



Bare singular indefinites in Russian: distribution and interpretation

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The rationale

- Many languages do not have lexical articles (definite and/or indefinite) but can still express the meaning of (in)definiteness, sometimes/often unambiguously.
- Empirically, a question arises whether article-less languages impose any constraints on the interpretation of nominal phrases
 - And if yes, what are those constraints
- A theoretical question concerns the problem of modeling the interpretation of nominal phrases in languages with and without articles:
 - Same structures or different?

Russian Bare Singulars

- In Russian, a language which does not have overt articles 'bare' nominals can get a range of interpretations

(1) **Poezd** prišel.

def/#indef

train.NOM arrived

'The/#A train arrived

(2) Prišel **poezd**.

def/indef

arrived train.NOM

'The/A train arrived.'

(3) **Poezd** kak sredstvo peredviženija očen' udoben.

gen

train.NOM as means transportation.GEN very convenient

'The train as a means of transport is very convenient.'

My focus

- I focus on *bare* (that is, without any overt markers) *singular* nominal expressions in combination with stage level/episodic predicates
 - to bring out an indef/def reading, and not a generic reading
- Syntactic restriction: ‘canonical’ argument positions only
 - Subject position: preverbal and postverbal
 - Object position
- My primary question is whether an indefinite interpretation is freely available for such expressions in all syntactic argument positions, although the analysis will cover both a definite and an indefinite interpretation.

Russian: some markers

- There are no overt articles but there are some expressions that can be used as indicators of the referential status of a nominal expression:
 - demonstratives (e.g., this/that...)
 - Indefinite pronouns (comparable to *some*, *certain*, *this/one* in English)
 - In traditional literature on Russian, numerals and quantifiers (e.g., *every*, *many*) are also treated as referential indicators, called 'actualizers'

(4) Prišel etot/odin/kakoj-to poezd. def/indef
 arrived this/one/some train.NOM
 'This/some train arrived.'

- These markers are never obligatory

Antecedents

- The literature on indefinites in languages without articles is relatively scarce
- Some general references:
 - Chierchia (1998), Krifka (2004), Dayal (2004)
- Indefinites with overt markers in Russian:
 - Yanovich (2005), Geist (2010) and Ionin (2013), among others.
- Hardly anything on Bare Indefinites
 - Geist (2010).

Specific questions

- Do bare singular nominals in argument positions get a ‘full fledged’ indefinite interpretation (i.e., do they behave similar to α -indefinites in English)?
- Do bare singular nominals with an indefinite interpretation (if it exists) have a restricted distribution?
 - If yes, what are the restrictions, precisely?
- Is the nature of the restrictions (should they exist) rooted in the properties of a bare singular itself or is it due to some other factors?
 - What are the factors?
- What kind of formal analysis would capture all the properties and/or available readings of bare singular (BSg) nominals?

Question 1

- Do bare singular nominals in argument positions get a 'full fledged' indefinite interpretation (i.e., do they behave similar to a-indefinites in English)?

Existing approaches

- Traditional view: all nominals have both definite and indefinite readings, preferred or dispreferred depending on the syntactic position/information structure and possibly some other factors
- More recent, Dayal 2004: singular nominals cannot get an indefinite interpretation in languages without articles.
 - Assumes a close tie between a generic and an indefinite reading;
 - Indefinite readings for plurals are derived from generic ones;
 - Indefinite readings for singulars are non-existent.

Data: 3 'indefinite' contexts

- Russian BSGs can actually have an indefinite reading, contra Dayal 2004.
- It can be shown in 3 contexts which are specific for indefinites or which bring out some specific properties of indefinites:
 - Distributive contexts
 - Existential sentences
 - Opacity contexts/Interaction with scopal elements

Distributive contexts

(5) V kazhdom dome plakal rebenok.
in every house cried child
'A child (a different one) was crying in every house'

- In a distributive context, the nominal phrase cannot be interpreted as either a kind or a definite, so it has to be indefinite.
 - Kinds ('singular' kinds) do not distribute
 - A definite interpretation of a nominal phrase would give rise to an implausible reading involving one (unique) child

Existential sentences

- The Russian counterpart of *there* sentences in English are formed by fronting a locative phrase, as in (8):

(6) *V komnate ležal kover.*
in room lied carpet
'There was a carpet in the room.'

- The example above has a BSG nominal phrase *kover* 'carpet', which can only be interpreted as an indefinite in the given context.

Opacity

(7) Vasja hočet zhenit'sja na bankirše,
 Vasja wants marry PREP banker
 'Vasja wants to marry a banker...'

a. no ne mozhet najti podhodjasčuju.
 but not can find suitable
 ...but cannot find a suitable one.'

b. no my eje esče ne videli.
 but we her yet not saw
 ... but we haven't met her yet.'

Scope

- Examples with two quantifiers do not show scope ambiguities
 - Reason: frozen scope
- Indefinites do show scope ambiguity with negation

(8) Vasja ne polučil **grant**,...

Vasja not received grant

'Vasja did not get a grant'

a. xotja zajavlenije bylo sostavleno očen' xorošo.
 although application was composed very well

$\exists > \text{neg}$

b. eto den'gi iz kakogo-to proekta.

this money from some project

$\text{neg} > \exists$

- The wide-scope interpretation is preferred (for me).

Conclusion(/Answer) 1:

- Bare singulars do get a 'true' indefinite interpretation

Question 2

- Do bare singular nominals with an indefinite interpretation (if it exists) have a restricted distribution?
 - What are the restrictions, precisely?

Data: restrictions

- Bare singulars with an indefinite interpretation are ‘difficult’ in preverbal subject position.

- (9) a. V komnate bylo neskol’ko malen’kih detej.
 in room were several small children
 ‘There were several small children in the room.’
- b. #Devočka podošla ko mne i sprosila...
 girl.NOM. came.up to me and asked...
- c. Ko mne podošla devočka i sprosila...
 to me came.up girl.NOM. and asked...
 ‘A girl came up to me and asked...’

- Indefinite subjects are usually postverbal.

Previous proposals: Geist (2010)

- All preverbal subjects in Russian are topics.
- Reinhart 1981: only strongly referential, i.e. specific, indefinites can function as topics.
- BNs (in particular, BSgs) in Russian cannot have a *specific* interpretation.
- BSgs are hence excluded from preverbal topic position.

Specificity

- Specificity: specific indefinites have a particular (identifiable or not) referent.
- Fodor & Sag (1982): there are two types of indefinite expressions, referential (specific indefinites) and quantificational (non-specific) ones.
- The former have a particular referent, which can be known or unknown, the latter do not refer.
- This distinction corresponds to scopal specificity: wide scope indefinites are specific/referential; narrow scope indefinites are quantificational or weakly referential.

Can BSgs be specific?

- YES, BSgs can be specific (contra Geist 2010):
 - The way to test it: scope ambiguities

(10) Irina xočet vylečit' pacienta...

Irina wants cure patient

'Irina wants to cure a patient...

a. i polučit' rekomendaciju v ordinaturu.

and get recommendation in residency

and get a recommendation to become a resident.'

want > E

b. iz sosednej palaty

from neighbour ward

from the ward next door.'

E > want

Question 3

- Is the nature of the restrictions (should they exist) rooted in the properties of a bare singular itself or is it due to some other factors?
 - What are the factors?

Answer 3

- Geist's (2010) explanation attributes a certain property (i.e., the absence of a specific interpretation) to a BSg itself.
- We have just seen that
 - a BSg *can* be indefinite
 - a BSg *can* get a specific interpretation
- The observed restriction on BSgs in preverbal subject position is not due to some inherent property of a BSg, but to a context.
 - More specific details on the 'context' below

A question

- Why a BSg in preverbal subject/topic position cannot be just interpreted as specific given that a specific interpretation is available for BSgs?
- Additional questions
 - Is the restriction really specificity?
 - Is the restriction effective only in preverbal subject/topic position or also in other positions?

Overt specificity markers

- Russian has various elements which explicitly mark specificity distinctions:

- Specific known:

(11) Irina xočet vylečit' **odnogo** pacienta. (wide scope)
Irina wants cure one patient

- Specific unknown:

(12) Irina xočet vylečit' **kakogo-to** pacienta. (wide scope)
Irina wants cure some patient

- Non-specific:

(13) Irina xočet vylečit' **kakogo-nibud'** pacienta.
Irina wants cure some (any) patient

Is it specificity?

(9) V komnate bylo neskol'ko malen'kih detej.

in room were several small children

'There were several small children in the room.'

- If the subject in (1) appears with an overt specificity marker, the sentence becomes perfectly acceptable:

a. Odna/ kakaja-to devočka podošla ko mne i sprosila...
 one/ some girl.NOM came.up to me and asked...

- If, however, the subject combines with a marker that yields a non-specific reading, it is ruled out:

b. #(Kakaja-nibud') devočka podošla ko mne i sprosila...
 (some unspecific) girl.NOM came.up to me and asked...

- So **YES**, the restriction is really specificity

Other positions?

- Impressionistically speaking, BSGs in object position often have a preference for a non-specific reading:

(14) Irina pošla v magazin, ona xočet kupit' knigu.

Irina went in shop she wants buy book

- A preferred reading: non-specific (any) book

- Although not always:

(15) Irina podošla k professoru, ona xočet zadat' vopros.

Irina came to professor she wants aks question

- Here vopros (question) is more likely to be specific.

- Compare: xočet sdelat' izobretenie (wants to make a discovery)

vs.

xočet sdat' ekzamen (wants to pass an exam)

- To conclude, a specificity restriction is the strongest for preverbal subjects. In other position (object position) we observe weaker preferences which are conditioned by rather complex factors.

Preference for marking specificity

- In general, specific indefinites interpretations are likely to be marked by overt specificity markers:

(16) a. Ja xoču pročitat' **detektiv**.

I want read detective.story

- Non-specific/any detective story

b. Ja xoču pročitat' **odin detektiv**.

I want read one detective.story

- Specific detective story

- Descriptive generalization:

If you want to unambiguously convey a specific indefinite interpretation with a BSg, use an overt marker.

Why is there a preference?

- Specificity is the only semantic interpretation that can be overtly marked in Russian
- Grice: maxim of quantity
 - Make your contribution as informative as is required.
 - Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- Whenever you can mark, do mark
 - This marking is never obligatory, because it's a pragmatic principle

Back to Q2: a summary

- BSgs in preverbal subject position
 - Specific indefinite (*requires/strongly prefers* an overt marker)
 - #Non-specific indefinite
- BSgs in postverbal subject position
 - Specific indefinite (*preferably* with an overt marker)
 - Non-specific indefinite
- BSgs in object position
 - Specific indefinite (*preferably* with an overt marker)
 - Non-specific indefinite
- A definite interpretation is possible for BSgs in *all* these positions.

Conclusion 2: restrictions and their nature

- I have argued:
 - There is no inherent deficiency in BSg indefinites with respect to the range of interpretations that they can obtain
 - BSg indefinites can be both specific and non-specific
 - A specific interpretation is more difficult to obtain in the absence of a specificity marker.
- Two types of restrictions on the distribution of BSgs:
 - Information structure:
 - Preverbal subjects are topics
 - Topics can be definite or specific indefinites (Reinhart 1981).
 - Pragmatic preference for marking a category that can be marked
- Preverbal subjects: a preference for specificity marking becomes a 'requirement'
 - Why?
 - NB: modified subjects

Support: topicalized objects

- Regular BSg objects: definite, specific or non-specific indefinite

Context: a professor is talking about his first lecture in a big audience, several people attracted his attention during the class for various reasons.

- NB: this context makes a non-specific object interpretation implausible on general grounds

(17) Ja očen' xorosho zapomnil devušku: ona zapisyvala každyj primer.
 I.NOM very well remembered girl.ACC: she copied every example
 'One girl I remember very well: she copied every example.'

Cf: '#A girl.... "'

Topicalized objects

- Topicalized objects: only a definite reading, a specific indefinite has to be marked:

(18) *Devušku* ja očen' xorosho zapomnil: ona zapisyvala každyj primer.
 girl.ACC I.NOM very well remembered: she copied every example
 'The girl I remember very well: she copied every example.'

(19) *Odnú devušku* ja očen' xorosho zapomnil : ona zapisyvala každyj primer.
 one girl.ACC I.NOM very well remembered: she copied every example
 'I remember very well a (certain) girl: she copied every example.'

- This means that a topic position really imposes very strong restrictions on the overt specificity marking in Russian
- The same seems to hold for English: *a* vs. *one* vs. *this* vs. *a certain*

Some facts from English

- Ionin, T. 2010. An Experimental Study on the Scope of (Un)modified Indefinites. *International Review of Pragmatics* 2.
- A study of different types of indefinite expressions in English
 - *a* indefinites
 - *a certain* indefinites
 - *one/at least one/exactly one* indefinites
- 3 experimental studies with the purpose to test the scopal behaviour of the three types of indefinites
- Local, narrow-scope readings are preferred for *a* indefinites, whereas long-distance scope is preferred for *a certain* indefinites.

The experiment

- Written truth value judgment task
- *RC-wide: context matches widest-scope reading of indefinite*

The teenagers who live in this neighborhood are film buffs, and closely follow the film reviews in the local newspaper. The newspaper has two reviewers, Paige and Robert, and the teenagers tend to trust Paige's judgment more. This week, for instance, the teenagers watched all the movies recommended by Paige, but they completely ignored Robert's recommendations.

- (a) Every teenager watched every film that a certain reviewer had recommended.
- (b) Every teenager watched every film that a reviewer had recommended.

The results: *a* indefinites

- The context is set up to make the target sentence true on the widest-scope reading of the indefinite.
- The narrow-scope reading, in contrast, is false in the given scenario: it is false that every teenager watched every film recommended by any reviewer, since in fact they ignored Robert's recommendations.
- **Results: %TRUE responses (N=22)**

a certain indefinites 88%

a indefinites 38%

English & Russian

- *a* indefinites in English resist a wide scope interpretation
- If scope and specificity are related phenomena, then this means that *a* indefinites in English resist a specific interpretation
- This makes *a* indefinites in English and BSG indefinites in Russian similar:
 - Specific indefinites in both English and Russian tend to appear with special 'specificity' markers

Question 4

- What kind of formal representation would capture all the properties and/or available readings of bare singular (BSg) nominals?

Proposal

- BSGs are underspecified: they can get
 - a definite
 - a specific/non-specific indefinite
 - a kind interpretation.
- Source of underspecification: a semantic determiner D
 - The primary semantic function of D: type-shifting, creating entities of type $\langle e \rangle$ which can serve as arguments
 - Semantically, an element with variable inputs or taking $\langle et \rangle$ as input
 - Underspecified D: $\{ \iota, CH(f) \}$
 - Hidden assumption: uniform choice function semantics for indefinites (Winter 1997)

A 'semantic' determiner?

- To abstract away from the NP/DP debate for languages without articles in the literature
 - The debate is primarily syntactic, I am not concerned with syntactic arguments here
- 2 ways to view my proposal in the light of the NP/DP debate
- Assuming the strict version of syntax-semantics mapping, a syntactic projection (DP with an empty head) corresponds to this semantic operator
 - This is, in principle, what I would argue for in the long run
- If this assumption is not made, there is still a semantic operator but no syntactic instantiation of it
 - NB: Considerable repercussions for the design of grammar, i.e. separate semantic component, etc.

BSgs: structure

(20) $[_{DP} D_{\emptyset} [\dots [_{NP} N]]]$

- Russian does not have articles, so the D in the nominal extended structure is normally empty
 - A related but still separate question is whether demonstratives, possessives and possibly some other elements like indefinite markers appear in this syntactic position
 - I am concerned with *bare* nominal arguments
- Crucially, we do not have to postulate several empty elements (an empty indefinite D, an empty definite D), but one empty D which is underspecified
 - Its primary function is to create <e> type entities (Higginbotham 1985, Stowell 1989, Longobardi 1994 and subsequent)

Two additional factors

- Information structure
 - Preverbal subjects in Russian SVO (neutral WO) sentences are topics
 - Topics can be definite or specific indefinites (Reinhart 1981).
- Preference to mark specific indefinites
 - Specificity is the only semantic interpretation that can be overtly marked in Russian
 - Whenever you can mark, do mark
 - This marking is not an obligation, but preference

Topic

- Topic: information structure notion, 'what the sentence is about'
- Crucially: this notion of topic is *independent* of any possible syntactic, morphological or intonational marking associated with topics.
- I assume that preverbal subjects in Russian categorical sentences with a neutral word order are by default topics in a sense described above.

Back to the data

- (9)a. V komnate bylo neskol'ko malen'kih detej.
 in room were several small children
 'There were several small children in the room.'
- b. #Devočka podošla ko mne i sprosila...
 girl.NOM. came.up to me and asked...
- c. Ko mne podošla devočka i sprosila...
 to me came.up girl.NOM. and asked...
 'A girl came up to me and asked...'

Explanation

b. Devočka podošla ko mne i sprošila...
 girl.NOM. came.up to me and asked...
 #A/The girl came up to me and asked

- Structure: $[_{DP} D_{\ominus} [.....[_{NP} N]]]$ where $D_{\ominus}: \{ \iota, CH(f) \}$
- Information structure rules out an unspecific indefinite interpretation
- Topic position requires overt specificity marking
 - although I don't know why
- Thus, the *bare* singular in (b) can only have a definite reading
- The same explanation would hold for topicalized objects

Back to the data

(10) Irina xočet vylečit' pacienta...

Irina wants cure patient

'Irina wants to cure a patient...

a. i polučit' rekomendaciju v ordinaturu.

want > ∃

and get recommendation in residency

and get a recommendation to become a resident.'

b. iz sosednej palaty

∃ > want

from neighbour ward

from the ward next door.'

Explanation

- Structure: $[_{DP} D_{\otimes} [.....[_{NP} N]]]$ where $D_{\otimes}: \{ \iota, CH(f) \}$
 - Information structure does not interfere
- Specificity marking is preferred but not obligatory to get a specific interpretation:

(10) Irina xočet vylečit' odnogo pacienta...

Irina wants cure one patient

'Irina wants to cure one/a certain patient...

 - Both continuations are still possible but the (a) means that curing one particular patient is somehow important for getting a recommendation letter
- The same explanation would hold for postverbal subjects

Answer 4:

- An analysis proposed consists of three ingredients
 - Structural representation
 - Restrictions imposed by information structure
 - Preference for overt specificity marking (cf. maxim of quantity)
- Structural representation: underspecified semantic determiner D that yields a definite or an indefinite interpretation
 - NB: specificity is not marked on D
- The restrictions imposed by the information structure
 - Mark topics as specific (topic = preverbal subject)
- Use overt markers to disambiguate an indefinite expression
 - It is not clear at this point how the specificity issue is resolved for BSGs in the absence of overt markers: cf. *make a discovery* vs. *pass an exam*
 - Possibly a function of 'context' in the broadest sense (i.e. from lexical semantics to world knowledge)

To sum up

- Indefinite interpretation is a legitimate alternative in the range of interpretations available for BSgs in Russian
- In many (if not all) respects, Russian BSg indefinites behave *exactly* like the English α -indefinites, i.e., singular expressions with an indefinite articles
- I proposed a structural underspecification analysis for BSgs which derives a definite and an indefinite interpretation by means of an underspecified semantic determiner
 - NB: the kind reading of BSgs can be incorporated easily since it is derived by means of ι (Borik & Espinal, ms.)
- Information structure and (a version of) maxim of quantity are the mechanisms that help to resolve the structural ambiguity attributed to a BSg

Thank you!

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