

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SEMANTIC AND SYNTACTIC BEHAVIOUR OF BARE COUNT NOUNS IN RUSSIAN

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Abstract: This paper is concerned with a subclass of nouns in the Russian language, viz. bare count nouns, and their semantic and syntactic intricacies. Semantically, I offer a brief overview of the various interpretations yielded by such nouns in different contexts. Additionally, I take a closer look at the indefinite reading, which has been the target of doubts, by drawing a parallel between bare singulars in Russian, qua indefinites, and bona fide indefinites in English, in accordance with Borik's account (2016). From a syntactic vantage point, I seek to adduce evidence in support of the claim that generic bare singulars have a complex architecture, of the DP type, headed by null D, in conformity with Pereltsvaig (2006) and Borik and Espinal (2019).

Keywords: indefinite, generic, null D, DP, Russian

1. Introduction

The present paper aims to offer a brief analysis of bare count nouns¹ in the Russian language from a semantic and syntactic standpoint. From a semantic standpoint, I will take a look at the different interpretations of the aforementioned class of nouns, with a focus on the indefinite reading. For this part of the discussion I have drawn mainly on Borik's paper 'Constraints on the position and interpretation of Russian singular indefinites' (2016). From a syntactic standpoint, I will delve into their behaviour within various syntactic environments with a view to demonstrate that bare count nouns are DP projections, not NP projections as it has been speculated in the literature. This section of my study is based upon the influential work of Borik and Espinal (2019) and Pereltsvaig (2006, 2007). Examples to reinforce the claims which sit at the core of the discussion have been drawn from relevant studies and the Russian National Corpus.

Thus, the structure of this paper is bipartite as it is organized around the two dimensions of analysis. For the first section I will explore the semantic behavior of bare count nouns, whereas in the second section I will direct my attention towards their syntactic properties and restrict the discussion to generic bare count nouns.

2. The semantic properties of bare count nouns

It is widely-acknowledged that in the Russian language, which completely lacks a subclass of determiners, viz. articles, bare count nouns may engender different types of readings: definite (1), indefinite (2) and generic/kind (3). For clarity purposes, I will briefly explain one example per type of reading. In (1a) the bare count noun *poezd* 'train' appears in preverbal position, which is the topic position in categorial judgements, thus giving rise to the definite interpretation. (2a) is a mirror reflection of the word order in (1a), with the same bare count noun in postverbal position, which consequently yields the indefinite reading. Last but not least, the context in (3a) favours the generic/kind reading as it refers to the train as a means of transport.

¹ I should clarify that by bare count nouns I only refer to singular, countable nouns, to the exclusion of plural countable nouns.

- (1) a. Poezd prišel.
train.NOM. arrived.PERF.PAST
'The train has arrived.'
(Borik 2016, 9)
- b. Kogda mašina dogorit?
When car.NOM. will burn.PERF.FUTURE.
'When will the car burn up?'
- c. Uslyšav, što mašina vyehala iz garaža
Hearing that car.NOM left.PERF.PAST from garage.GEN.
'As soon as I hear the car leaving the garage...'
- d. Mal'chik ulybnulsia.
Boy.NOM. smiles.PERF.PAST.
'The boy smiled.'
- (2) a. Prišel poezd.
Arrived.PERF.PAST. train.NOM.
'A train has arrived.' (Borik 2016, 9)
- b. Esli poiavlialas' mašina
If passed.IMPERF.PAST. car.NOM -
'If a car passed by...'
- c. mchalsia mal'chik.
hurried.IMP.PAST. boy.NOM.
'.... a boy was hurrying.'
- d. ... prishla zhenshchina...
...arrived.PERF.PAST. woman.NOM.
'...a woman arrived'
- (3) a. Poezd kak sredstvo peredviženija očen udoben.
Train.NOM.SG. as means transport.GEN. very comfortable.SG.
'The train as a means of transport is very convenient.'
(Borik 2016, 9)
- b. ...ženšina obyčno totčas že dotragivaetsia do telefona...
...woman.NOM. usually immediately touches.REFL.IMP.PERF at phone.GEN.
'...the woman usually immediately touches the phone...'
- c. ...obyčno ženšina idet pod ruku s mužčinoi.
... usually woman.NOM. walk.IMP.PRES. under arm.ACC with man.INSTR.
'...the woman usually walks hand in hand with the man.'
- d. ... čelovek voobše očen'i očen'- daže liubit byt'
oskorblennym
... man.NOM. generally very and very likes.IMP.PRES. to be.INF.
jjignit.PERF.PART.

As Borik (2016) points out, the definite and kind/generic readings have been unequivocally received, but that does not hold true for the indefinite reading, which has been contested in the literature (Dayal 2004). In the ensuing pages, I endeavor to present a brief overview of the arguments in favor of the indefinite reading, as outlined by Borik (2016).

The first piece of evidence she presents in her analysis is couched within distributive contexts (4), which only allow the indefinite reading. Let us take a look at the example in (4c). There are two bare count nouns in postverbal subject position, *hoziain* 'host' and *hoziaika* 'hostess' respectively. The kind/generic reading cannot be obtained as singular kinds preclude access to individuals, and thus cannot appear in distributive contexts. As for the definite reading, a cursory glance suffices to demonstrate that the sentence does not convey the presence

of the same host and hostess in each and every house. Rather, it entails that different individuals, to which we can ascribe the title of host/hostess are present in every house.

- (4) a. V kazhdom dome igral rebenok. (Borik 2016, 10)
 In each.PREP. house.PREP. played.IMP.PAST. child.NOM.
 ‘A child (a different one) was playing in every house.’
- b. ...v každom dome zdes’ est’ televizor...
 ... in each.PREP. house.PREP. here is TV.NOM.
 ‘There is a TV in every house here..’
- c. ... v kazhdom dome hoziain i hoziaika...
 ... in every.PREP. house.PREP. host.NOM. and hostess.NOM.
 ‘There is a host and a hostess in every house.’

Another piece of evidence she adduces in support of the indefinite reading stems from scope ambiguities that arise in object position. In (5) we are dealing with a bare singular in an opaque context, viz. the complement clause of the opacity-inducing predicate *hočet* ‘wants’. Such a context yields two possible readings. On the one hand, on the opaque reading (5a), also known as the narrow-scope reading, the predicate scopes over the indefinite which results in the interpretation that Vasja wants to marry any person who fits the descriptive content of the indefinite. On the other hand, the second possible reading which is yielded by the context is the transparent, or the wide-scope reading, in which the indefinite is outside the scope of the predicate. Under the transparent reading, Vasja wants to marry a specific, not any movie star, as illustrated in (5b). Thus, bare singular exhibit a similar behavior to their English indefinite counterparts.

- (5) Vasja hočet ženit’sja na kinozvezde
 Vasja wants marry.IMP.INF.REFL. with moviestar.NOM
 ‘Vasja wants to marry a movie star.’
- a) no ne mozet najti podhodjasčuju.
 but not can.IMP.PRES. find.PERF.INF. right.ACC
 ‘but he cannot find the right one.’
- b) no my eje esče ne videli.
 but we her.ACC. yet not saw.IMP.PAST.
 ‘but we haven’t seen her yet.’ (Borik 2016,11)

The third context which corroborates her claim is existential *there* sentences, which in Russian are realized by means of fronting a locative phrase.

- (6) a. V komnate ležal kover.
 in room.PREP. lay.IMP.PAST. carpet.NOM.
 ‘There was a carpet in the room.’ (Ibid., 11)
- b. V komnate... est’ dver’.
 in room.PREP. is.IMP.PRES. door.NOM.
 ‘There is a door in the room.’
- c. V komnate tvorčestva tože byl magnitfon.
 in room.PREP. art.GEN too was.IMP.PAST. tape recorder.NOM.
 ‘There was a tape recorder in the art room.’

A second test that reinforces Borik and Espinal’s (2019) claim is that generic singulars can antecede pronominal expressions. The example in (12) illustrates the same discrepancy between agreeing and non-agreeing subjects. The agreeing subject can antecede the reflexive pronoun *sebjaj* ‘themselves’, whereas the non-agreeing subject completely lacks this ability, behavior which reflects their distinct syntactic structure. Turning to generic singulars, it becomes clear that their behavior aligns perfectly with that of agreeing subjects, i.e. DPs, since the bare count *tigr* ‘tiger’ antecedes the reflexive pronoun.

- (12) [Pjat banditov]i prikryvali/ *prikryvalo sebjai
 ot pul’ Džemsa Bonda.
 Five thieves.GEN.PL. protected.PERF.PL/protected.PERF.SG.NEUT. themselves
 from bullets James.GEN. Bond.GEN.
 ‘Five thieves protected themselves from James Bond’s bullets.’
 (Ibid., 307)
- (13) Tigri znaet kak zaščitit’ sebjai ot napadenija.
 Tiger.NOM.SG. knows how protects.IMP.INF. itself from danger.GEN.SG.
 ‘The tiger knows how to protects itself from danger’. (Ibid.)

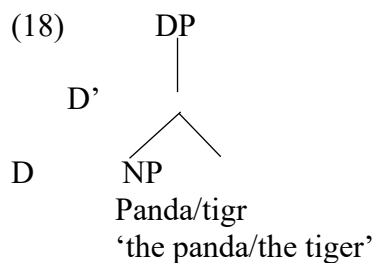
Another diagnostic test which concurs with previous findings comes from pronominal substitution, which aims to demonstrate that only agreeing subjects can be supplanted by personal pronouns, as in (14). The ungrammaticality of the verb *tancevalo* in (14b) stems from its conjunction with the personal pronoun *oni*, which can only be a DP. Thus, *oni* can only replace a similar constituent, that is the agreeing subject. This test, too, yields results favorable to our analysis of kind singulars as DPs.

- (14) a. Pjat’ par tancevali/ tancevalo tango.
 five pairs.GEN.PL. danced.IMP.PL/danced.IMP.SG.NEUT. tango.
 ‘Five pairs were dancing tango.’
 b. Oni tancevali/ *tancevalo tango.
 They.PL.NOM. danced.IMP.PL./danced.IMP.SG. Tango.
 ‘They were dancing tango.’ (Ibid.,308)
- (15) a. Panda naxoditsja na grani isčeznovenija.
 Panda.NOM.SG. is.found.IMP.SG.on verge extinction.GEN.SG.
 ‘The panda is on the verge of extinction.’
 b. Ona naxoditsja na grani isčeznovenija.
 She.SG.NOM is found.IMP.SG. on verge extinction.GEN.
 ‘She is on the verge of extinction.’ (Ibid.)

The fourth and last argument which sheds light on the syntactic properties of generic singulars is based on the ability to license non-restrictive relative clauses. First, let us examine the examples in (16), where the bare singulars *galstuke* ‘tie’ and *jubku* ‘skirt’, have a number neutral interpretation, i.e. they ‘denote either an atomic or a plural entity satisfying the description of the nominal’ (Ibid., 309). Number neutrality has long been considered to be a tell-tale sign of the NP status (Farkas and de Swart 2003, Dayal 2004, Espinal and McNally 2011), which prompts the authors to assume that the singular count nouns in (16) are “true” bare nouns, lacking both syntactic and semantic number.

- (16) a. Petja xodit v galstuke, (*kotoryj vseгда nraivsja ego žene).
 Petja goes in tie.SG.PREP., *which always likes his wife.
 ‘Petja is a tie-wearer, *which his wife likes.’
- b. Katja nosit jubku, (*katoruju ona vseгда pokupaet sama).
 Katja wear skirt.SG.ACC. which she always buys herself.
 ‘Katja is a skirt-wearer, *which she buys herself.’ (Ibid., 309)
- (17) Amurskij tigr, kotoryj očen’ opasen, obitaet na jugo-vostoke
 Rossii. south-west Russia.GEN.
 ‘The Siberian tiger, which is very dangerous, lives in the south-west of Russia.’
 (Ibid.)

Thus, all the tests presented in the previous pages bolster the hypothesis developed by Perelstvaig (2006), and later on supported by Borik and Espinal (2019). According to their accounts, generic singulars in the Russian language are DP projections, with a null D head (18).



4. Conclusions

Through the present paper, I have offered an insight into the semantic and syntactic behavior of bare count nouns in the Russian languages by presenting the three readings they might yield, viz. the definite, indefinite and generic/kinds reading. Moreover, I have advocated, in accordance with (Borik 2016) and contra Dayal (2004), that the indefinite reading of this particular subclass of nouns has yet to be properly contested, since the evidence corroborated in the second section underpins the claim that their behavior parallels that of bona fide indefinites. As for their syntactic properties, I have reiterated the diagnostic tests proposed by Perelstvaig (2006) and later adopted by Borik and Espinal (2019), which provide compelling evidence for the DP status of generic singulars in Russian.

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