

Syntactic position and interpretation: the case of Russian preverbal subjects

There is a common assumption in literature on Slavic languages that preverbal subjects are interpreted definitely, while postverbal subjects are interpreted indefinitely (Pospelov 1970, Krámský 1972). However, there have not been many experimental studies that would test the interpretation of preverbal and postverbal subjects in articleless languages.

We designed an experiment to test this claim in Russian. It was aimed at checking the correlation between word order (SV/VS) and interpretation (definite/indefinite) for Russian BPl nominals in subject position. Our primary goal was to establish whether the position of a nominal, in the absence of articles, (fully/partially) determines its (in)definiteness. We examined the interpretation of bare plural subject NPs using an Acceptability Judgement Test (AJT) with a scale from 1 (not acceptable) to 4 (fully acceptable). 120 participants were given short written instructions: to listen to the items and give their first judgement. The stimuli were presented acoustically in order to exclude the possible influence of prosody on the interpretation. In the following examples of experimental items, the judgment applied to the last sentence:

(1) Preverbal indefinite context:

U nas v dome nikogda ne bylo gryzunov. No včera ja uslyšala, kak **myšy** skrebutsja.
We never had rodents at home. But yesterday I heard (lit.) how mice scratch.

(2) Postverbal indefinite context:

Nam nikogda ne prinosili počtu. No segodnja v jaščike **ležali pis’ma**.
We have never received any mail. But today in the mailbox (lit.) were lying letters.

(3) Preverbal definite context:

On vošěl v komnatu i uvidel mal’čika i devočku. **Deti** nepodvižno sideli za stolom.
He entered the room and saw a boy and a girl. The children were sitting motionlessly at the table.

(4) Postverbal definite context:

Xozjaika iskala famil’noe serebro po vsem škafam. No bylo ponятно, čto *propali stolovye pribory*.
The landlady was looking for family silverware in all cabinets. But it was clear that (lit.) was gone the cutlery.

The experiment showed that there is, indeed, a preference for definite interpretation of nominals in preverbal position and the indefinite in postverbal. This preference for a definite interpretation of preverbal subjects can be explained by the assumption that preverbal subjects in Russian are aboutness topics; they tend to be definite, although a (specific) indefinite interpretation is not ruled out for sentential topics (cf. Reinhart 1981).

Additionally, the results indicated that speakers would be overall more permissive for indefinite NPs, and NPs in preverbal position. These results are statistically significant and we believe they indicate important, theoretically relevant *mismatches* between syntactic position and interpretation. In particular, they seriously undermine the strict version of the hypothesis that preverbal subjects can only be definite.

As for *indefinite preverbal* subjects, our data included examples with non-specific indefinites, which are not, in principle, good candidates for topichood but were still judged fairly acceptable in preverbal position by the speakers. We suggest that weak (i.e., non-specific) readings of indefinites survive in topics when they are already licensed in the sentential context with which the topic is linked (Leonetti 2010). As a piece of evidence that this generalization is on the right track, we can provide an example where such licensing by the previous context is missing and the acceptability of the example drops to 17% vs. mean 29% in other items.

What we would like to pay special attention to is the overall superior adequacy of indefinites, independently of syntactic position. We would like to suggest the following explanation for the observed (this time, interpretational) mismatch between indefinite and definite nominal expression. By hypothesis, bare NPs in Russian (and possibly in article-less languages in general, although there might be variation between different languages) are semantically indefinite (Heim 2011), whereas definiteness is a pragmatic strengthening of indefinites. This hypothesis predicts that indefinite NPs are felicitous in a wider range of positions and contexts, which is exactly what has been observed in our experiment.

To develop this hypothesis, we argue, on the basis of contrastive analysis of the Russian bare and the English definite nominal phrases in argument position, that if Russian bare nominals exhibit definiteness, it is not the same *type* of definiteness that is encoded in English by the definite article *the*. Our crucial argument is that one of the most fundamental characteristics of the English definites, namely, the presupposition of uniqueness associated with them, is absent in Russian alleged definites. We will argue that a semantic analysis based on the assumption that bare nominals in Russian are underlyingly indefinite (see Heim 2011) is the one that best captures the empirical facts. We will also show that definiteness effects exhibited by some of the bare nominals in argument position are cancellable implicatures.

In general, definiteness (as implicature) arises due to a number of factors in Russian.

- A. Familiarity (Christophersen 1939; Heim 1982), which can be subsumed under identifiability by the speaker and the hearer (Lyons 1999), and anaphoricity (cf. example (4)) as its special case (Heim 1982) may be one of the most powerful mechanisms for inducing a definite interpretation of Russian bare nominals (see example (3) above).
- B. Topicality, which strongly favours a definite interpretation cross-linguistically (cf. Reinhart 1981 and the reasoning above). Topicality is related to the identifiability of the referent. It may be referentially new, but it has to be situationally given or inferable from the context (cf. D-linking in Pesetsky 1987). Identifiable nominals are generally found in preverbal topic position in Russian (or as Šimík & Burianová (2018) claim, in clause-initial position). The stronger the link to the previous discourse, the easier it is for a bare nominal to appear in a position associated with topic.
- C. Situational uniqueness, as opposed to semantic uniqueness, can also induce a definite reading in Russian bare nominals. Unique objects like *the sun*, *the moon*, etc., even though are used with the definite article in languages like English, are known to be unique in the world. Their uniqueness is not semantically derived or determined, it is simply ‘reflected’ by means of the definite article. In Russian, there is nothing to reflect the unique status of such objects in the world, so they are linguistically unmarked.

(Selected) references

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