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A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF IMPERSONAL SENTENCES IN GERMAN AND UZBEK: THE CASE OF THE PRONOUN "ES"

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ABSTRACT. This article offers a contrastive analysis of impersonal sentences in German and Uzbek, taking the German pronoun "es" as its empirical focus. German is a non-pro-drop language in which every finite clause requires an overt grammatical subject; when no referential subject is available, German fills the subject position with the formal pronoun "es." Uzbek, by contrast, is an agglutinative, verb-final and subject-drop language that possesses no grammatical category comparable to an expletive subject. The study examines four authentic sentence pairs drawn from Franz Kafka's novel *Der Process* and its Uzbek translation, classifying the occurrences of "es" into correlative, existential and positional types and tracing how each is realised in Uzbek. The findings show that the impersonality encoded by "es" in German is preserved in Uzbek through structurally different devices: verbal-noun nominalisation with possessive marking, the existential predicates bor / yo'q, zero-subject constructions licensed by verbal agreement, and occasional personalisation of impersonal predicates. The pronoun "es" thus emerges as a parameter-sensitive element whose obligatory presence in German and systematic absence in Uzbek reflect deeper typological differences in subjecthood and word order.

Keywords: impersonal sentences; pronoun es; German; Uzbek; contrastive analysis; expletive subject; subject-drop; language typology.

INTRODUCTION.

Impersonal sentences – sentences that lack a referential, agentive subject – constitute one of the most revealing testing grounds for cross-linguistic comparison, because languages differ sharply in the formal means by which they encode the absence of a thematic subject. Some languages insert a semantically empty placeholder into the subject position; others leave that position unfilled altogether. German and Uzbek occupy opposite poles of this continuum, and the German pronoun "es" stands precisely at the point where the two systems diverge.

German is a non-pro-drop (non-null-subject) language: its grammar requires that every finite clause contain an overt grammatical subject in the nominative case. This requirement, formalised in syntactic theory as the Extended Projection Principle, is reinforced by the verb-second (V2) constraint, which demands that the position before the finite verb – the so-called Vorfeld – be lexically filled. When a clause has no referential subject, German satisfies both demands by inserting the pronoun "es." Standard reference grammars distinguish several functions of this element: the referential or anaphoric "es," which substitutes for a neuter noun phrase or a stretch of discourse; the correlative or anticipatory "es" (Korrelat), which announces an extraposed subordinate or infinitival clause; the expletive or impersonal "es," found with weather verbs, with the existential construction "es gibt," and in impersonal passives; and the positional or placeholder "es" (Vorfeld-es), which merely occupies the pre-verbal slot and disappears as soon as another constituent moves into it.

Uzbek represents the opposite typological profile. It is an agglutinative, head-final language with canonical subject–object–verb order and rich verbal agreement that encodes the person and number of the subject directly on the predicate. As a consequence, Uzbek is a subject-drop language: a

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pronominal subject is routinely omitted because it is recoverable from verbal morphology. Crucially, Uzbek has no grammatical category corresponding to an expletive or dummy subject. Where German must supply "es," Uzbek either leaves the subject position empty or reorganises the clause around a different element — most often an existential predicate or a nominalised clause.

This asymmetry makes "es" an ideal lens for a contrastive study of impersonality. The present article pursues three questions. First, what functional types of "es" occur in impersonal sentences in authentic German prose? Second, by what grammatical means does Uzbek render the impersonality that German encodes through "es"? Third, what typological generalisations follow from the comparison? To answer these questions the study draws on a parallel literary corpus, described in the following section.

MATERIALS AND METHODS.

The study adopts the comparative (contrastive) method, in which two languages are juxtaposed against a shared tertium comparationis. Here the tertium comparationis is the functional task of encoding impersonality, that is, of constructing a grammatical clause when no referential subject is present. The German clause and its Uzbek counterpart are compared not for surface similarity but for the way each fulfils this shared communicative function.

The empirical material consists of parallel sentence pairs extracted from Franz Kafka's novel *Der Process* (1925) and its published Uzbek translation. The novel was chosen because its dense, reflective prose contains a high frequency of impersonal and existential constructions, providing a natural concentration of "es" in diverse functions. Four representative pairs were selected for close analysis so that all of the principal impersonal types – correlative, existential and positional – are represented. Each German occurrence of "es" was classified according to the categories established in standard German grammars, and the corresponding Uzbek segment was analysed to identify the grammatical device by which the same content is expressed. The analysis is qualitative and descriptive: it characterises the structural correspondence between the two languages rather than counting frequencies, which would require a larger corpus. Obvious typographic errors in the source examples have been silently normalised to standard German and Uzbek orthography; page references follow the editions from which the examples were taken.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.

Table 1 summarises the four functional types of "es" identified in the corpus together with the Uzbek device that corresponds to each. The detailed analysis of the individual examples follows.

Table 1. Functional types of "es" and their Uzbek correspondences

Type of es	German construction	Uzbek correspondence
Correlative (Korrelat)	es + predicate + extraposed clause (e.g. es ist zu befürchten, dass…)	Nominalised clause with possessive, or personalised predicate; no overt placeholder
Correlative (evaluative)	es ist + adjective + infinitival clause (es ist schwer… zu…)	Verbal noun (-(i)sh) + possessive as grammatical subject

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Type of es	German construction	Uzbek correspondence
Existential	es gibt + noun phrase	Existential predicate bor / yo‘q with the noun as subject
Positional (Vorfeld-es)	es + finite verb + postposed logical subject (es fanden Untersuchungen statt)	Zero subject; logical subject in initial position, agreement on verb

Correlative “es” with a modal-evaluative predicate. The first example illustrates the anticipatory function of “es.”

(1) German: *Es ist dann nur zu befürchten, dass er bald einschläft, nach dem Essen schläft er bald ein. (p. 177)*

Uzbek: *Hamisha ovqatni ichib bo‘lishi bilan u tarashadek qotadi-qoladi, yana shunday uxlab qolmasa, deb qo‘rqaman-da. (p. 254)*

In the German sentence “es” is a correlative element that anticipates the extraposed dass-clause; the real propositional content (“that he will soon fall asleep”) is the logical subject of the impersonal predicate “ist zu befürchten” (‘is to be feared’). The construction is doubly impersonal: there is no human subject, and the modal-passive predicate presents the fear as an objective state of affairs. Uzbek does not reproduce this impersonal frame at all. The translation reorganises the clause around an explicit first-person experiencer, “qo‘rqaman” (‘I fear’), so that the German impersonal evaluation becomes an Uzbek personal one. No placeholder pronoun appears, and could not: Uzbek encodes the experiencer in the verbal ending “-man” and leaves the subject position lexically empty. The impersonality of the source is thus replaced by subject-drop personalisation.

Correlative “es” with an evaluative adjective. The second example shows the most transparent case of correlative “es.”

(2) German: *Es ist schwer, alles zu behalten. (p. 178)*

Uzbek: *Ammo yoddan eslashim mushkul. (p. 256)*

Here “es” anticipates the infinitival clause “alles zu behalten” (‘to retain everything’), which is the genuine subject of the evaluative predicate “ist schwer” (‘is difficult’). German cannot place the infinitival clause in the empty subject slot directly, so the placeholder “es” maintains the V2 structure. Uzbek achieves the same evaluative meaning by nominalising the action with the verbal-noun suffix “-(i)sh” and adding the first-person possessive: “eslashim” (‘my remembering’). This nominalised form functions as the grammatical subject of the predicate “mushkul” (‘difficult’). What German distributes between a placeholder and an extraposed clause, Uzbek concentrates in a single inflected verbal noun. The contrast is structurally exact: both languages have an evaluative predicate and a clausal subject, but German requires an overt pronominal placeholder while Uzbek supplies a morphologically subjectivised clause.

Existential “es gibt.” The third example represents the impersonal existential construction.

(3) German: *Es gibt auch wenig gemeinsame Interessen. (p. 181)*

Uzbek: *Qolaversa, ularning yakdil dardu tashvishlari ham yo‘q hisobi. (p. 261)*

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The German construction “es gibt” is idiomatic and rigidly impersonal: “es” is a fixed expletive subject and the notional content – “wenig gemeinsame Interessen” (‘few common interests’) – appears in the accusative as the grammatical object. Uzbek expresses existence and non-existence not through a transitive verb but through the predicative particles “bor” (‘there is’) and “yo‘q” (‘there is not’). In the translation the noun phrase “yakdil dardu tashvishlari” (‘shared cares’) becomes the grammatical subject, and the negated existential “yo‘q hisobi” (‘are practically none’) serves as the predicate. The German expletive subject therefore has no Uzbek reflex whatsoever; the element that German treats as a syntactic object is promoted to subject in Uzbek. This is the clearest demonstration that the two languages assign subjecthood on entirely different principles in existential clauses.

Positional (Vorfeld-) “es.” The fourth example contains the placeholder “es” that merely fills the pre-verbal slot.

(4) German: *... es fanden zwar Untersuchungen statt, ich kam auch zu jeder ... (p. 183)*

Uzbek: *... To‘g‘ri, tergov boshlangan, men hech bir so‘roqdan qolmasdim ... (p. 266)*

In “es fanden Untersuchungen statt” the logical subject is the plural noun “Untersuchungen” (‘investigations’), with which the verb agrees (fanden, third person plural). The pronoun “es” is purely positional: it occupies the Vorfeld so that the V2 constraint is met, and it would vanish if any other constituent – here the adverb “zwar” – were fronted instead. The Uzbek clause has no such placeholder. Verb-final order means the pre-verbal field can be filled by the logical subject or by a topicalised adverb, and rich agreement allows the subject to remain implicit. The translator renders the clause as “tergov boshlangan” (‘an investigation was begun’), in which the noun “tergov” is itself the subject and no expletive is needed. The example shows that the very motivation for positional “es” – a fixed second-position verb requiring a filled first position – is absent in Uzbek, which therefore never generates such a pronoun.

The four examples converge on a single generalisation: the impersonality that German encodes by means of the pronoun “es” is uniformly realised in Uzbek without any placeholder, through devices that exploit the agglutinative and subject-drop character of the language. Correlative “es” corresponds to a nominalised clause bearing possessive agreement or to outright personalisation of the predicate; existential “es gibt” corresponds to the predicates bor and yo‘q with the notional noun raised to subject; and positional “es” corresponds to a zero subject in a verb-final clause.

The deeper explanation lies in two interacting parameters. German combines a strict requirement for an overt grammatical subject with the verb-second constraint; together these force the language to fill an otherwise empty subject and pre-verbal position, and “es” is the grammaticalised means of doing so. Uzbek lacks both pressures: it is a subject-drop language whose verbal agreement makes an overt subject unnecessary, and it is verb-final, so there is no second-position verb creating an obligatory first slot. With neither structural demand present, Uzbek has no occasion to develop an expletive pronoun, and indeed has none. Impersonality, in other words, is a universal communicative function whose formal encoding is parametrically variable: German encodes it positively, by inserting a dedicated element, while Uzbek encodes it negatively, by leaving a position empty or by restructuring the clause.

These findings carry a clear pedagogical implication. Uzbek learners of German tend to omit “es” in exactly those constructions where their native grammar would leave the subject unexpressed, producing ungrammatical sentences such as *“ist schwer zu behalten” or *“gibt viele Gründe.” Conversely, German-speaking learners of Uzbek are inclined to over-supply pronominal subjects,

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importing an expletive where none is licensed. Explicit contrastive instruction that foregrounds the typological motivation for "es" – rather than presenting it as an isolated idiom – is therefore likely to reduce such transfer errors.

CONCLUSION

The pronoun "es" is structurally obligatory in German impersonal sentences and structurally absent from their Uzbek equivalents. This contrast is not a matter of stylistic preference but of grammatical architecture: German's combination of an obligatory overt subject and verb-second order requires a placeholder, whereas Uzbek's subject-drop, verb-final, agglutinative organisation makes such a placeholder both unnecessary and impossible. Across correlative, existential and positional uses, the impersonal meaning carried by "es" survives translation into Uzbek, but it is redistributed onto nominalised clauses, existential predicates and zero-subject constructions. Future research could extend the analysis to a larger parallel corpus and to other Turkic languages, in order to test whether the devices identified here represent a stable areal strategy for encoding impersonality in the absence of an expletive subject.

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