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English Sentences Referring to Weather Conditions  
in View of Comparative Evidence

English sentences referring to weather conditions and natural phenomena are treated by most linguists on a par with other sentences containing the formal it subject. The intention of this paper is to show the structural and semantic uniqueness of the sentences under examination, by relating them to comparative evidence adduced from several Indo-European languages.

Here are some examples of sentences of that kind:

- |                             |                                |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1a. <u>It's</u> raining.    | 1b. Rain is falling.           |
| 2a. <u>It's</u> snowing.    | 2b. Snow is falling.           |
| 3a. <u>It's</u> sleeting.   | 3b. Sleet is falling.          |
| 4. <u>It's</u> hailing.     |                                |
| 5. <u>It's</u> thundering.  |                                |
| 6. <u>It's</u> lightning.   |                                |
| 7. <u>It's</u> blowing.     |                                |
| 8. <u>It's</u> dawnning.    |                                |
| 9a. <u>It's</u> duskning.   | 9c. <u>It's</u> getting dusk.  |
| 10a. <u>It's</u> darkening. | 10b. <u>It's</u> getting dark. |
| 11. <u>It's</u> freezing.   |                                |
| 12. <u>It's</u> thawing.    |                                |

There are also derivative constructions such as:

13. It is going to rain.
14. It threatens to rain.
15. It stopped raining., etc.

In some of such sentences the formal it subject is followed by ((be) Adj) construction, eg.:

16. It is hot (cold, warm) today.
17. It is fine this afternoon.
18. It is dark when the evening comes.

The reason why the class of sentences referring to weather conditions

tions should be discussed separately from all other instances of sentences containing it in subject position is that the function of the it element in the former case is different than anywhere else. The status of it in the sentences analysed in this paper has been investigated by many linguists. Some interpretations attempted by traditional grammarians are presented below to illustrate the diversity of possible solutions and the difficulty of the problem: Jespersen defines it as an unspecified (1969:149)

Conceptual it subject.

"refers to something definite",

"the great neuter of nature".

McMorris defines it as an indefinite it subject.

"used for impersonal verbs denoting natural phenomena".

Zanavoori defines it as a formal it subject.

"referring either to some vague notion or to nothing at all".

Allen defines it as a meaningless it subject.

"meaningless subject for impersonal verbs".

Quirk defines it as an empty

meaningless it subject.

"a subject may lack semantic content altogether".

The definitions quoted above vary as far as the reference of it subject and its semantic content are concerned. They range from the 'conceptual' interpretation of Jespersen according to which it possesses definite semantic connotations to the interpretation of Quirk who denies any semantic content of it whatsoever. The standpoints of the other grammarians oscillate between these two extremes. Thus McMorris approaches Jespersen in his definition and Allen's interpretation seems to be similar to that of Quirk. Zanavoori takes a middle course in this question, asserting that it subject may refer either to something vague, or to nothing at all. The reason of the differences between these standard interpretations definitely does not lie in a mistaken procedure or methodology, but rather in the different fundamental notions and theoretical principles which are implicit in these analyses. Namely, the analysis of Quirk is oriented more syntactically, formally, as compared with the approach of Jespersen, whose theory presupposes a greater extent of semantic, 'logical' considerations.

The problem is even more acute in a language like Polish. First of all, there is no unique correspondence between the highly developed case-system of Polish nouns (pronouns) and the category of 'subject'. That is, there are sentences in which the subject noun (pronoun) is expressed in the genitive and not in the nominative; eg. when the sentence refers to lack of something or existence in negation (cf. Klemensiewicz 1969:32):

Braknie czasu.

Nie ma brata.

Then, Polish sentences referring to weather conditions

contain, as a rule, no syntactic element equivalent to the English it, ie. no nominal element in subject-position, eg.:

Błyska się. 'It is lightning.'

(Deszcz) pada. 'It is raining.'

Grzmie. 'It is thundering.', etc.

This situation allows of even more speculation in grammatical analysis. As an example, two contrasting opinions of Szober and Wierzbicka may be adduced here:

"Such sentences ought to be called 'sentences with an indefinite subject; usually they are called 'subjectless sentences'. Yet this term is not quite exact because there is a subject in those sentences, although it is hidden in the very meaning of the verb" (Szober 1968:303):

"Zdania takie można by nazwać zdaniami z nieokreślonym podmiotem; zazwyczaj nazywają je 'zdaniami bezpodmiotowymi', nazwa ta jednak nie jest zbyt ścisła, bo w zdaniach tych jest również podmiot, tylko ukryty w samym znaczeniu czasownika."

"The following conclusion is to be drawn: in the sentences Wiele and Wiatr wiele, Świta and Poranek świta the elements wiatr and poranek alternate with zero. Precisely in those sentences there is a real zero-subject. It is zero, but it does possess a definite positive content." (Wierzbicka 1966:188):

"Nasza się wniosek następujący: W zdaniach Wiele i Wiatr wiele, Świta i Poranek świta elementy wiatr i poranek alternują z zerem. W tych właśnie zdaniach występuje rzeczownikowy podmiot zeroowy. Zerowy, ale mający określona treść pozytywną."

Wierzbicka is compelled to the above conclusion by surface syntactic considerations. According to her the category 'subject' is to be established on the basis of the paradigmatic alternations of a nominal element and the syntagmatic position occupied by a NP in a given utterance.

The standpoint expressed by Szober is different. His ma-  
 jor criterion in establishing the category 'subject' is the  
 meaning of linguistic constituents. Only by taking such a posi-  
 tion is he justified in saying that a subject may be hidden in  
 the meaning of a verb. Following Wierzbicka's way of reasoning,  
 this statement is doubly untenable. First, according to her, a  
 subject cannot be 'hidden in a verb' (the linear syntagmatic re-  
 lations do not allow that), and, second, by implication, a sub-  
 ject cannot be hidden in the meaning of a verb (as meaning is  
 something beyond the scope of the formal syntactic structure).  
 Klemensiewicz (1969:32) does not take sides in this con-  
 troversy. He asserts that in this class of subjectless, imper-  
 sonal sentences there are no grounds to define specifically the  
 presumable subject.

A conclusion to be drawn from what has been presented and  
 confronted so far is that in traditional linguistics there is  
 no unanimity as to whether the underlying structures of sen-  
 tences should be analysed on syntactic grounds, or rather on  
 semantic principles. Definitely Jespersen and Szober are orien-  
 tated semantically, 'logically', as compared with the strictly  
 formal standpoint of, for instance, Quirk and Wierzbicka.

In modern transformational linguistics the treatments of  
 English sentences with it subject, referring to weather condi-  
 tions, are almost non-existent. Authors seem to generally avoid  
 this problem which, although marginal, might constitute a po-  
 tential challenge to their neatly organized theories.

One of the rare attempts to account for this class of sen-  
 tences has been undertaken by Darden in the paper "What Rains?"  
 (1973). Darden questions the widespread assumption of transfor-  
 mational-Generative Grammars that every sentence, at the level  
 of deep structure, has a subject. He makes an important obser-  
 vation:

"The fact that all languages examined so far have a rule S-MP+VP  
 cannot be taken as relevant, since this analysis is a product  
 of the initial assumption, rather than a discovery about lan-  
 guage. Whenever a sentence is found to lack a surface subject,  
 a dummy subject can be put in and then deleted." (1973:523).

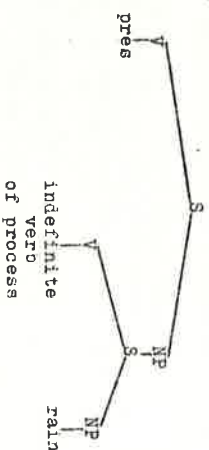
Darden shows that the assumption that every sentence has  
 a subject creates problems even in English. The problems derive  
 from the sentences about weather conditions, containing the it

element in subject position. His claim concerning the underlying  
 organization of those sentences is that the sources of it raining,  
it snows, etc. are rain rains, snow snows, etc. To justify this  
 claim Darden points out that many speakers of English accept the  
 following sentences:

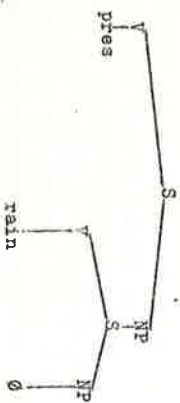
- (9) It rained and turned the road into a quagmire.
- (10) It rained and flooded my basement.
- (11) It snowed and covered our tracks.
- (12) It snowed but didn't stick.
- (13) It thundered and scared hell out of me. (1973:524).

In these sentences, he argues, the subjects of the conjoined verb  
 phrases should be correlative. Thus the underlying it which  
 is the subject of the second verb in sentences (9)-(13) must be  
 the rain, the snow, and the thunder. This fact is regarded as  
 sufficient evidence for the claim that It rained, It snowed and  
It thundered have as their bases respectively Rain rained, Snow  
snowed and Thunder thundered.

Darden points out that this analysis is not directly ap-  
 plicable to other languages. He proposes for sentences such as  
 Russian Doždít ('It is raining') the following case structure:



Then, to derive the more common expression Jaer vožd, a verb of  
 going, Jaer has to be inserted as the process verb. Darden de-  
 rives the other sentence, Doždít, by the application of a sub-  
 ject incorporation rule to the above deep structure. The result  
 of this transformation is shown in the following diagram:





Darden presents this transformation in order to show that such an analysis would work equally well for the English It is raining. Due to that the important assumption of universal base structure can be saved.

In his analysis Darden represents the semantic, 'logical' approach in its modern generative version. Although not the whole of his argument seems tenable, it constitutes a very appealing solution of the problem discussed in this paper. Therefore the remaining part of this discussion will be devoted to finding some further evidence supporting the semantic, 'logical' standpoint.

To clarify the issue, an important question should be answered at the outset: Is the formal surface subject of the sort of the English it universal and indispensable in all languages? The answer is: By no means is that so. The table below provides this statement with sound evidence selected from a number of Indo-European languages:

English	German	French	Latin	Russian	Polish
It's raining	Es regnet	Il pleut	Pluit	Dožd' idet	Deszcz pada
It's thundering	Es donnert	Il tonne	Tonat	Grom Gremi	Gromi
It's lightning	Es blitzt	Il s'clair	Fulgurat	Svorkaet	Blyzka sie

Among the six languages under examination there are three, English, German and French, which make use of a syntactic element of the it kind, and three others that do not exhibit such an element.

Perlmutter (1971:105) argues that the obligatory presence of a dummy-subject element is governed by a general surface-structure constraint productive in the languages of the first group: "Any sentence other than an Imperative in which there is a S that does not contain a subject in surface structure is ungrammatical" (1971:100).

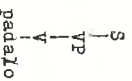
Yet, according to Perlmutter, a large number of languages have no such a constraint in their Grammars. Assuming this form of explanation of a linguistic phenomenon, Perlmutter unfortunately does not provide an answer to the crucial question whether this dummy subject is present in the deep structure or introduced by transformations, regarding it as a problem "not directly relevant to the hypothesis" (1971:103). However, the explanatory power of this hypothesis cannot be fully estimated without having specified the derivational origin of the it element.

An observation to be drawn from the above table is that in Polish, for example, the abstract semantic notion (rain) ( in Deszcz pada or pada ) is conveyed by a noun, the use of which is optional, and in the case the noun is elided, the semantic reading of the reduced predicate-sentence is clear due to the syntactic peculiarities of the verb itself: in the past tense the predicate-sentence (padało) referring to rain takes the inflectional ending in neuter gender (ie. wasn (rain) is not represented by a masculine subject: Deszcz padał). In the present tense the gender distinctions are opaque.

In Russian the case is similar except that the use of the nominal subject is basically obligatory, cf. Dožd' idet versus \*idet (rarely Dožhit). To complete the presentation, it should be pointed out that the verbs in both the Polish and the Russian example are by themselves common process verbs, having primary meanings not connected with the notion (rain): pada means 'is falling' and idet means 'is going'.

In view of the above evidence Darden's proposal emerges as not universal enough to account for the derivation of the Polish sentence pada or padało. In the deep structure that he has presented the semantic element (rain) is obligatory and it has been assumed that this notion may change its surface-syntactic form (either NP or VP) but never may it be completely elided. This is, however, the case in the above sentences.

It is at this point that Darden's proposal should be compared with a solution developed by Shopen and Świeżkowski (1970:121). The authors present subjectless sentences ('autonomous elliptical expressions') as a sub-category of elliptical utterances. Resting on the assumption that elliptical constructions should find their place in the underlying representations of a language, they are justified in positing the following deep structure of the sentence padało:



Thus Shopen and Świeżkowski, by recognizing the existence of elliptical underlying representations, eliminate the necessity of having a subject in the deep structure of every sentence. This strong claim is undoubtedly useful in accounting for certain el-

typical constructions, but still it is questionable: Why should two sentences with the same meaning (ie. Deszcz padał and Padało) be derived from two deep structures? Such a procedure stands in contrast to the generally accepted principle that two utterances with identical semantic readings should be assigned one underlying representation.

A general syntactic conclusion can be inferred on the basis of the above evidence that agglutinative languages (Latin, Polish, Russian), with inflectional systems well developed, tend to mark syntactically the uniqueness of this kind of sentences in the inflectional endings of verbs, unless this is provided by the obligatory subject itself. Thus the abstract semantic notion (rain) is expressed in the discussed languages in either of the following syntactic patterns:

- (1). A formal subject - a special verb, eg.: It was raining.
- (2). A common process verb with a special inflectional marker, eg.: Padało.  
Dożyło.
- (3). A special nominal subject - a process verb; in agreement, eg.: Deszcz padał.  
Dość się.

It is worth noting that, as a rule, in neither of the languages an amalgamated sentence with the semantic duplication of the kind \*The rain is raining or \*Dość dożył is possible, although in some languages are not quite uniform in their patterning. Thus in English there are optional constructions such as eg. It's sleeting versus Sleet is falling. On the other hand, it is impossible to obtain a sentence like \*It's dawning on the model of It's dawning, It's dawning, or the Polish Daje.

An extremely conspicuous case is that of the Russian sentence Grom гремит, where an obvious semantic duplication of the same notion expressed by two cognate surface-syntactic elements is at work. Darcew (1973:525) tends to disregard this seemingly exceptional construction, however Jespersen (1969:128) recalls other examples of this kind, namely the Hungarian sentence Esik az eső ('the rain rains'), as well as Shakespeare's phrase: "But the rain it raineth every day". Consequently, these very specific sentences are not so much exceptional as is commonly believed and, as such, they provide important information about the possible underlying organization of all the sentences referring to weather conditions (rain rains, snow snows, etc.). If this conclusion is

correct, it means that the it element refers to the nominal underlying notion (rain) cognate to the verb 'to rain'.

Now, it remains to discuss sentences of the kind It is hot (today). The syntactic and semantic reference of the it subject may in fact be multiple in these sentences, as the it may refer both ways - cataphorically and anaphorically - to the preceding and the following constituents of an utterance, eg.:

- (a). The blast-furnace was filled up with iron and coal yesterday.  
It is hot today.

- (b). (a metallurgist at work saying): It is not today.  
(cataphoric reference to the abstract notion of heat not caused by natural weather conditions).
- (c). (a remark about the weather condition): It is not today.  
(anaphoric reference to the abstract, general notion of natural heat).

As a result, these sentences are very often ambiguous (especially in a larger context), that is, they may have more than one underlying representation.

This is not the case with the sentence It is raining, for example, which always means one and only one thing. To put it differently, under no circumstances can the it subject of that sentence be understood as referring to something which comes in the preceding sentence, and which is different from the notion (rain), even in a context like the following:

This is my father's watering can. It is raining now.  
That is, the it subject in this example cannot refer anaphorically to the NP of the preceding sentence.

The above evidence and argument have been presented to demonstrate with psychological plausibility that for a Russian native speaker, for example, (having in mind a sentence like Dożył) the claim of his English colleague that his own equivalent sentence It's raining contains no real subject, and, what is more, no nominal element with any semantic content can be substituted for the it (Quirk 1973:354) sounds spuriously abstract and unjustified.

Such paradoxes will exist as long as grammatical analyses and deep representations of a language are based on purely syntactic, language-specific considerations.

Streszczenie

Artykuł porusza problemy związane z interpretacją syntaktyczną i semantyczną angielskich zdań odnoszących się do pogody i zjawisk atmosferycznych, zawierających formalny podmiot *it* /np. *It is raining in Fada daszcz*/. W oparciu o materiał porównawczy stwierdzić można, że w różnych językach odpowiednio zdania tego typu mają bardzo różnicowaną strukturę syntaktyczną - niektóre zawierają podmiot formalny będący odpowiednikiem angielskiego *it* - w innych natomiast brak jest tego rodzaju podmiotu. Bez względu na te istotne różnice w strukturze powierzeniowej, omawiane zdania interpretowane są rozmaicie przez językoznawców, nawet w obrębie jednego języka. Na tym tle szczególnie interesujący wydaje się status semantyczny podmiotu formalnego *it* - czy jest on jednostką znaczeniowo pustą, o funkcji wyłącznie syntaktycznej, czy też posiada określone konotacje semantyczne. Problem ten istotny jest również dla języka polskiego, choć nie w tym przypadku nieco inną naturę - czy zdania *Pada, śnieg, itp.* należy traktować jako bezpodmiotowe /wierzbicka/, czy też - jako zdania, których podmiot "ukryty" jest w znaczeniu czasownikalnym /Szober/. W postsumowaniu stwierdza się, że analiza tego typu zdań może być trafna tylko wtedy, gdy ma charakter semantyczny i posiuguje się prezentacjami formalnymi typu uniwersalnego - w przeciwnym razie prowni bowiem do wielu rozbieżnych rezultatów.

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