

Compositional Interpretation of Negative Concord Items: Evidence from Coordination

In the paper I present new arguments for treating *ni*-words in Russian as denoting universal quantifiers ‘all’, ‘every’, etc., based on the interaction of these words with coordination.

There are three major approaches to compositional interpretation of words like *nikogo* and particle *ne* in sentences like following:

- (1) *Nikogo ne bylo.*
NI-who not was
‘Nobody was there’
- *nikogo* means ‘nobody,’ and negation *ne* is semantically vacuous, perhaps a marker of syntactic concord (*NO*-hypothesis);
 - *nikogo* denotes an existential quantifier interpreted in the scope of negation (*SOME*-hypothesis): ‘it’s not the case that someone was there’;
 - *nikogo* denotes a universal quantifier interpreted above the scope of negation (*ALL*-hypothesis): ‘everyone failed to be there’.

Each of these interpretations has had advocates for some expressions in some language. No-hypothesis has been most convincingly advocated for French by Swart and Sag; ALL-hypothesis has been defended by Giannakidou for Greek and Romance and Slavic languages (2000, 2005), and by Abels ([1]) specifically for Russian. SOME-hypothesis is by far the most popular one, supported by Brown and Franks for Russian.

Interaction with logical operators like conjunction *i* ‘and’ and disjunction *ili* ‘or’ shows that the *ALL*-hypothesis makes the best predictions with regard to the meaning of these constructions. Thus, *ni*-expressions are conjoined rather than disjoined:

- (2) *Ya ne vizhu v etom nikakogo grekha i / *ili nikakogo pozora.*
I don’t see in it NI-what sin and / *or NI-what shame
‘I don’t consider it any sin or any shame=I consider it no sin and no shame’

Logically, the conjunction ‘and’ in this context would lead to an incorrect interpretation (weaker than observed) under *SOME*-hypothesis, resulting for (2) in ‘I don’t see in it any sin or I don’t see in it any shame,’ or ‘it’s not the case that I see both a sin and a shame in it’, which is weaker than the actual reading.

The *NO*-hypothesis and the *ALL*-hypothesis both predict the correct interpretation equivalent to ‘For every (kind of) sin, I don’t consider this that kind of sin, and for every (kind of) shame, I don’t consider this that kind of shame.’

Note that doubtlessly existential indefinite pronouns *-libo* are connected with a disjunction rather than a conjunction in the very same context:

- (3) Ya ne vizhu v etom kakogo-libo grekha ??i / ili kakogo-libo pozora.
 I don’t see in it what-LIBO sin and / *or what-LIBO shame
 ‘I don’t consider it any sin or any shame=I consider it no sin and no shame’

Sentences with conjoined negated predicates supply additional evidence, excluding the *NO*-hypothesis:

- (4) Nikto ne priezžal i ne zvonil.
 NI-who not came and not called
 ‘Nobody came or called’ [NCRL]

Since under the *NO*-hypothesis *ne* must be analyzed as semantically empty, this predicts too weak an interpretation ‘no person both came and called’. The actual meaning of (4) is compatible with the *ALL*-hypothesis and (under semantic type lift) with the *SOME*-hypothesis.

Combinations of *ni*-words with a disjunction of verbs are much more rare, but they point to the same conclusions.

Thus, treating *ni*-words as universal quantifiers makes correct predictions for their interpretation in contexts with coordination, and the other two approaches fail in at least some cases.

References

- [1] Klaus Abels. “Expletive negation” in Russian: A conspiracy theory. *Journal of Slavic Linguistics*, 2005.