

## Definiteness and free word order in Russian<sup>1</sup>

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Recently, it has been suggested that Russian uses free word order to convey the notion of (in)definiteness. NPs that precede the verb tend to receive a definite interpretation, while NPs that follow the verb tend to receive an indefinite interpretation. In what follows I address two questions. First, does the interpretation of inherently (in)definite<sup>2</sup> NPs depend on their position in the sentence? Second, how can free word order convey the notion of definiteness in the case of transitive verbs that have two arguments and where preverbal and postverbal positions are occupied? It appears that inherently definite NPs are still interpreted as definite even if they follow the verb, whereas inherently indefinite NPs are interpreted as indefinite even when they precede the verb. Also, in Russian word order is sensitive to the subject-object distinction: if subject and object are both (in)definite, the most preferred word order is SVO.

### 1 Introduction

Many languages use a formal article to express the notion of definiteness versus indefiniteness. For example, in English the definite article *the* implies a specific or known instance, as opposed to the indefinite article *a*, which implies lack of specificity. As can be seen from (1), a noun will receive a definite or indefinite interpretation depending on the article:

- (1) a. A girl was standing on the corner<sup>3</sup>.  
b. The girl was standing on the corner.

In (1a), *girl* is interpreted as indefinite, while in (1b) *girl* is interpreted as definite.

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<sup>2</sup> I should clarify that by using this term I do not mean that something can be inherently definite or indefinite by nature. This distinction between the two categories of NPs is quite conditional and for my purposes here roughly corresponds to the distinction between definite and indefinite articles in English.

<sup>3</sup> I translate NPs inside the prepositional phrase as definite, for the sake of consistency. Here I focus on the subject and object NPs, so for the purposes of this paper this is not crucial.

In recent years, it has been proposed that the category of definiteness is a universal one and is expressed in languages without a formal article by non-formal means (Kramsky 1972, Nikolaeva 1979, Revzina 1979). According to Kramsky (1972:19)<sup>4</sup>, “the category of determinedness vs. indeterminateness, which is most frequently expressed just by the article, is a universal category and in many languages it is expressed just by non-formal means, the article in the usual sense of the word being absent in them”. For example, free word order is used to convey the notion of definiteness in languages lacking a formal article. Russian is an example of a language that does not have an article but has relatively free word order<sup>5</sup>. In Russian, both subject and object can appear preverbally or postverbally. A number of researchers have shown that in Russian and related languages word order is one of the factors that determines whether the interpretation of a noun phrase is definite or indefinite (Kramsky 1972, Nikolaeva 1979, Yokoyama 1985). Kramsky (1972:191) suggests that “[t]he free word order in Slavic languages makes possible the full use of functional sentence perspective for the aims of expressing the opposition determination vs. indeterminateness”. The standard hypothesis is that an NP that appears postverbally tends to receive an indefinite interpretation, whereas an NP that appears preverbally tends to receive a definite interpretation. Consider the example (2) below:

- (2) a. Na uglu stoyala devochka.  
       on corner was standing girl-NOM  
       ‘A girl was standing on the corner’  
       b. Devochka stoyala na uglu.  
       girl-NOM was standing on corner  
       ‘The girl was standing on the corner’

In (2a), the NP appears postverbally and this word order is more appropriate in a situation where this NP is introduced for the first time and the most natural interpretation would be indefinite. Meanwhile, in (2b), the NP appears preverbally and this presupposes that a listener is already familiar with *this girl* and the most natural interpretation would be *the girl*. Note that the sentences in (2) contain an intransitive verb and do not contain any formal ‘hints’ to whether the NP *girl* should be interpreted definitely or indefinitely. By a ‘formal hint’ I mean any formal element which would indicate (in)definiteness of a noun. For example, if *girl* were preceded by a demonstrative pronoun *this* it would be such a formal hint. Therefore, one possibility to express (in)definiteness of this noun is by means of word order.

The following two questions arise from the observations above. First, what is the role of word order in the case of inherently definite and inherently indefinite NPs? According to Milsark’s (1974) analysis, inherently definite NPs include strong quantifiers (*every, all, most*), personal pronouns, demonstratives, and proper names. Inherently indefinite NPs include weak quantifiers (*some, few, many*) and numerals. If the position

<sup>4</sup> Kramsky (1972) proposes the term “determinedness” versus “indeterminedness”. In this paper I use the term “definiteness” versus “indefiniteness” to refer to the same phenomenon.

<sup>5</sup> By ‘relatively free word order’ I mean that one cannot move anything anywhere and resulting structures always will be grammatical. Certain constraints still take place. But this is a separate topic and I am not going to explore it here.



of an NP in Russian is tied to definiteness, inherently definite NPs should tend to appear in a preverbal position, while inherently indefinite NPs should tend to appear in a postverbal position.

Second, how does word order work in the case of transitive verbs? Transitive verbs have two arguments, each of which can be inherently definite, inherently indefinite or neutral with respect to definiteness, as in (2). In sentences with transitive verbs the issue is more complex. Since both positions are occupied, the question is what happens with word order in case of two definite or indefinite NPs?

In the rest of this paper I discuss these two issues. I analyze inherently definite and inherently indefinite NPs in Russian with respect to their position in sentences containing intransitive and transitive verbs. I show that in Russian, inherently definite NPs most naturally occur in a preverbal position, whereas inherently indefinite NPs most naturally occur in a postverbal position. Furthermore, in Russian, word order is sensitive to the definiteness of subject and object: when subject and object have the same definiteness status (i.e. both are definite or indefinite), and also when subject is definite and object is indefinite, the most preferred word order is SVO. However, when the object is definite and subject is indefinite the most preferred word order is OVS.

## **2 Inherently definite and inherently indefinite NPs in Russian**

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### **2.1 Weak and strong quantifiers**

For the purposes of this paper, I adopt Milsark's (1974) distinction between weak and strong quantifiers, presented in Diesing (1992:59). According to Milsark, inherently definite NPs include strong quantifiers (*every, all, most*), personal pronouns, demonstratives and proper names. Inherently indefinite NPs include weak quantifiers (*some, few, many*), and numerals. Milsark (1974) observes that weak determiners can appear with a subject NP in *there*-insertion contexts, while strong determiners cannot. The following example is from Diesing (1992):

- (3) a. There is/are a/some/a few/many/three fly (flies) in my soup.
- b. \*There is/are the/every/all/most fly (flies) in my soup.

Diesing (1992) calls this "the definiteness effect". These examples show that weak determiners are indefinite, while strong determiners are definite.

### **2.2 A revised hypothesis**

As already mentioned, if there is a connection in Russian between the position of an NP and its interpretation as definite or indefinite, inherently definite NPs should more naturally occur in a preverbal position, whereas inherently indefinite NPs would tend to occur in a postverbal position. I propose to revise the original hypothesis as follows: in Russian, an interpretation of an NP as definite or indefinite depends upon its position in the sentence only if the sentence does not contain any formal 'hints' (demonstrative pronouns, quantifiers, etc). The position in the sentence does not influence an interpretation of inherently definite or inherently indefinite NPs. Rather, inherently

definite and indefinite NPs prefer different positions in the sentence. In the following section I demonstrate that this is indeed the case. For the sake of simplicity, I only use sentences based on intransitive verbs.

### 2.3 Definite versus indefinite NPs and their position in the sentence

The following examples show that in Russian word order is sensitive to the semantic nature of the NP. Inherently definite NPs tend to appear in a preverbal position, whereas inherently indefinite NPs tend to appear in a postverbal position. If this order is reversed, the resulting structures though still acceptable, are generally marked or require a special context<sup>6</sup>:

- (4) a. Ona/moya podrugа zhivet v Ierusalime.  
 she/my friend-NOM lives in Jerusalem  
 'She/my friend lives in Jerusalem'
- b. Etot mal'chik zhivet v sosedney kvartire.  
 this boy-NOM lives in neighbor's apartment  
 'This boy lives next door'
- c. Maria priehala v Moskvu.  
 Maria-NOM arrived in Moscow  
 'Maria arrived in Moscow'
- d. Kazhdiy shkol'nik/vse shkol'niki  
 every schoolchild/all schoolchildren-NOM  
 edet/ut letom v derevnu.  
 go-sg/pl in summer to village  
 'Every schoolchild/all schoolchildren go to a village in summer'
- (5) a. ## V Ierusalime zhivet ona/moya podrugа.  
 in Jerusalem lives she/my friend-NOM  
 'She/my friend lives in Jerusalem'
- b. ## V sosedney kvartire zhivet etot mal'chik.  
 in neighbor's apartment lives this boy-NOM  
 'This boy lives next door'
- c. ## V Moskvu priehala Maria.  
 in Moscow arrived Maria-NOM  
 'Maria arrived in Moscow'
- d. # V derevnu edet/ut letom kazhdiy shkol'nik/vse shkol'niki  
 to village go-sg/pl in summer every schoolchild/all schoolchildren-NOM  
 'Every schoolchild/all schoolchildren/most schoolchildren go to a village in summer'

I call the sentences in (4) "basic structure" because they seem to be most natural and require no particular context. Meanwhile, the sentences in (5) will not be used to simply state the fact that somebody lives in Jerusalem or goes to a village.

<sup>6</sup> I use '#' to indicate that the sentence is marked or requires a special context, but still grammatically intact, as opposed to '\*' or '?' which indicate that the sentence is ungrammatical or questionable.

An example of an acceptable context for sentences having a definite subject following the verb is provided in Yokoyama (1985:194). She points out that proper names and other definite NPs can appear in a postverbal position, provided that the sentence is presentational (i.e. the definite NP supplies new information). For example:

- (6) a. Voshla Masha.  
came-in Mahsa  
'Masha came-in'

This sentence is likely to be uttered by someone inside the room where Masha came in.

By contrast, sentences, which contain inherently indefinite NPs – weak quantifiers and numerals – sound more natural if these NPs appear in a postverbal position, as shown by examples in (7):

- (7) a. V zooparke zhivut neskol'ko/mnogo/pyat' drakonov.  
in Zoo live-pl some/many/five dragons-GEN  
'There are some/many/five dragons in the Zoo'  
b. V Norvegii shel sneg.  
in Norway went snow-NOM  
'There was snow in Norway/It was snowing in Norway'
- (8) a. # Neskol'ko/mnogo/pyat' drakonov zhivut v zooparke.  
some/many/five dragons-GEN live-pl in Zoo  
'Some/many/five dragons live in the Zoo'  
b. # Sneg shel v Norvegii.  
snow went in Norway  
'There was snow in Norway/It was snowing in Norway'

The sentence in (7a) would normally be used to state the fact that there are (a certain number of) dragons in the Zoo. But (8a) sounds odd unless uttered with an appropriate context. For example:

- (9) a. Ya znau, chto drakoni suschestvuyut -  
I know that dragons exist -  
neskol'ko/mnogo/pyat' drakonov zhivut v zooparke.  
some/ many/five dragons-gen. live-pl. in zoo  
'I know that dragons exist – some/many/five dragons live in the Zoo'

I expect that judgments regarding the examples marked # / ## may vary from speaker to speaker. More than that, I am aware of the fact that in Russian, contexts in which these sentences sound natural can be easily constructed. However, what is crucial here is the contrast between the two possible structures. The sentences in (4) and (7) do seem to require no particular context.

As to example (7b), I consider *snow* to be inherently indefinite. For example, this noun cannot appear with a number of strong quantifiers or with possessive pronouns,



though it can appear with demonstrative pronouns and with the strong quantifier *all*. If *snow* is preceded by a demonstrative pronoun *this* it appears in a preverbal position – examples (10a-c) below:

- (10) a. \*Kazhdiy sneg/\*moy sneg/?bol'shinstvo snega  
           'every snow/my snow/most snow'  
       b. Etot sneg/ves' sneg  
           'this snow/all snow'  
       c. Etot sneg       iz   Norvegii.  
           this snow-NOM from Norway  
           'This snow is from Norway'

Obviously, (10c) requires a particular context. For example, if somebody decides to transport a small jar of snow from Norway to Canada, it would be appropriate to say, pointing to this jar of snow, that this snow is from Norway. Again, the fact that we have to look for a specific context to interpret this sentence might indicate that *snow* is most naturally interpreted as indefinite. Therefore, its most natural position is after the verb and example (8b) is marked. This sentence seems to be more appropriate as an answer to a question like "Where was it snowing last year?"

Note that in Russian, nouns that denote states of nature – *snow, rain, wind, cold*, etc. – usually follow the verb. This is also true about nouns like *winter, morning*, etc.:

- (11) a. Shel dozhd'/Dul veter/Bilo holodno.  
           went rain/   blew wind/was cold  
           'It was raining/It was windy/ It was cold'  
       b. Prishla zima/nastupilo utro  
           came winter/came morning  
           'Winter arrived/Morning came'
- (12) a. \*Dozhd' shel/?veter dul/?holodno bilo  
           rain went/blew wind/cold was  
           'It was raining/It was windy/ It was cold'  
       b. ?Zima prishla/?Utro nastupilo  
           winter came/morning came  
           'Winter arrived/Morning came'

Yokoyama (1985:192-3) proposes the following account. There is a category of semantically uninformative or "light" verbs, for example, existential verbs like *live, be, exist*, or verbs of "appearing on the scene". The subject of these verbs is most often an indefinite NP. The sentences containing these verbs are often found at the beginning of fairy tales. It has been noticed that they correspond to English *there*-insertion sentences. Yokoyama's example (3) is repeated here as (13):

- (13) a. Zhil-byl    tzar'  
           lived-was king  
           'There lived a king'

In Russian, the verbs in the examples (11)-(12) are semantically “light” when used with subjects such as “rain” or “morning”: rain exists by “going”, morning by “coming”, etc. Given the principle of word order that the more informative elements (i.e. elements that supply new information) go to the end of the sentence and the less informative elements go to the beginning of the sentence (Yokoyama 1985:191), in sentences like (11)-(12) the subject will appear in a postverbal position.

To sum up, the data above is consistent with the hypothesis that the interpretation of inherently definite and inherently indefinite NPs does not depend upon their position in the sentence. Inherently definite NPs tend to appear in a preverbal position, whereas inherently indefinite NPs tend to appear in a postverbal position. The inversion generally results in a marked sentence.

### 3 Definite versus indefinite NPs and transitivity

#### 3.1 Definiteness and subject-object distinction

The second issue concerns transitive verbs. The difficulty stems from the fact that transitive verbs have two arguments, each of which can be inherently definite or inherently indefinite. Since both positions – subject and object – are occupied, the question is what is the role of word order in case of two definite, or two indefinite NPs. There are four options available: <definite, indefinite>, <definite, definite>, <indefinite, indefinite>, <indefinite, definite>. Consider these four variants in Russian:

- (14) a. Roza        razbila kakuu-to vazu.  
           Rose-NOM broke a/some vase-ACC  
           ‘Rose broke a vase’  
       b. ## Kakuu-to vasu razbila Roza.  
           a/some vase-ACC broke Rose-NOM  
           ‘A vase was broken by Rose’

In (14a), the sentence contains a definite subject (proper name) and an indefinite object (weak quantifier). The word order is SVO. In (14b) however, this order is reversed and the indefinite object moves to the preverbal position. This sentence is marked in a sense that it seems to be more appropriate in a situation where several vases were broken and one of them (we do not know which one) was broken by Rose.

The subject and object in example (15) both contain a demonstrative pronoun and are thus definite:

- (15) a. Etot shkol’nik        razbil eto okno.  
           this schoolchild-NOM broke this window-ACC  
           ‘This schoolchild broke this window’  
       b. ## Eto okno        razbil etot shkol’nik  
           this window-ACC broke this schoolchild-NOM  
           ‘This window was broken by this child’

Again, the preferred word order is SVO, as in (15a). If this order is reversed, as in (15b), the sentence seems to require a special context. It would be appropriate if a conversation is about *this window* and we are eager to find out who has broken it.

The subject and object in (16) both contain a weak quantifier and are indefinite:

- (16) a. Kakoi-to shkol'nik              razbil kakuu-to vazu.  
           a/some schoolchild-NOM broke a/some vase-ACC  
           'A schoolchild broke a vase'  
       b. ## Kakuu-to vazu              razbil kakoi-to shkol'nik  
           a/some vase-ACC broke a/some schoolchild-NOM  
           'A vase was broken by a schoolchild'

Note that even though subject and object are both indefinite, the indefinite subject more naturally appears in a preverbal position than the indefinite object. In (16b) the indefinite object moves to the subject position and the resulting structure is marked.

Finally, example (17) represents the only case where the preferred word order is OVS. This sentence contains a definite object (demonstrative) and an indefinite subject (weak quantifier):

- (17) a. Eto okno              razbil kakoi-to shkol'nik.  
           this window-ACC broke a/some schoolchild-NOM  
           'This window was broken by a schoolchild'  
       b. # Kakoi-to shkol'nik              razbil eto okno.  
           a/some schoolchild-NOM broke this window-ACC  
           'A schoolchild broke this window'

The sentence in (17a), represents the basic structure, while (17b), where the indefinite subject moves to the preverbal position, is a marked sentence.

### 3.2 Ioup's hierarchy of determiners and word order

Note that although (17b) is less natural than (17a), it is still better than (14b). This leads to the idea of a hierarchy of weak and strong determiners. In fact, Diesing (1992) presents Ioup's (1975) discussion of the factors that determine relative quantifier scope. Ioup (1975) points out that various quantifiers differ in relative scope preferences. She presents this in the form of a hierarchy. The leftmost elements in the hierarchy show the greatest preference for wider scope, and the rightmost elements show the greatest preferences for narrower scope:

- (18) Ioup's (1975:64) hierarchy:

each > every > all > most > many > several > some > a few

According to this hierarchy, determiners differ in their degree of definiteness. If we assume that this property of determiners is universal we can extend this hierarchy to Russian as follows:



(19) ...> proper names > demonstrative pronouns >...

If in Russian, proper names occupy the leftmost position, while demonstrative pronouns *etot/tot* (this/that) occupy the next position to the right, we can explain why (17b) is better than (14b). Since proper names are “more definite” than demonstrative pronouns their appearance in the postverbal position is less natural.

This difference, however, can also be due to difference in word order: (17b) has SVO word order, while (14b) has OVS word order. Note also, that the examples (15b) and (16b) are equally marked, even though in (15b) a definite NP occupies the preverbal position and in (16b) an indefinite NP occupies the preverbal position, both sentences have OVS word order.

The examples above suggest that when subject and object have the same degree of definiteness, the word order SVO seems to be preferred. In (15), both NPs are definite, both being preceded by the same demonstrative pronoun *eto* (this), and consequently have the same degree of definiteness. In this case inversion results in a marked sentence. The same is true about (16). Here subject and object NPs have the same degree of indefiniteness: they are preceded by the same weak quantifier *kakoi-to* (a/some). However, if one NP is definite and the other one is indefinite, the definite NP will appear in the preverbal position. If the definite NP is a subject, the preferred word order will be SVO. However, if the definite NP is an object, as in (17), free word order allows for the subject/object inversion and OVS word order is the most natural option.

#### 4 Conclusion

The data above suggest that the hypothesis proposed by previous researchers, that in Russian an interpretation of an NP as definite or indefinite depends upon its position in the sentence, is not entirely wrong. However, things are that straightforward only when we look at NPs that are neutral with respect to definiteness and appear in sentences with intransitive verbs, as in (2). The matter becomes more complex when it comes to inherently definite and inherently indefinite NPs and sentences with transitive verbs. First, the interpretation of inherently definite and inherently indefinite NPs does not depend upon their position in the sentence. Inherently definite NPs are still interpreted as definite even when they appear in a postverbal position and inherently indefinite NPs are interpreted as indefinite even when they appear in a preverbal position, and that's why such structures are generally marked. Second, in Russian, word order appears to be sensitive to the definiteness of subject and object: if the subject is definite and the object is indefinite or when the subject and the object are both definite or indefinite, the most preferred word order is SVO. However, when the object is definite and the subject is indefinite (example (17)), the most preferred word order is OVS. This is consistent with the revised hypothesis since in this case the only definite NP moves to the preverbal position.

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