The interpretation of bare nominals in languages without articles: the case of Russian

Daria Seres (UAB) and Olga Borik (UNED)

This paper makes a contribution to the understanding of (in)definiteness in Russian (a language without articles). The sematic research on definiteness has been mainly focused on languages with overt articles (Hawkins 1978, Heim 1982, Lyons 1999, Abbott 2004, Elbourne 2013, i.a.) even though almost half of the world languages are articleless (Dryer 2013a, 2013b). The expression of different kinds of reference in such languages is still rather understudied, although it is widely acknowledged that speakers of articleless languages perceive the definiteness/indefiniteness contrast (Brun 2001, Abraham et al. 2007, Zlatić 2014, i.a.).

The main goal of this presentation is to examine the interpretation of bare nominals (i.e., the ones that appear without any overt markers) in Russian and the concepts that are behind their perceived definite reading. We also compare them to the ones in languages with articles, namely, English, showing that definiteness effects are derived differently in the two languages under study.

In semantic literature, definiteness is generally understood as either uniqueness (Frege 1879, Strawson 1950) or familiarity (Christophersen 1939), but also such concepts as salience (von Heusinger 1997) or (in)determinacy (Coppock & Beaver 2015) have been used. Many researchers assume the "Fregean" semantics for definiteness, i.e., definite nominals are characterized by the presupposition of uniqueness and the presupposition of existence (see Heim 2011 for an overview). We argue that in Russian bare nominals perceived as definites do not have the presupposition of uniqueness. The contrast between (1) and (2) exhibits the absence of uniqueness of the Russian bare nominal *avtor* equivalent to the English definite *the author*. While the proposed continuation in (1) leads to presupposition violation and, thus, results infelicitous, in (2) the continuation is acceptable, even though it may cause an effect comparable to cancelling of an implicature.

(1)   *The author* of this book gave an interview to a newspaper…
        #The other author/#the second author/another author appeared on a radio show.
(2)   *Avtor* etoj   knigi   dal   intervju   Novoj gazete…
        author this.GEN   book.GEN   gave   interview   to.newspaper 'Novaja Gazeta'.DAT
        Drugoj   *avtor* vystupil   v   ėfire   Ėxa Moskvy.
        Other   author appeared   on   air   radio 'Èxo Moskvy'.GEN

These empirical facts suggest that the uniqueness effects in Russian do not come as part of the nominal phrase itself and cannot be associated with its semantic composition. This means that, unlike English, the uniqueness effects, when they appear to exist in Russian, cannot be attributed to any hard-core semantic operation like an iota shift (Partee 1987), lexicalized as a definite article in languages with articles. Otherwise, we would expect to have the same semantic effects for English in (1) and for Russian in (2).

We suggest that the observed definiteness effects in Russian in particular and possibly in other languages without articles come from different sources. We identify and will discuss the following key factors that strongly favour a definite interpretation of a bare nominal in Russian: a) 'Ontological' uniqueness, i.e., when uniqueness is conveyed by the descriptive content of a nominal phrase itself, as in the case of *the moon* or *the tallest boy in class*. b) Topichood, which

strongly favors a definite interpretation cross-linguistically and may also account for the presupposition of existence of bare nominals. c) Familiarity/anaphoric reference with an antecedent provided by the previous context.

In line with Heim's (2011) hypothesis, we claim that definiteness in Russian bare nominals appears as a result of pragmatic strengthening and/or contextual support, while their underlying interpretation is indefinite. According to this hypothesis, definites are simply pragmatically stronger variants of indefinites, hence definiteness is a cancellable implicature (cf. Heim 2011). The main observation underlying the pragmatic strengthening account for (in)definiteness is that a sentence with a definite argument always entails the corresponding sentence with an indefinite argument (i.e., *The cat* ran away -> *A cat* ran away). The articles *the* and *a* are then construed as alternatives on a Horn scale, with the definite one chosen for the narrowest domain restriction only. For languages without articles the Horn scale does not exist, as there are no actual articles. An indefinite interpretation is thus taken to be the default one for articleless nominal arguments. Under this hypothesis we do not expect any presuppositional effects with the Russian nominals perceived as definites (see above) since they are derived by pragmatic strengthening and not by a semantic type shift.

The default interpretation of bare nominals in articleless languages, like Russian, has been debated in the literature (Partee 1987, Chierchia 1998, Geist 2010, i.a.). We claim that Russian bare nominals can be considered 'bona fide' indefinites (contra Dayal 2004) due to such empirical facts as their ability to take different scopes, appear in opacity contexts, be used in existential and distributive sentences and introduce discourse referents. Furthermore, this claim got experimental support (A et al. 2019), i.e., indefinitely interpreted bare nominals were found to be felicitous in a wider range of linguistic environments than the ones with the perceived definite reading (as predicted in Heim 2011). Other recent experimental findings (Šimík & Demian, in prep.) also support this hypothesis demonstrating the absence of uniqueness/maximality presupposition in Russian bare nominals.

All in all, we propose that what is perceived as a definite reading in Russian and in English have different sources. While in English it is semantically hard-wired (and represented syntactically as D), in Russian it has a pragmatic source, being a cancellable implicature.

Selected references:
Chierchia, G. (1998) Reference to kinds across languages. *Natural Language Semantics* 6: 339–405 • Dayal, V. (2004) Number marking and (in)definiteness in kind terms. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 27: 393–450 • Dryer, M. S. (2013a) Definite Articles. In: Dryer M.S., M. Haspelmath (eds.), *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online*. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. • Dryer, M.S. (2013b) Indefinite Articles. • Heim, I. (2011) Definiteness and Indefiniteness. In C. Maienborn et al. (eds.), HSK 33.2, De Gruyter Mouton • Geist, L. (2010). *Bare Singular NPs in Argument Positions: Restrictions on Indefiniteness.* International Review of Pragmatics 2: 191 – 227 • Lyons, C. (1999) *Definiteness*. Cambridge University Press. • Partee, B. (1987) Noun phrase interpretation and type-shifting principles. In J. Groenendijk et al. (eds.), *Studies in Discourse Representation Theory and the Theory of Generalized Quantifiers:* 115–143, Dordrecht: Foris.