Bare singulars indefinites in Russian as a matter of preference
Olga Borik, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

1. It is generally assumed in the literature that bare nominals (BNs) in Russian can get both a definite and an indefinite interpretation (although see Dayal 2004 for a different view). This observation is empirically supported by the data, but what is also known is that indefinite nominals are not entirely unconstrained. In particular, indefinite BN subjects in Russian are rarely found in preverbal subject position in declarative sentences, where they are interpreted as sentential topics. They appear much more naturally in postverbal subject position. The constraint is illustrated in (1), where (1a) provides the context for (1b) and (1c):

(1) a. V komnate bylo neskol’ko malen’kix detej.
   in room were several small children.
   ‘There were several small children in the room.’
   b. Devočka podnjala ruku i sprosila…
   girl.NOM. raised hand and asked…
   ‘The#A girl raised her hand and asked…’
   c. Ko mne podošla devočka i sprosila…
   to me walked.up girl.NOM. and asked…
   ‘The/A girl came up to me and and asked…’

Geist (2010) argues that the constraint on BSg indefinites illustrated in (1) is due to the fact that these nominals cannot have a specific reference. Following Reinhart (1981), she assumes that only strongly referential (specific) indefinites can function as topics, and since singular BNs cannot be specific, they do not appear as topics (where topic is understood as an information structure notion, independent of any possible syntactic, morphological or intonational marking).

2. I assume that specificity is related to scope. In particular, a specific interpretation is associated with a wide scope reading of indefinites (cf. Fodor & Sag 1982). I will first present evidence that bare singular indefinites in Russian can be associated with a specific interpretation. For this, we need to look at BSg nominals in object position, as in (2) and (3):

(2) Vasja xočet zhenit’ja na kinozvezde.
   Vasja wants marry to movie-star
   ‘Vasja wants to marry a movie star.’
(3) Vasja segodnja ne sdal ekzamen.
   Vasja today not passed exam
   ‘Vasja did not pass an exam today.’

In both sentences, a BSg in object position exhibits regular scope ambiguities with respect to a modal in (2) or negation in (3). What matters for the argument developed here is the availability of a specific, or wide scope reading, which can be made prominent by continuing (2) with a sentence like “It’s a sister of John” and (3) with a sentence “It was chemistry”.

Despite the fact that a specific (i.e., a wide scope) interpretation is available for the object BSgs in both (2) and (3), the (informally) consulted native speakers generally have a preference for a non-specific (i.e., a narrow scope) interpretation for many other BSg objects. Thus, in (4) a specific interpretation of ‘book’ is very difficult (for some speakers almost impossible) to obtain:

(4) Vasja xočet kupit knigu.
   Vasja want buy book
   ‘Vasja wants to buy a book.’

Even though the exact factors that favor or disfavor a particular indefinite interpretation still need to be established, it is clear that the availability of a specific interpretation for a bare singular nominal is a matter of (sometimes strong) preference, and I will propose an explanation for it below. Crucially, we cannot adopt Geist’s (2010) proposal which attributes
the absence of a specific reading to the bare form itself: if it was the case, we would not be able to get a specific reading in (2) or (3) at all. However, this reading is available, although might be dispreferred.

3. In this talk I will argue that there are two factors that play a role in the distribution and interpretation of BSG indefinites in Russian. One factor is information structure and its role has already been established in, for instance, Geist 2010. I adopt the generalization that indefinite BSGs cannot appear in topic position, although I do not think that Geist’s explanation based on the absence of a specific interpretation of BSGs is correct, as examples in (2) and (3) illustrate. Another factor, which (to my knowledge) has not been proposed before is a preference to mark a specific interpretation in accordance with Grices’s Maxim of Quantity: specificity in Russian is a functional nominal category that can be marked (cf. Ionin 2013, Yanovich 2005, Geist 2008), hence it should be marked whenever possible. But since specificity markers are not grammatically obligatory (hence crucially different from ‘proper’ articles), their presence can only be forced pragmatically, leaving room for variation in their use among the native speakers. Below I elaborate on the proposed explanation.

4. Even though Russian does not have an article system, it has various means of indicating a referential status of a nominal expressions (cf. Padučeva’s 1985 actualizers, various specificity markers as described in Ionin 2013, Geist 2008, etc.). Even though a specific interpretation of a BSG object is available in (2) and (3), it is almost always ‘pushed away’ by a non-specific (narrow scope) one in many other cases, as illustrated by (4). However, a specific interpretation of the object in (4) becomes prominent if a specificity marker odin (cf. Ionin) is added to the object, as illustrated in (5):

(5) Vasja xočet kupit odnu knigu.
Vasja want buy one book
‘Vasja wants to buy one/a certain book.’

Thus, descriptively, we seem to observe than there is a preference to use specificity markers for specific indefinites whenever you can. This preference becomes especially strong for preverbal subject position, where only specific indefinites can appear. Grices’ Maxim of Quantity offers an independent explanation for this phenomenon, stating that every contribution should be made as informative as is required. Thus, in relation to specific indefinites, the principle is interpreted as, roughly, ‘mark whenever you can’, and it is not an obligatory type of grammatical marking.

To sum up, BSGs in preverbal subject position can be interpreted as definite or specific indefinite. The first type of interpretation is highly preferred by the information structure: topics tend to be definite. For the second type, the maxim of quantity enforces specificity marking. BSGs that appear as either postverbal subjects or objects are not topics, so the information structure does not enforce any interpretational preferences for BSGs found in these position. However, the maxim of quantity still encourages speakers to mark the only interpretation that can be overtly marked in Russian, namely, the one of a specific indefinite. Thus, I argue that the restrictions on the interpretation of BSG indefinites in Russian can only be formulated in terms of ‘preference’, not in terms of the presence/absence of a certain type of interpretation in a certain (in this case a bare) form. The empirical data that I have provided support this type of approach in contrast to a more radical approach by Geist (2010).

References: