Phrasal lexemes and reduction strategies in Russian

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1 Phrasal lexemes in Russian

Russian has a very rich lexeme formation system. Apart from strictly morphological mechanisms such as derivation and compounding, Russian displays so-called ‘lexical phrases’ (Booj 2009b) or “phrasal lexemes” (Masini 2009).

Phrasal lexemes are constructions with a phrasal structure but a lexical nature, and are attested in a number of languages (e.g. Dutch: Booj 2009b, English: Giegerich 2005, German: Hünig 2010, Italian: Masini 2007, 2009). These are the main patterns for phrasal lexemes in Russian (Benigni & Masini 2009):

- [Adj N] železnaja doroga ‘iron road’
- [N Prep N] po, nareznaja ‘warrant for arrest’
- [X Conj X] iron road
- [N N] zub, nudrosti ‘tooth, wisdom’

Here we will deal with phrasal lexemes of the [Adj N] type, which is by far the most productive pattern.

2 Phrasal nouns versus canonical noun phrases

Contrary to canonical noun phrases, phrasal nouns generally:

- i) cannot be interrupted by other lexical material:
  - (5) a. mobil’nyj telefon ‘mobile telephone’, b. * mobil’nyj telefon service Office

- ii) cannot undergo paradigmatic commutability:
  - (6) a. železnaja doroga ‘iron road’, b. * železný put ‘iron way’

- iii) cannot be internally modified (modification may have scope on the whole expression only):
  - (7) a. detskij sad ‘child’s garden’, b. ‘n/k o detskij sad ‘only child’s garden’

3 Phrasal nouns versus noun compounds

i) PN forms free (a), compounds present at least one bound form (b):

- (8) a. avtorskoe pravo ‘author’s right’, b. dom+vladelce

ii) PN display regular internal agreement / inflection (a), compounds do not (b):

- (9) avtornaja kartinka ‘author photo’, b. startova

iii) PN display internal case government (a), compounds normally do not (b):

- (10) a. prav. i objaznjenija ‘rights and duties’, b. divan-krovat’ ‘sofa bed’

iv) PN may display internal case government (a), compounds normally do not (b):

- (11) a. obmen studentami, b. egorซ= tutilt

5 A corpus of [Adj N] phrasal nouns

In order to study Russian PNs and their reduction strategies, we collected a corpus of PNs of the [Adj N] type by generating a frequency list of [Adj N] combinations from the Russian Web Corpus (gathered by Serge Sharoff at the University of Leiden), containing 97,965,824 tokens, available on the Sketch Engine site: www.sketchengine.info. The raw frequency list was revised manually, thus obtaining a list of about 1000 PNs with frequency ≥ 200.

Then we checked whether the PNs in the corpus had a corresponding shortened form: this was the case for about 113 PNs (approx. 13%), some of which presented more than one shortened form. The quantitative results are given in the table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrasal nouns</th>
<th>Stump compounds</th>
<th>Ellipsis of Adj or N</th>
<th>Suffixation of Adj or N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(fq ≥ 200)</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most used strategies are Suffixation of Adj (64 items) and stump compounding (42).

6 Reduction by suffixation in the corpus

- (18) a. minerala/naja voda ‘mineral water’, b. rolevik game ‘role-playing / simulation game’
- (19) a. kopiroval’naja bumaga ‘copying paper’, b. suguščenkə ‘condensed milk’
- (20) a. maršrutnoe taksi ‘fixed route taxi’, b. sguščënka ‘concentrated milk’

What seems to play a role here is not frequency, but the familiarity / intimacy with the referent, also testified by the colloquial register attributed to these shortenings.

7 Frequency, familiarity and register

One would expect that shortenings correlate with high frequency. However, in our corpus the chances to have a shortened form do not increase as raw frequency increases. Besides, there exist a number of PNs with low or far frequency that do present a shortened form (especially in -a), which is typically more frequent.

- (19a) a. kopiroval’naja bumaga ‘copying paper’, b. suguščenka ‘condensed milk’

- (20a) a. maršrutnoe taksi ‘fixed route taxi’, b. sguščenka ‘concentrated milk’

8 Implications and further questions

- It is a common view that reduction strategies do not form new lexemes (a maršrutka is still a maršrutka taksī, cf. (19b)), but rather some variant of an already existing form (e.g. maršrutka). What is the motivation behind this mechanism?

- We can tentatively hypothesise the following motivations or tendencies:
  - a semantic / functional tendency: the shortened form might in fact have a new meaning if we intend ‘meaning’ in a broad sense as a bundle of semantic, pragmatic and usage features (register/style, genre, level of intimacy).
  - a structural / formal tendency: the shortening of PNs might be a way to ‘morphologise’ (i.e. to reduce to the word level) lexical units that are phrasal in nature. This might correlate with Russian being a highly inflectional language with clearly identifiable word level units. Of course, both hypotheses need more investigation.

9 A theoretical account

If we accept that the concept of ‘meaning’ is broader than usually thought and that, as a result, full and shortened forms might not be total synonyms, then we can easily account for these reduction mechanisms in terms of Construction Grammar (cf., a.m.o., Fillmore et al. 1988, Goldberg 1995) and/or Construction Morphology (Booj 2005, 2009a,b).

Here follow the advantages of a constructionist approach:

- the constructional framework does not post a strict division between syntax and the lexicomorphology, therefore intermediate phenomena such as phrasal lexemes are expected to occur and can be accounted for (Booj 2009b, Masini 2009);

- constructionist models use a broad definition of ‘meaning’, which comprises semantic, pragmatic and usage features, including information about style/register, genre, etc. This model is therefore suitable in principle for account for full vs. reduced forms that differ solely in this kind of information.

References