



A unifying approach to Russian impersonal morphology

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1. Impersonal morphology: grammatical default or meaningful linguistic sign?



Starting point:

Russian disposes of quite a big set of constructions that regularly occur with IM (i.e., third person singular neuter form on the verbal predicate with no overt agreeing nominative NP; ellipses excluded). Most occurrences of IM include typical impersonal constructions, such as weather impersonals or emotional state impersonals.



The problem:

There exist other, sometimes optional uses of IM whose participation in impersonal constructions is at least questionable:

IM occurring in combination with numeral phrases in subject position, genitive of negation, infinitival subjects, clause subjects and other kinds of non-canonical (=non-nominative) subjects.



The question:

Does impersonal form (IM) indicate “impersonal meaning” or is it just a grammatical default used whenever there is (for different, unrelated reasons) no nominative NP to agree with (i.e. is IM some sort of morphological homonym)?

In other words, is there a relationship between impersonal form and impersonal function? If so, what is this common impersonal function?



The goals:

- 1) Establish a coherent, formally and functionally (form-and-function-)based definition of impersonal constructions in Russian (and, eventually, other Slavic and possibly also non-Slavic languages)
- 2) Contribute to the ongoing theoretical discussion of form-meaning relationship in grammar by testing of what has been labelled the “Principle of No Synonymy in Grammatical Forms” (Goldberg 1995: 3)

2. Current controversies about what constructions are to be labelled “impersonal” in Russian



A. Views excluding constructions that display IM:

Example 1): Dative-infinitive constructions

Perlmutter/Moore (2002); Babby (2010) claim that dative-infinitive constructions (model type: *Что нам делать? Зачем отпускать любимого человека?*) are not impersonal constructions; they assume that infinitive clauses in Russian require dative subjects.

Formal and semantic objections to this view:

1. There are also nominative subjects with infinitives in Russian:

(1) *И царица хохотать, и плечами пожимать.* (Puškin: ‘Skazka o mertvoj carevne’)

(2) *Кто куда, а мы танцевать* (headlines of a commercial article about a dancing school; <http://www.msk.kp.ru/daily/26052/2964300/>, 08/21/2015)



(3) *Она — зарабатывать и отдыхать от шума в доме, а он — привыкать к миру без женщины.*
(Russian National Corpus; Kira Surikova: 'Ўеџенес', 2003)

2. The dative-infinitive construction shows clear semantic and formal parallels with other impersonal constructions:

(4) *Мне скучно/холодно.*

(4a) *В комнате нам было душно.* (example from Babby 2010: 24, who himself classifies it as impersonal!)

(5) *Ей повезло.*

→ no reason to exclude infinitive impersonals (with or without dative experiencers) from Russian impersonals

Note that other scholars include this construction type into their definition of impersonals as well (e.g. Creissels 2007: 23; Galkina-Fedoruk 1958: 212-219; Veyrenc 1979: 19).

Example 2): Numeral constructions



(6) *Много женщин пошло на фронт.* (Galkina-Fedoruk 1958: 106)

Galkina-Fedoruk (1958: 105f.) excludes numeral constructions from the impersonal domain: The numeral phrase is considered a subject, hence no impersonal construction is admitted.

Although it is not refuted here that the numeral phrase in (6) functions as a syntactical subject, it is claimed that (6) is an instantiation of an impersonal construction nevertheless.

B. Views including constructions without IM

- Indefinite-personal constructions (*неопределённо-личные конструкции*) are notoriously counted among impersonal constructions (e.g., Malchukov/Ogawa 2011: 28; Siewierska 2008: 125)
- Even decausatives (also: anticausatives; e.g.: *ваза разбилась*) sometimes figure among impersonals (Siewierska 2008: 125). Since decausatives have a nominative subject (which is referential and topical, albeit not agentive) and an agreeing predicate, decausatives clearly fall outside the understanding of impersonality advocated here.

2.1 The center of the impersonal domain: what undoubtedly impersonal constructions have in common



Siewierska (2008) differs between a „subject-centered“ and an „agent-centered“ perspective on impersonals:

	Subject-centered view	Agent-centered view
Impersonal constructions defined on the basis of ...	Structural/formal criteria, e.g.: lack of canonical subject properties, lack of subject altogether, referentially and semantically empty (expletive) subjects, invariant marking of the verb (in languages with morphological marking on the verb)	Semantic criteria: Agent defocusing → every construction/clause type in which an agentive argument (also labelled ‘actor, instigator, initiator’) is defocused (erased, downgraded) is regarded as impersonal.

Strict adherence to either approach (especially the agent-centered one) yields questionable results as discussed in Section 2. Strict adherence to the subject-centered view is unsatisfying as well because it does not give any explanation for the facts observed (variation of formal subject properties).

→ A both formally and functionally (semantically, pragmatically) based account of impersonality is required.



Malchukov's and Ogawa's proposal:

Starting from Keenan's (1976) classical work on subjecthood, Malchukov/Ogawa (2011) propose that the common function of impersonals is to signal lack of a subject NP with (some of the) prototypical "functional subject properties" (Malchukov/Ogawa 2011: 19) such as agentivity, topicality, and referentiality.

Based on this assumption, the authors classify impersonals in respect of the functional subject property that they lack most as:

a) A-impersonals: signal lack of an agentive subject NP

(7) *Ей повезло.*

(8) *Я посмотрел на нее, и у меня отлегло от сердца.* (I.S. Turgenev, 'Pervaja ljubov', <http://ilibrary.ru/text/1335/p.20/index.html>; 09/01/2015)

b) T-impersonals: signal lack of a topical subject NP

(9) *Парламент проголосовал за правительство Юрия Лянкэ; в него вошло пять женщин* (newspaper headlines; <http://gagauzinfo.md/index.php?newsid=8024>, 09/01/2015)

c) R-impersonals: signal lack of a referential subject NP

(10) *Темнеет. Светает.*



As can easily be seen from the examples (7) – (10), the three criteria overlap and it is not always clear to which class a given impersonal should be ascribed (e.g., in Adversity Impersonals, it is not clear whether there is no agent/instigator or whether the instigator is merely not topical and low in referentiality, e.g.: *Ego obdalo volnoj*. (Ušakov 2014: *Tolkovyj slovar'sovremennogo russkogo jazyka*, p. 368;)

Hierarchy of subject properties:

It is not clear either if the three functional subject properties are equal or ranked in an hierarchical order.

It is plausible, however, that agentivity is somewhat superior to the other properties:

For instance, lack of referentiality and topicality does not automatically result in impersonal morphology when there is a human agent:

e.g., Неопределённо-личные конструкции, indefinite-personal constructions:

(11) *Почему в метро без билета пассажиров не пропускают, а пьяных граждан с билетом - пропускают?* (<https://otvet.mail.ru/question/8740257>, 09/01/2015)

The existence of a human agent, albeit low in referentiality and topicality, can still yield a personal construction.



Lack of topicality alone, however, does not seem sufficient to yield an impersonal construction in Russian, since the information structure of a sentence is usually expressed by word order (and, in the spoken language, by intonation):

(12) *Девушка вошла.* (subject phrase in topic position)

(12a) *Вошла девушка.* (subject phrase in non-topic position)

In addition, agentivity and referentiality are highly gradual categories, while topicality is a rather (but not rigid) binary category.

It remains a task for the future to develop a sound method of establishing to what degree a given impersonal deviates from prototypical functional subjecthood. Even if our proceeding is not completely elaborate yet, it is still possible for us to establish whether a noun phrase in subject position is agentive, referential and topical based on previous research.

This is exactly what we are going to do now with regard to constructions in which IM is not obligatory, i.e. in the periphery of the impersonal domain.



2.2 The periphery of the impersonal domain

2.2.1 Existentials

IM regularly occurs in negative existentials:

(13) АТО: *За прошедшие сутки погибших нет, но есть раненые.*

(http://www.ukrinform.ua/rus/news/ato_za_proshedshie_sutki_pogibshih_net_no_est_ranenie_17722
50, 08/21/, 2015)

Babby (1980: 161): talks about “natural ergativity” in Russian when referring to genitive of negation (GoN): GoN is available for intransitive subjects and transitive objects, but never for transitive subjects.

However, as is well known, negation does not automatically trigger GoN in Russian.



Why GoN and IM under negation?

In negated existentials, the very existence of some entity is denied. This means that there is no referent in the extra-linguistic world that the negated NP relates to.

The subject of negated existentials is thus an instance of a non-referential subject, and a quite clear one! → negated existentials are R-impersonals

The idea that the factor triggering GoN is lack of referentiality as put forward, for instance, by Bunčić (2014) perfectly fits into the understanding of impersonality advocated here.



It is assumed that this interpretation applies to all instances of GoN. Indeed, the variation between GoN and nominative/accusative becomes quite comprehensible:

A. Negated intransitive subjects:

- (14) *До меня до сих пор не дошли письма_{NomPl}, отправленные в начале декабря - больше двух месяцев прошло.* (<http://www.online812.ru/2013/02/21/010/>, 08/25/015)
- (15) *Что делать, если не пришло письмо_{NomPl} для подтверждения адреса электронной почты?* (http://fut.ru/info/help_secondlink/, 08/25/2015)
- (16) *Вчера заказала три документа через "Документ за час", никаких писем_{GenPl} не пришло, документы не добавлены.* (<http://www.lawyercom.ru/question/11793-vchera-zakazala-tri-dokumenta-cherez-dokument-za-chas-nikakih-pisem-ne-prishlo-dokumenty>, 08/25/2015)
- (17) *У них не было детей.*
- (18) *У них дети не были хорошо воспитаны.*
- (19) *Вася был в Лондоне.: 1. 'Vasja has been to London.' 2. 'Vasja was in London at the time.'*
- (20) *Васи не было в Лондоне.: Only one reading: 'Vasja was not in London at the time.'*
(Glushan 2013: 13)



B. Negated direct objects

- With accusative:

(21) *Приходят посылки, которые_{NomPl} я не заказывала.*

(<http://www.gsconto.com/ru/qa/show/52311/Prihodyat-posylki-kotorye-ya-ne-zakazyvala>, 08/25/2015)

(22) *Больше никогда не буду заказывать пиццу_{AkkSing} из кафе.* (comment about a very tasty pizza recipe <http://gotovim-doma.ru/view.php?r=903-recept-Pitstva-Margarita>, 08/25/2015)

(23) *Такую гибкую фигуру еще не видел!* (line from a love-poem, <http://ejz.ru/19/komplimenty-devushkam-i-parniam>, 08/25/2015)

→ The negation relates to the action expressed by the verb rather than to the object

- With genitive:

(24) *Я никогда не видел девушки_{GenSing} красивее тебя.*

(<http://tatoeba.org/eng/sentences/show/3589540>, 08/25/2015)

→ The negation relates to the direct object; there is no girl more beautiful than “you”!



Conclusion and summary:

The use of IM in negated existentials poses no problem for the understanding of impersonality proposed here as it indicates, above all, lack of a referential subject (combined with lack of an agentive subject).

The above examples show that the tendency towards GoN and, when in the genitive phrase is in subject position, IM, increases when referentiality of the NP decreases.

However, the choice between GoN and nominative/accusative cannot be formulated in terms of a clear-cut grammatical rule as it depends on:

- context
- the semantics of verb and NP
- probably individual speakers' preferences in cases where both forms with regard to context and lexical semantics are available

→ GoN in subject position yields **R-impersonals**.



2.2.2 Numeral constructions

In other Slavic languages (e.g. Czech, Croatian, Serbian), there is a grammatical rule requiring that there be IM after numerals ≥ 5 . In Russian, there is no such clear-cut rule, but personal (i.e., plural, semantic) agreement is recommended for numbers smaller than five (e.g. Rozental' et al. 2005: 464)

As has been established by Corbett (e.g., 2000: 215) and verified by Azerkovič (2014), the size of the number in a numeral phrase does indeed influence the choice of agreement in Russian as well.

Questions:

1. How do numeral constructions fit into our picture of impersonality?
2. Why do non-paucal numbers increase the likelihood of IM on the verb?



Consider the following prototypical use of a numeral phrase
(the beginning of a joke in Croatian):

(25) *U vlaku – Vozilo se nekoliko mladića u istom kupeu*
in train – rode_{IM} REFLsome youngsters_{GenPl} in same compartment
s jednim svećenikom. Mladići psovali i ružno govorili a svećenik šutio
with one priest. Youngsters cursed and ugly talked and priest remained-silent
i molio. Mladići su htjeli izazvati svećenika ...
and prayed. youngsters AUX wanted provoke priest ...

‘On a train – Some youngsters were riding in the same compartment with a priest. The youngsters were cursing and using bad words, but the priest remained silent and prayed. The youngsters wanted to challenge the priest ...’



Numeral phrases typically ...

- ... occur in non-topical position
- ... display a low degree of agentivity, even when animate, as they are often part of a presentational construction.
- ... show a reduced degree of individuation, since the entities included in the numeral phrase are conceived of as homogeneous parts of a whole, not as individuals.

→ The higher the number, the lesser is our ability to conceive of the different entities referred to by the numeral phrase as individual entities. A decrease in individuation also reduces the degree of referentiality.

What other factors affecting the choice of IM with numeral phrases have been discussed in the literature?

Azerkovič (2014), Corbett (e.g.: 1983: 136-156; 2000: 213-216): animacy, word order; Glushan (2013): individuation



All of these factors burn down to the prototypical functional subject properties discussed here:

1. Word order indicates topicality, for it is observed in the literature that post-position of the subject increases the likelihood of IM.
2. Animacy is another typical subject property and is crucially linked with agentivity. However, while animacy is a property of nouns only, agentivity results from the interplay of noun and verb semantics, and from argument structure (transitive sentences yield a potentially higher degree of agentivity than intransitive ones).

A look at real-life data:

(26) *Пять хулиганов били/??было в Петербурге припаркованные автомобили*
(news headline; <http://rustelegraph.ru/news/2014-12-08/Pyat-khuliganov-bili-v-Peterburge-priparkovannye-avtomobili-23069/>, 08/26/2015)

- Non-topical, transitive, agentive, animate subject numeral phrase → IM hardly available



(27) *Погибло/погибли несколько человек.*

- non-topical, intransitive, non-agentive, animate, indefinite number
→ IM possible

(28) *Несколько человек обедали вместе и по счету должны были оплатить 175 шиллингов.* (beginning of a riddle; <https://otvet.mail.ru/question/52541598> , 98/26/2915)

- topical, intransitive, agentive, animate, indefinite number → IM hardly available

(29) *Недавно построены и эти семь домов.* (Rozental' et al. 2005: 465)

- Non-topical, intransitive, non-agentive, inanimate, high number, definite → no IM

(30) *Задержано несколько сотен находящихся в розыске людей* (news headline; <http://minval.az/news/84942>; 08/26/2015)

- non-topical, intransitive, non-agentive, animate, high number → IM

(30а) *Несколько десятков человек были задержаны этим вечером в центре Москвы.* (<http://echo.msk.ru/news/1543858-echo.html>, 07/07/2015)

- topical, intransitive, non-agentive, animate, high number → no IM

(31) *За последние пять лет в Москве появилось 400 км новых дорог* (news headline; <http://www.tvc.ru/news/show/id/74043>, 08/21/2015)

- non-topical, non-agentive, inanimate, high number → IM



(31a) *Друз[ь]я, на свет появилось 9 замечательных щенят.*

(post on digital social network, http://pikabu.ru/story/chelyabinsk_druzya_na_svet_poyavilos_9_zamechatelnyikh_shchenyat_otdam_v_khoroshie_ruki_eshchyo_foto_vnutri_i_telefon_2689848, 08/26/2015)

- Non-topical, non-agentive, animate, high number → IM

(31b) *ЦИК завершила регистрацию кандидатов в нардепы: появились еще 9*

Дартов Вейдеров (news headline; <http://glavred.info/politika/cik-zavershila-registraciyu-kandidatov-v-nardepy-poyavilis-esche-9-dart-veyderov-291603.html>, 08/26/2015)

- Non-topical, agentive, animate, high number → no IM

However, the choice between impersonal and personal morphology is not a straightforward one:

(32) *На одно рабочее место в Украине pretendует почти пять человек* (news headline;

<http://korrespondent.net/ukraine/3443029-na-odno-rabochee-mesto-v-ukrayne-pretenduet-pochty-piat-chelovek>; 08/26/2015)

- Non-topical, intransitive, agentive, animate, high number (= 5) → IM

(32a) *В Украине сейчас на одно рабочее место pretendуют больше шести*

кандидатов (news headline; <http://iz.com.ua/ukraina/65757-v-ukraine-seychas-na-odno-rabochee-mesto-pretenduyut-bolshe-shesti-kandidatov.html>; 08/26/2015)

- Non-topical, intransitive, agentive, animate, high number (= 6) → no IM

2.2.2 Numeral constructions: summary and conclusion



The use of IM numeral phrases poses no problem for the understanding of impersonality advocated here, either!

Factors determining agreement resolution in Russian numeral phrases in subject position:

Factors favoring grammatical agreement (IM)	Factors favoring semantic (plural) agreement
Intransitivity of the clause	Transitivity of the clause
Low degree of agentivity, as manifested through the semantics of the verb and the head noun in the numeral phrase	High degree of agentivity, as manifested through the semantics of the verb and the head noun in the numeral phrase
Inanimacy of the head noun in the numeral phrase	Animacy of the head noun in the numeral phrase
Low degree of referentiality, as manifested through: high and indefinite numbers, context	High degree of referentiality, as manifested through: low numbers, demonstrative pronouns, context
Non-topicality (i.e., post-position of numeral phrase)	Topicality (i.e., initial position)



2.2.3 Distributive *po*-phrases

Classic (school grammar) explanation of the use of IM in distributive *po*-phrases:
Since distributive *po* requires dative case, there is no nominative subject and hence IM is required.

Linguistic discussion: are distributive *po*-phrases a diagnostic of unaccusativity in Russian?

(33) *Каждый принес по чемодану.* (transitive)

‘Every person brought a (different) suitcase.’

(33a) *На каждом дереве сидело по птице.* (unaccusative)

‘On every tree sat a (different) bird.’

(33b) **На каждом дереве пело по птице.* (unergative)

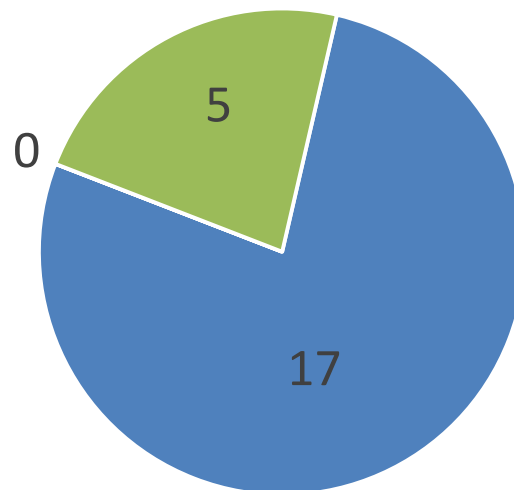
Intended: ‘On every tree sang a (different) bird.’

(all from Kuznetsova 2005: 171)

A look at the results of a pilot study:



1. На каждом дереве сидело/а по птице. (n=22)

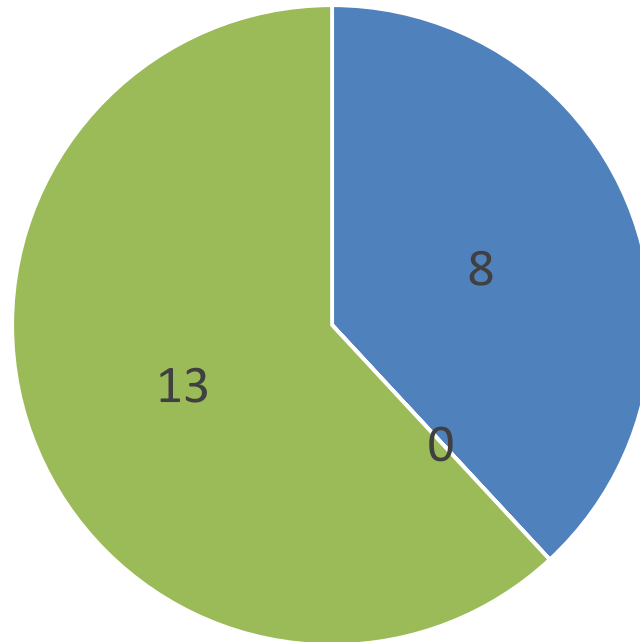


■ grammatical agreement (IM) ■ semantic agreement ■ both options rejected

One alternative option given:

На каждом дереве было по птице.

2. На каждом дереве пело/а по птице. (n = 21)



■ grammatical agreement (IM) ■ semantic agreement ■ both options rejected

Sample of the alternative options given:

На каждом дереве пела одна птица.

На всех деревьях пели птицы.

На каждом дереве пела птица.

3. За каждым столом сидело по девочке и писало домашнее задание. (n=22)



■ grammatical agreement (IM)

■ semantic agreement (plural agreement)

■ both options rejected

Sample of the alternative options given:

За каждым столом сидело по девочке. Они писали домашнее задание.

За каждым столом сидела девочка и писала домашнее задание.

За каждым столом сидела девочка, выполнявшая домашнее задание.

За столами девочки делали домашнее задание.

Another example with a transitive subject, animate, yet non-topical *po*-phrase not yielding IM:

(34) *[К]аждого узника вели по трое конвойных.* (Kuznetsova 2005: 173)

Po-phrases: summary and conclusions

- Although distributive *po* automatically triggers dative case on the subject, it does not automatically trigger IM on the verb.
 - When distributive *po* fails to impose IM on the verb (which results either in a personal sentence with a non-canonical subject or in rejection of the given construction by native speakers), the reason is that the head noun of the *po*-phrase disposes of prototypical subject properties (animacy, agentivity, transitivity).
 - The fact that IM usually occurs with distributive *po*-phrases in subject position is due to the semantics of *po* itself: the entity denoted by the *po*-phrase gets de-individuated and acquires the semantic role of a theme.
 - Objects of transitive verbs and subjects of unaccusative intransitive verbs are more likely to dispose of the semantic features implied by a *po*-phrase than transitive or unergative subjects (Kuznetsova 2005: 179f.) → *po*-phrases are no reliable diagnostics for unaccusativity in Russian (Kuznetsova 2005)
- Distributive *po*-phrases with IM are part of the impersonal domain as their subjects rank low in agentivity, referentiality and topicality.



2.2.4 Infinitival and clause subjects

(35) *Убить человека безоружного ему было стыдно.* (Timofeev in Veselaya 2014: 81)

(36) *Меня беспокоит, что она мало прибавляет в весе.* (entry on a web forum, <https://health.mail.ru/consultation/1583975/>; 08/28/2015)

Infinitival and clause subjects are intransitive, inanimate, non-agentive and typically in non-topical position. As such, they are also low in referentiality, because there are no objects in the extra-linguistic world that they could relate to.

→ No problem with these two types of non-canonical subjects, either!



3. A glance at IM in Croatian and Serbian

- IM after numeral subjects ≥ 5 and indefinite lexical quantifiers (*mnogo*, *nekoliko*, *malo*)
- The rule is widely respected even with animate numerals in topic position.
- However, we find examples with highly referential and/or agentive numeral phrase subjects as the following:

(37) *Četiri ili pet nepoznatih počinitelja su_{3rdPI} u četvrtak popodne opljačkali_{3rd PI} mladića.*

‘Four or five unknown persons robbed a young man on Friday.’ (subheading in a newspaper article; <http://www.24sata.hr/crna-kronika-news/zagreb-petorica-razbojnika-napali-i-opljackali-mladica-21-306281>, 04/27/2015)

(38) *Naših 5 momaka su bez problema prošli u 3. k[rug] takmičenja [...]*

‘Our five boys reached the third round without any problems.’ (facebook post; <https://sr.rs.facebook.com/Vis.cs.1.6team/posts/297932320261194>, 04/27/2015)

→ The same semantic and pragmatic, cognitively based, mechanisms are at work, but stricter linguistic standardization in Croatian and Serbian allows less deviation from the rule than in Russian (cf. Schlund submitted).



4. Conclusion

1. Russian impersonals build a network of constructions which are formally related by IM on the verb and functionally (semantically, pragmatically) related by lack of prototypical subject properties (animacy and agentivity, referentiality, topicality)
2. IM may or may not include lack of an overt subject altogether:

(39) *Темнеет*: subjectless impersonal

(40) *Мне не спится*: subjectless impersonal with subject-like oblique ‘мне’

(41) *В этом году вышло несколько таких фильмов*: impersonal with non-canonical subject ‘несколько таких фильмов’ (answers to the question of “кто/что”)

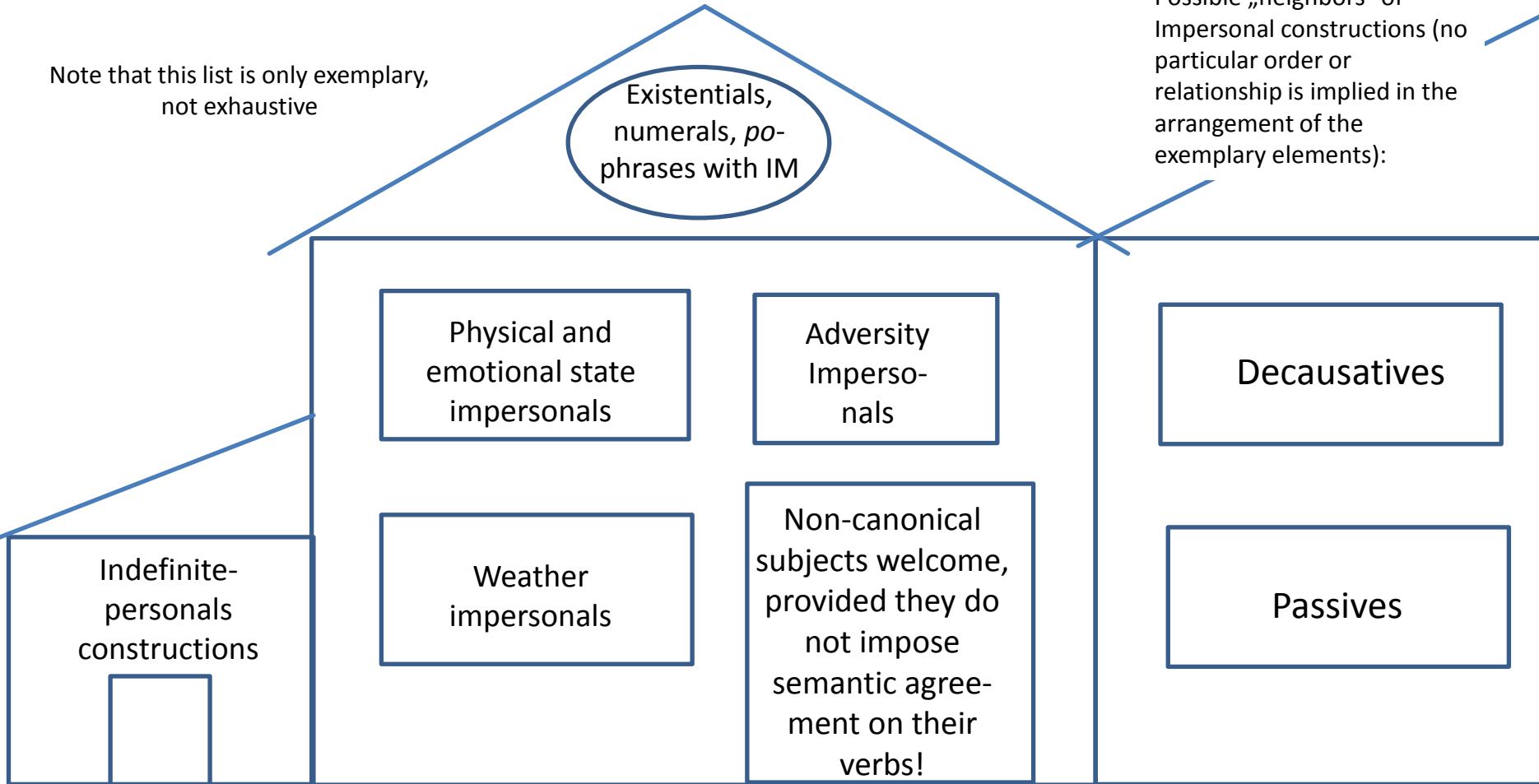
4. Conclusion



The “House of Russian Impersonals” (located in the street of “instigator defocusers”)

Note that this list is only exemplary,
not exhaustive

Possible „neighbors“ of
Impersonal constructions (no
particular order or
relationship is implied in the
arrangement of the
exemplary elements):



4. Conclusion



Tasks for the future:

- Develop methods to measure agentivity, referentiality and topicality and to determine their relative weight.
- Test if the understanding of impersonality outlined here applies to other Slavic languages as well.
- Conduct comparative studies of Slavic impersonals: Are there any clear differences in the relative weight of subject properties in different Slavic languages?
- Establish a “map of impersonality” for the Slavic world.



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