aspects of a construction’s interpretation arise irrespective of the number of independently motivated grammatical forms added.

3. The Marker *się*

In the literature on Polish grammar, the discussion of the marker *się* is one of the most prominent topics. Some analysts treat it as a reflexive marker, some as a clitic, while others see it as a core of middle constructions.² To complicate matters further, *się* has a number of different uses, some of which escape the distinction between reflexives and middles altogether. However, only two types of *się* are in fact relevant to the discussion of SLVF constructions undertaken here. Both types are used in constructions which detransitivize standard transitive scenarios.

3.1. The “Experiencer” Scenario

The first transitive scenario to be considered profiles the source of experience as the subject, and the experiencer as the object, as in (8):

- (8) Ten film **mnie** nudzi.
 this film 1SG-ACC bore-3SG-PRES
 ‘This film bores me.’

Sentence (8) does not seem unusual in any way. The experiencer-object is marked as accusative and the passive is possible. However, the verb *nudzić* ‘to bore’ can also be used with *się*, and then the only profiled participant is the experiencer, appearing as the subject.

- (9) (Ja) Nudzę **się**.
 (I) bore-1SG-PRES self
 ‘I bore self.’ (‘I’m bored; I feel boredom.’ [Not the same as *I bore myself*])

In (9), *się* is not a reflexive marker proper. As I argued in earlier work (Dancygier 1997), only the so-called “heavy” reflexive markers can be interpreted in this way. Their characteristic feature is standard case marking (which *się* does not allow), while in terms of interpretation they are best seen, along with reflexives in other languages, as instances of the “split-self” metaphor, as it was described by Lakoff (1996). *Się*, contrary to the heavy reflexives, does not separate two aspects of a person to give each of them its own participant role in a sentence. On the contrary, as noted by Schenker (1993), it blurs the differences between participant roles. Consequently, *się*, as used in (9), prevents the profiling of the source of boredom, but at the same time presents the experiencer as somehow responsible for allowing boredom to continue.

The processes responsible for the construction in (9) can be viewed as representative of two different aspects of conceptual integration, or blending, as described by Fauconnier and Turner (1998a, 1998b, 2002). Within the blending framework, we can talk about two or more mental spaces (*input spaces*) being blended into one. The blended space inherits aspects of structure from the input

² For a discussion of middles and reflexives see Kemmer (1993) and Pederson (1991). A general discussion on *się* can be found in Kubiński (1982), Kański (1986), Schenker (1985, 1993), and Słoń (1998).

In (10), the experiencer is profiled less saliently than in (9), but more saliently than in (5). The lack of subject and the verb form (SLVF) introduce the general-state meaning, which is then localized in a participant's experiential sphere. That participant is also presented as partially responsible (via *się*) for the state of boredom affecting him/her.

Interestingly enough, this type of construction is also available in the cases of scenarios where no participant is suppressed, but the sense of responsibility is reduced. For example, a sentence such as (11), which profiles an experiencer as the subject, but can also be understood as a refusal, can be rephrased as (12) to soften the impact:

(11) (Ja) Nie chcę spać.
 (I) not want-1SG-PRES sleep
 'I don't want to sleep.'

(12) Nie chce mi się spać.
 not want-3SG-PRES 1SG-DAT self sleep
 '(It) doesn't want self to me to sleep.' ('I don't feel like sleeping')

As in the examples above, the forms conspire to reduce experience-hood and responsibility.

The data presented so far suggest consistent contribution of the mechanisms of constructional compositionality and blending. The SLVF form and its meaning of "general state" is imported "wholesale" into other constructions. The transitive "experiencer" scenario, on the other hand, can be decompressed to create two related concepts: the experiential sphere and a blended participant, as marked by *się* in (9). These three form-meaning packages can then be recombined in two ways: SLVF + Dative, as in (5)-(7), and SLVF + *się* + dative, as in (10) and (12).

3.2. The "Control" Scenario

The second type of a transitive scenario which can be detransitivized with a *się* construction is exemplified in (13):

(13) Janek wylał herbatę.
 John-NOM spill-3SG-PAST tea-ACC
 'John spilled the tea.'

The sentence resembles a standard transitive agent-patient scenario, but it is natural not to attribute volitionality to the subject's behavior (although (13) could mean that John spilled the tea intentionally for, let's say, ritual purposes). Rather, the subject participant is expected to control the object-patient, but temporarily loses his ability to control it. It is in this sense that (13) can be detransitivized with *się*:

- (14) Herbata **się** wylała.
 tea-NOM **self** spill-1SG-PAST
 ‘The tea (got) spilled.’

In (14), the participant in control is not profiled, while the affected participant is now profiled as subject, with *się* again blurring the contrast between controller and controlled. Not surprisingly, a dative can now be added to (14), to highlight the experiential viewpoint of the participant who will have to deal with the mess.

- (15) Herbata **mu** **się** wylała.
 tea-NOM 3SG-DAT **self** spill-3SG-PAST
 ‘The tea (got) spilled / He spilled the tea.’

The meaning of (15) changes the original scenario in (13) in many ways. The affected object (tea) has been granted some degree of responsibility, while the subject in control, though demoted, participates in the scenario only as the locus of the experiential viewpoint. These changes result not only from the different configuration of syntactic functions, but also from the specific meaning contributions of formal features such as *się* and the dative.

3.3. Compositional and Conventional Meanings of Constructions

As I argued above, the “control” scenario can be reorganized with the use of *się* and the experiential dative in ways which rely to a significant degree on the compositional contribution of the two forms. It should also be emphasized that the forms (*się* and dative) are not only contributing different meanings, but also relying on their original “source” scenarios in doing so. The use of *się* in (14) and (15) signals a redefinition of the “control” scenario in a way which demotes the participant in control and promotes a blended controlled/controller participant. The use of the dative in (15), on the other hand, adds the experiential viewpoint extracted from a standard “experiencer” scenario to the now redefined “control” scenario. The resulting construction (in (15)) is thus a blend of elements decompressed from two different standard constructions. Interestingly enough, this “hybrid” construction can still be interpreted primarily as compositional, although the components both arise via decompression from other constructions.

However, the forms reviewed so far can participate in constructions which are also used in specific, conventional ways. The interpretation of such constructions relies to some degree on the compositional contribution of individual forms, but to a significant degree on other, conventional factors. For example, one of the most common constructions using SLVF and *się* is known in literature as the “generic” or “impersonal” construction.

- (16) Wychodzi **się** przez sekretariat.
 go-out-3SG-PRES **self** through office-ACC
 ‘(One) goes out through the office.’

It seems, however, that the construction in (16) is not just simply generic or impersonal. In fact, it is probably more appropriately labelled as a “how-to” construction, since it obligatorily contains a description of the proper way to do things (so (16) could not be used to say something general about going out, but has to be understood as prescribing the correct way to do it). The “how-to” meaning does indeed rely on the general-state SLVF and the demoting of the main participant via *się*, but the forms themselves do not guarantee a “how-to” interpretation in each case.

Another case in point are the so-called “type of experience” constructions, as shown in (17) and (18):

(17) *Tę kurtkę łatwo się pierze.*
 this-ACC coat-ACC easily-ADV self wash-3SG-PRES
 ‘This coat washes easily.’

(18) *Lasem szybko mi się idzie.*
 forest-INSTR fast-ADV 1SG-DAT self walk-3SG-PRES
 ‘Hiking through the forest is fast. (I can hike fast through the forest.)’

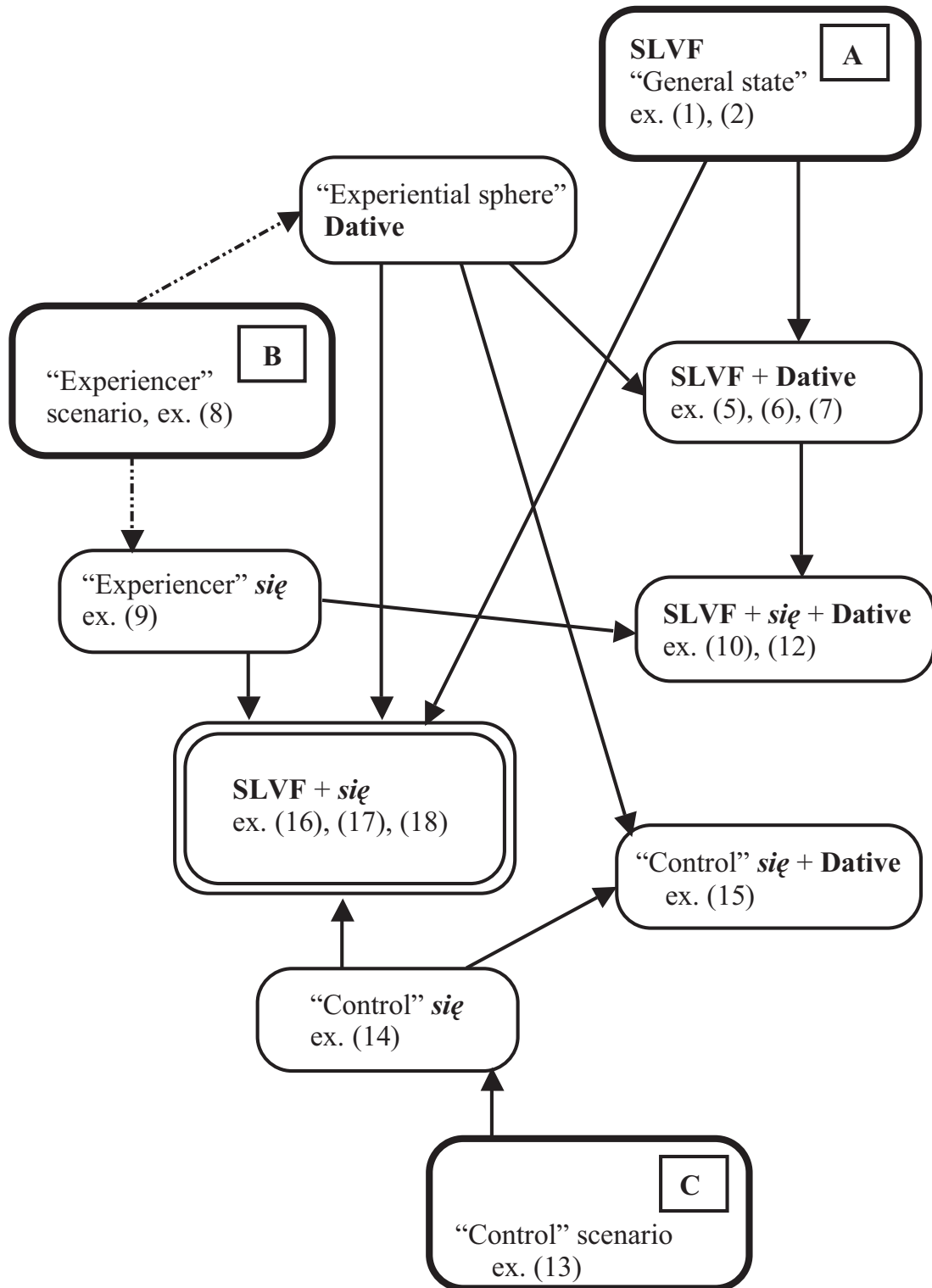
The constructions in (17) and (18) both focus on the type of experience, as described by the adverbs *łatwo* ‘easily’ and *szybko* ‘fast’. Both use the SLVF, which highlights the generality of the statement made (this is especially clear in (17), which can easily be construed as a generic statement). Both use *się*, and as a result demote the actual participant going through the experience (the “washer” or the “hiker”). Sentence (18) also uses the dative, thus bringing the experience to the speaker’s experiential sphere. However, the obligatory use of adverbs describing the experience and the presence of phrases such as *lasem* ‘through the forest’ which further specify the nature of the experience are lexical components of the constructions which contribute to their conventional interpretation.

It appears, then, that the form-meaning pairs distinguished in this paper can participate in meaning construals of various kinds. They can compositionally contribute to many constructions in a variety of combinations, but they can also be used in constructions which are interpreted more conventionally, and which rely to an important degree on lexical means, not on form alone.

Furthermore, the form-meaning pairs can also be exploited in almost idiomatic expressions which seem to fill important gaps in the language user’s repertoire. In its basic use, the construction with SLVF (as exemplified by (1)) describes a state. The stative interpretation is naturally the result of the verb used—the verb ‘to be’. When a change of state is described, the lexical choices are rather limited in Polish. The verb which is typically co-opted into the construction is the verb *robić* ‘to make’, with *się*, as in (19):

(19) *Robi się gorąco.*
 make-3SG-PRES self hot-ADV
 ‘It’s getting hot.’

Figure 1. Network of SLVF Spaces



The network of constructions described above seems to strongly support the idea that constructional compositionality offers an explanation of a number of phenomena related to the emergence of meaning at the constructional level. First of all, it appears that some form-meaning packages (such as the tense pattern in predictives, the SLVF form, or the dative of experiential sphere) may have limited use on their own, but are readily accessible as building blocks which can then reapply in many different constructions and contribute elements of meaning to their overall interpretation. Such partial building blocks of structure and meaning can compositionally combine to give form and function to a construction, but the overall conventional meaning of a construction cannot be determined by those building blocks in any strict sense. On the other hand, those basic form-function packages may themselves be “extracted” (or decompressed) from more general and more standard scenarios, which are partly responsible for the meaning which emerges in the partial, decompressed chunks.

Finally, the mechanisms of constructional compositionality apparently rely on the mechanisms of conceptual integration. I want to argue that one can view a construction such as the one in (10) as a result of blending of mental spaces set up or evoked by the forms involved (SLVF, *się*, dative). While compositionality might be understood by some as a simple additive process, where new forms entering the construction add new meanings to it, what actually happens in constructions is nothing like this. The combination of meanings brought into the construction by individual form-meaning packages gives rise to new, emergent aspects of meaning. That is, the description of boredom in (10) is not simply a combination of ‘general-state + no source of experience profiled + experiential sphere’. This combination of meanings is the basis on which the speaker may express her dismay at being bored without taking any responsibility for not counteracting it. Naturally, the emergence of new layers of meaning goes much further in more conventionalized constructions, such as (16), where the “how-to” interpretation builds on the “general-state” meaning without expressing it in any explicit way.

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Constructional Compositionality and Blending

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