

The interaction of negation and disjunction in Russian

Syntax Interface Lectures

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1 Introduction

- an elegant pattern noticed by Anna Szabolcsi as far as the interpretation of disjunction is concerned
- spotting potential counterexamples and trying to see how they fit

1.1 Disjunction and negation crosslinguistically (Szabolcsi 2002, 2004)

English

- (1) James doesn't speak Russian or German.
- a. 'James speaks neither Russian nor German' (preferred)
 - b. 'James doesn't speak Russian or James doesn't speak German' (marginal)

Hungarian (Szabolcsi & Haddican 2004)

- (2) *Mari nem járt hokira vagy algebrára*
Mari not went hockey-to or algebra-to
- a. '~~Mary didn't take hockey and didn't take algebra.~~'
 - b. 'Mary didn't take hockey or didn't take algebra.'

- English-like languages
 - Dutch, Romanian, Korean (but cf. Lee 2010 for claims to the contrary), ...
- Hungarian-like languages
 - Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Japanese, ...

1.2 Polarity is at the core of the distinction

Disjunction is a PPI in these languages but not in English or Dutch

1.2.1 NNRs in Hungarian (Szabolcsi 2002)

Locality of negation

(3) Szabolcsi (2002, 2004) claim that Hungarian *vagy* does allow NNRs.

(4) Biclausal structures:

Nem hiszem, hogy becsuktuk volna az ajtót vagy az ablakot.
 not think.1SG that in.closed.1PL AUX the door.ACC or the window.ACC
 'I don't think we closed the door or the window.'

(5) Secondary predication

Nem tart-om János-t bátor-nak vagy okos-nak.
 not consider-1SG John-ACC brave-DAT or smart-DAT
 'I don't consider John brave or smart.'

Why not in monoclausal sentences then?

→ Hungarian *vagy* is a positive polarity item

1.2.2 PPI licensing

PPI licensing

- no predicate-mate negation

1.3 Going back to Russian

Distilled into a generalisation, Russian counterparts of (1)

- are acceptable, and
- have no *neither... nor...* reading (NNR)

1.4 Aims for today

- adduce more data to refine the generalisation
- discuss a number of environments where the English-like interpretation is available
- as well as other factors of relevance

2 Generalisation part I: Does Russian allow disjunctions under negation?

2.1 Generalisation part I: Is (1) acceptable in Russian?

TVJ task reported in [Verbuk \(2006\)](#)

(6) *On ne govorit po-russki ili po-nemecki.*
he not speaks Russian or German
= 'He doesn't speak Russian or he doesn't speak German'

- My intuition (confirmed by a dozen speakers): (6) is bad unless there's a pause before *ili*
- But then an alternative structure is available
- Let's assume for the moment that the sentence is perfect and revisit this judgement later

2.1.1 Alternative structure for *or* > \neg

(7) Two clausal disjuncts + ellipsis

(8) [*On ne govorit po-russki*] *ili* [~~*on-ne govorit*~~ *po-nemecki*]
he not speaks Russian or he not speaks German

- the '*or* > \neg ' interpretation falls out naturally
- there are nice processing experiments to help us decide ([Hoeks et al. 2006](#))

3 Generalisation part II: NNRs in Russian

3.1 Factor of relevance 1: surface word order and scope

(9) Russian is an overt scope language, -ish

Fronting the disjunction ameliorates judgement:

(10) [*Po-russki ili po-nemecki*] *on ne govorit* [NNR]
Russian or German he not speaks
'Russian or German, he doesn't speak.'

- overt scope paradox: fronting the disjunction should change scope relations, yet the disjunction scopes under the negation,
- which it couldn't do from its original position.

3.2 Exceptional *neither... nor* readings (Letuchiy 2015)

3.2.1 Russian copular clauses with overt copula

(11) *on ne byl / budet vorom ili mošennikom* [NNR]
he NEG be.PST:M:SG / be.FUT.SG thief or crook
'He {was/will be} neither a thief nor a crook.'

3.2.2 Russian copular clauses without overt copula

(12) **on ne vor ili mošennik*
he NEG thief or crook
'(He isn't a thief or a crook.)'

3.2.3 Other instances of predication

The pattern observed in copular clauses with an overt copula is consistent with Szabolcsi's (2002) observation regarding secondary predication in Hungarian:

(13) *Ja ne sčitaju [pivo vrednym ili protivnym]* [NNR]
I not consider beer harmful or nasty
'I do not consider beer harmful or nasty.'

- (14) *Ja ne videl [Vanju v šljape ili parike]* [NNR]
 I not saw Vanya in hat or wig
 ‘I haven’t seen Vanya in a hat or a wig.’
- (15) *Ja ne em [mjaso syrym ili peregotovlennym]* [NNR]
 I not eat meat raw or overcooked
 ‘I do not eat meat raw or overcooked.’

3.2.4 Summing up

We have seen that

- copular sentences with an overt copula appear similar to sentences involving small clauses
- if Szabolcsi’s (2002) locality condition on PPI-licensing is correct (i.e. ‘non-predicatemate’ higher negation counts as sufficiently non-local), the different behaviour of *ili* in Russian predicational structures with an overt copula and without one has implications for the analysis of copular constructions.

3.3 Neither... nor... readings in present tense

3.3.1 Conjunction of negations

- (16) **on ne vor ili mošennik*
 he NEG thief or crook
 (‘He isn’t a thief or a crook.’)
- (17) According to De Morgan’s laws, the negation of a disjunction is equivalent to a conjunction of negations, which seems to be the most natural way of expressing the NNR in the present tense in the absence of an overt copula.
- (18) *on ne vor i ne mošennik*
 he not thief and not crook
 ‘He isn’t a thief or a crook.’

3.3.2 Modifying one disjunct with an indefinite

- (19) If one disjunct is modified with an indefinite, the copulaless sentence becomes acceptable and only has the NNR.

- (20) a. *on ne vor ili kakoj-nibud' mošennik*
 he not thief or some crook
 b. *on ne kakoj-nibud' vor ili mošennik*
 he not some thief or crook
 'He isn't some thief of a crook.'
- (21) The indefinite brings in a decidedly depreciative or pejorative flavour to the sentence.
- (22) Not all indefinite series in Russian are suited for this, but the *-to* and *-nibud'* indefinites seem OK
- (23) a. *on ne vor ili mošennik kakoj-to*
 he not thief or some crook
 b. *on ne vor kakoj-to ili mošennik*
 he not some thief or crook
 'He isn't some thief of a crook.'
- (24) The word order NP-indefinite seems to be relevant: the *-to*-indefinites do not precede the NP they modify unless they are followed by the adverbial *tam* 'there'.
- (25) a. *on ne vor ili kakoj-to *(tam) mošennik*
 he not thief or some there crook
 b. *on ne kakoj-to *(tam) vor ili mošennik*
 he not some there thief or crook

3.3.3 Summary

- *neither... nor...* reading available in sentences with overt predicator
 - disjunction in sentences without overt copula leads to unacceptability
 - which can be remedied by supplying one of the disjuncts with an indefinite
- we should probably be looking at theories whereby disjunction and indefinites have a common core (e.g. InqB or other variants of inquisitive semantics; [Ciardelli, Groenendijk & Roelofsen 2013](#)).

3.4 Complications

3.4.1 Two or words: *ili* and *libo*

- (26) Russian has several disjunction markers

- (27) a. vor **ili** mošennik
thief or crook
- b. vor **libo** mošennik
thief or crook
- (28) a. **ili** vor **ili** mošennik
or thief or crook
- b. **libo** vor **libo** mošennik
or thief or crook
- (29) The difference between *ili* and *libo* is frequently described as having to do with **exclusivity**: *libo* is, unlike *ili* obligatorily exclusive.
- (30) Polysyndetic *ili* is, however, typically exclusive as well.
- (31) In addition, there are also other disjunction strategies than simply using an *or*-word.
- a. *to li X to li Y*
- b. *X li, Y li*
- (32) Their relevance for the issue at hand remains to be investigated.

4 Questions

4.1 Internal structure of disjunction markers

Both the core and the peripheral disjunction markers contain *li*, whose other function is that of a question particle/complementiser.

- Can the constitutive parts of *ili* and *libo* be used independently of each other?
- If so, what is their syntactic distribution and semantic contribution? Cf. Mitrović (2014); Szabolcsi (2015) amongst others on the μ and κ elements.
- Are there any restrictions on the order of syntactic and semantic composition?

4.2 Interpretation in a bigger context

- Do all disjunction markers in Russian violate Szabolcsi's (2004) generalisation?
- What is special about copular clauses?

- To what extent is disjunction under negation unacceptable?
 - What are the implications for Szabolcsi's (2004) two-type taxonomy?
 - Why should the non-exclusive *ili* be incompatible with having a superordinate negation?

4.3 Concluding remarks

- Russian *ili* behaves like Hungarian *vagy* in allowing NNRs when sufficiently far away from a c-commanding negation, including copular clauses
- Outside of such environments, many speakers perceive sentences with *ili* under negation as degraded.
- Not entirely clear if that degradedness is problematic for Szabolcsi's (2004) analysis of disjunction markers in Hungarian and Russian as double NPIs.

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