

**Formal grammar or functional sentence perspective?  
Some remarks about word order in Polish**

**1. Polish word order: free or fixed?**

A commonly made observation about word order in Polish is that it is relatively free. Witkoś (1998: 1) actually describes Polish as “a notoriously free phrase/word order language”. The example sentences in (1) illustrate his point: in (1a) the order of the main sentence elements is subject – verb – object (SVO), in (1b) it is object – verb – subject (OVS), and in (1c) it is verb – object – subject (VOS).

- (1a) *Funkcjonariusze ABC aresztowali o szóstej rano mojego wujka.*  
‘ABC officers arrested my uncle at 6am.’  
(1b) *Mojego wujka o szóstej rano aresztowali funkcjonariusze ABC.*  
(1c) *O szóstej rano aresztowali mojego wujka funkcjonariusze ABC.*

The view expressed by Witkoś is not shared, however, by Szwedek (1976: 51), who makes the following claim: “... it is not true that the order of sentence elements in Polish is free or is a matter of style.” For Szwedek, Polish word order is determined by certain contextual and situational factors.

In the sections that follow below I will first examine the motivations for the two contradictory views sketched above. Then I will look at some empirical data concerning the syntactic behaviour of the Polish verb *podobać się* (‘please / like’), with a view to relating these data to formal and functional descriptions of Polish word order. I will also point out some discrepancies between corpus data and intuitive judgements of the well-formedness of Polish word order patterns.

**2. Polish word order and formal grammar**

The sentences in (1) clearly show that in Polish the positions of the subject and the object in relation to the verb are not fixed. As for example Tajsner (1998) observes, in Polish grammatical functions are expressed by rich word morphology and therefore they need not be adjacent to their governors, i.e. the elements that assign case to them. This means that with respect to the formal level of case relations one can indeed say that Polish word order is basically free.

While the morphological characteristics of Polish grammar allow NP arguments to become detached from their governors, there still remains the question of what motivates particular word order arrangements, for example those arrangements in which the object appears in the sentence initial position. Within theories of formal grammar (e.g. Witkoś 1998, 2004; Tajsner 1998; Cegłowski and Tajsner 2006) it is assumed that syntax is autonomous, in the sense that syntactic rules may not make any references to pragmatic, phonological or semantic information. This means that operations like object fronting cannot be described by referring to any characteristics of the speech situation: they must be treated as operations triggered by sentence internal syntactic features. Tajsner (1998: 143) proposes the following principle to account for the distribution of arguments in Polish sentences:

One argument in every sentence must be promoted to a theme position. The position of theme is defined formally, as a position within the checking domain of the feature  $\Delta$  present in AgrS.

As for sentences with verb-initial predication, Tajsner (1998: 141-142) claims that they are marginal and “always heavily marked stylistically, whereby this stylistic marking must be manifested by contrastive stress...” This is reflected by Tajsner’s judgements of the status of the following sentences:

- (2a) *Tomek lubi Anię.*  
‘Tomek likes Ann.’
- (2b) *Anię lubi Tomek.*
- (2c) *??Lubi Tomek Anię.*

### 3. Polish word order and functional sentence perspective

In contrast to formal grammar, functional accounts of word order freely appeal to contextual and situational features. As the two quotations below demonstrate, the key notion is the distribution of information in the sentence. Thus, according to functionalists, Polish word order is governed by communicative rather than grammatical factors.

(...) the order of words is strictly determined and (...) it reflects the organization of the utterance according to the ‘new/given’ information distribution which, of course, is dependent on the context and situation. (...) word order in Polish is an element of text structure rather than an element of sentence structure. (Szwedek 1976: 51)

The thematic position of the object expression is most often a result of two word order tendencies in Polish: old information comes first, new information comes last. (Grzegorek1984: 100)

### 4. The verb *podobać się* and word order variation: some empirical data

In a formal generative account, the verb *podobać się* could be assigned to the class of alternating verbs, i.e. verbs which allow either of its two arguments, Theme or Experiencer, to occur in the sentence initial position:

- (2a) *Janowi* (Experiencer - Dative) *podoba się mój dom* (Theme - Nominative).  
‘John likes my house’
- (2b) *Mój dom* (Theme - Nominative) *podoba się Janowi* (Experiencer - Dative).  
‘John likes my house’

To examine empirically the surface arrangements in which *podobać się* actually occurs, Miechowicz-Mathiasen and Scheffler (2008) analysed all the combinations of that verb and its two arguments in the IPI PAN corpus of modern Polish.<sup>1</sup> As Table 1 below shows, all the possible patterns were attested:

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<sup>1</sup> The IPI PAN Corpus was developed by the Linguistic Engineering Group at the Institute of Computer Science, Polish Academy of Sciences. The preliminary version used in this study contains over 70 million morphosyntactically annotated segments. The details concerning this version of the corpus and the tool used by Miechowicz-Mathiasen and Scheffler (2008) to analyse it can be found in Przepiórkowski (2004).

TABLE 1. Word order variation allowed by *podobać się*

|    | WORD ORDER | NUMBER OF INSTANCES |
|----|------------|---------------------|
| 1. | DAT V NOM  | 103                 |
| 2. | NOM V DAT  | 56                  |
| 3. | DAT NOM V  | 42                  |
| 4. | NOM DAT V  | 119                 |
| 5. | V DAT NOM  | 144                 |
| 6. | V NOM DAT  | 6                   |

(Miechowicz-Mathiasen & Scheffler 2008)

Miechowicz-Mathiasen and Scheffler (2008) propose a formal generative account of the syntactic properties of the verb *podobać się*. It is interesting, however, to take a look and some of their data from the point of view of functional sentence perspective to see to what extent particular patterns can be shown to be related to the distribution of old and new information in the relevant portions of text. What follows are randomly selected examples of each of the six patterns together with the immediately preceding context. The amount of context included with each example depended on how much of it was needed to determine the communicative value of particular sentence elements.

#### Pattern 1

*Ale jednocześnie prezydent stwierdził, że nie należy tego zbyt ograniczać. (...) ta dysproporcja w uzasadnieniu prezydenta jest naszym zdaniem wyjątkowo rażąca. **Prezydentowi nie podobają się szczególnie przepisy zakazujące...***

‘But the president also stated that this should not be restricted too much. (...) this disproportion in the president’s justification is in our opinion particularly striking. **The president especially does not like the regulations banning ...**’

#### Pattern 2

*Tomasz ma jednak już dość ciągłej walki o pieniądze. Chce wycofać się z interesu i poświęcić swojej życiowej pasji: filozofii. **Ten pomysł nie podoba się Wiesławowi (Andrzej Chyra), szwagrowi i wspólnikowi Tomasza.***

‘Tomasz, however, has had enough of the constant struggle for money. He wants to quit the business and devote himself to his life’s passion: philosophy. **Wiesław, Tomasz’s brother-in-law and business partner, played by Andrzej Chyra, does not like this idea.**’

#### Pattern 3

*Po przyjrzeniu się w szczegółach przedkładanemu przez rząd projektowi ordynacji wyborczej do Parlamentu Europejskiego musimy powiedzieć, iż **Sojuszowi Lewicy Demokratycznej ten projekt się podoba.***

‘After examining the details of the Government’s proposal concerning the European elections statute we must say that **Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej likes this proposal.**’

#### Pattern 4

*Krystyna jest urzędniczką. Oprócz tego od kilku lat zajmuje się ubezpieczeniami na życie. - Ta praca mi się podoba, to kontakt z ludźmi, oferowanie trudnego, ale ciekawego produktu.*

‘Krystyna is an office worker. Apart from that for a few years she has been selling life insurance policies. “**I like this work**, it’s about meeting people, offering them a product that is complex but interesting.” ’

#### Pattern 5

*A jak kurs oceniali uczestnicy? - Bardzo wysoko. Podoba się im bezpośredni kontakt z tak wybitnymi artystami.*

‘ “How did the participants evaluate the course? “Very highly. **They like direct contact with such great artists.**” ’

#### Pattern 6

*To była śmiała decyzja, bo jeszcze nie znano zwyczaju wojaży Polek koszykarek za ocean. Nie bardzo podobało się to działaczom klubowym, którzy wiązali z Patrycją nadzieje na świetność sekcji.*

‘It was a brave decision because until then no Polish female basketball player had ever gone to play in the States. **This was not liked very much by club officials**, who hoped that Patrycja would make a valuable contribution to the club.’

Table 2 below contains a summary of the distribution of old vs. new information in the six examples above. It demonstrates that despite variation in word order, the information structure in each case is constant: the speakers / writers move from old / given facts to new ones. This obviously confirms the claims made by Szwedek and Grzegorek, which were referred to in section 3.

TABLE 2. The verb *podobać się*: information structure

| pattern   | old / given information                                 | new information  |
|-----------|---|--|
| pattern 1 | presenting president’s views                            | president’s dislike of specific regulations                        |
| pattern 2 | Tomasz’s plan to quit the business                      | Wiesław’s dislike of Tomasz’s plan                                 |
| pattern 3 | the presentation by <i>Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej</i> | the specific view presented by <i>Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej</i> |
| pattern 4 | Krystyna’s job  | Krystyna’s attitude towards her job                                |
| pattern 5 | assessing the course                                    | reason why the participants liked the course                       |
| pattern 6 | assessment of Patrycja’s decision                       | club officials’ dislike of Patrycja’s decision                     |

### 5. Verb-initial predication

It is interesting to note that the most common pattern in Table 1 is pattern 5, in which it is the verb that occupies the sentence initial position. This clearly goes against Tajsner’s claim that verb–initial predication in Polish is marginal.

Having said that, one should also bear in mind that while verb-initial predication with *podobać się* is the most common arrangement that was attested, Miechowicz-Mathiasen and Scheffler (2008) observe that the pattern itself is in some respects very rigid: in as many as 141 sentences out of the total 144 the verb is immediately followed by dative pronominal forms. Since weak pronominal argument forms like the dative *mi* 'me' tend to occur clause internally in Polish (cf. Witkoś 1998), the high frequency of pattern 5 is likely to result from the properties of those pronouns rather than from the properties of the verb. When one turns to transitive verbs like *lubić* 'like', which is the lexical item used by Tajsner, authentic examples of verb-initial predication are much harder to attest. They do, however, occur, and they do not require contrastive stress. The example sentences below come from the World Wide Web:

*Lubią one bardzo kąpiele, nawet błotne.*

'They like bathing very much, even in mud.'

<http://WWW.dens.inet.pl/88.html>

*Lubimy wszyscy po prostu pomagać innym!*

'We all simply like to help others!'

<http://www.poszukam.pl/sf/>

*Lubią chłopaki dreszczowce i trzymanie kibiców w niepewności do samego końca.*

'The boys like thrillers and keeping their fans in suspense till the end.'

<http://mecz.5638.zaglebie.org/pelne.php?id=1572>

*Lubi Tomek z babcią wędrować, oj lubi.*

'Tomek likes walking with grandma, he really does.'

[http://www.gorkiewiczowa.republika.pl/bibliograf/chleba\\_kromka\\_dla\\_tomka.htm](http://www.gorkiewiczowa.republika.pl/bibliograf/chleba_kromka_dla_tomka.htm)

## 6. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to offer the following two observations. First, with respect to the dispute between formal grammarians and functionalists, it seems that the data concerning syntactic arrangements in which the verb *podobać się* occurs, strongly support the view that at least to some extent Polish word order is an element of text structure. This means that any comprehensive treatment of Polish word order syntax cannot ignore phenomena taking place above the level of the sentence. This is necessary if one's goal is not just to formulate rules filtering out all the ill-formed sentences, but also to explain why certain combinations of words occur.

Secondly, the data presented in this paper indicate that human intuition is not a reliable guide to what actually happens in language use: that is, verb-initial predication does not appear to be as marginal as has been suggested. In my view, if linguistics is to deal with language rather than intuition, then authentic corpus data should be given priority. This is all the more important because, as Sinclair (1991: 4) put it:

Students of linguistics over many years have been urged to rely heavily on their intuitions and to prefer their intuitions to actual text where there was some discrepancy. Their study, therefore, has been more about intuition than about language.

## 7. References

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