Gender as a structural feature: a case study of deverbal nominals in Russian

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This paper presents novel evidence showing that the gender selection in Russian deverbal nominals (DNs) is not a lexical feature on nominalizing suffixes, as is commonly assumed in the literature, but instead should be analyzed as a structural feature.

Data. Data from my sample of Russian eventive DNs derived by a zero suffix or *-k-* suffix indicates that there exists a relation between the argument structure of DNs and the gender selection. The majority of transitive simplex DNs in the sample are feminine (95%), whereas the majority of unergative unprefixed DNs are masculine (89%). The examples of transitive and unergative eventive DNs are given in (1) and (2) correspondingly.

(1) a. dač-a pokazan-ii b. žar-k-a grib-ov
         give-FEM   testimony-GEN.PL   fry-NMZ-FEM   mushroom- GEN.PL
         'giving testimony'   'frying mushrooms'

(2) a. taneć (*vals-a) b. pin-o-k (*golov-y)
         danse.MASC   waltz-GEN   kick-TV-NMZ.MASC   head-GEN

Prefixed DNs show a different pattern: while unergative prefixed DNs tend to be masculine (83%), transitive prefixed DNs are equally distributed across the feminine and masculine class.

Hypothesis. The feminine gender value is selected if a DN projects an (overt or implicit) internal argument, whereas the masculine gender value is assigned whenever a DN has an unergative structure.

The evidence for the syntactic nature of the implicit internal arguments of DNs comes from the fact that implicit arguments of object control DNs can control the PRO argument of the embedded infinitival clauses (3).

(3) a. pros'-b-a (k prisutstvujušč-im$_i$) [id-ti k seb-e$_i$ domoi]
         ask-NMZ-FEM   to   present-DAT   go-INF   to   self-DAT   home
         'a request (to the people present) to go to their homes'

Analysis. Following an analysis of gender in Italian and Luganda nouns developed in Ferrari-Bridgers (2008), I propose that gender markers on Russian DNs function as nominalizing morphemes. Furthermore, adopting Chomsky's Probe-Goal framework of agreement (Chomsky 2000, 2001), I suggest that in Russian the head of the nominalizing projection *n*P, similar like *v,* may have unvalued phi-features which must be checked against the valued phi-features of an active Goal. The Goal is active for agreement if it has an unchecked Case feature. The checking of *n*'s phi-features takes place in exchange of checking the Case feature of a Goal. Thus, in case of transitive DNs, the phi-features on *n* are checked against the phi-features of the internal argument, but they remain covert, in a similar way as the checked phi-feature on *v* remain covert in languages with case marked objects and without object agreement in transitive sentences (Chomsky 2000, 2001, Legate 2003, Levine & Freidin 2001). The presence of the checked phi-features on *n*P is then translated at PF as a feminine gender marker. On the other hand, in case of unergative DNs, no active nominal is available for agreement, therefore, *n* has no phi-features. In this case a default gender marker, i.e. masculine in Russian is assigned (for a discussion about masculine as a default and feminine as a marked gender value in Russian see Corbett & Frazer 1999). This analysis accounts for the pattern of gender distribution illustrated by the examples in (1-2).

Prefixed DNs. According to Svenonius (2004), the structure of lexical prefixes in Russian involves a small clause analysis, where a lexical prefix is taken to be a lexical realization of the head of the small clause - R(esult) P, responsible for the introduction of the result state sub-event. Different types of the result state correspond to different syntactic structures: if the result state

represents a change of location of an object, then the R(esult)P takes as a complement a PathP, which in its turn selects a PlaceP, as in (4). The PathP and PlaceP introduce the *figure* and *ground* arguments respectively:

(4) $[_{VP} V[_{R(esult)P} PREFIX[_{PathP} DP_{Figure}[_{PlaceP} DP_{Ground}]]]]$

If the result state is represented by a transition from one state into another, the structure does not contain PathP, and the internal DP originates in the spec of R(esult)P:

(5) $[_{VP} V[_{R(esult)P} DP [PREFIX]]]$

I argue that the two types of prefixed structures in (4) and (5) correspond to different options of gender selection in DNs. In particular, the DNs which contain a PathP are predominantly masculine (6); whereas the DNs whose structure does not involve PathP occur mostly as feminine nouns (7).

(6)   ob-xod   dom-a   pere-vod   tekst-a
        PREF-walk.MASC   house-GEN   PREF-lead-MASC   text-GEN
        'a tour round a/the house'   'translation of a/the text'

(7)   ob-rabot-k-a   material-a   po-kras-k-a   okon
        PREF-work-NMZ-FEM   material-GEN   PREF-paint-NMZ-FEM   window.GEN.PL
        'processing of the material'   'painting of windows'

I assume that the head of the ResultP is a structural case assigner, which checks the Case feature of the *figure* argument. The Case feature checking involves agreement in phi-features. As was assumed above for *n*, the checked phi-features on the head of the R(esult)P also remain covert. Then the gender assignment pattern illustrated by the examples in (6-7) follows straightforward: the *figure* argument of PathP gets its Case feature checked by R(esult)P and it becomes inactive for further agreement with *n*, hence the derived DN is assigned a default gender value - masculine. On the other hand, the argument introduced by the ResultP must have its Case feature checked outside of the small clause, i.e. by *n*. As a result, the unpronounced checked phi-features on *n* surface as a feminine gender value on the derived DN.

The status of the 'nominalizing' suffix -k-. I suggest that the suffix *-k-,* which is traditionally taken to be a nominalizing suffix, in fact performs a different function. The suffix *-k-*, I propose, acts as a quantizing element, similar like the homophonous diminutive suffix *-k-*. Based on Borer's analysis of mass-count distinction in nouns (Borer 2005), I suggest that the suffix *-k-* of the DNs originates not in *n,* but as a head of a functional projection responsible for the derivation of a count interpretation for a noun. The consequences of this analysis will be discussed.

References

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