

The Semantics of Russian Genitive of Negation: The Nature and Role of Perspectival Structure

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There is a large literature on the problem of the "genitive of negation" (Gen Neg) in Russian, a construction that poses challenges for syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, as well as for the nature of the lexicon. The problem is illustrated in (1) and (2), two different ways to say "[the/an] answer hasn't arrived". Example (2) shows Gen Neg: the subject is in the genitive case and the verb is in a non-agreeing impersonal form.

- (1) *Otvét iz polka ne prišel.*
Answer-NOM.M.SG from regiment NEG arrived-M.SG
'The answer from the regiment has not arrived.'
- (2) *Otveta iz polka ne prišlo.*
Answer-GEN.M.SG from regiment NEG arrived-N.SG
'There was no answer from the regiment.'

What the alternation between Nom and Gen in such sentences depends on is an old and difficult problem. Almost all Western investigators believe that sentences like (1) and (2) always differ in scope of negation. Babby (1980) proposed that topic-focus structure determines scope of negation, and hence is crucial for Gen Neg. Pesetsky (1982) argued that the Genitive NP is always an underlying direct object bearing a null negative polarity quantifier, and that the relevant intransitive verbs are always unaccusative. Russian work on Gen Neg (Apresjan, Paduceva, and others) emphasizes the lexical semantics of the relevant verbs and the referential status of the subject.

In our work (B and P 2002a,b,c, P and B 2002) we are trying to understand the semantics of the construction in a way that integrates lexical and compositional semantics. We do not believe that scope of negation is the whole semantic story. The Subject Gen Neg construction is limited to "existential sentences" and aspectual or modal modifications thereof, but existential sentences have no distinctive (surface) syntactic structure in Russian. The similar Object Gen Neg construction shows no obvious syntactic properties beyond the alternation of Acc and Gen case. We consider interactions of syntax and semantics of the (open class of) "genitive" verbs, referential status and presuppositionality of the subject, and other factors. In particular, for Subject Gen Neg we argue for a difference in "perspectival structure" regarding the relative roles of subject and implicit or explicit Locative, a difference similar to the subtle semantic distinction associated with diathesis alternation in *spray/load* verbs, discussed in recent work by Levin and Rappaport Hovav, Krifka, and others.

We try to capture both similarities and differences between Subject and Object Gen Neg by viewing both as diathetic alternations (Ackerman and Moore 2001, Dowty 2001, Kiparsky 1997, Krifka 2000, Paduceva 2002), involving semantic shifts in verb meaning correlated with changes in "proto-Agent" or "proto-Patient" properties (Dowty 1991). This hypothesis connects the "semantic bleaching" of intransitive verbs with Subject Gen Neg with the differences in referentiality of the affected NP in both constructions and in affirmative Gen/Acc alternations with intensional verbs, and relates the conditioning factors noted by Ickovič (1974) and Timberlake (1975) to the transitivity properties of Hopper and Thompson (1981). The interaction of sentential negation with verbal semantics and diathesis alternation is a key issue to be discussed.

We will include some discussion of the variability across Slavic languages in patterns of Genitive of Negation, and make some speculative remarks about the differences underlying different ways that “differences in perspective” may be realized, including differences in Topic-focus structure (as Babby proposed for Russian Gen Neg), lexical diathesis alternations, and syntactic alternations.

Some of our work so far on this topic can be found at <http://people.umass.edu/partee/>.

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