

A dynamic pragmatic constraint on bare NPs in Russian

Overview. In Russian, two identical bare NPs occurring within the same context cannot be used to pick out two different individuals. This is unexpected given that Russian bare NPs clearly have indefinite uses: they can introduce novel discourse referents and do not require uniqueness or maximality (Borik 2016; Seres & Borik 2018). In this paper, I will argue that the observed constraint can be accounted for by a discourse-level pragmatic constraint on reference resolution.

Puzzle. Recent studies on Russian bare NPs (Borik 2016; Seres & Borik 2018) provided substantial evidence to analyze them semantically as existential quantifiers: they can introduce novel discourse referents, as in (1a); they do not introduce a uniqueness or maximality presupposition, as shown by the felicity of (1b); and they can take variable scope, as in (1c). Data with bare singulars are provided, but bare plurals behave in parallel.

(1) a. *V komnatu vošla devočka_i. Ona_i byla očēn' napugana.*
 in room entered girl she was very scared
 'A girl entered the room. She was very scared.'

b. Context. The speaker is asked what the noise is outside. They go out and see five dogs, one of which is barking. They respond.

Na ulice lajet sobaka!
 on street barks dog
 'On the street, a dog is barking!'

c. *vas'a xočet ženit's'a na ital'janke.*
 V. wants marry on Italian

1. 'Vasya wants his future wife to be Italian.' $want > \exists$
2. 'There is a specific Italian that Vasya wants to marry.' $\exists > want$

If bare NPs are existentials, we would expect that they can felicitously be witnessed by a non-unique satisfier of their predicate in *any* context. However, this is not the case. Intriguingly, two identical bare NPs cannot normally be used within the same sentence to pick out different individuals, see (2).

(2) [#]*Na ulice lajet sobaka i ryčit sobaka*
 on street barks barks and growls dog

Intended: 'On the street, a dog is barking and a (different) dog is growling.'

Proposal. I take it that the predicate denoted by the bare NP forms the restrictor of a covert existential quantifier. At the same time, I propose that their distribution is then restricted by a discourse-level constraint on reference resolution. The constraint is introduced in (3). I adopt the dynamic notion of context as an *information state* (Heim 1982): a set of pairs of possible worlds in which all the common ground propositions are true and assignment functions containing objects under discussion — discourse referents. I also assume that existentials that do not have a novelty requirement can be used to either introduce a new discourse referent or pick out a familiar one.

(3) Unambiguity Constraint

In a (local) context *c*, an existential formed from a bare NP which lexicalizes a predicate *P* can be used to pick out a discourse referent *i* iff there is no *j* distinct from *i* such that *j* is entailed by *c* to also satisfy *P*.

According to the proposed analysis, the infelicity of (2) is due to the use of the second bare NP: it introduces a new dog referent *i* when there is already a dog referent *j* present in the context, previously introduced by the first bare NP. If that is indeed the problem, I expect that sequences of bare NPs *should* be acceptable in certain cases.

Predictions. First, a sequence of bare NPs should be acceptable in cases when: i) the second bare NP picks out the same referent as the first; ii) a modifier is added to the second bare NP that entails that its witness cannot be the same one. Both these predictions are borne out. In (4), the bare NP *kniga* 'book'

is felicitously used the second time to refer to the same individual. In (5), the use of the second bare NP becomes felicitous if the adjective *drugoj* ‘other’ is added, which entails that the second girl is not the same as the first one.

- (4) *Na tom stole ležala kniga_i i gazeta. An'a vz'ala knigu_{i/*j}.*
 on that table lied book and newspaper A. took book
 ‘A book and a newspaper were lying on that table. Anya took the/*a book.’ (Geist 2010)
- (5) *Na ulice plačeta devočka, a #(drugaja) devočka eđ uspokajvajat.*
 on street cries girl but another girl her comforting
 ‘On the street, a girl is crying, and another girl is comforting her.’

Moreover, the proposed analysis also captures that the use of two identical bare NPs in the same sentence is possible in special contexts, even when they do pick out distinct referents. In such cases, the existence of the two referents is assumed to already be given in the discourse, and what is asserted is that these referents share the property lexicalized by the NP. Consider (6), a quasi-minimal counterpart to (1). Here, both the speaker and the addressee know that there is a barking entity (x) and a growling entity (y). The speaker’s interlocutor asks them what kind of animal x is then, and then the same for y . The first conjunct answers the former question, and the second answers the latter.

- (6) {What kind of animal is the one barking and what kind of animal is the one growling?}
^{ok} *Lajet sobaka i ryčit (tože) sobaka.*
 barks dog and growls also dog
 ‘The one who is barking is a dog, and the one who is growling is also a dog.’

I assume that the QUD that a given conjunct addresses locally restricts the context so that only discourse referents directly relevant for its resolution are considered (Roberts 2012). Then, (6) is felicitous because the two bare NPs are used to address two different QUDs. In each case, the presence of the other discourse referent is ignored because it does not matter for the resolution of that particular QUD. Most crucially, with the second disjunct in (6), the goal is to find out what type of animal the growling entity, y , is. As such, the barking entity, x , would be ignored in the local context. The first conjunct establishes that x is a dog, but that is irrelevant for the second conjunct. Because y is ignored, the use of *sobaka* ‘dog’ in the second conjunct does not violate the constraint in (3).

This explanation is further confirmed by more naturally occurring examples where two identical bare NPs are used within the same clause: in all such cases, the main point of the utterance is intuitively to highlight that each of the meant individuals shares the property lexicalized by the NP. For instance, felicitous use of (7) requires taking for granted that some x attacked some y , while the main point the speaker makes in (7) is that x is a dog and y is a dog. Thus, just as in (6), the two bare NPs in (7) address two different QUDs: ‘what kind of animal x is?’ and ‘what kind of animal y is?’, respectively. Crucially, when the second QUD is being addressed, x becomes unavailable since it is irrelevant to its resolution, and hence the use of the second bare NP *sobaka* ‘dog’ does not violate UC.

- (7) *Sobaka napala na sobaku!*
 dog attacked on dog
 ‘A DOG attacked a DOG (i.e., not a cat or a racoon...).’

Conclusion. The fact that in Russian, two identical bare NPs used in the same sentence normally cannot have different witnesses is surprising given that in general, they behave as existential quantifiers. In this paper, I provided an account for this restriction. Namely, I argued that bare NPs are indeed semantically existential, but their uses are restricted by a pragmatic principle I called Unambiguity Constraint. UC requires that a bare NP can only be used to talk about referent i if there is no given j distinct from i that can satisfy the NP’s predicate. An important question for further research is whether UC is only associated with the use of bare NPs in Russian or is in fact a more generally applied principle on reference resolution. I will address this question in my talk, providing evidence for the latter.

References

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