



Explaining the distribution of infinitives of impersonals in Russian

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ABSTRACT

In Russian infinitives of impersonal verbs have a peculiar distribution: they are not acceptable in most syntactic contexts, but there are also syntactic contexts in which they are perfectly acceptable. Based on a qualitative analysis of data from corpora, the Internet and an acceptability survey, it is argued that the restrictions on impersonals in infinitival constructions can be explained if both morphological and semantic–syntactic factors are taken into account. As is shown, the infinitive in Russian is easily associated with a human (arbitrary) subject. The restrictions on infinitives can be accounted for in terms of a semantic–syntactic incompatibility between the meaning of the impersonal verb, which lacks a subject, and the meaning of the infinitive, which is easily associated with a human subject. This analysis not only explains the data from Russian, but also makes predictions about similar data from other languages.

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1. Introduction

As is remarked by [Perlmutter and Moore \(2002\)](#), in Russian there is a restriction on infinitives of impersonal verbs. Perlmutter and Moore explain this restriction by postulating null (covert, non-audible or written) forms, more specifically null nominative subjects of finite impersonal verbs, and the requirement that subjects of infinitival clauses be dative.

Because of its elegance, Perlmutter and Moore's explanation of the Russian data is quite attractive. It can therefore be argued that as long as no alternative explanation is provided, both the use of null forms and the rule that the case of the subject of the infinitive is dative cannot be rejected. This opinion is clearly expressed by [Perlmutter \(2007, p. 304\)](#), when he states that '[w]hile readers are certainly entitled to their opinions about what is desirable or undesirable, it is incumbent on those who find null subject undesirable to show that a grammar without them is superior to one that posits them.'

However, as I will contend in this paper, even though the analysis given by [Perlmutter and Moore \(2002\)](#) provides an important generalization of the data, it is incomplete, and in some cases gives an oversimplified picture of the data. Furthermore, the 'null dative subject hypothesis' at times makes wrong predictions. Following [Babby \(2009\)](#), and in contrast to [Perlmutter and Moore \(2002\)](#), I will contend that data cannot be explained with reference to case. In contrast to the purely syntactic approach given by both Perlmutter and Moore and Babby, I will argue that the restriction on infinitives of impersonals is not just syntactic, but also has a (morpho)semantic dimension.

This article is structured as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of the relevant data; Section 3 discusses the analysis of infinitives and impersonals in Russian given by [Perlmutter and Moore \(2002\)](#) and [Babby \(2009\)](#); Section 4 presents an alternative analysis to the same data; Section 5 provides a general conclusion.

2. The data and theoretical preliminaries

This section sets forth definitions of the terms 'impersonal verb' and 'subject' and provides a general overview of the data, as well as the methodology I have used to collect and analyze said data.

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For this analysis I will use the term ‘impersonal verb’ with respect to verbs (or constructions) that do not have a subject that agrees with the verb, and which have third person singular (neuter) marking when they are used as a finite form, for example:

- (1) Morozilo.
froze-3_{SG-N}
‘It was freezing.’
- (2) Morosilo.
drizzled-3_{SG-N}
‘It was drizzling.’

Weather verbs are typical instances of this type of impersonal (see, e.g. Birjulin (1993) for an analysis of this class of impersonal verbs), and therefore these meteorological verbs will be my focus here. However, Russian has a vast array of other types of impersonal verbs and constructions (see, e.g. Guiraud-Weber (1984) for an overview of such impersonal constructions in Russian). It should be stressed that some of these impersonal verbs – including meteorological impersonal verbs – do in fact have personal counterparts with a comparable meaning that show agreement between the subject and the verb:

- (3) Morosil doždik.
drizzled-3_{SG-M} rain-NOM-M
‘The rain was drizzling.’

Furthermore, in some cases, the impersonal nature of the verb is due to the construction, and the impersonal status of the verb is not part of its argument structure. See, e.g. Babby (2009) for an overview of the argument structure of various impersonal verbs and impersonal constructions.

Note that the class of impersonals under discussion does *not* include the so-called ‘undetermined personal constructions’ and ‘generalized personal constructions’, which are traditionally distinguished in Russian grammars (e.g. Švedova 1980). Such constructions are associated with a non-specific (generic or arbitrary) human first participant, which cannot be expressed by a nominative form, for example in the following sentences from the Russian National Corpus (henceforth RNC):

- (4) **Stučat.** (RNC)
knock-3_{PL}
‘Someone is knocking at the door.’
- (5) Bez kritiki ne **prožives’.** (RNC)
without criticism not survive-2_{SG-PRES}
‘You (one) cannot survive without criticism.’

These constructions cannot be infinitival, since the specific generic or arbitrary interpretation of the first participant (subject) is directly related to the second or third person marking on the verb (for an analysis of similar constructions cross-linguistically within a more formal framework, see, e.g. Egerland, 2003). As such, they fall outside the scope of the present analysis.

To reiterate, the aforementioned impersonal meteorological verbs will be the focus of this section, and other types of impersonals will be discussed in Section 4.5.

Another term requiring elaboration is ‘subject’. In linguistic literature the term ‘subject’ is defined in various ways, depending on the theoretical framework used by the author. The present analysis will use the term ‘subject’ in two ways. First, I will use it as a syntactic term for the form, which agrees with the verb (called ‘morphological subject’ by Babby (2010b)). Prototypically this means that the subject is a noun, pronoun or noun phrase with nominative case marking.¹

¹ I deliberately use the term ‘prototypically’ because there may very well be instances where the form that governs agreement is not a nominative noun or pronoun. One reviewer argued, for example, that in the following Russian sentence the prepositional phrase *po pjat’ bol’nyx*, which is not a nominative noun, agrees with the verb, which may show either singular or plural morphology:

- (i) U nix v bol’nice ežednevno **umirajut/** **umiraet** po pjat’ bol’nyx.
at them in hospital daily die.3_{PL}/ die.3_{SG} per five patients-GEN
‘In their hospital five patients die every day.’

In the case of plural agreement one might also give an alternative analysis, and argue that the PP cannot be seen as the subject, in the same way as in the following sentence from the Internet the nominative *sobaki* (‘dogs’) is the subject, and not the genitive plural form *štuk* (‘pieces’):

- (ii) Zimoj v Kožuxovskom prijute sobaki umirali po pjat – šest’ štuk za den’.
winter-INSTR in Kožuxovskij shelter dogs-NOM died-PL per five-six pieces-GEN a day
‘During winter in the Kožuxovskij shelter dogs were dying five-six pieces a day.’

In the same vein, in (i) the plural agreement of the verb could be explained in the same way as the plural agreement of the undetermined personal constructions as in (4). Cf.:

- (iii) Na vstreču ot každogo klasa, načinaja s pjatogo, **vybirali** po pjat’ čelovek.
in meeting from every class starting from fifth selected-3_{PL} per five people
‘When they visited, they selected five people [per class], starting from the fifth class.’ (RNC)

I will refrain from further discussion of the term ‘subject’ here, and refer readers to Babby (2010b) for an analysis within a formal framework, or Keenan (1976) for a typological approach to subjecthood.

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